

## A Kings Ethic: Counter Intuitive Greatness

### Luke 22:21-30

**Introduction:** How one determines greatness displays or reveals what is most valuable. Our culture places a high value on fame, notoriety, wealth, power, and accomplishment, not only as valuable but as the measurable in ascertaining prominence. In other words, we look up to (or acknowledge) the celebrity, the one who excels in certain fields of discipline, or the entrepreneur. That is why people like Tom Hanks, Kobe Bryant, and Elon Musk are names in the news and that draw admiration. Every culture has markers of greatness, and most often they have to do with external factors, rather than internal ones, what someone *does* rather than *who* they are, their accomplishments over their character.

Jesus addressed this issue more than once with His disciples, but the last time was right before He went to the cross. This morning we will go back to the upper room where Jesus anticipates His death and the disciples were oblivious to the events unfolding right before their eyes. We are going to look at the issue of **greatness** through the lens of humility, or to say another way, we have to push through the pervasiveness of pride to get to what defines greatness in Christ's kingdom.

### **Pervasiveness of Pride (21-25)**

**Luke 22:21-25** But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. <sup>22</sup> For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" <sup>23</sup> And they began to **question one another**, which of them it could be who was going to do this. <sup>24</sup> 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**."

Pride is a slippery sin. What I mean by that is by nature, pride is *self-deceptive*, making us oblivious to the truth of our condition. **Proverbs** is full of principles concerning pride, that it is the way of evil (8:13), it goes before destruction (16:18), it will bring a person low (29:23), the Lord tears down the house of the prideful (15:25), and is simply called "sin" (21:4). Pride is at the core of all sin, the root cause of all others. Prides desires to place self above all else, valuing self over what God desires, the needs of others, and elevates our own thoughts, preferences, and demands. Pride is the opposite of fearing the Lord, and since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, pride is inherently foolish. Pride plagues us all. It is the source of our **lust**, desiring for ourselves something God has not called us to have or in the manner in which we want it. **Anxiety** demands answers to questions we are not privy to or knowledge of the future that God has chosen not to give. **Envy** desires what others have, demanding the same for ourselves, **laziness** delights in personal comfort over faith driven obedience, and **grumbling and complaining** shows that our heart is not content with what God has given or promised. Pride is NOT something that can be boxed in, dichotomized from all other sins since it is intertwined with all others. We see this pervasiveness in the disciples **mindset, words, and actions** in the days and hours before Jesus went to the cross.

### **Presumed Preparation**

After completing the Passover meal where Jesus transformed it into "communion", which we celebrate His blood and body given for us, Jesus let the disciples in on the secret Jesus had known already: *there was a traitor in their midst*. Two things are extraordinary at this point. **1)** They began to **point fingers** at each other, questioning *each other* as to who the traitor was. In other words, they were extremely quick to throw each other under the bus ("I've always thought Thaddeus was kind of shifty") and were as slow in considering that **they themselves** may be the one. Pride always gives us a rosier picture of

ourselves than is reality. Pride is the magic mirror on the wall, always telling us that we are the fairest of them all, and we are far too quick to believe it.

2) It did not take long for the disciples to get over the news of a traitor and onto a discussion of their own greatness! Think about that! Wouldn't that news be shocking and end all other discussions. But pride inflates and puffs up. Each individual man at this point was convinced they were strong, ready, and willing. Peter said he was ready to go **prison and death** (Luke 22:33). When Jesus told them all that they would fall away before the end of the night, Peter separated himself from the group, saying even if he must die, He would never deny! And all the disciples jumped on the bandwagon and said the same (Matt. 26:30-35). Pride causes us to overestimate our readiness, puff up our competency, and place ourselves above others (who surely are not as good as us!)

### Contention of Prominence

Jesus was hurting and troubled in His soul at this late hour (John 13:21) and wanted to be with His friends in these waning moments before facing wrath. Instead of looking to their friend and Saviors needs, they were supremely concerning about their own! *This is the marrow of pride*. It sees others as means of our own happiness and will look to others needs only *after our own*. As they got closer to Jerusalem, the disciples got more and more swept up into their own greatness, instead of magnifying the greatness of Jesus:

- **After the Mount of Transfiguration** (Matt. 18:1-4; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48) - There was an argument going on among them, the kind that brothers have, after Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain with Him. You could only imagine the conversation that went on, with some feigning humility (I don't know why He picked us, but He obviously knows what He's doing), elevating themselves and demeaning the others. In fact, when Jesus called them out on this like a good parent ("what are you guys talking about back there" - Mark 9:33), they kept silent like naughty kids.
- **The Request of James, John, and mom** (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45) - Right before the triumphal entry, you had this family threesome come and ask for places of honor next to Jesus in the kingdom (what mom wouldn't want their sons to be the chief princes!). Not only was this incredibly audacious, missing the point of Jesus' teaching, it led to the rest of the 12 to become indignant (Mark 10:41).

