

Luke 22:24-30  
June 13, 2010 (Early Service)

Hampton Baptist  
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### “What Will Your Verse Be?”

Some years ago, St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City was seeking a new president. More than one hundred candidates applied for the position. The search committee narrowed the list to five eminently qualified persons. Then somebody came up with a brilliant idea: let's send a person to the institutions where each of the five finalists is currently employed, and let's interview the janitor at each place, asking him what he thinks of the person seeking to be our president. This was done, and a janitor gave such a glowing appraisal of William MacElvaney that he was selected President of St. Paul's School of Theology.

Somebody on that search committee understood, in a flash of genius, that those who live close to Christ become so secure in his love that they no longer relate to other people according to rank or power or money or prestige. They treat janitors and governors with equal dignity. They regard everybody as a VIP. Children seem to do this intuitively; adult Christians have to relearn it.

How do we move beyond measuring people by their *successes* and start regarding people for their *service*, for their sacrifices? What is *greatness* in the Kingdom of God?

When Jesus gathered his disciples in the upper room for that last supper, he knew that they would face uncertainty after his death. He knew that they had learned many lessons, yet the true test was yet to come. Let's look at what transpired with Jesus and the twelve disciples as he sought to prepare them for *their* futures.

Jesus knew the end was near; he had deliberately planned this last supper with his disciples. Dr. Luke, who was a stickler for details, recorded that after serving the bread and the cup, Jesus said that one among them was going to betray him. The disciples then began to discuss among themselves who the culprit might be. I wonder if they employed reasoning something like this, “I think it must be one of those fishermen, because since Jesus has made them fishers of people, they have missed the adventure of the sea.” “I think it is probably the tax collector, because he was dishonest before he joined us, and I have never really trusted him.” “I think it is probably the Zealot, because Jesus is not as patriotic as expected.” We don't know. All Luke stated was they discussed among themselves which one might be the betrayer.

But then their conversation took a turn. After wondering about who was the one to betray Jesus, the disciples began to seek *personal* validation. They not only spoke of the *faults* of the others, but individually they began to feel pretty good about themselves. Funny how that happens, isn't it? Often, we speak *ill* of others as an unconscious act of making us feel *better* about ourselves. It is not a *conscious* act; we don't think, “Hmmm. Think I'll talk bad about someone else so I'll feel better about myself.” This was what happened in the upper room. Jesus said someone was going to betray him; the disciples tried to determine who it was by pointing out the other's faults, which led to inflations of their own egos.

Luke used the phrase “as to which one of them was regarded to be the greatest.” The

greatest what? Eater, since they had just finished a meal? Disciple? Were they jockeying for the highest rank in the movement? I wonder if Andrew said, "I was the first disciple, so I must be the greatest," or if Philip said, "I'm from his native Galilee; that has to carry some weight." James may have said, "I'm the greatest, because I was present at the transfiguration and when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead." John then would have piped in, "Me, too, but Jesus loves me more than any of you." Peter could have said, "I saw those two events also, but I am the greatest, because Jesus called me Rock and said 'Upon this rock, I'll build my church.'"

So these disciples debated in Mohammad Ali fashion by saying, "I am the greatest." They, like Ali, had convinced themselves of the title because of what they had *done*. They had achieved, had been present for the miracles, had learned from the master teacher and now felt ready to pass along what they *thought* they knew. Their idea of greatness was hierarchical, meaning the *great* person was at the top giving orders to the *little* people.

Many adolescents seek to lay claim to the statement, "I am the greatest." Some may have achieved academically in all subjects; others in particular subjects. Some may have excelled in all sports; others in select sports. Some may have been popular with everyone in their grade; others may have been the favorite of their small group. Some may think they are the greatest because of their chosen college/university. Yet, can anyone rightfully lay claim to a blanket statement, "I am the greatest?" Someone might say, "I am the greatest member of a specific club." Does that mean the best leader or the person who attended the most events? Or "I'm the greatest baseball player." Does that mean the best batter or fielder? Or, "I'm the best student in my class." Does that indicate the highest grade point average, the person involved in the most extracurricular activities, or the person with the largest number of friends on Facebook?

