

Part 78: New Greatness

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William Shakespeare once penned, “Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.”

But if you were listening to our text for this morning you may pick up a different tone on greatness. Jesus’ message today is one that should cause us to perhaps stand in fear with regards to greatness, or at least, greatness according to the world.

The Bible presents that our search for greatness possesses a great problem. It was a perverse desire for greatness that led Adam and Eve to raise their hands to take the fruit and rival God’s status. From that moment on the whole world became a competitive marketplace trying to edge out, steal, and work our way to the top of our classes, death charts, corporate structures and family life.

I wonder if you’ve felt the weight of this? Maybe jealous that someone else has some “tool” that validates or vindicates their status over you? Perhaps you find yourself constantly irritated at the girl who works in the same department as you because she is getting a little more praise from your supervisor.

From a secular worldview, it’s this competition that lead men like Karl Marx to want to renovate the economic constructs of the day. But the Bible says that if we ever want to know true greatness, and be freed from the burden and disappointment of false greatness—we don’t need a new economy we need a new heart.

James remind us, (**James 4:1-2**) "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel..." Our hearts are at war over who is the greatness, and what the symbol of that greatness is.

But as Adam’s sin brought confusion into the quest for status and greatness, Jesus Christ, the second Adam came to clarify true greatness. We are at the last supper in the book of Luke and today Jesus is preparing his disciples for life after his death by correcting their understanding of themselves and others by reframing power, authority, and privilege in light of the true realities of greatness.

This is our main point this: **True greatness is hidden in Christ and in his church.**

Earlier on in Luke, Jesus already rebuked the Pharisees who wanted to see the Kingdom of God in power. But Jesus said to them, “The power of the kingdom is here, it’s me. You just can’t see it through your worldly eyes.” It was hidden from them. But today, Jesus is going to reveal what the shroud of sin conceals.

We will see this in four ways: **The Problem of Greatness, The Posture of Greatness, The Person of Greatness and The People of Greatness.**

Let's begin by examining our first point today: **The Problem of Greatness.**

When I started dating my wife, her friends and family told me that it was impossible to take a bad picture of her. She looked beautiful in every one. Her beauty was natural. So naturally, I labored greatly to capture a photo that would bring her down to earth--and I've still been trying.

I bring this point up because what frustrated Sarah's friends is that beauty doesn't come naturally. What does come naturally is when we accidentally open our phones cameras and discover how many chins we really have. What is natural are blinks and sneezes, mid cough contortions, and awkward photo-bombers.

So too there is a natural greatness in our world, but like those pictures that catch us by surprise, it isn't flattering. The problem of greatness is that our world's natural greatness is nasty greatness. Notice how Luke's context and Jesus' response show the ugly nature of this natural tendency: **Luke 22:24-25**, "A dispute arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.'"

Do you remember growing up when your parents would run an errand and you and your siblings would fight over who would be in charge when mom and dad were gone? This is in essence what is happening at the last supper in Luke 22. Jesus has predicted that he's going to die, he has mentioned he's being betrayed, and the conversation naturally drifts to who then will get to be in charge when Jesus was gone.

Here we see how conflicted and confused our own hearts can be. As natural as it was for the disciples to not want Jesus to go and to grieve his death, it was just as natural for them to fight over who gets to be the leader when he's gone. Jesus leans into their hearts by showing them how they are thinking about this from the wrong direction.

It was not too long ago that Jesus spoke into the disciple's anxiety in **Luke 12:29-31** saying, "Don't worry about anything, for the nations (Greek = Gentiles) of the world seek after these things...Instead seek the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you."

Jesus tells his disciples that they need to think according to God's kingdom, not the world's kingdom. Yet here they can only perceive greatness through the lens of worldly kings.

We too should be warned how easy it is for us to drift into worldly thinking. Whether it is in regards to our sexuality, our finances, our mental health, or our family—it is all too natural to drift into worldly wisdom. We encounter problems as Christians, but we seek answers from the world. The world can be helpful in identifying and displaying all kinds of wisdom, but it can't rightly interpret it for us.

In the book of Jeremiah, God warns his people of following prophets who speak to God's people with that natural inclinations of the world as their primary source of wisdom. Jeremiah warns, **Jeremiah 23:16-17**, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"

When we view the world through the strictly human lens, we can identify problems for sure, but their ability to solve them can only go so far. To adequately see any of our problems, we need to see our own heart, and to see our own heart, we need to see God's heart, and in Jesus and God's word, he shows all of this to us. If we want to better understand our needs and issues, we need Jesus' help. The Bible makes the most sense of our reality.

Jesus helps his disciples by revealing that this worldly greatness is a sham. It has no substance. And he does this by showing that even human eyes ought to be able to pick this up.

He says the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship and rule over people with authority so that they may be called "benefactors." The title "benefactor" was a big deal in that day and age. The title was taken from two Greek words one meaning "good" and the other "works." It was a person who did good works. To be called a benefactor was to be dubbed as a person of great influence, wealth and honor—many cities were dependent upon these benefactor relationships.