Its important to note that the disciples were working off of good and true knowledge. Jesus had assured them that they **would** rule on thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). It was not that they had bad theology, but they missed the point. They had right theology but wrong attitudes. We can be taught the right thing, but if we do not take that knowledge and allow it to **humble us and grow in love**, we fall incredibly short. If we are truly well taught (and I hope we are), we will not hate, attack, or diminish those who disagree. We will not fear those who are different. We will not avoid unbelievers who live out their sinful beliefs. We will be patient with others in the way God has been patient with us, full of grace and quick to forgive in the way God has with us. Being well taught or having the right theology is so much more than knowledge, facts, or memorized texts. Its allowing those texts to change us, transforming us each day by the work of the Spirit to speak the truth in love and walk with the lowly, just as Jesus demonstrated. If all of our study of God's Word has not softened our heart toward God and others, we are in dire need of repentance.

### Power of Position

Notice that Jesus sought to gently correct these men at this point, since they obviously were missing the point. As He had done before, He gave a compare and contrast between the system of the world and

the ethic of His Kingdom. The world system of power is based on position, be it through strength, education, or age. In Jesus' economy, power comes through influence and influence comes through ones displayed character. He started with the negative examples:

- **Power through control** - This is an effective way to lead (now, not a good way, but effective). This is the way of autocratic power, dominance, dictatorship (my way or the highway), force, intimidation, and fear. This is leading through insecurity rather than love, the goal being the outcome rather than the person. This is the way Rome ruled. This is why they perfected death by crucifixion, to not only punish actual seditionists, but to squelch anyone considering it. Dictatorships like North Korea operate out of cruel fear based tactics where no one trusts anyone and there is always the knowledge that someone is watching and ready to punish. There is no gentleness here, and any kindness is shown as a manipulative tool to get people to do what they want.
- **Power through dependency** - Not only are there positional realities, but realities of resources. The ones with authority were called "The Benefactors", or the ones bank rolling someone else. Giving money to someone else can seem like a magnanimous gesture, but not when there are strings attached. Your credit card company does not lend you money because they like you, but because there is mutual gain in the relationship. Money gives power of loyalty, or the fear of being cut off, or a debtor relationship. This is not loving, but is affective. If you want to put someone under your thumb, give them money and then make demands.

So pride is prevalent, not in the disciples but in us. How do we counter it? What are we called to? How does it change?

### **Heart of Humility (26-27)**

**Luke 22:26-27 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.

#### **Humble Identity**

Jesus changes the entire paradigm for His followers. The measure of greatness is not longer the accomplishment or the level of influence (if that were the measure, the worlds tyrants would be considered "great"). Jesus said that greatness is found in WHO you are, even more than WHAT you do. We are to **become** as the youngest. This would have been shocking and counter-intuitive, since it was age that was honored in circles, where youth was told to stay silent and wait their turn. Greatness is found when, instead of seeking honor by cultural measurements, one must take on the mindset of one who is culturally dishonored, much like a servant. Earlier, Jesus had taken a child to Himself and told the disciples they needed to become **like children** (Matt. 18:2).

Children trust implicitly. They seek to please their parents without seeking much beyond that. They do not have greater ambitions outside of the moment, hoping mom and dad see what they are doing. What is the point? Jesus is NOT asking for mere acts of service from His followers. He is calling them to **be** humble, to **be a servant**, to let that become who they are. That means we never turn it off. We are not servants at church but tyrants at home. We are not about customer service at work but a me-monster we our family. Being a leader or becoming great starts with an adoption of an identity as a humble servant, which tempers our expectation and solidifies our confidence.

#### **Humble Mindset**

Once we have adopted as a gospel enabled identity, we can now take on a whole new way of thinking. Jesus said it this way in **Philippians 2:3** - "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in **humility** count others more significant than yourselves." Consider others as having surpassing value greater than yourselves. This means that we no longer are concerning ourselves primarily about us, about what we are getting out of something or what type of recognition we get, but are so consumed with God's glory that we begin to see people as those who are worthy to serve. Think about it. It's easier to serve someone we like or respect rather than someone who is difficult or stinks. Not only that, but it frees us from having to get recognition or seek immediate reward for loving others.

