

## **“The Greatest” (Luke 22:24–30)**

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**Brian Watson**

It’s funny how language changes over time. Certain words that once had one meaning now have have another. One example is goat. As long as that word has existed, it’s always referred to a specific type of animal, but it also has had a secondary meaning. Goat used to refer to someone who was a failure, someone you could blame. And that was most clearly the case in the world of sports. A goat is someone who lost the game for the team. The clearest example that comes to my mind is Scott Norwood, the placekicker of the Buffalo Bills who failed to kick a field goal to win Super Bowl XXV in 1991. With only seconds left in the game, the Bills were down only one point to the New York Giants. Norwood attempted a 47-yard field goal and missed it as the ball sailed wide right. The Bills lost that Super Bowl and the next three Super Bowls. Norwood played only one more year in the NFL before becoming an insurance salesman and then a real estate agent. Of course, Bill Buckner is another infamous goat, because his error helped the Red Sox lose Game 6 of the 1986 World Series.

But now goat has a new meaning. It’s now spelled in capital letters as an acronym: Great Of All Time. People refer to Tom Brady as the GOAT. There are debates about who is the GOAT of the NBA. Is it Michael Jordan or LeBron James, or is it someone else?

While the acronym GOAT might be new, the question of who is the greatest is old. It’s the kind of barroom and sports radio debate that has gone on for as long as professional sports has existed. The question of who is the greatest isn’t limited to sports. There’s something in the human heart that seems to rank everything. We debate over which is the greatest movie, the greatest song, the greatest product, and everything else. This seems to start at a young age. Caleb often gives Simon two choices and asks him to pick which is better.

Everyone wants to know who or what is the greatest. This isn’t limited to our culture or time. In fact, even Jesus’ disciples debated about which one of them is the greatest. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, his biography of Jesus, we’re told that the disciples argued about which one of them is the greatest. Jesus used a child as an example of greatness and said, “he who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48).<sup>1</sup> The shocking thing about that episode is that Jesus had just told his disciples—for the second time—that he was going to die (Luke 9:44;

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

the first time was in Luke 9:22). I can't imagine someone saying to a group of people, "I'm about to suffer and be killed," and then that group of people act as if they hadn't heard any of those words and start to debate something as petty as which one of them was the greatest. But that's what Jesus' followers did, and that reflects something about the human heart. Our pride causes us to try to be seen as great. We want other people to acknowledge us above others.

This same pattern occurs in chapter 22 of Luke, which we will continue to study today. Jesus has been sharing one last supper with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He explains that his body will be crushed and his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He has even warned his disciples that one of them will betray him. And, once again, the disciples start arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

We'll see that in today's passage, Luke 22:24–30. Let's turn there now and read the passage:

<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. <sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> "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.

It's strange that the disciples would pick this moment to argue about something such as this, but I think it makes sense. Jesus has just told the group that one of them would betray Jesus. That person was Judas, who sold Jesus out to the Jewish leaders who wanted to kill Jesus. They had to arrest him away from the throngs of Jewish people celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread in Jerusalem. When the disciples heard that one of them would betray Jesus, eleven of them must have thought, "I would never do that." Then they started to ask each other which one would be the betrayer. In verse 22, it says, "And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this." It's not much of a leap from that kind of question to a discussion over who was so great among them that he would never betray Jesus.

At any rate, the disciples were quarreling over who was the greatest, and Jesus issues them another warning. He basically says, "Don't try to be like those pagan kings who are all about power and prestige. They don't lead their people by serving them. No, they lord their

power over their people. They may be called benefactors, but they don't benefit the people." "Benefactor" was something of a technical term. It sounds good to us, but it reflects another situation in the ancient world: those who were wealthy became benefactors to patrons in order to gain political power and also to have their patrons be indebted to them—not in literal financial and legal terms, but socially. People in the ancient world didn't give charitably; they gave gifts with the expectation that those who received the gifts would give back to them one way or the other.

Jesus tells them not to be like those worldly leaders. Instead, in the kingdom of God, the truth path to greatness comes through humility and service. Those who were older and in positions of power and respect should act like younger people, people without power. In our day, youth is a prized possession, but that wasn't the case then. People didn't idolize youth the way they do now. The point Jesus is making is that they shouldn't strive for positions of high status. When those who were wealthier or who were honored guests would eat a meal, they would "recline at table." They would literally be on the floor, in a somewhat reclined position, eating off low tables while they relaxed. In that society, they would be viewed as greater than the people serving them. Perhaps think of a very fancy wedding reception, where the guests are served by those working for a hotel or catering company. The honored guests have a higher status than those servers. In that sense, they are greater. But Jesus tells them that, in reality, it's greater to serve.

