

Greater Than Everything
If You Love Me, You'll Lead Me
November 7, 2021

Good morning everyone!

I'm really glad you're here or watching online as we reach the mid-point of our series, *Greater Than Everything*.

If this is your first time with us or your first time in a long time, I want to give you a real quick overview of where we are and what we've been talking about to this point.

And, really, it's pretty simple.

I've made the claim in both messages before this one that ...

The one thing that will change almost everything about your life for the better ...

... if you can do it ... and keep on doing it ... and do it more and more ...

... is to love other people.

The one thing that will change almost everything about your life for the better ...

... if you can do it ... and keep on doing it ... and do it more and more ...

... is to love other people.

Meaning ...

- People who are *like* you
- As well as people who are *unlike* you.
- And people who *like* you
- As well as people who *don't* like you.

If you can grow in your ability to love others – meaning “everyone around you” – almost everything about your life (and maybe even theirs) will change for the better.

... which is why *love* is greater than everything.

And we know that is true for two reasons.

One, because Jesus tells us so ... which, of course, probably only matters to those of us who are Christians.

But *if we are Christians*, Jesus made it very clear – as did those who became the leaders of the early church after Him that ...

- Above all else, *love* is to be our defining characteristic.
- Because *without love*, regardless of how

smart we are, how spiritual we are, how whatever we are ... we are nothing.

Love is that big of a deal – greater than everything – to Jesus and those who follow Him.

But the second reason we know that love is greater than everything (in case the first reason is not enough) ...

The second reason we know is because experience tells us so.

We know from experience – from our own and from observing others – that ...

What destroys happiness even for people who have the otherwise “perfect life” is *damaged and broken relationships*.

Regardless of ...

- How much money you have in the bank ...

- Or how great your job is ...
- Or how wonderful your home ...
- Or any other “gee, isn’t my life great” factor ...

The greatest sadness, angst, and grief we all experience stems from relational trauma, relational carnage, and relational death.

Therefore ... the wisest thing we can do is to ensure that our relationships don't get permanently damaged and broken.

And the way to do that is to become better at loving other people.

And the good news is that you and I actually *can* become better at loving other people. You and I actually *can* grow in our ability and capacity to love *even those* who aren't like us and don't like

us.

Of course, that probably sounds a little hard to believe if you think of love the way most people do:

- That it's primarily a "feeling" or an emotion.
- And that it's something that just comes naturally to us.

... which is why, if you're going to become a better lover of *all* people, you've first got to raise the bar on your definition of love.

You have to aim a lot higher than most of us do, which is what we talked about last Sunday using the Apostle Paul's classic description from a letter he wrote to a group of Christ-followers in the first-century city of Corinth.

And if you missed that message or the first message in this series, as always, I encourage you to go back and watch, listen to or read the transcript of the message, which you can find in the media section of our app, website, and podcast.

So that's a summary of what we've learned so far.

What I want to talk about today and in the two Sundays that follow are some very specific applications of what we've been learning.

- Next week we'll look very closely at Jesus' crazy advice about loving people we don't like (and who don't like us).
- And the following week, we'll talk about how to love people we *do* like (and who like us) when they hurt us and fail us and let us down.

But today, we're going to look at one of the greatest principles Jesus ever taught.

Jesus on Leadership

In fact, if I ever get around to writing that book that I'm going to write one of these days, what I'm going to say today is going to be a chapter in it ... because this principle has been so transformational to me personally.

Not that I always get it right – I don't – but ever since I've learned this principle and have tried to apply it, it has changed the way I think about *leadership* both in my role as lead pastor of this church as well as in my family.

And my life – and maybe even the lives of those who have to live with me and put up with me – is better because of it.

Now, I know that some of you are thinking, “well, that’s great for you, Rick. But I’m not a leader. I’m not in charge of anything. I’m not anyone’s boss. I’ve not been given responsibility to provide direction.”

And I get that.

But leadership is not about authority or position or responsibility. Leadership is about influence.

You can be a leader without being the designated authority or having a specific position or responsibility.

In fact, just because someone *has* the authority or the position or the responsibility doesn’t mean that they *are* the leader.

If no one follows them – if no one goes where they’re going, they’re not leading. They’re just taking a walk!

