

## Surprised by True Greatness

Luke 22:24-30

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Jesus' disciples didn't know it at the time, but their Last Supper Passover with Jesus was the last meal they would have with Him before His death on the cross. And how did they spend that precious time? By arguing amongst each other about which of them would be viewed as the greatest when they went to heaven. We may look down on the disciples for their proud and petty conversation, but there are times when we are no better. And how did Jesus respond to their conversation? With a profound demonstration of selfless love. Let's learn from His example today!

After 3.5 years of personal tutoring and private instruction, after 3.5 years of listening to hundreds of sermons and a trainload of personal illustrations on spiritual truths, the disciples were still miles away from an understanding of true greatness, authentic spirituality, and genuine servant-leadership.

And now here they are in the upper room with the Lord, and you would think the disciples thought they were getting ready for the prom, rather than persecution. They're enamored with themselves; they are inflated by the world's concept of greatness.

But they are about to prove the divine principle, "Take heed, while you stand, lest you fall."

If you put the clues of the Gospel accounts together, Luke's Gospel records a surprising turn of events. Let me invite you back to chapter 22 where an event occurred sometime during the Last Supper.

John's Gospel says that this unique event actually interrupted dinner, as Jesus got up to effectively model true greatness.

Evidently, Jesus is going to respond to the conversation that was taking place during supper.

Luke records the conversation, as embarrassing as it was, in **Luke 22:24**,

*A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*

*Luke 22:24*

By the way, one of the greatest proofs of the inspiration of Scripture is that we would never include moments like these in the biographies of church leaders. We naturally tend to polish the halos of our heroes. God doesn't do that as he inspires the biblical account.

Can you imagine being one of the apostles and for the rest of your ministry, here within hours of the Lord's death, is written proof that you were arguing with the other men as to why you're the greatest. And it's now in the inspired record of Scripture!

Have you ever accidentally made a phone call when your cell phone is in your pocket? Someone on the other end just listens to your conversation and then they tell you about it later. You're first question is: "What did I say?"

I remember having surgery a few years ago, I had fallen and broken my nose and I thought the doctor would sit me in a chair and just reset it—have me bite down on a piece of bark or something like they do in the movies, and it'd be over. But it required surgery in an operating room, going under with anesthesia, so there I was on the operating table, only to realize that the surgeon was a member of our church, and the anesthesiologist was a member of our church. They were going to put me under! I wondered if they were happy with me. This was their chance. No one would know. Actually, they were skillful doctors who pulled me through it, and when I came back to consciousness, I asked one of them if, while I was under anesthetics, I had said anything that would have disqualified me from the pastorate. Was anything recorded? And he said, "No."

What Luke just recorded for all time **here in verse 24**, you would think it might disqualify these men from becoming—in less than two months from this dinner—the leaders of the New Testament church.

Instead, what you're about to witness is the patience of Jesus and the grace of Jesus with them and with you and me to this day.

Everything we say, in fact, everything we think, is on record. But instead of throwing us aside, He continues to teach us and forgive us and shape us into a different definition of what true greatness looks like as His disciples.

So, instead of giving them a tongue lashing they would never forget, Jesus highlights the distinction between those who are considered great people on earth and those who are considered great people in heaven.

**Now verse 25:**

*And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 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 22:25-27*

When Vespasian returned to Rome as the new emperor after a military victory, Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote that the crowd flocked to the streets to cheer him on, and they hailed him as their Benefactor.

David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 866

In other words, “You’re so great, how can we live without you?”

One historian wrote that the emperor Tiberius had coins stamped and under his image it was written, “deserving of adoration.”

William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Baker Book House, 1978), p. 971

The guy with the business account at the restaurant is always going to be considered greater than the waitress or the waiter, Jesus says here, according to the standards of earth.

Jesus is saying, “Listen, that’s how greatness works in the world; greatness is defined by how many people serve you, not how many people you serve.”

At this point, it’s hard to imagine, but the church is going to be created in less than two months, and it looks like the disciples will end up arguing over who gets to preach the first sermon; when they miraculously speak in all those different languages to all the people who’ve gathered in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost, the disciples will regroup afterward and argue over who had the most converts, or whose language was most miraculous.