First, he says that leaders should serve. Leaders are not in leadership position to get attention, to accrue power, to sit around and be served by people who are under their authority. Instead, leaders are supposed to serve.

Second, Jesus says that he, the real GOAT—Great Of All Time—has come to serve. If Jesus, the greatest person that has ever walked the face of the Earth, is a servant, then his disciples should be servants. The disciples are students. They should follow the example of their teacher. The disciples are subjects of the King, Jesus, who is not only King of the Jews, but King of kings, the Son of God who became a human being. If such an exalted, authoritative, powerful person came to serve, then his disciples should as well.

I'm going to come back to how Jesus serves in a while. But first, I want to point out that what Jesus says here is consistent with what the Bible says about seeking power and glory. And this is a message that we desperately need to hear, especially in our celebrity-infatuated culture.

It seems like everyone in our culture wants to be famous, wants to be rich, wants to be popular. And because of social media, it is easier than ever to aggrandize yourself. People with a moderate amount of looks and talent parade themselves online in a long series of selfies and videos. They may post revealing pictures of how they look. They may brag about their achievements, or even brag about their family. They may post videos of themselves singing or performing. It's not wrong to post a picture of yourself, or to share news about something in your life, or to be pleased with your family. It's not wrong to share your talent with the world. But I think many people go beyond mere sharing. They want to be acknowledged. They want to be seen as great.

But there's something rather distasteful about such status seeking. Certainly, the Bible addresses that issue. Proverbs 25:27 says this:

It is not good to eat much honey,  
nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory.

Seeking your own glory is like eating too many sweets. It may feel good at the time, but it's not good for you.

Proverbs 27:2 says this:

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;  
a stranger, and not your own lips.

These verses aren't just biblical. They're also highly practical. They speak about how things go in the world. I think we've all experienced people who love to talk about how great they are. Generally, we don't want to be around such people. The practice of praising yourself is annoying. And truly great people don't do that sort of thing. Their greatness is apparent. I have a Facebook friend who is a former student of mine, from when I was a professor of music. He posts quite a few selfies of when, I suppose, he's dressed up for work. He's not a bad looking guy, but he's also not a matinee idol. And more than once, he has posted a selfie with a few little fire emojis, which I guess is his way of saying, "I'm looking really hot right now." I've been tempted to write, "If you're really hot, you don't need to say it." But I don't, because I don't want to humiliate the guy. But there is something kind of desperate and pathetic about drawing attention to yourself.

Yet we tend to idolize people who have greater power, money, talent, and status. We do that through celebrity news. We do that through sports. If we were to meet a great entertainer or

athlete real life, we would be star struck. But we don't tend to be in awe of the person who volunteers their time, without fanfare, for a church or some charitable cause. We don't see a woman who has given away a large percentage of her income each year and get nervous and be reduced to a bumbling idiot because we're so in awe of her generosity. We are drawn to celebrities and we are in awe of them.

This happens within the church, too. We live in an age of celebrity pastors. There have been celebrity pastors for a long time. We might think of Charles Spurgeon, for example. Billy Graham was a celebrity preacher and evangelist. There are pastors of megachurches who are celebrities. It's not wrong for a preacher to have a large audience. If he faithfully preaches the word with a great amount of skill, we might expect that he'll gather an audience. Jesus gathered crowds. But there's a danger there. Because we tend to be drawn to people who appear great, we may put them on a pedestal. And because we tend to crave power and popularity, celebrity pastors may be tempted not to serve God and the people who are under their care, but to build their own kingdoms. And this is happening now. Pastors have used their positions to become rich. They have used their positions to be celebrated, to appear before large crowds, to gain power. And a lot of people seem to buy into this. We elevate a man, thinking he is the anointed one, when in reality he may be not be serving others, but serving his own interests. Churches build additional campuses in which there isn't a live preacher, but a celebrity preacher on a screen, as if there's only one man who can preach. This just feeds into our celebrity culture. It's not a good thing.

And it's not terribly new. Of course, today there are many ways for one pastor to be broadcast to large audiences. But even before such technology, there were celebrity pastors of a sort. In the first century, there were some men who claimed to be preachers of the gospel. They claimed to be apostles of Jesus Christ. They probably dressed nicely and spoke in very eloquent, clever, and powerful ways. The apostle Paul, who probably wasn't terribly impressive physically or even vocally, refers to these men ironically as "super-apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11). The problem is that they weren't preaching the same message as Paul. They weren't preaching the true gospel message, the good news of Christianity.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about this issue, he urged them not be deceived by appearances (see 2 Cor. 11:1–15). Though he had to defend his ministry and remind them that he taught the truth, he said he wasn't boasting in himself. He writes, "Let the one who

boasts, boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” (2 Cor. 10:17–18).