So, at least for the rest of this message, I want you to avoid limiting your definition of leadership to authority, position, and responsibility and, instead, think of it in terms of influence.

Actually, think of it in terms of *your* influence because wherever it is that you are influencing anyone, you are leading them. And you are a leader.

And if you *do* have designated authority, position and responsibility over something or someone, what we're going to learn today will help you increase your influence.

So, let's talk about two words that are rarely connected, at least in our culture: *leadership and love*.

Leadership and love.

And instead of me trying to explain the

connection between the two, I'm going to share a story with you.

It's early evening – the evening on which Judas Iscariot will betray Jesus of Nazareth; the evening on which Jesus will be handed over to the chief priests and Temple leaders who will then turn him over to the Romans to be crucified the next day.

But before any of that happens, Jesus and the Twelve (including Judas) have gathered to celebrate the ancient Jewish festival of Passover.

As they are sharing the Passover meal together, Jesus tells them that it's the last time they will be together like this ... because He is going to die.

And he explains to them that the symbolism of that meal which had always pointed back in time to the Jewish people's release from

Egyptian captivity ...

... would from now on point to *Him* – specifically, to his body and blood, which would release them (and us!) from captivity to sin and death and Hell.

When you read the story in all four Gospel writings (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), it's by far the most serious and intense moment they've shared over their three-and-a-half years together.

... which makes what happens next seem almost comical if it wasn't so sad.

Luke writes that ...

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Luke 22:24 (NIV)

Now, think about that.

Jesus has just told them He is going to die for their sins and the sins of the whole world, and they're arguing about ...

- Who is going to be chief of staff ...
- Who is going to be in charge
- Who is going to get to call the shots.

... after He is gone!

Can you imagine that?

It's as tacky as tackiness can be. It's as insensitive as insensitivity can be.

By the way, this is one of the reasons we can trust what we're reading in the Gospel writings.

There's no sugarcoating of the guys who turn

out to be the leaders. If these guys had made up the whole thing, they would have never invented a story like this!

Anyway ... instead of re-explaining the new meaning of the Passover, Jesus jumps into their discussion because He knows that after He is gone, they *will be* in charge of carrying out the mission of His movement.

And they are still clueless about leadership.

So, He says to them ...

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.”

And in that world, a “benefactor” was someone who did something good or gave money because it meant that everyone now owes them, which is what gave them authority.

“But,” Jesus says ...

You are not to be like that.”

Luke 22:25 (NIV)

“Having authority and being in the position of benefactor doesn’t give you the right to lord it over people.”

“Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest ...

Like a child – who, again, in that world, had no rights or privileges.

... and the one who rules like the one who serves.”

Luke 22:26 (NIV)

Then Jesus asks a question that sets up a really crazy thing He is going to do as their time together comes to an end.

They have no idea what He is about to do next ...

So, He asks them ...

“Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves?” Luke 22:27 (NIV)

Now, think about that. If Jesus asked *you* that question, what would you say?

It is it the person sitting at the table who is greatest or the one serving those who sit at the table?

It's not a trick question. *It's the one sitting at the table.*

That's how it works in the real world.

Which is what Jesus says:

“Is it not the one who is at the table?”

But then He adds:

“But I am among you as one who serves.” Luke 22:27 (NIV)

And the point is clear: *Jesus* – the one who had *all* authority and position and responsibility – should be the one sitting and everyone else should be serving him!

... which makes what Jesus is about to do all the more stunning.

One of Jesus’ closest friends who was at this meal, John, picks up the story from here.

He writes:

It was just before the Passover Festival.

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

*Having loved his own who were
in the world, he now showed
them the fullest extent of His
love. John 13:1 (NIV)*

Some versions of our English New Testament say that “he loved them to the end” which is a more literal translation of the Greek word *telos*.

But, in context of what’s about to happen, I think this translation is probably more in keeping with what John meant.

*Having loved his own who were
in the world ...*

Having loved these 12 men (including Judas the betrayer) ...

Having loved these 12 men who he had invited to follow Him as Leader ...

Have loved his own ...

... he now showed them the fullest extent of His love.

And this is the point where love and leadership connect.

John writes:

Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:4-5 (NIV)

Now, because you and I don't live in first century Palestine, we may not get what's going on here because we don't do this kind of thing in our culture.

But, for them, because the roads were dusty and dirty and everyone wore sandals, whenever you came into someone's home ...