But Jesus here exposes what historians have now found to be common during this time. These benefactor relationships were entirely one sided. While these individuals earned the title of "benefactor," it was a title in name only.

The way Jesus puts it is that these people are not doing good, but instead they are using their authority as a weapon to the end that people give them this title.

Isn't this often who school yard bullies, or modern "mean girls" work in the cafeteria? The one who has the power to hurt or the power to bless is the one who uses that to their advantage. You give the bully what he wants so he doesn't punch you. You tell the mean girl how pretty she looks so you can be invited to her fancy birthday party or avoid her hit list.

In other words for these benefactors, good was in their name but not in their nature. They were praised in the public square only because they lorded their possessions and power over others as a tool not to serve, but to be served. They seemed to be generous and kind, but it was only to the extent that they extracted servitude from the masses.

Worldly greatness is often empty greatness. And we often know that don't we, but we still want it. Notice how Luke tells us these disciples were arguing about who would be "regarded" or "considered," as the greatest. Jesus says these kings were working in light of what they wanted to be "called."

The truth is we are all too often content to live for such a name even if it's an empty one because we know it is an empty one. We often want to be called good as a comfort to those who know we are not good. Remember Jesus just told his disciples one of them is going to betray him, and look at what follows **Luke 22:23-24**, "And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. A dispute also rose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest."

Did you notice that? Their boasting in their greatness was a defense mechanism against their potential sin. The argument quickly moved from, "Is it you?" to "It can't be me because I'm great!"

Much of our desires to be seen as successful, smart, fit, and fabulous stems from a problem that only Jesus can fix. We hope a new name might atone for our failings. But there's only one name that can do that and it's Jesus' not yours. The title of greatness in the world can do nothing to change the not great

realities of your own heart—but faith in Jesus’ name, and that alone removes our paranoia. It acknowledges our sins and failings but then it gives us a new identity robed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

That’s why those who see the title of “saint” as more spectacular than any worldly title are the only ones who can understand true greatness. That’s why Jesus transitions saying, **Luke 22:26**, "But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves."

This is our second point this morning: **The Posture of Greatness**. The true posture of greatness, is humble service.

Where the world attaches greatness to a name given at the end, Jesus attaches greatness to a nature. To be called the greatest, is not the end for the believer, it’s the beginning. The one who is the greatest, the one who is the leader is called to exercise that authority in humble service of others.

Now, our world today has a category that sees this kind of humility and service as great. I once heard of a pastor who said, “Many of us like to be seen as a servant when it’s advantageous to be seen as one. But how do you feel when you are treated as a servant when you don’t want to be?”

Jesus here is showing us that this kind of greatness is not a naturally reoccurring element. Notice how he says we must “become” like the younger and “become” the one who serves. We have to work at it, and that work must be a work of Jesus’ own mercy in our lives. We cannot give up our desire for prestige until Jesus makes us something else by faith.

Remember the shock, in John 3, when Jesus says to Nicodemus that he must be born again? Nicodemus responds how any of us would hearing this for the first time: **John 3:4** "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

If we marvel at how unnatural Christian conversion is, then we must also marvel at how unnatural Christian greatness is. For we can't naturally become as the younger! We drift towards childlike immaturity, but we don't drift toward childlike humility! Our culture wants the sweetness of a child, the tenderness of a child, but all the privileges of the adults!

But what Jesus is promoting here is that the one who is truly great is the one who uses his privilege by laying down his privilege. He uses his authority, to serve with his authority. Now it’s important to note that Jesus doesn’t get rid of authority and leadership, he’s not anti-authority—instead he’s showing us the new nature of authority for those who are his disciples.

Those who are born again by faith, are born again to take up positions which the world sees as lowly. Here’s why our world has gotten so bonkers with authority. We fight, scratch, claw, cheat and abuse our way to the top of the power pole because we think that when we are in that position—everyone will serve us. We view it as the power that demands our own relief.

But how different and how refreshing is it to see the Bible’s view of authority? We do not pursue positions of power and of greatness so that we are served, but so that we might subject all of our power and greatness to others in service: first to God and then to others. For the Christian mom, the Christian boss, the Christian husband, pastor and pre-school teacher—your position of authority doesn’t symbolize the end of your service but instead the beginning of it.

I've recently been convicted of this when I'm sitting watching a football game, and one of my kids is sitting next to me and I ask them to get up and do something that I otherwise am fully able to do. Why am I doing this? Because I'm thinking that my position as "Dad" has earned me a right to be served. As my children, they should serve me.

To change our minds, we need to change our hearts. Paul helps us here in **Romans 12:3** saying, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Notice where Paul starts this process of examination: he's not saying start with a view of service, a view of self, or even a view of others. He's starting with the measure of faith that God has assigned. How we view ourselves and treat others is connected to what our faith reveals about how we view and treat God.

We can only begin to see and act clearly when the binoculars of faith fill the whole of our world with the greatness of God. A right view of God is the beginning of gospel greatness. We can spend an eternity trying to humbly ourselves, or we can look at God and be humbled when we see his infinite beauty and glory.

This is exactly where Jesus goes next as he turns another cultural example on its head: **Luke 22:27**, "For who is the greater, one who reclines at the table? Or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves."