The church isn’t going to make it off the launching pad; it’s going to fizzle out and die.

They are missing that distinctive characteristic which Jesus modeled; He had equal rights with the Father but He did not grasp them—clutch them—but became a servant. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (***Philippians 2***).

They’re missing this. They’re not listening.

This reminds me of the story of the young man whose cart was stuck in the middle of the muddy road. This donkey had decided he wasn’t going to pull it out; he planted his hooves firmly on the ground and would not move. This young man shouted at the donkey, pulled on

the rope, waved his arms, but that donkey wouldn't take another step forward. Eventually, an old farmer came down the road and immediately sized up the problem. He said, "Do you want some help?" and the young man said, "I do, but I don't think you can do any better. I've been yelling at this donkey for an hour, and he won't budge." The old farmer went over to the side of the road, picked up a big stick, came back and hit the donkey between the eyes. Then he said, "Now get." And the donkey immediately pulled the cart out of the mud. "I don't understand," the young man said, "when I yelled in his face he acted as if he didn't even hear me, and you spoke in a quiet voice and he moved." "That's true," the farmer said, "but first, I got his attention."

Let me tell you, the Lord is about to get their attention as He takes a proverbial two-by-four to their pride. Not by yelling, but by quietly serving.

John's Gospel records that at this moment, the Lord got up from the table, took off His outer tunic and wrapped a towel around His waist. He was now going to play the role of the household servant.

In these days, roads were dusty, and sandals were common. A large waterpot was typically placed at the entrance of a house, and a household servant would arrive with a ladle and a towel to wash the dirty feet of the guests as they came in.

As we've already learned, when people ate, they reclined on cushions or on mats on the floor, propping themselves up with an elbow. They faced a low, rectangular, wooden table. If their feet were dirty, everybody knew it. But there was no household servant provided by the owner of this home, that waiter, so to speak, isn't anywhere in this picture.

And none of the disciples are volunteering! They're too busy arguing over their greatness; they don't have time to consider an act of service.

***In John 13:5, we're told that to the total shock of the disciples,***

*[Jesus] poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

*John 13:5*

You might notice that Jesus didn't stand up and make an announcement that He will now demonstrate the true greatness of servant-leadership.

Get out your cameras. Start taking notes.

The truth is, they were stunned enough as it was. Jesus simply began playing the role they refused to play; in fact, none of them had volunteered to even wash His feet!

Evidently, they were too great for even that!

But now, I believe you could have heard a pin drop in this upper room. Their eyes were turned down, their cheeks flushed with shame. Their Lord—their Leader, their King—is now their waiter. He’s washing their dirty feet!

And by the way, this would have included Judas Iscariot. How do you wash the feet of Judas Iscariot? With sandpaper. Ice cold water. I’d put him last so that by the time I got to him, the towel would be wringing wet, and the water would be muddy. And I’d make sure to splash some water on his clothes!

Now, we’re told that when the Lord arrives at Peter’s feet, Peter pulls them away in **verse 8:**

*Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.”*

*John 13:8*

In the original language, Peter uses a double negative (*ou mē*) which is another way of emphasizing the negative. “Lord, there is absolutely no way in the world you are ever going to wash my feet!”

**Jesus says to him in verse 8:**

*“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”*

*John 13:8*

The word translated “share” here refers to fellowship. The Lord is telling him, “If I don’t wash you, you can’t have fellowship with Me.”

**So, Peter, the epitome of a dramatic reaction, says in verse 9:**

*“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”*

*John 13:9*

In other words, give me a full bath—let’s wash my hair while you’re at it – don’t forget behind my ears. Give me the full treatment!

**Jesus responds in verse 10,**

*“The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”*

*John 13:10*

The Lord is referring to two kinds of baths. One is the bath of *regeneration*. This is salvation—this is where you are totally cleansed, once and for all, from the penalty of sin. You only need this bath one time in your life.

As Paul wrote in ***Titus 3:5, “He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration.”***

So, you have the bath of regeneration. Then there is another bath we can call the bath of *restoration*. This is restored fellowship that comes when the *believer* confesses his daily sin.

So, the bath of *regeneration* gets you into the family of God. The bath of *restoration* keeps you in fellowship with God.