Jesus interrupted their arguing. Remember, Jesus knew he was on death's row; he knew that he was going to die the next day. So at a time when he was trying to give last-minute instructions to those who would extend the mission that he began, the disciples argued among themselves.

Yet the disciples were simply following the pattern they had been taught. For them, greatness came because of *notoriety*. In the structures of their society, the greatest, most noble and honored people were those who possessed and exercised power over others. They wanted to *be* somebody; their ideas of the Kingdom which Jesus was initiating were not accurate though. Some of them thought they would be able to have power over other people, specifically those who had had power over them, namely the Romans. They were just following what they had seen and what they had been taught.

We are no different from the disciples. All of us have learned by what we have seen and by what we have been taught. We have been molded by our families and by this church. We may have learned math, English, history, science, etc. at school, but we have learned about *life* from our families. We have also been learning at church. Through so many *structured* ministries such as Sunday School, Worship, Mission Education, Music, Vacation Bible School, WMU, Mission Trips, and other church events, we have learned about God and how God's people should relate in the world. Through *unstructured* interactions, we have watched others and learned. What we *do* with our learned behavior is left up to us. As Christians, you and I have been taught here and at home how to live for Jesus. In his discourse with the disciples, Jesus told them that the greatest among them is to be the servant of all.

The normal patterns of society are to be completely reversed in the Kingdom of God.

The greatest was to become as the youngest. Age was an extremely important factor in their culture, especially in family relationships. The youngest was the least important member of the family, the one who had to do the most menial tasks and could expect the smallest reward.

I am the oldest child in my family of origin, which means that I was the test child, the one on whom my parents practiced. Because I was the oldest, I was the first to do many things, including going off to college. The oldest are generally given the duties of taking care of the younger ones, which can be deduced from the text. But the life of Jesus had instituted a *new* set of values, a completely revolutionary approach to human relations for his followers. Your place in the family, your status in society, your position on the ladder has nothing to do with birth order, bank accounts, stock portfolios, grade point averages, athletic ability, or any other designation which determines importance by the world's standards. Greatness is determined by service to others. The manner in which we display our love for God is how we *treat* others, including the people who are not like us; those who don't speak our language; those who have different values; even those we don't like.

In Luke's gospel, we find Jesus words detailing how one achieves greatness through service. Words of service are explained in the gospel of John as *action* by Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Foot-washing in that society was a menial task reserved for slaves, yet Jesus, as their teacher, displayed servant leadership as the way to greatness in his kingdom.

All of us have achievements of which we are proud. Whether the accomplishment included a diploma, a promotion, a certificate, or an award, persistence, stamina, and will-power were part of that process. But we never function alone; we don't perform in a vacuum. We receive encouragement from our families, our friends, and our church. But how does a person become great? Jesus said, "By serving others."

Many of us have benefited from the luxury of higher education. How can your education serve others? What you have learned thus far has brought you to this station in your life. To be considered great, Jesus says to use your education to serve others. What will you do to help people? How can God use your life?

The poet Walt Whitman wrote, "That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse." This morning I ask you, what will your verse be? Will the drama of your life continue to be consumed with the accumulation of more things? Will your focus be on how much money you can make and how many toys you can buy? What will your verse be? Will you seek to climb that ladder of status and success always fixating your attention at someone a little higher on the ladder? What will your verse be?

Will you see a world that is filled with injustice and seek to contribute toward the *solutions* rather than to contribute toward the *problem*? What will your verse be? Will you see yourself as being created in the image of God, or will you abuse your body by not taking care of yourself? What will your verse be? Will you live your life in relationship with Jesus Christ, knowing that God is always with you, or will you try to live life your own way? What will your verse be? Will you try to be the greatest in the eyes of our society and play by their rules, or will you seek to be great in the Kingdom of God by serving others? "That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse." Once more I pose the question, "What will your verse be?"