

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## WHO'S THE GREATEST?

Luke 22:24-30

By

Steven J. Cole

April 16, 2000

© Steven J. Cole, 2000

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

April 16, 2000  
Luke Lesson 100

### Who's the Greatest? Luke 22:24-30

Former world heavyweight boxing champ, Muhammad Ali, was known for often bragging, "I'm the greatest." Just before take-off on an airline flight, the stewardess reminded Ali to fasten his seatbelt. "Superman don't need no seatbelt," Ali told her. The stewardess retorted, "Superman don't need no airplane, either." Ali fastened his seatbelt. (*The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. by Clifton Fadimon [Little, Brown] p. 14.)

No one would mistake Muhammad Ali's braggadocio as a Christian virtue. Humility and selflessness are to mark the believer in Jesus Christ. Since we all know this, it seems incredible that the apostles would get into this silly debate over which of them was the greatest, especially when you consider the setting: the Last Supper, the night before Jesus would go to the cross. The Lord had just announced that one of the twelve would betray Him. The disciples had responded by discussing who would do such a thing, and with each one asking, "Surely, not I?" (Mark 14:19). Perhaps this led someone to say, "I know that I'm not a likely candidate." Someone else said, "Me, neither!" Another said, "Well, it couldn't be me?" "Why not? Do you think you're better than the rest of us?" From there, things heated up quickly.

This wasn't the first time that the twelve had gotten into this sort of silly debate. They had argued about the same matter while they walked at some distance from Jesus, thinking that He couldn't hear what they were discussing (Mark 9:33-37). But He knew what they were discussing and used the occasion to teach them about childlike humility. On another occasion, the mother of James and John had come to Jesus to ask that her sons could sit on His right and left in the kingdom. The other disciples were indignant (Mark 10:35-45). What right had these two brothers to claim the top spots in the kingdom? Jesus taught them that the greatest should become the servant and the one who wished to be first should be the slave of all, adding, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

But in spite of these repeated lessons, here they were again, right on the eve of the Lord's death, arguing over which of them was the greatest! This shows us that although we can have this lesson in our heads, it takes a while to put it into practice. We just think that we've learned it once and for all when someone does something to bug us and we think, "I'm a better servant of Christ than he is!" Although we may not get into a verbal debate, the thought of our heart is, "I'm greater than he is!" So we all have to keep coming back to this fundamental lesson:

The greatest in God's sight are those who humbly serve.

This is a lesson that all who are actively serving Christ must continually apply. But it also applies to Christians who are sitting on the bench, not engaged in serving the Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that every believer has been given at least one spiritual gift and is to employ it in serving one another (1 Pet. 4:10). Being a servant of Christ is more than just signing up to teach Sunday School or to do some other job at the church. Being a servant is a mindset, where each day you make yourself available to Christ and ask Him to use you in His service in whatever ways He chooses. It may be to speak a word about the Savior to someone who needs Him. It may be to offer cheerful help to someone in need. It may be to listen to a person who needs sympathy or understanding. But whatever the job, your daily attitude is, "Lord, here I am. Use me as Your servant." If you're not living in that way, then you are living for self, not for Christ.

Our text brings out four important lessons in servanthood:

1. The great example of servanthood: Jesus Christ.

Although Luke presumably did not know about and thus did not record the event, John 13:1-11 reports that at sometime during the Supper, Jesus got up, girded Himself with a towel, took a basin of water, and washed the disciples' feet. I don't know for sure where in the chronology that great object lesson took place, but I would think that it happened after the dispute among the disciples and just before Jesus' verbal lesson recorded here (*i.e.*, between verses 24 and 25). Or, it could have followed verse 27, where Jesus states, "I am among you as the one who serves." But at any rate, Jesus is the great example of servanthood. Note four things:

A. Jesus faithfully served although He alone deserves eternal supremacy.

Have you ever gone out at night and looked into the sky and thought about the fact that your eye cannot even begin to see the billions of galaxies and stars that are in the universe? With my binoculars, I have at times been able to locate Andromeda galaxy, which is 200 million light years from the earth. It is composed of 200 million suns brighter than our sun. But it is just one of millions of other galaxies. Even the powerful Hubble telescope cannot get to the end of the universe. And Jesus spoke the entire works into existence by the word of His power!

