

The Greatest Becomes The Least
By Jason Huff
Psalm 119:132-135, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:24-38

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 22:24-38. Listen now to God's Word. "Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me." Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That is enough," he replied."

Willow Creek Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago is one of the most well-known and influential megachurches in the country. Pastors that have significant influence in the Christian world such as John Ortberg and Lee Strobel have worked there. The church is known for having conferences that are broadcast throughout the country, and perhaps their biggest is the Leadership Summit, which is telecast to attendees in 57 countries. Founding pastor Bill Hybels has always said that his goal was to choose a couple of speakers that would make some people in the audience uncomfortable. I attended when President Bill Clinton was there in 2000. Jimmy Carter spoke in 2007, and other recent notables include Colin Powell and British prime minister Tony Blair. There's a prestige to this event rare in the Christian world.

There are a lot of good things Christians can learn about leadership at the Leadership Summit. Many of us in the church have never so much as read a book on the subject, yet we find ourselves in positions of authority that require it. But after attending the Leadership Summit for a few years, I started to see a problem. The church has begun to adapt the world's ways of leading. There's nothing wrong with learning how to do effective evangelism or reaching out to people through the Internet or through modern worship music. But Christians aren't called to lead like the world does. The world often leads by compromise and deception, and when those don't work, coercion and force. The world tells us, "Do whatever you can to sell your product, and change your product until it's what people want." The world tells us, "Make your product appealing to every age group so that they can enjoy it with other people just like them. Make them think it's all about them, and leave out any bad side effects." The world tells us to make a vision statement and goals and objectives and dream big. They sound great. We've been conditioned to think so. But they aren't what Jesus taught about leadership.

Today's passage takes us to the table conversation during the Last Supper. Jesus' disciples were in a conflict over who was the greatest. It sounds like a conversation with a bunch of 7-year-olds to us, but this was a real issue in the religious climate of their era. In a culture bound by rules of honor and shame, not knowing the social hierarchy could lead to disgrace. It seems that the disciples are finally understanding that Jesus is going to leave them soon, even if they don't get the full picture of His death. So who's going to be in charge? Who will call the shots when the revolution comes? It's not like the modern church has fixed this kind of bickering either. All of us know of churches that have been torn apart over who controlled the checkbook or who ran the Christian Education committee. There are pastors and bishops and priests and whatnot who are really into being seen as the head of their particular flock. Issues of power and control can destroy any church, large or small.

Jesus stops this conversation by bringing up the world's way of doing things. In that time, kings and nobles and those of high birth and status didn't pay taxes; they collected them. In turn, they would act as benefactors for all sorts of projects – amphitheaters, temples, you name it. It was a show of how magnanimous they were. You notice how there's no Tiger Stadium any more but there is a Comerica Park? No Pontiac Silverdome but instead, Ford Field? It was the same in ancient Rome. If you had money and power, you paid for a temple or two, a public work here or there, and gave yourself all the credit. Back then it wasn't for advertising; it was to gain favor and status. You were buying your authority. Would anybody want to cross you after all your good works? Of course not!

But this isn't leadership to Jesus; it leads to resentment and anger, to one person flaunting their status above someone else. Jesus had every right to do as He pleased as the Son of God. Unlike those kings and benefactors, His power and authority came from His very being, His perfection as part of the Godhead. Yet He never abused His influence. He served the people of Israel – healing the sick, feeding the five thousand, proclaiming the good news of God without cost. That's exactly what Jesus calls the disciples to do. They are told to be servant leaders.

What are the core differences between everyday leaders in the world and servant leaders? Looking at the life of Jesus, we can see a few. First, servant leaders always have in mind the work the Master has given them and they do it faithfully. Imagine going to a restaurant and giving the waiter your order. Thirty minutes later, you haven't seen him or your food. When you do find him in the back on a cot, he tells you, "Oh, well, I had to go check my email and call my girlfriend and take a nap. Give me a minute and I'll put your order in." Something tells me that he's not going to get a tip and you're not going back to that restaurant! In comparison, a good waiter makes sure they get your order right, checks on it with the cook, makes sure your drinks are filled and that you have everything you need...we know good service when we see it.

In the same way, we are called on to serve God with our full devotion. Our task is to please Him with our lives, to live them in a way that reflects His desires. This means that sometimes we give up our own dreams to serve His better dream for us. We can be doing all sorts of ministry in the church, study after study and small groups and classes for this age group and that affinity group, but if they aren't what God wants us to be doing, it's not servant leadership. It's just leading the same old way and putting a false Christian face on it. We have to be asking, "What is God doing right now, and how can I become part of what He is doing?"

Jesus modeled this perfectly. As Jesus put it in John 5:19, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” There were plenty of good things that Jesus could have done. He only fed the crowds a couple of times; surely He could have provided food to last for years. Despite all the healings we read about, we only have to look at the book of Acts to find that there were many more that Jesus never reached. But Jesus wasn’t about doing all the good things possible; He was about His Father’s business. If we are going to be servant leaders, we must be clear that we serve the Father always.

This also means that we serve people in accordance to Christ’s teachings. We cannot put people above God, letting them dictate the message of the Gospel, but instead we minister to them by teaching them through word and example what we know of God. This may take many forms. Sometimes when we hear “servant leader,” we wonder, “does that mean that I should be at a soup kitchen serving meals every day?” The answer is no. The church early on realized that different people have different gifts to serve different ways. A teacher should serve in their teaching; a chef should serve in their cooking; an entrepreneur should serve in their business. That doesn’t mean that we don’t serve together in ways outside of those gifts, such as through gifts to Head Start or volunteering with Angel Food, but that we shouldn’t be worried that we are serving less because we’re not a pastor or not a teacher or not a deacon or an elder. Serve where God leads you in your gifts, and you will be doing what God requires.

