

# Humility: Strength to Serve

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

God our helper,  
By your Holy Spirit, open our minds,  
And warm our hearts,  
That as your word is proclaimed,  
We may be led into your truth and taught your will,  
For the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Background

There is a serious tone to the setting of our morning's reading. Jesus has just instituted the Lord's Supper:

Taking a loaf of bread, Jesus broke it and gave it to the disciples, "*This is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me.*" Taking the cup he said, "*This cup is poured out for you in the new covenant of my blood.*" Jesus then shared, "*one of you will betray me.*"

Jesus was only hours away from the cross, and the cross cast a long shadow over Jesus and the Twelve.

So, let's hear what is on the disciples' minds in the midst of the *gravitas* of the situation.

## Scripture: Luke 22:24-30 (NRSVue)

<sup>24</sup> A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. <sup>25</sup> But he said to them, "The kings of the gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But not so with you; rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves.

<sup>27</sup> For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. <sup>28</sup> "You are those who have stood by me in my trials, <sup>29</sup> and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, <sup>30</sup> so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.

## SERMON – Humility: Strength to Serve

There is always a lively discussion when we talk about who is the G.O.A.T. (greatest of all time) in different areas. So... *what do you think?*

**Who's the all-time greatest U.S. President?**

Washington or Lincoln?

**Who's the all-time greatest basketball player?**

Michael Jordan or LeBron James?

**All-time greatest actor?**

Robert DeNiro or Al Pacino?

**All-time greatest sandwich?**

PB & J or Bologna & cheese?

Well, the disciples had their own little debate.

**Who's the all-time greatest... disciple?**



Here's how I imagine the discussion going:

Peter is the first to speak—

- Well, Jesus gave me a nickname: The Rock.
- I was one of the three who was there for the transfiguration.
- Plus, *I'm* the guy that'll let people in through the pearly gates.

The brothers James and John butt in—

- don't forget, we were at the transfiguration too Peter.
- And the Master gave us nicknames too—
- we're the Sons of Thunder.

John then adds—

- well five of my books will make it into the Bible—which is a perennial bestseller. That's more than you, Matthew and Peter.

Thaddeus says—

- "I'm definitely his favorite." The eleven roll their eyes.

Judas speaks up—

- Everybody knows about me, my kissing abilities, and even a band will be named after me.

Jesus shakes his head—

- "Father, you wanted me to pick *these* guys?"

We're just like the disciples. We get it all wrong when we focus on ourselves. But the light bulb turns on when we remember, "It's not about me." The reality check is—that very night all the disciples would desert Jesus. Peter denied Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus. Thomas doubted Jesus. *And yet*, even despite their failures, and our failures, they came around.

Jesus saw it in them. Greatness was in store for his disciples, once they tapped into the power of service... which they did.

So, what is it that makes for greatness "according to the world's standards?" How do you get to the top?

- Results, big numbers, big wins, and big money
- Fame and lots of followers and likes
- Power and being an influencer
- Brashness
- Acquiring territory
- Ambition

**But how do we as Christians measure success?**

- Is it the same as the world's standards? ...or is our secret sauce something different?
- Jesus tells us the secret to success: You must become like the youngest. If you want to lead, be like a servant. Jesus turns true greatness on its head and it's totally counter-intuitive—yet so true. To get ahead, put others first. To make it to the top, be humble.

Who will inherit the earth?... the meek, says Jesus. Jesus isn't abolishing leadership, He's transforming it. Redefining it. Ennobling it.

Don't use your influence and strength to become great. Seek to serve... *then* you will be great. It's a spiritual law of life you see everywhere. True leadership is being willing to put on the heart of Christ, and to follow his example of humility.



In the first century, seating arrangements were very clear. The table was in the shape of a square and one side of it was left open. At the top side of the square, the host sat in the middle.

The guest on the host's immediate right had the seat of honor. The next highest was on the host's left. Then it was the second person on his right, the second on his left, and all the way down. The disciples were likely arguing over their chair placement.

Jesus is very clear: the standards of the kingdom are worlds away from the world's standards. *"The kings of the gentiles lord it over them. Those in authority over them give themselves titles like Benefactor."* **"But not so with you."** On the contrary, it will be *different* with you. The greatest among you must become like the youngest, take the lowest rank, be willing to do the menial tasks. Jesus is saying, climb *down*, not *up*, the ladder of success. Have downward mobility.

In Jesus' upside down kingdom, the bottom rung is the highest. The leader leads by putting others first—lead by serving. *"You must become like a child,"* says Jesus. See yourself as a beginner, open to learning and development. Don't be so worried about prestige or status or accolades.

Jesus is Lord and King, but his authority is expressed by caring for and serving others. *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,"* says Jesus, *"for I am gentle and humble in heart."* This is what we Christians are to be known by... our love *and* our service. We stick out. So use your status and position to advance God's loving purposes. No strings attached. We give without expectation of return.

Christians can be and are in authority, we can be benefactors, but we exercise it in a totally different way. We see it as a gift conferred upon us, a responsibility. And we do it with the mind and the attitude of Christ. *"I came not to be served,"* says Jesus, *"but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many."*

God's reign transforms authority. It doesn't feel heavy-handed or overbearing. It brings freedom and empowerment. It builds up community. It's a beautiful thing when we're all serving one another. We realize we're a part of something so much bigger than ourselves. Heaven on earth. But a life defined and dominated by getting and taking, is a living hell for everyone around you... including yourself.

But that's not our way. Strive not to be the guest of honor, but be a waiter. A server. Let's be "bus boys" and "bus girls" in the kingdom of God. Waiting on others. Lifting them up. As Jesus

told Peter, “*strengthen your brothers and sisters.*” If we stand by Jesus, through thick and thin, and keep putting others first, a heavenly kingdom will be conferred upon us. We’ll find true joy and influence there– at Christ’s banquet table in heaven. And at the Lord’s Table here on earth, with the risen Christ with us. If we take up our cross and die to ourselves, we’re assured the crown of life.



I came across an interesting ESPN feature article about offensive tackle Justin Herron, who was one of the best players on his Wake Forest football team at the time. He’s now on the New England Patriots. Junior year, Justin was confident that he would be voted team captain. But when the votes were counted, six other players were ahead of him. He was devastated. He went to his head coach and said,

“Coach, I do everything right. I’m the first to practice. I watch more film than anyone. I’m the last to leave the weight room. I do everything right. Why didn’t I get elected as the captain? What else can I do?”

The coach admitted, “Justin, you *do* do everything right. We always see you doing extra work. You’re a tremendous competitor and a very good player. But football is a *team* sport. You need to set a good example and bring other guys with you.”

Herron took to heart his coach’s guidance and went to work. “Team first” became his MO. He mentored younger players, even those who played his position. When he got injured, he typed up analyses of the opponent to give to the person filling in for him. When Justin watched film, he brought others with him. Almost exactly a year after his big disappointment, Herron got a phone call. “Congratulations, Justin,” said the coach, “your teammates have named you team captain.” Justin Herron tapped into the spiritual principle Jesus was talking about. Be humble. Be a learner. Bring others along. Serve them. Put others first.

Amen.

Sermon Art: “*Interconnectedness*”

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