You see the center of Christian greatness, Christian leadership, Christian service is Jesus himself. This is our third point: **The Person of Greatness.**

If you just look at the world, it's hard to see how any of this makes sense. That's why Jesus talks about the table here. In that culture, and still in ours today, it was the servant's job to serve and wait tables, and the master's job to be served because of his position. But Jesus says, "Am I not among you as the one who serves?"

No one is greater than Jesus. He is the king of the whole universe, and yet what has he come to do? To serve. He came to submit his own will to the will of the Father and submit his service to those whose very sins would put him to death.

Gospel leadership and greatness only makes sense in Jesus because it shows us that all of it is an act of faith. We might protest at some point and say, "Well yeah, but I've got to run a business," "I've got to get these kids in line," "I've got to meet this deadline."

This is why we must look to Jesus to expose the beauty of service that is lost in the world. Jesus served by leading. Jesus served by teaching. Jesus served by rebuking. Jesus served by counseling. Jesus served by saying, "follow me." Service didn't mean hard things weren't said or done. Service wasn't apathy or anarchy. But Jesus' service was submission to the purpose and plan of God, and in that we are saved, the church is built and a kingdom is coming.

So too, we must trust that if our service is in submission to the plan and purpose of God, it will not fail or falter in its effectiveness. True leadership, in any sphere begins by submitting ourselves to God through Jesus Christ and living in light of his purpose and commands.

This is where Jesus goes now: **Luke 22:28-30**, “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

From Gentile kings to gospel kings. This is our final point this morning, **The People of Greatness**. If Jesus is the person of greatness, then the church is the people of greatness who follow in his footsteps.

Why is service, why is humility the way to greatness? Because it is quite frankly the only way of the one true kingdom. The Titanic was billed as the “unsinkable ship,” but guess what? It sunk. The world’s greatness is billed as the true greatness where we find peace, but guess what...it sinks. But there is one greatness that lives forever, and that’s kingdom greatness.

Notice how despite the thick headedness of the apostles, Jesus holds out for them a role in his kingdom. From a covenant story line, this is Jesus establishing the New Testament church as the fulfillment of the Old Testament people of God. In Revelation 21 we see the new city of God come down and John tells us that it has “12 foundations on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the lamb” (**Revelation 21:14**).

So even though these disciples were called to serve, they were promised that one day they would get to sit and eat at an even greater table. At that table they could rest, at that table they would be honored for their service properly. But on a more immediate level, Jesus is here commissioning the unique role the apostles would have in the establishment of the church in the New Testament.

In Matthew, Jesus says that the church presently has the “Keys to the kingdom.” And it was these apostles who Jesus entrusted to establish that sphere of authority here on earth even if it won’t fully be here until glory.

But in seeing how Jesus is speaking to the men who would oversee the startup of Jesus’ church we can learn a few things about the nature of his church and of those who are part of it by way of application.

First, notice how Jesus speaks of the disciples here. When speaking in the context of greatness what does he call his disciples? In verse 28 they are the stayers, and in verse 26 they are the servers. Though kingdom greatness awaits, it is not because of anything unique about the disciples. They will reap the rewards because they stayed with Jesus and they served like Jesus.

Jesus is saying to the disciples, you’ve stayed with me so far in my ministry, but now as I’m leaving you are going to be the ones serving in my ministry. True greatness is not leaving Jesus and running to the comforts of the world, but it’s staying with Jesus even in the trials that come when following him.

And as we stay with Jesus, we serve like Jesus. This is why the church must be a community of stayers and servers. The world will look at us with foolishness. It will think we are wasting our life, that we are throwing away our pleasure—but as the community of the one true kingdom we remind each other that this is the way of Christ.

We can begin to apply this posture even here in our gathering. When you come to church, do you see yourself as primarily being served by the worship and the word, or do you realize that you too are here to serve in it? We serve others by modeling what worship and listening to scripture looks like. We serve others by going out of our comfort zone to meet new people and ask them about the gospel. We serve by volunteering to care for kids even when our weeks are filled with kids. We stay with Jesus and we serve like Jesus because Jesus did all of that for us.

But secondly, we see the reward of heaven.

The Bible does talk in a general sense that we will get to judge angels. I'm not sure what that means, but it sounds like it will be a good time. But whatever Jesus means to the apostles is unique to them in their apostolic function in the church.

But what we see is both a table and thrones. We get to finally recline at a table, we get to finally rest. The whole life of the Christian is one of service, but in glory our service will be restful. We will enjoy God perfectly by serving him at his table and enjoying his mercy.

But here Jesus doesn't give us a throne. So where are we here? Look at what Jesus says to the church in Laodicea in **Revelation 3:20-22**, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "

Where is our throne? We don't get one. We get to sit with Jesus. Brothers and sisters, that's the throne you want. That's the greatness we were made for. We were made not to be Jesus, but to be with Jesus. So while we serve here, we might be discomforted, we might feel burdened and weary, but one day we will sit. Sit with Jesus, and recline at his table.

And blessed is the one who has that privilege. Let's pray.