Peter, James, and John got a brief glimpse of Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and they were awestruck (Luke 9:28-36). Later, on the Isle of Patmos, John, who had laid his head on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, got a further revelation of Christ in His heavenly glory. His response was not to say, "Oh, hi, Lord, good to see you again!" Rather, he fell on his face at Christ's feet as a dead man (Rev. 1:12-17).

This Lord of glory left the splendor of heaven and took on human flesh so that He could accomplish our salvation. He rightly could have come in all His splendor, demanding our instant allegiance on penalty of death. But instead He took on the form of a servant and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

Christ's willingness to serve did not in any way rob Him of the ultimate authority that will be His. He states here, "My Father has granted Me a kingdom" (22:29). He is coming again and He will conquer all His enemies and reign over all the earth. But in God's sovereign plan, although He deserves and one day will have ultimate supremacy, the first time He came to earth as a humble servant to show us how we should serve Him and one another. If Jesus, who deserved supremacy as the Almighty Creator, willingly served, then should not we, who deserve nothing except judgment, offer ourselves in faithful service to God?

B. Jesus faithfully served through many trials and temptations.

Jesus tells the disciples, "And you are those who have stood by Me in My trials" (22:28). At first glance, this verse does not seem unusual. We all know that Jesus was tried when the devil tempted Him in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). We know that He went through the awful trial of Gethsemane, followed by His trial and crucifixion. But we tend to think that between those two terrible events, everything was smooth sailing for Jesus. But, the disciples were not standing with Jesus during these two events. He had not yet chosen them when He was tempted by Satan. And, they all fled and deserted Him at His final hour of trial. So Jesus is referring to trials or temptations that took place in the time in between these two recorded times of trial.

After Jesus had successfully resisted the devil in the wilderness, we read that the devil "departed from Him until an opportune time" (4:13). Although Jesus did not have a sin nature tempting Him from within, as we do, He was perpetually bombarded from without by the great enemy of our souls. If Satan could bring Jesus down, God's plan of salvation would be thwarted. Although it was impossible for the Son of God to sin, it was no mock battle that He fought. Satan continually dangled before Jesus ways to escape the cross. He tempted Him to exert His power and assert His authority apart from God's plan. But in spite of all these temptations, Jesus faithfully humbled Himself and served the Father's purpose, even to the point of death.

There are many Christians who will serve God as long as there is no opposition and things are going relatively smoothly. But what about when criticism or opposition comes? What about when we are treated unfairly? What about when we are misunderstood or when people question our motivation? Do we keep serving then or do we quit with the protest, "If that's the kind of treatment I get for serving, I'm out of here! Let someone else serve!" Jesus is our great example of serving faithfully through many trials.

C. Jesus faithfully served though lonely and misunderstood.

Although the disciples had stood with Jesus up to this point, even through some intense opposition, Jesus knew that in a short while they would all forsake Him and flee for their lives. Even now, not even Peter, James, or John could enter into the anguish that Jesus would face in the garden. They just didn't get it. Jesus

had to face His final trial alone. But, as He told them in that Upper Room, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (John 16:32).

Commenting on what he calls Jesus' profound loneliness, Alexander Maclaren states, "The more pure and lofty a nature, the more keen its sensitiveness, the more exquisite its delights, and the sharper its pains. The more loving and unselfish a heart, the more its longing for companionship; and the more its aching in loneliness" (*Exposition of Holy Scripture* [Baker], Luke 13-24, p. 237). As the psalmist wrote prophetically of Christ, "Reproach has broken my heart, and I am so sick. And I looked for sympathy, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none" (Ps. 69:20).

