

# The Passion

*And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so."  
(Luke 23:3 ESV)*

*Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And  
having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46 ESV)*

## **Redefining Greatness**

**March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Luke 22:24-30**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Luke 22.

Do you want to be great? As a Christian, are we allowed to pursue such things? Is ambition appropriate?

If is, then what does greatness look like? What is the standard by which you would measure it?

And how would you attain it?

These may seem like vague, hypothetical questions, but they actually shape the way that you live your life. They shape the goals that you make. They dictate your decisions. How you answer this question will define the target of your life.

What is greatness?

In our passage this morning, the disciples are wrestling with this question. Look with me now to Luke 22, verses 24-30. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But not so with you. Rather,

let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. <sup>27</sup> For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

<sup>28</sup> “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, <sup>29</sup> and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, <sup>30</sup> that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:24-30 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we begin to consider this passage, I want you to look closely at verses 28-30. After explaining that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdom of the world and that the one who would be great should be one who serves, we might expect Jesus to say: “So stop thinking about greatness you foolish, misguided sinners! Throw that ambition away and prepare for an eternity of mopping the floor!”

Some of us expected him to say that. And that expectation flows out of a deficient theology of man.

We have memorized every passage that exposes us as sinners and describes us as worms, but we have failed to hold those in tension with the passages that describe our lofty status in God’s eyes. We are image bearers! We are children of God! We are heirs to a coming Kingdom! We were made to exercise dominion on His behalf over this world that He has made.

Sin marred and distorted that image, but it did not remove it all together! And when sin is finally dealt with once and for all in the final judgement – when we dwell in the new heavens and the new earth – we will once and for all step into that great and glorious assignment with which we have been entrusted. There is greatness and glory at the end of our story!

Therefore, after reminding his disciples that they were to devote their lives to humble service, rather than rebuking the disciples for desiring greatness, Jesus directs their attention forward to the day when they will finally experience the greatness that they long for. Look again at verses 28-30:

<sup>28</sup> “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, <sup>29</sup> and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom,<sup>30</sup> that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom **and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** (Luke 22:28-30 ESV)

Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples' pursuit of greatness.

But he does redefine it.

He reminds them that the greatness that they seek will look nothing like what this world is offering because true greatness will not be realized in this world but in the world to come. Jesus was consistent with this message. In the beatitudes, for example, Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** (Matthew 5:3 ESV)

Blessed are the meek, **for they shall inherit the earth.** (Matthew 5:5 ESV)

The author to the Hebrews points us to Jesus as the perfect example of how to live with this eternal perspective. He tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus:

the founder and perfecter of our faith, **who for the joy that was set before him** endured the cross, despising the shame, **and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** (Hebrews 12:2 ESV)

Jesus suffered. Jesus was shamed. Jesus washed feet. But in heaven, Jesus is not suffering, Jesus is not shamed, and Jesus is not washing feet. He is REIGNING on his throne!

And the disciples – they who suffered with him – are ALSO going to reign on thrones. And we are heirs as well. In Romans 8:16-17 we read:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> **and if children, then heirs**—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him** in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:16-17 ESV)

Serving and suffering now. Reigning as heirs then. Down. But then up. That's the pattern. Are you seeing that? We're not called to be lowly for the sake of lowliness! The call to self-sacrificing service is never separated from the promise of a GLORIOUS reward in the kingdom to come!

Therefore, if we lose sight of THAT, we won't be able to live like this. In this passage, Jesus teaches us:

## How To Be Great In The Kingdom Of God

This is a very simple lesson with three points. First, if you want to be great in the kingdom of God:

### 1. Don't follow the examples of the world

Jesus directs our attention to those who are esteemed as "great" in the world's eyes. He warns:

The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. (Matthew 22:25b ESV)

That's how "greatness" is displayed out there. But true greatness is exactly opposite to the counterfeit that the world has to offer. The kings and rulers lord their position over their constituents. They use people to serve their own ends.

**But not so with you.** Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. (Luke 22:26 ESV)

In the culture where Jesus spoke these words, "the young" were viewed as "less than" the old. They were, therefore, expected to defer to those who were older than them with a posture of humility. Jesus points to that cultural expectation and says, "People who are truly great should adopt that posture towards everyone."

True greatness is marked by humility. True greatness stoops down to serve.

The Apostle Paul pairs these ideas together in Philippians 2:3-4, where he writes:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4 ESV)

In a culture that is increasingly banging the drum of self-care and boundaries, verses like these need to be revisited often. There are a thousand voices out there telling me to prioritize myself.

It's easy to think about yourself, isn't it? I've never once needed a coach to tell me, "Now, today you need to keep one question front and center: What does Levi want?" I can think that way without any coaching. That's my default. And it's yours as well.

But it is NOT my default to count others as more significant than myself.

What do THEY need? What can I do to make my wife's day better? How can I stoop down? How can I serve?

According to Jesus, true greatness – the greatness that will be recognized in the kingdom of God – is other-centered.

The world says, "Nice guys finish last." But the world thinks that the grave is the finish line! If the grave is the finish line, then you'd be a FOOL to listen to Jesus! Climb over whoever you need to climb over to get what's yours! Use people. Lord over them. That is the story of our history books, and it's the story of my natural inclinations, and it is a story that makes complete sense if the grave is the finish line.

But the grave is not the finish line. The grave is simply a door into the eternal kingdom.

And that changes everything! Why would you follow the example of a person who has never given a thought to what's on the other side of that door? Why are you buying his books and modelling your behavior after his practices? So what if he built a big business? So what if she is a New York Times best seller? If Jesus is telling you to prepare for THAT kingdom, and they're teaching you how to build your best life now in THIS kingdom, then they're not going to set a helpful example for you to follow!