- The host would offer you a basin of water
- You would take off your sandals
- Then you'd wash your feet and dry them with a towel.
- And then you would come inside.

It was common practice.

However, if you entered the home of a *wealthy* person who had servants, *those servants would do it for you.*

In fact, one of the marks of a person's "high status" in society was that you had servants who would wash the feet of your guests!ⁱ

On the flip side, *to be the servant* who had to wash their feet was about as low you could get.

So, foot washing was a common experience whenever you went to someone's home for a meal.

Sometimes you did it yourself. Sometimes the servants did it for you.

BUT ... under no circumstances would the host ever wash the feet of his guests.

It simply was not done ... which is why what Jesus was doing in this moment was crazy.

He was the host of the meal! He had arranged the whole thing – the location, the room, the food.

And not only was He the host, more importantly, in the minds of the disciples, Jesus was the Supreme Leader and ultimate authority, soon to

be King ...

... which is why they were arguing about what position they were going to have!

But here He was, down on His hands and knees with a basin and a towel, doing the most menial and humiliating work a person could do in that culture.

It was crazy.

In fact, it was *so* crazy that when Jesus got to where Peter was sitting, John tells us that Peter actually argued with Him.

“Master, you will *not* do such a thing!” Peter said.

But Jesus insisted. And Peter relented.ⁱⁱ

John writes that ...

When [Jesus] had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

*“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.
John 13:12 (NIV)*

John doesn't say this, but I can imagine the shocked disciples thinking, “Uhhh, we really don't because this is crazy. You'd better explain it to us.”

And Jesus does.

*“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.” John 13:13
(NIV)*

In other words, “you understand that I am your leader. You get it.”

Now, I want you to get this:

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet

...

“Now that I, your Leader, have shown you the full extent of my love for you by taking on the very nature of a servant ...”ⁱⁱⁱ

“You, who are so concerned about ...

- What position you’re going to have ...
- What authority you’re going to have ...
- What area of responsibility you’re going to be in charge of ...

Now that I, your leader, have washed your feet ...

“You also should wash one another’s feet.”

“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for

you.”

John 13:14-15 (NIV)

And, in that example, Jesus connects two words that are so rarely connected: *leadership and love.*

That’s what’s going on here.

Jesus was saying, “You want to be a leader? You want to be in charge? You want to have influence?”

“Then follow my example. Do what I have done for you. Wash each other’s feet.”

And just to be clear, he didn’t mean for them to *literally* wash each other’s feet – although some Christian churches do that occasionally as part of worship ... which is OK. It’s a good object lesson.

What Jesus *really* meant – and the point of the

example He had given them – was ...

“Use your position and authority (whether it’s formal or informal) not as leverage for yourself and your own needs and desires.”

... which is what people typically do when they have some kind of power and position.

“Instead,” Jesus was saying, “use it to serve one another ...”

... an idea which you probably know is echoed in so much of the leadership literature of the past 20 years.

If you’ve heard of or been trained in the principles of “Servant Leadership” this is where it comes from.

But in the example Jesus was giving them that evening, it actually goes much deeper than that.

This whole scene wasn’t just about Jesus being

a servant. It was about him *loving them so completely* that He *would* serve them in such a dramatic – and even crazy – way.

The point he was making wasn't just to serve one another but to “serve one another *in love.*”

Love Matters

Now, what's amazing is that Jesus' disciples – after such a bumbling start that night – actually *got it!* They actually understood what Jesus was demonstrating for them.

“Ohhhh ... we should use our power and position and authority and influence to serve one another in love.”

... which is why you can hardly turn the page of what they wrote (and we have what they wrote in the New Testament) without running into that idea in some form or another.

In fact, a few years later Paul used that exact phrase in one of his letters:

*You, my brothers and sisters,
were called to be free.*

*But do not use your freedom to
indulge the flesh (your sinful
nature); rather, serve one
another humbly in love.*

Galatians 5:13 (NIV)

Serve one another in love, just like Jesus did.

So that's the connection between love and leadership. That's the principle Jesus taught and demonstrated.

**Serve the people who are under your
influence but *love* the people you serve.**

And that second part is so important because it's possible to serve without loving.

And some of you have experienced that.