Jesus’ conversation with Simon Peter shows us another side of servant leadership: the fact of testing and spiritual warfare. Our translation today makes it sound like Jesus is speaking about Simon specifically, but the “you” in the Greek is plural. It means that Satan has asked to sift all the disciples. Peter will face a spiritual test earlier than the rest, but all of them are under spiritual attack. These are the same disciples we will see holed up in an upper room in fear of winding up like Jesus, the same Thomas who doubted the resurrection without seeing the proof. They were indeed tested, and Judas was found to be unfaithful. The rest make mistakes, but they overcome their fears and return to Jesus.

Servant leaders know that they will face spiritual warfare. It’s because the true servant leader who first serves God and then serves others in their leadership role is dangerous to the devil. He can’t be bought. He can’t be manipulated or coerced by the promise of power because he knows the God who has all authority and power. The servant leader is not interested in how she appears to other people if she has done what God has commanded of her. The servant leader isn’t interested in compromising principles for personal gain. The servant leader leads not to be cheered by the world but to be greeted by God someday with the welcome, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” There is nothing more dangerous to God’s enemy than a Christian who has surrendered everything to Christ and leads as Jesus’ follower.

Sometimes, we may fail our tests. That’s not to excuse ourselves or to glibly choose to sin, but we are fallible. Peter showed that, and we’ll study his situation more in a couple of weeks. But what we need to know is that we should expect pushback when we give ourselves totally to God. In 1 Peter 4:13-14, we are told, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

Sometimes these tests come in simple ways – literally after writing the last paragraph, a number of difficult circumstances fell in my lap, hours and hours of lost time and frustrations. All of us experience these things from time to time, believers and unbelievers alike. But spiritual warfare, the unique testing of the faithful when we are serving God and attempting to spread His word, is a reality. We need not fear anything we may face, but we have to be aware that we are not just called to be nice people. We are fighting a battle on the LORD’s behalf. And that battle is not against our neighbors who need to know the redemption of Christ or the man who struggles with sin down the street who can be redeemed. As Ephesians 6:12-13 tells us, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, put on the full armor of God in order that you may resist on the day of evil, and when you have done everything, to stand firm.”

The servant leader knows that the armor of God is what Paul goes on to describe – truth, righteousness, eagerness to share the gospel, faith, assurance of salvation, and the Word of God itself. The servant leader does not harness these to let others know how holy or godly they are, but uses these tools to serve God and to serve those who need to know about the forgiveness provided for us through Christ’s sacrificial death. Through putting on the armor of God, the servant leader is prepared for whatever our spiritual enemy throws at us.

Finally, Jesus prepares the servant leader for what lies ahead by telling the disciples to be readied for their task. Jesus talks about taking a bag and a sword and the disciples take Him literally. The disciples are like, “Yeah, we’ve got two swords!” Some of them are thinking that the Kingdom is coming and the war to take down Rome is here. But Jesus’ response is two-fold. When Jesus says, “That is enough,” He’s not just saying that two swords are enough to fulfill the prophecy that He was counted among the lawless. He’s also saying, “Enough!” It’s a statement of aggravation that they still don’t understand and think that violence is the way to bring about the Kingdom. It’s tricky to translate, but it’s certain that Jesus is not calling us all to carry swords around with us.

What Jesus is telling the disciples is that a paradigm shift is about to take place. When the disciples first went through the country spreading the gospel that the Kingdom of God was nearing through Jesus, they were welcomed into homes and villages. They were given food and water and clothing and everything they needed. God grew their faith by providing for them in very tangible ways they easily understood. But something new was coming. On Pentecost, the day in the church calendar we celebrate today, the Holy Spirit was sent to the disciples to remind them of Jesus’ teachings and to spur them on to action in His name. Their faith would be strong and their resolve firm. But because of the opposition of the religious leaders, they would no longer find themselves welcomed everywhere. In fact, Christians found themselves outlawed and hunted for over two centuries, first by the Jews and then by the auspices of Rome itself. They were ostracized as often as they were welcomed. And so this meant that the disciples had to be ready to care for the needs they would meet as they spread the Gospel, rather than relying on the goodwill of strangers. Taking a sword meant being prepared to prepare your own food and fight off animals sleeping out in the wild. Being a disciple in the first century was tough work!

For us, I believe this final teaching for servant leaders is one of growth. When we first start investigating God and become believers, everything is given to us. We attend and listen and participate passively. That's appropriate. Nobody should be asking us to teach a Bible study or become an elder because we're still just learning who God is and what Christ has done for us and what our response should be. Even when we start serving, there should be a safety net – just as God provided for the disciples when they first went out preaching in Israel. We become leaders gradually. But just as the disciples eventually had to step out further in faith and trust the Holy Spirit to lead them into dangerous and uncharted territory, those of us who have been believers for a while need to do the same. Whether that's creating friendships to spread the Gospel or even witnessing to people we don't know, whether it's ministering to those in prison or hosting the homeless, God is leading us to risk ourselves in order to make Him known...and as His leaders, our role is not to figure out why we must risk but to serve with our lives. No one person can do it all – and not just the pastor or the elders are deacons are called to those tasks. Even the least among us is great when they follow God's lead and sacrifice to serve our King.

Be mindful that we are serving the King. Be wary of the enemy that wants to break our spirit and our faith. Be ready to grow and risk to serve. These are the marks of true leaders in the Kingdom of God. Leading as God directs doesn't lead to many earthly rewards, but the disciples were promised thrones in Christ's Kingdom, where they would sit over all of Israel. Leading by becoming the least promises spiritual rewards we cannot fathom. And perhaps best of all, by serving as Jesus served, with the apostle Paul we can say, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." When we serve in our leadership, we know the heart of the Son who came to serve and save us.