Yet in spite of loneliness and being misunderstood, Jesus faithfully served the Father's purpose. His fellowship with the Father was the sustaining factor when no one else understood. In this, too, Jesus is our great example. We are called to serve Him even when we feel lonely and misunderstood.

D. Jesus faithfully served because of His great love for us.

Christ's amazing love is the only explanation for why He would leave the glory of heaven and submit Himself to all of the abuse and hardship He went through to secure our salvation. Just before Jesus girded Himself with that towel and began the lowly servant's task of washing the disciples' feet, John 13:1 states that Jesus loved His own who were in the world and that He loved them to the uttermost.

The apostle Paul was driven by this same love of Christ. He said that the life he now lived in the flesh, he lived by faith in the Son of God, and then he adds, "who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). In that great eighth chapter of Romans, Paul reaches a crescendo when he reflects on God's great love in Christ. He states that even if we are put to death for Christ's sake, "we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." Nothing, he states, absolutely nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39).

Just as Christ served because of His great love for us and Paul served because he was captivated by Christ's love, so we should serve because of Christ's love for us and our love for Him. God's love as seen in Christ, and especially in His sacrificial death, is the great motive for anything and everything we do in service for Him. Jesus Christ is our great example of servanthood.

## 2. The great enemy of servanthood: Self.

The disciples' squabble came from one source: self! James 4:1 asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" He answers, "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" Selfish desire leads us into conflict with one another. That is why Jesus spells out the beginning requirement if we wish to follow Him: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). But denying self isn't a once and for all decision that we make and then get on with life. Self keeps rearing its ugly head, even in those who have tried to kill the monster for years! So even the most mature saints constantly have to do battle with self.

### A. Self reveals itself in pride.

You would think that right after the Lord's Supper, this sort of dispute among these men would not have happened, but it did. Pride and selfishness (which are related) are the most common and troubling problems we face. In the next section, Peter's pride comes through as he protests that he is ready to die with Jesus. Peter believed in his own commitment more than he believed Jesus' word! If these men who had walked in close relationship with Christ could fall into the pride of proclaiming their own greatness right after the Lord's Supper, then we are not immune!

One of the most remarkable deceptions that the enemy has pulled off is to infect the evangelical church with the notion that we are supposed to build up our self-esteem! It has swept into the church in the past 30 years. I have not been able to find any evangelical writers much before 1970 (when James Dobson's *Hide or Seek* hit the market) who proclaim this false doctrine. J. C. Ryle, for example, who wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, viewed self-esteem as a deep-rooted evil. He comments, "Ambition, self-esteem, and self-conceit lie deep at the bottom of all men's hearts, and often in the

hearts where they are least suspected" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], Luke 11-24, p. 403).

John Calvin, who tipped me off to my own errors on this matter, frequently warns against the evil of self-love. He says, "There is, indeed, nothing that man's nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered. Accordingly, when his nature becomes aware that its gifts are highly esteemed, it tends to be unduly credulous about them." He goes on to say that "blind self-love is innate in all mortals," and because of this, "when anyone publicly extolled human nature in most favorable terms, he was listened to with applause." He warns that if we listen to "the sort of alluring talk that tickles the pride that itches in [our] very marrow," we will not advance in true self-knowledge, "but will be plunged into the worst ignorance" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill [Westminster], 2:1:2).

So, rather than pouring the gasoline of self-esteem on our propensity toward pride, we must, in the words of Isaac Watts, "pour contempt on all our pride" if we want to be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### B. Self reveals itself in competition.

"I'm the greatest apostle!" "You are not! I am!" "You guys are both wrong. I'm the greatest!" The apostles were doing what men by nature are prone to do, competing for first place. Our American culture is especially competitive. That's how you get scholarships, get into college, and get good grades, by doing better than other students. That's how you get ahead in business, by competing with others for customers. That's how sports teams win championships, by competing and conquering the opposing teams. We live in a climate of competition!