Paul knew that what mattered most was not seeking to make one’s self look great in the eyes of other people. He knew that what mattered was not boasting in one’s self. He realized that people would view him differently. Some would love him, and some would look down on him. What mattered to Paul was being faithful to what God had called him to do, to be commended by God. We might say he was working for an audience of One.

Jesus commended this same practice. He taught that we should aim not be seen as righteous, but to aim to please God. In Matthew 6:1, he says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” One way of trying to be great is to do good works in order to be seen. I think that’s part of the human condition. There’s something inside of us that craves recognition. This isn’t entirely bad. It’s just that it’s misplaced. We should want God’s recognition, God’s approval. But even then, our motivation shouldn’t be to do something for God so that he will reward us. We should do things for God out of love and thanks and because it’s simply the right thing to do. We certainly shouldn’t do things to be seen to a good person.

Yet that’s so hard for us, to do what is good and right without calling attention to it. I’m sure many of us have been guilty of that. I’ve certainly heard people in this church boast in their own way about how they were doing good things. But that is one way of seeking greatness, even within the church. Another way of seeking greatness in the church is getting our way or maintaining our little positions of power. I think that’s why there is often conflict in churches. If we all focused on doing things the best way, doing what was right, and doing it in the most excellent manner, then we would have greater unity. But instead, we have our pride. We want to be the ones to do that thing, whatever it is, because we want recognition. If we all focused on pleasing God first, then many problems would be resolved.

Instead of seeking to draw attention to ourselves or seeking to have power, we should seek to serve, because that is the way of Jesus. As he told his disciples, “I am among you as the one who serves.” Jesus doesn’t say here how he serves. But we know from the other Gospels how he serves. In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus says these words, we’re told something else. He says this in Matthew 20:25–28:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.<sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,<sup>27</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,<sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus came to serve by giving his life as a ransom for many. He came to redeem people from sin. Sin is not just the wrong things we do. Sin is a power at work within us, a tendency to rebel against God, to do things our way instead of his way. And chief among the various sinful dispositions is pride. That was the sin of Adam and Eve, who wanted to be God. It’s the sin of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who surveyed his kingdom and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). (Nebuchadnezzar was immediately humiliated by God until he came to his senses.) It’s the sin of Herod Agrippa, who was claimed to be a god and who was struck down by the real God “because he did not give God the glory” (Acts 12:23). And it’s the sin of you and me. We want to be the center of the universe. We want to do life on our terms, not God’s. We want to be GOATs. But there’s only one GOAT, and it’s not you or me.

Because God is truly the greatest, and because this is his creation, he would have every right to condemn rebels, to remove them from his world. But God’s greatness includes his mercy and grace. Instead of destroying all rebels, he sends his Son to save many of them. The Son of God, who has always existed in glory and splendor, the one through whom God the Father created the universe, became a human being. He humbled himself to become a man (though he was and is still God). And he came not to be like Nebuchadnezzar and Herod, to live in a palace and be served. No, he came to serve by laying down his life for his people. After living the perfect life, he was treated like a real goat, a scapegoat. The sins of his people were placed on him, and he died to pay the penalty for sin. He bore great physical pain on the cross. But he also endured the spiritual pain that is condemnation. He endured this so that his people could be spared that penalty and could be forgiven. He lowered himself so others could be exalted.

Jesus demonstrated this act of service by washing his disciples’ feet. Though Luke doesn’t write about this in his Gospel, John does. That is an interesting fact, by the way. You would think that Luke would write about that, because it would strengthen his point, that Jesus came to serve. But Luke doesn’t. John does write about it. Now, since John’s Gospel was written later, some people who are skeptical might think that this story of Jesus washing his disciples’

feet was fabricated, a bit of fiction. But if that were so, it's quite odd, because John doesn't discuss the disciples arguing about who would be the greatest. When you read John, you don't understand why it was that Jesus washed his disciples' feet. The reason is given in the other Gospels. The Gospels have several of these moments, which some have called "undesigned coincidences."<sup>2</sup> Each Gospel is like a puzzle. The pieces fit together, but sometimes it seems like a piece is missing. That missing piece can be found in one of the other Gospels. Yet this fitting together of the Gospels isn't done in any kind of obvious way, so that it looks like humans contrived to make up stories that fit together, the way that criminals might come together to make up an alibi. Instead, the Gospels read more like eyewitness testimony. Each witness focuses on certain things, perhaps what they remembered most clearly or what was most important to their story. But together, these eyewitnesses give us a greater picture of what happened.