This is where humility is slippery as well. Even when we serve we can do it with the expectation of acknowledgment, reward, or even a "thank you" on the back end. Every once in a while (and let me stress that), I try to do something around the house that will help Erin and communicate love to her, a selfless act like washing the clothes, sweeping the floor, or washing the mirrors. The problem comes when these things are not readily noticed or acknowledged, but I desperately WANT them to be. Instead of knowing that these were done out of a love for God and my wife, and that being enough, I want her to notice, to say thank you, or give me a big smooch. So I find myself hinting or outright telling her what I did, how I served her, and that she should notice. This is where self-love and supposed service collide.

The mindset of humility plays out in other ways in relationships as well. How many of us have had conflicts in our marriages because we have placed expectations on our spouse that they continually fall short of. We communicate them, let them know, and hold them to these, but they still seem to fall short. When our expectations are not met, we are in a perpetually foul mood, joyless, and put our spouse in that uneasy space of feeling like they can never do anything right. Humility is acknowledging that what needs to change in this IS NOT MY SPOUSE but my own expectations. My expectations may be just that: MINE. They are not Biblical or inherently right, but simply what I want, and when I don't get what I want, I'm ticked. Sound familiar to anyone? This plays out in relationships here as well. When we have expectations of how others should serve or love us, and get angry when they fall short of those, we need to look at our own selves before blaming others. Am I thinking humbly? Am I treating others as having value greater than myself? Or am I demanding my rights, my preferences, and my way with others?

### **Humble Example**

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." **Philippians 2:5-8***

We love the fact that Jesus never gives us a command that He does not give us the grace to do. Beyond that, He gave us an example to follow. Not only did Jesus embrace the realities of humility, service, and greatness by coming into the world, taking on flesh, and dying in our place, but He did something vivid for the disciples to learn from. He took on the role of a common servant and washed the feet of those who were squabbling while He was suffering. He told them that typically the one reclining at the table would be considered greater, and the one serving lesser. But in His economy, He displayed greatness by **becoming the servant**, washing the feet even of His betrayer.

Is this how we view leadership? Is this how we lead as husbands and fathers? Is this how we seek to influence others in our workplace, neighborhood and community? When we become like Jesus in humility, we show something vastly different than what the world offers. To be clear as well, humility is not a wimpy, let-people-walk-over-you venture. It is standing firm in the truth even when people hate you, since you are no longer concerned primarily about reputation. It's a willingness to discipline your

children, risking their "liking" you in the short term to train them in godliness for the future. It is living out convictional realities even when it cost.

How do we retrain our prideful hearts?

- **Adopt the mindset of a slave** (Luke 17:10), living out who we truly are
- **Seek to understand your own heart and have a healthy distrust of it** - With the humble comes wisdom (Prov. 11:2) - We know that pride is prevalent and so evaluate our motives, seeking the Lord to purify those. However, we also are wary of the other extreme where we overanalyze to the point of paralysis, meaning our pride prevents us from walking in faith driven obedience
- **Be quick to admit weakness, fault, and take responsibility for our actions** - Self-confidence and blame shifting are the stuff of the Fall. Being free in the gospel means we can admit that we are wrong, that our motives are NOT as pure as we think, and that we HAVE considered ourselves better than others. Humility means we practice a posture of repentance, knowing that our sin is greater than we even know, so that we can embrace forgiveness and peace.

### Radical Nature of Reassurance (28-30)

**Luke 22:28-30** "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.

#### Grace in Failure

Finally, this is where the story takes a hopeful turn. If we simply took an objective look at the scene, it would NOT be a huge leap if Jesus simply jettisoned these men who were clearly self-absorbed, who were oblivious to Jesus' plight, and who continually turned the conversation to themselves. It would seem that Jesus could have been angry, telling them to get out or to shut their mouths. But instead of any of that, He gives them **reassurance! What??!!** This is grace. This is bold, rich, lavish grace given to those who did not deserve it.

Here is the truth this morning: **all of us have blown it in the area of pride.** We have all reacted pridefully, treated others as lesser than us, and thought we deserved more than we do. God's grace demonstrate by Christ reminds us that He has not let us go, that He will give us the strength to endure, and we won't get thrown out of His hand. This is the same grace of assurance that allows us to repent toward God and to seek forgiveness from others. Has there been anyone you have been acting prideful toward, or that you have habitually acted out in?

#### Hope in His Greatness

Finally, Jesus reminded the disciples that all that was coming into the future was His! True greatness comes from the One who is truly great! Everything that was and was to come was His, and we are the recipients of His extended grace from that. Humility is needed because it prepares us to live with the Great One forever, and so today we magnify Him, deflecting all praise and glory to Him, away from ourselves, which gets us ready for eternity.

So lets define greatness properly: ***if we want to be great, let us become the least. If we want to become great, let's become a servant, humbly seeking to serve others since they have a surpassing value greater than ourselves.***