You've followed someone – a church leader, a business leader, a parent, a coach, a teacher – who didn't love you, didn't really care for you.

And, eventually, it became about power and control over you; in some cases, it even became abusive ... which is why it's so hard for you to trust anyone in leadership.

Or maybe you've been a leader and you understood “servant leadership” because you went to the seminar, bought the book, and got the T-shirt.

But you *served without love* and, eventually, people didn't really want to follow you. They just did it because they had to. They were forced to because of your power and position over them.

Or you served without love and, eventually, it

led to burnout and bitterness which is why you lost your passion for what you do. For some of you, it's why you had to quit.

You cannot serve people for very long without loving them.

In fact, this is the idea behind something that another of Jesus' friends, Peter, once wrote to pastors of first-century churches.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them ...

... not because you must, but because you are willing as God wants you to be ...

... not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve;

... not lording it over ...

Fascinating that so many years later, Peter uses the exact same phrase that Jesus did that night.

... not lording it over those entrusted to you

... but being [what? Same wording Jesus used] ... examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:2-3 (NIV)

And what makes pastors (and ministry leaders in general) willing and eager to serve?

What prevents them from leveraging their power for dishonest gain?

What keeps them from “lording it over the flock”?

It's love.

Love for *all* of the people God has entrusted to you as a pastor or ministry leader; not just ...

- People who are *like* you
- And people who *like* you

But, also, the people entrusted to you ...

- Who are *unlike* you.
- And maybe even *don't* like you.

By the way, this is a very hard thing for pastors and ministry leaders to learn because most of us go into the ministry primarily because ...

- We're interested in God
- We're excited about God
- We love God

- And we've been changed by God.

It's about God – as it should be.

But it's also about *people*. And people are hard to deal with sometimes.

And if you're a pastor or a ministry leader and you don't learn to love people, you'll become hard, too.

- Ministry will become “just a job” to you.
- You'll leverage your power for your own benefit.
- And you'll start lording it over your “flock.”

In fact, just this week, that actually happened to me.

I got very frustrated with our process in a staff meeting. We were having a tough and emotional conversation about a difficult issue.

And one point I said in anger, “I’m going to sit in my office and just make the decision myself. And then I’m going to come out and tell you what we’re going to do ...”

... which would actually be OK because it *was* my decision to make in the end.

But then I powered up. I said something I almost never say anymore: *“because I’m your boss.”*

Fortunately, some of them challenged me and pushed back on me and so I didn’t do that.

But that’s “lording it over the flock.” That’s the kind of thing that happens whenever leadership disconnects from love.

And later, I felt terrible about it. “Arghh – am I

ever going to get this right???”

Of course, this kind of thing almost always happens to me whenever I’m going to preach about something. I screw it up beforehand, which is how God tries to keep me humble.

Getting Practical

Now, obviously, I’ve jumped off into talking about ministry leadership here, but the principle applies to all kinds of leadership roles and environments: parenting, coaching, teaching, bossing, and just being an influence on someone.

Again, it’s “serve the people who are under your influence but, also, love the people you serve.”

But what does it look like to be a loving leader?

- Jesus gave us an example of washing feet

which we're probably not going to follow literally.

- I just gave you an example of how not to be a loving leader, which I hope you don't follow!

So, I want to share another example of what loving leadership looks like that comes from something Paul wrote about marriage.

And, actually, what he wrote is pretty controversial these days because ... well, you'll see.

In his letter to the churches in the first-century city of Ephesus, Paul writes:

The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)

And the reason that's controversial is because it seems to say that the man is in charge; that the man has authority over the woman in a marriage.

And that sounds so patriarchal which, obviously, is not where our culture is these days.

And it doesn't help that in the very next sentence Paul writes ...

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Ephesians 5:24 (NIV)

What? Submit???

Is this *The Handmaid's Tale* where men basically treat women as their personal slaves?

Actually, no, it's not. And here's why.

The Greek word that Paul uses which gets translated “head” is *kephale*.

It shows up 75 times in the New Testament.

And sometimes it means “authority over,” sometimes it means leader, sometimes it literally means “head” – like the one on your shoulders.

Sometimes it means “pre-eminent, respected, and prominent” – again, like the head on your shoulders!

And sometimes it means “source” or “origin” as in a fountainhead, or the head of a spring.^{iv}

So, which one does Paul mean here?