This mindset is not reserved for the outside world. Within the church, leaders will arise who are fixated on building their earthly kingdom. Leaders will arise who use people for their own selfish ends. As one pastor warns:

Never follow a man who chases his own name. Never follow a man who chases his own belly. Never follow a man who lives for himself. Christ did not live that way. Christ made himself a servant.<sup>1</sup>

If you want to be great in the kingdom of God, then don't follow the examples of the world. That's the first lesson that Jesus teaches us here. Second, and flowing out of it, if you want to be great in the kingdom of God:

## 2. Don't settle for lesser rewards

Rewards sometimes get a bad rap. They are viewed with suspicion. But rewards are found everywhere in the Bible! In the beatitudes, for example, Jesus said:

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, **for your reward is great in heaven** (Matthew 5:11-12a ESV)

Life is long. Obedience is hard. Therefore, God gives us a glimpse of our coming reward to encourage us in our walk with him. This is why, in our passage this morning, after Jesus called the disciples to a life of humility and service and suffering, he pointed them forward to the thrones on which they would sit. There is a REWARD in store for us in the kingdom of heaven that FAR SURPASSES anything that this world has to offer!

And the world has some things to offer, doesn't it?

The world is offering us rewards everywhere we look.

Click here and we will give you sexual gratification. Spend here and you will be admired. Travel here and you will be fulfilled. Follow these steps and you will have success.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus In Luke* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 324.

Rewards are being promised left, right and center! The question is, then, which reward should we pursue?

Brothers and sisters, don't settle for lesser rewards. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,<sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** (Matthew 6:19-21 ESV)

Where is your treasure? What is your heart after? What is the greatness that you pursue?

The rich young ruler lived for his money. Perhaps that's your temptation.

Or perhaps, like the pharisees, you are living for the praise of man. In Matthew 23, Jesus pointed to their long-winded prayers and their self-righteous sermons, and he warned:

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. (Matthew 23:5a ESV)

It feels good to be admired by others, doesn't it? It feels good to roll out our righteousness for everyone to see. We do it in a hundred different ways, and it's hard to define, but we all know when we're doing it. We all know when we're performing for man rather than serving for God.

Jesus warns:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:1-2 ESV)

How often have we settled for lesser rewards?

There is a kingdom that is coming! We will reign and rule with Him! In Matthew 19, Jesus said:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> **But many who are first will be last, and the last first.** (Matthew 19:28-30 ESV)

The day is coming when everything will be flipped upside down! Those who suffered with him will be glorified with him! Those who settled for lesser rewards will say goodbye to their temporary pleasures, and they'll wonder why they didn't prepare for the kingdom that endures forever.

If you want to be great in the kingdom of God, then don't follow the example of the world, and don't settle for lesser rewards.

Third, and finally, if you want to be great in the kingdom of God:

### **3. Fix your eyes on Jesus and follow his lead**

Do you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven? Do you want to know what greatness looks like? Then lock your eyes on Jesus and follow his lead. In this text, the emphasis is placed on his self-sacrificing service. Jesus asks:

For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? **But I am among you as the one who serves.** (Luke 22:27 ESV)

If anyone deserved to sit at the table and have his needs catered to by others, it was Jesus. He had every right to lean back and rest. Every one of the disciples understood that Jesus' greatness was unrivaled.

Therefore, as he reclined at the table after having washed their feet and after having taught them that his blood was going to be shed for them, he took this opportunity to teach them that true greatness is marked by self-sacrificing service.

Every detail of Jesus' life and ministry exemplified this.

He left his heavenly throne to come down to us.

He took on our humanity. He clothed his strength in our weakness.

He sat and ate with the people who had been rejected by the world. He laid his hands on the people who were unclean and contagious. He loved the unlovable. He forgave the unforgivable.

He served us, even though we rejected him. He claimed us as his own even though we denied him. He stooped down and he washed the filthy feet of Judas even though he knew that Judas would betray him in just a few short hours. This is the model of greatness that Jesus set for us.

But the most profound display of true greatness was the cross.

The King came down from his throne and hung naked in our place for our rebellion.

He died so that we could live. He was forsaken so that we could be forgiven. He descended to hell so that we could ascend to heaven.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11  
ESV)

THAT is greatness.

And having descended to the depths – having served us to the end – Jesus then proved that this earthly, temporary kingdom will not have the final word. Because, contrary to what we have been told, the grave is not the end.

On the third day, he rose! Vindicated! Triumphant! Greatness personified! He held in his hands the keys of death and hell!

He ascended to his throne, where he is now seated in victory! The joy that was set before him is complete. The victory is won. Humility has given way to glory!

What does greatness look like? It looks like Jesus!

Would you be great? Fix your eyes on him and follow his lead!

Stoop down and talk to that person who has been ignored all day long. Maybe that's the woman huddled up with her blanket in the alley. Maybe that's your eight-year-old who wants you to play after a long day at work. Maybe that's the co-worker who has no social awareness.

Bear one another's burdens. Answer that phone call that you know will rob you of your last bit of energy. Take over the nursery shift for the woman who clearly needs a morning to be in the service. Give up your Saturday to help with that move. Be a listening ear for your brother who's grieving.

Be willing to suffer for others. Serve that person who betrayed you so deeply. Love your enemy.

And don't settle for a lesser reward. Don't put on a show to impress your spouse or to impress your coworkers or to impress your church. Don't boast. Don't brag. Just follow in the footsteps of Jesus and trust that God sees, God knows, and God rewards.

Down is the way up.

This is the example that Jesus has set. This is the greatness that receives the reward. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.