At any rate, this is what happens in John's Gospel. Here is John 13:1–5:

<sup>1</sup> Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

In this time and place, people wore sandals. And they walked great lengths along dirty and dusty road. Their feet became quite dirty. When they ate at someone's home, that host would have a servant wash the feet of his guests. Here, Jesus becomes the servant, washing their feet, because he loved his disciples "to the end." He later makes it clear that his washing their feet symbolized his cleansing them of their sin. Those who belong to Jesus, who trust him and follow him, are made clean. Their sins are removed.

Then, after Jesus had washed their feet, he said to them:

Do you understand what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an

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<sup>2</sup> See Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2017).



example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:12–17).

We can't remove the sins from other people. But we can serve them in many ways. This is the way of Jesus. He served and he expects his people to serve. Those who do this are blessed.

So, Jesus teaches his disciples to be humble and to serve. And, paradoxically, this is the way to be exalted. Look again at Luke 22:28–30:

<sup>28</sup> 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.

Jesus tells his disciples that their positions in the kingdom of God will be great. They will sit on thrones in the new creation, leading all of God's people, a renewed and reconstituted Israel that consists not just of Jewish people, but of Gentiles, too. In fact, all of God's people will reign with God forever (Rev. 22:5). But I think the apostles will have greater authority than we will, and that's God choice. All Christians will be with God forever in the new creation, but not all will necessarily have the same role to play and the same status. And that's fine.

The reason that's fine is that's the way it is in this life. Jesus does not teach here that the disciples were not to be authorities. Jesus isn't teaching that there aren't authorities in the church. The church needs leaders. Never does it say in the Bible that the church is a democratic society, where everyone decides what is right. Christians are called sheep, and they need shepherds. There are many Christians who don't think the church should have real authority, that the pastors or elders of the church shouldn't be strong leaders. I think that's very misguided. Jesus isn't teaching that at all. In fact, Jesus, though he came to serve, was a very strong authority. He spoke with authority. He delivered hard truths. But he did this for the right reasons. Being a leader who makes decisions, even unpopular ones, is one way of serving. Jesus' point is that leaders should lead in a way that benefits the people. And what benefits God's people is doing things God's way. God designed life to function in a certain way. Because he loves us, he wants us to live rightly. Leaders are supposed to love people by pointing them in the right way, by making sure they stay on the right path. Leaders are not supposed to seek their own glory or build their own little kingdoms. And all of us are supposed to have the same kind of attitude.

The reality is that the true way of greatness is loving God and loving other people. The truth path to greatness is serving God and serving other people. Ironically, if we strive after greatness, we'll never be great. We'll never be the GOAT. Those people who strive for greatness now will come to a harsh reality when they meet the true GOAT. They will have to stand before him in judgment, just as we all will. And the ones who failed to serve the GOAT will be the real goats. Their sins remain on them, and they will be punished for those sins. Those who trust and serve the GOAT are sheep, the people who will enter the new creation to live with God forever. (See Matt. 25:31–46.)

Seek greatness and you will never get it. But forget about greatness and serve the One who is truly great, and you will find it. What matters is not whether we appear great to other people. What matters is what God thinks of us. What matters is whether we're faithfully serving God, doing what he has called us to do.

God has not called all of us to be in the limelight. He has not called all of us to be leaders. Some Christians will end up doing things that are far more public than others. But that doesn't mean they are greater. The one who serves quietly and faithfully in the background may be the truly great one.

Wherever you find yourself today, seek to serve God. You must first see that you are not great. You certainly aren't the GOAT. But Jesus is the GOAT. And he's the only goat, the scapegoat, upon whom your sins can be placed and punished so that you don't have to be punished. Trust that Jesus is the only way to be in a right relationship with God. If you're not a Christian, humble yourself before God, confess your sins to him, and accept Jesus as his provision for your sin. As James, the brother of Jesus, writes, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:8, 10).

Christians, faithfully serve Jesus in whatever situation you find yourself in. God has put you in a certain place and time to do what he wants you to do. Don't compare yourself to other people. Don't wish God had made you somehow differently. Accept the role that God has assigned for you, and faithfully serve in that role. That doesn't mean it's wrong to seek out a different job, or to find some new position of service. If that's God's plan for you, it will happen. But I think one of the ways that we could all thrive is not to covet the supposed greatness of other people. I think we would be happier and healthier if we accepted the role God has given to us and served in that role according to his commandments. That is the only way to true greatness.