And Jesus says here in this upper room that not every one of these men have been bathed with the bath of regeneration. This is reference to Judas.

But even those who’ve been bathed still need daily cleansing.

There’s a warning here for the unbeliever: like Judas the pretender, it’s possible to be in the upper room, but not in the family of God. In other words, it’s possible to be in church, but not be a Christian.

Judas submitted to a few things, like having his feet washed, but he never surrendered the most important things: his heart and his life to the Lord.

The message for the believer is that you can’t have fellowship with Christ if you have dirty feet.

In this context, dirty feet represent unconfessed sin that has broken that close relationship with your Lord. You need to confess it; and frankly, your feet are going to get dirty every day, so you better get good at confessing your sin and admitting your sin. That will keep you in daily fellowship with the Lord.

What great truths Jesus taught by using a servant’s towel and basin of water as God the Son washed twelve pairs of dirty feet.

We tend to wash the feet of somebody who will wash our feet in return. Not the Lord. He will wash the feet of Judas, who betrayed Him; He will wash the feet of Peter, who will deny Him; He’s washing the feet of Thomas who will doubt Him; He’s washing the feet of men who will scatter from Him rather than stand with Him.

**If I could pull two observations from this text it would be these. First:**

**Serving the disciples was a stunning example of humility.**

How do you wash people’s feet today?

It's a father who understands that his life is more than a career, but loving his wife and children. It's a mother faithfully serving her family in ways no one will ever see or know.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 483

It's an employee who is willing to roll up their sleeves and do the task no one wants to do: it might be cleaning the shop floor or making a fresh pot of coffee.

It's a volunteer at church who is unheralded, perhaps even unseen, but committed to body of Christ and is willing to wrap a servant's towel around their waist.

These are the real tests of true greatness, of servant-leadership.

I came across this prose written by Ruth Calkin entitled, "I Wonder," in which she writes:

*You know, Lord how I serve You with great emotion in the limelight.  
You know how eagerly I speak for You at a women's club.  
You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group.  
You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.  
But how would I react, if You pointed to a basin of water,  
And asked me to wash the calloused feet of an old woman  
Day after day and month after month  
In a room, where nobody saw ...  
And nobody knew.*

That would be true greatness.

Serving the disciples was a stunning example of humility, but there's one more surprise, back in **Luke's account, he goes on in chapter 22 and verse 28** to make these promises:

*"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.*

*Luke 22:28-30*

This is the last thing I would expect the Lord to do: commend them. I'd be looking for new disciples. But this is the shocking grace of the Lord toward them and, if we're honest, toward all of us who follow Him today.

J.C. Ryle put it this way:

He knew full well that within a few hours they were all going to forsake Him. But here we find Him graciously dwelling on that one good point in their conduct—they had stayed with Him in His trials, up to this point. Notwithstanding their faults, and their mistakes, He knew their hearts. But

Jesus focused on this one act of faithfulness in spite of their many acts of failure. Never had a Master such poor, weak servants as we are; and never had we such a gracious Lord.

Adapted from J.C. Ryle, *Expository Notes on the Gospels: Luke* (Evangelical Press, original: 1879; reprint: 1975), p. 347

The disciples will look back on this event; they have the embarrassing, inspired, eternal record of their conversation, their pride, their ambition, their arguing, and they're going to see it for how tragic and unsupportive of the Lord it was, just hours before His arrest.

And then they'll read on, as we're reading today, that the Lord doesn't kick them out, He promises to make them kings in His coming kingdom.

And you and I also have been promised to co-reign with Him in His coming kingdom.

**Here's my second observation:**

**Rewarding believers one day will be a shocking bestowal of honor.**

Beloved, be prepared to be shocked by the grace of God.

Every well-meaning Christian I meet, if I ask them how they're doing in their walk, will respond with humility and transparency, "I'm not nearly what I should be."

And that's because we count our acts of faithlessness. How shocked will we be to find the Lord saying, "Yes, that's all true, but don't overlook this one act of faithfulness. I'm focusing on that."?

Jesus is telling them—and us—here in this passage:

- I have a gift and a future for you. It's a coming **kingdom**.
- I have incredible privileges in mind for you, you will ***eat and drink at my table***.
- I have a position in mind for you; you will ***sit one day on a throne***. You're royalty!