Honestly, even though I have read so much on this over the years, I still do not know.

A lot of scholars say that Paul must mean “authority over” because he says that “wives

should submit” which implies that they are under authority.

And that could be right.

But, if it *is* what Paul means, notice what he does *not* say in this letter.

- He does *not* say, “husbands, man up and assume your authority!” ... which is what a lot of teachers and preachers *say* Paul was saying (even though he doesn’t actually *say* that).
- And he doesn’t say the husband *should* be the head or has *to become* the head ... which is what a lot of teachers and preachers *say* Paul was saying (even though he doesn’t actually *say* that).

All Paul *does* say is that the husband *is* the *kephale* (whatever it means).

And what Paul says the husband should *do* as the *kephale* – whether it means authority or source ...

What husbands should do is ...

*Husbands, love your wives just as
Christ loved the church and gave
himself up for her ...*

Ephesians 5:25 (NIV)

Sounds so much like what Jesus said and did on the night before his death doesn't it?

“If I, as your *kephale*, love you enough to wash your feet, then you should also do the same for one another.”

Being the head – whether you're Jesus or whether you're a husband – isn't about exercising power and authority. It isn't about “lording it over.”

It's about giving up your rights, privileges, and preferences in love *so that* something amazing can happen ... which Paul describes in the very next sentence.

Christ loved the church – meaning believers like you and me, collectively, not just individually ...

Jesus loved the church and give Himself up, Paul says ...

... to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:26-27 (NIV)

There's a lot of metaphors going on in that sentence ...

... but the bottom line is that Jesus did what Jesus did ... and Jesus does what Jesus does ...

- So that the church – all believers everywhere collectively – could become everything that it was meant to be ...
- So that you and I as his followers could grow and develop and become everything we are meant to be.

And in that sense, Jesus is like the fountainhead – he’s the source of our life. He creates the environment that allows us to flourish.

And, years ago, when I “got” this – when it became clear to me ...

It hit me that maybe the question of whether a husband has authority isn’t really the point here, because that’s not where Paul goes in this passage, just like it wasn’t where Jesus went with the Apostles.

Instead, the point is that whatever a *kephale* does and whatever position or role the *kephale* takes ...

... the result should be the flourishing of whoever is in his or her path – just as the water from a spring allows the earth around it to flourish, sometimes for miles and miles.

And so, as it applies to leadership, for me, I've boiled it down to this:

A loving leader creates the environment that allows people to flourish – to reach their full potential.

Your job if you're a leader – and my job as a pastor – isn't to boss people around so you can get your way or make your life easier.

Your job – if you want to be a loving leader – is climate control.

- It's to create an atmosphere where people are loved and accepted as they are and also challenged to be more than they are.
- It's to create a place that allows them to be filled with joy and maximizes who God made them to be.

And what that looks like varies from person to person. But if you pay attention and watch and listen and ask questions, you can figure it out.

For example, when Janelle, the last of our three daughters, was in her senior year at school and getting ready to go off to college ...

It hit me that that after she was gone, I was going to have *one sad momma* on my hands because *that* – being a mom – was such a huge part of who Jetta had been for so many years.

So, I started thinking, “what would help her to

flourish in this next stage of life? What would make her more of the best of who she is – besides, of course, hanging out with me?”

And the reason I thought those things is because I’m the kephale. I’m the head. And it’s my responsibility.

And one day it occurred to me: this woman needs a horse!

After all, she’d grown up in East Texas riding horses every day with her cousins and her friends. And we had a friend here at NHCC who would let her ride at their farm occasionally.

So, I figured out how we could afford to buy a horse. And we did.

And I have watched with great joy – from a distance because I don’t like horses!

I have watched with great joy over the past 15

years as she has made so many great experiences and made so many new friends ...

... some of whom have actually come to church here because of her influence *which brings her great joy*.

I have watched with great joy as she has flourished in a new way at this stage of her life.

See, that's the payoff of trying to be a loving leader and, occasionally, getting it right. You get to experience joy yourself.

Endnotes

ⁱ From Ray Pritchard, "Dirty Feet," <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/dirty-feet/>

ⁱⁱ John 13:6-9

ⁱⁱⁱ Phil 2:7

^{iv} <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/meta-study-debate-over-meaning-head-kephale>