I noticed this last fall when I was traveling in Poland. The main roads there are two lane roads and you frequently encounter horse-drawn carts and slow cars or trucks. Sometimes our driver would pull out to pass and I could see that we weren't going to make it. There just wasn't enough time to pass before the oncoming vehicle would hit us head on! In America, you wouldn't dare to try such a thing. I've even had drivers that I was trying to pass speed up, forcing me to drop back behind them. But in Poland,

everyone just sort of moves to the side and you pass three abreast. They cooperate rather than compete! A couple of times since then, I've been tempted to try that here, but I instantly realize that it would be suicide!

In the church, I think we need to work at cooperation and to be careful not to compete. Is another church doing better than ours? If they preach the gospel, praise God! It means that our team is doing well!

C. Self is modeled for us in worldly leadership.

Jesus describes worldly leadership, where the top man lords it over others but then demands the title of "Benefactor"! But then He states, "But not so with you" (22:26). Worldly leadership is not a model for biblical leadership. Biblical leadership does not lord it over people, even though at times it must exercise authority (1 Pet. 5:3; Titus 2:15). Biblical leadership does not demand recognition and status. It does not pay attention to titles. It does not use its position for personal advantage at others' expense. In all these areas, worldly leadership models selfish men seeking selfish advantage. Biblical leadership models servanthood, even at personal sacrifice or inconvenience.

Thus our great example of servanthood is Jesus Himself. Our great enemy of servanthood is self.

3. The great encouragement to servanthood: Christ's grace in spite of our sins.

Even though Jesus must have been grieved over this repeated petty quarreling among the apostles, and even though He knew that they all would soon forsake Him and flee, He gives them this gracious word of commendation, that they have stood with Him in His trials. And He goes on to encourage them by promising great rewards for them in His coming kingdom. Truly, as John 1:16 puts it, we have all received "grace upon grace"!

If you have failed the Lord in your attempts to serve Him, He wants you to hear His word of grace. He wants you to turn from your sin and failure and to serve Him again with a glad heart. He's like a father who is trying to teach his young child to do some new task. The child may fail or not do it perfectly, but the dad sees one little thing the child does right and says, "That's the way! Keep it

up! You're getting the idea!" As I think of my own ministry, I am overwhelmed that God allowed me to begin shepherding His flock when He did. I am appalled at some of the things I taught and at some of the stupid mistakes I made. Even now, I often wonder how He can use me. But God's grace encourages me to go on.

4. The great enjoyment of servanthood: To have fellowship and service with Christ throughout eternity.

Christ here promises the disciples (the Greek word implies a covenant) that they will eat and drink at His table in His kingdom and they will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. In light of their recent dispute and in light of their impending failures, that is sheer grace! The fact is, the Lord will reward every one of His servants far beyond what we deserve! No one will get to heaven and think, "You mean I sacrificed and worked so hard for this measly reward?" Rather, we all will think, "God has been far more gracious and generous with me than I could ever deserve!"

I don't know for sure what the Lord means in terms of the apostles' future rewards. Paul says that the saints will judge both the world and the angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3). Apparently the apostles will have a leading role in that task. Eating and drinking at Jesus' table is a picture of the joyous fellowship that awaits all of us in His presence. If we could see now what He has prepared for us then, we all would be "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [our] toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Any inconvenience or hardship you endure now in serving Christ will reap blessing upon blessing in that great day when His kingdom comes.

### Conclusion

I read about a church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that has a hand-lettered sign over the only door into the sanctuary: SERVANTS' ENTRANCE. There isn't any way in or out of that church except through the service door (*Christianity Today* [9/16/91], p. 42). That's how every church should be! It's a place for servants only. Who's the greatest in God's kingdom? Those who humbly serve as Jesus did.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the biggest obstacle you face as you seek to be a faithful servant of Christ? How do you overcome it?
2. Some say that we need “healthy” self-esteem (not prideful, not dumping on oneself). Is this biblical? Why/why not?
3. Is the Bible against all competition? Is it wrong to use competition as a motive in Christian service?
4. To what degree should heavenly rewards motivate our service for the Lord? Is it selfish to labor for future rewards?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2000, All Rights Reserved.