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor* (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 172

We are going to be shocked at the grace of Christ and the honor He will one day bestow upon His redeemed.

We will be shocked to be the recipients of rewards which Christ will give to His followers that will be far out of proportion to anything we have ever done for Him.

Ryle, p. 348

None of the disciples forgot this event, Peter certainly never forgot it, and as an old man, in **1 Peter 5:5**, Peter created a metaphor from the upper room, the only author to use it, where he writes, ***"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility."***



Put that apron around your waist and serve one another with humility; to the world you might be a nobody to act like that, but that happens to be true greatness in the eyes of God.

You might have noticed that we're not told if Jesus had His feet washed that night.

I can't help but wonder if someone volunteered. But let me tell you, my guess would be that after this lesson was over, the disciples crowded around their beloved Lord and all took part in washing His feet. We don't know for sure.

But what we do know is that all but one of these disciples devoted their lives—to their dying breath—to modeling the mark of true greatness: servant leadership they never forgot from that night in the upper room.

Now let's go and demonstrate it to others as well.

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# Study Guide

## Summary

In this sermon, we explored the concept of true greatness as demonstrated by Jesus during the Last Supper, focusing on Luke 22:24-30. Despite spending over three years with Jesus, the disciples still misunderstood the essence of greatness, arguing about who among them was the greatest. Jesus, instead of rebuking them harshly, chose to model true greatness by washing their feet. This act of humility and service was a profound lesson in servant-leadership. Jesus emphasized that greatness in God's kingdom is not about how many people serve you but how many you serve. He also reassured the disciples of their future roles in His kingdom, highlighting His grace and patience. The sermon concluded with a call to embody this servant-leadership in our daily lives.

## Key Takeaways

1. Jesus demonstrated that true greatness is not about status or power but about serving others. He washed the feet of His disciples, showing that genuine leadership involves humility and selflessness. This act challenges us to serve others without expecting anything in return, embodying the essence of Christ-like humility.
2. The disciples' argument about greatness reveals the human tendency towards pride. Jesus' response teaches us the importance of daily self-examination and confession. Just as our feet get dirty and need washing, our hearts need regular cleansing from sin to maintain fellowship with God. This ongoing process keeps us humble and aligned with God's will.
3. Despite the disciples' shortcomings, Jesus did not disqualify them but instead promised them roles in His future kingdom. This illustrates God's incredible grace, focusing on our acts of faithfulness rather than our failures. It reassures us that God sees our potential and is willing to use us for His purposes, despite our imperfections.
4. True greatness is often found in the mundane and unseen acts of service. We are called to serve others in humility, following Jesus' example, even when no one is watching.
5. Jesus promised His disciples that they would share in His kingdom, highlighting the future reward for faithful service. This promise extends to all believers, reminding us that our acts of service, though often unnoticed, are seen by God and will be rewarded. This future hope encourages us to persevere in serving others, knowing that our labor is not in vain.

## Discussion Guide

### Bible Reading

- Luke 22:24-30
- John 13:5-10
- Philippians 2:5-8

### Observation Questions

1. What were the disciples arguing about during the Last Supper according to Luke 22:24?
2. How did Jesus respond to the disciples' argument about greatness in Luke 22:25-27?
3. In John 13:5-10, what significant act did Jesus perform, and what was Peter's initial reaction?

### Interpretation Questions

1. How does Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet redefine the concept of greatness in God's kingdom?
2. What does Jesus' interaction with Peter in John 13:8-10 teach us about the importance of daily cleansing and confession?

### Application Questions

1. Reflect on a time when you sought recognition or status. How can Jesus' example of washing the disciples' feet change your approach to leadership and service?
2. In what ways can you practice humility and servant-leadership in your daily life, especially in mundane or unseen tasks?
3. Think of someone in your life who might be difficult to serve, much like Judas was for Jesus. How can you serve them with humility and love this week?
4. Jesus reassured the disciples of their future roles despite their failures. How does this assurance of God's grace and future reward encourage you to persevere in serving others?
5. Identify a specific area in your life where you can embody servant-leadership, whether at home, work, or church. What practical steps will you take to serve others in that area?