

Failing Jesus **Luke 22:21-34**

Last week's passage covered the Last Supper, and focused on Jesus' sacrifice of his life for the sake of his followers: "This [bread] is my body given for you" (22:19); "This cup is ... my blood, which is poured out for you" (22:20). This week's passage covers several episodes, all sharing a common theme: his disciples' various failures to reciprocate. First, one of them betrays him (22:21-23). The rest proceed to argue over who among them is the greatest (22:24-30). Then Jesus anticipates their desertion, along with Peter's denial (22:31-34).

Day 1: Luke 22:21-34 Glory and ignominy

Luke has intentionally organized his narrative to put all these items together. Matthew and Mark place the prediction of Judas' betrayal before their account of the Lord's Supper. They each locate the debate over preeminence several chapters earlier. They both situate the prediction of Peter's betrayal later that night, on the Mount of Olives, after the disciples finish the Passover meal and leave the upper room. Luke intentionally organizes his account topically in order to highlight the massive discrepancy between the self-sacrificing Lord and his self-serving disciples.

We read this passage, first of all, in its own right, as reminder of what Jesus endured, not only from his opponents, but also from his friends. We read it, secondly, so that we might be alert to ways in which we might – and must not – imitate their deplorable behavior.

Day 2: Luke 22:21-23 Judas betrays Jesus

These three verses break down into five basic points: (1) Judas is going to betray Jesus; (2) Jesus is prophetically aware of the fact; (3) this betrayal is foreordained by God; (4) Judas will be condemned for it; and, (5) none of the other disciples knows the identity of the culprit.

All five points are grievous. The first: a sorrow to be betrayed by a colleague and friend. The second: the turmoil to know of the coming betrayal, but to share an intimate meal with the culprit. The third: since God can feel love, he must also feel sorrow. The fourth: an eternal grief, to come so close to salvation only to end up condemned for all time. The fifth: suspicion infiltrates the band for the brief time that it has left, and while it reconstitutes, its innocence and unity are lost forever.

How might we betray Christ today? Much as Judas did, by coming to know him, and then renouncing him. In his seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis tells of the adventures of four English youths in the mythical land of the

Christ-figure Aslan. Sadly, in the last volume of the series, only three of the youths remain: the fourth has left behind Jesus as one of “all those funny games we used to play when we were children.” In real life today, I know of an author who began as a student at Moody Bible College, then graduated from Wheaton College, entered pastoral ministry while studying at a liberal seminary, and eventually became an agnostic professor of religion and a prolific writer whose books take aim at historic Christianity. A crisis of faith is sad in itself. But it is grievous beyond words to make a living undermining a formerly beloved Savior, and other people’s confidence in him. Let us not take our faith for granted. Today, pray for yourself and your family, that you will never renounce Christ. And pray for any you know who have previously renounced him, that they may avoid Judas’ fate, both in faith and in eternity.

Day 3: Luke 22:24 I am the greatest!

Given Judas’ betrayal, it would be easy to villainize him while excusing the rest of the disciples. All of the Gospels acknowledge this particular incident, but Luke is the most emphatic about the severity of its significance. Locating this discussion immediately following the prediction of betrayal, Luke drives home the point that the problem is not with ‘one bad apple,’ but with them all. What Judas does is unforgivable, but what the others do is inexcusable. The divine Son has announced that he is about to die, and they argue over which of *them* is the greatness. Instead of acceding *his* unrivaled greatness – a greatness both of identity (as divine son) and of character (in self-sacrifice) – they compete over their relative degree of petty greatness. Incredible!

Well, perhaps not so incredible. Our spiritual leaders sometimes do similar things. Pastors may compete over whose congregation is the largest, whose sermons are most often downloaded, or whose books sell the most: ironically, these are congregations which gather, presumably, to worship Christ not pastors; books and sermons written and preached, purportedly, to glorify Christ not their authors. All the while, we, their loyal followers (or is it Christ’s loyal followers?) proclaim the special celebrity of our favorite preacher or author. So it may not be just our heroes who compete for greatness, but we who compete on their behalf.

Who is your favorite Christian preacher or spiritual leader?

Who is the greatest of them all?

Day 4: Luke 22:25-27 Who is the greatest of them all?

Let us suppose that we, like the demented stepmother of Sleeping Beauty, want to pursue this patently petty question, “Mirror, mirror on the wall ... Who is the greatest of them all?” The first issue is how to measure greatness. Of course, that seems no issue at all. Nothing could be easier. We already know how to

measure greatness. We learn it from a young age. The lesson is reinforced every day, in every way, at work and at play. At work: the CEO of the biggest, most-profitable company; the highly recognized leaders in the most prestigious profession; the trendiest, fastest-growing start-up. At play: the player who scores the most points; the team with the most runs. Individually: the alpha male (or female); the most prominent and conspicuous; the most influential: the one to whom people naturally gravitate. So, carried over with only slight motivation to fit a religious – not to say, a genuinely Christian – context: I read today of “[*name withheld*], pastor of the third most influential church in the nation with more than 18,000 in attendance.” And, of course, the same sort of thing occurs when measuring greatness among church members: the criteria change a little when moving from pastors to church members, but largely not when switching from secular to ‘Christian’ standards of greatness.

The entire line of thought is absurd for two reasons. First, there is only one great: Jesus. Once he has come, no one else reasonably qualifies for that category. It is akin to standing on the surface of the sun, while comparing flashlights to determine the brightest. Secondly, implicitly using his own career trajectory as a model, Jesus has already explained how to identify the ‘greatest’: whoever leaves behind the highest glory in order to serve inconspicuously. By that measure, even if greats existed, we would not be able to identify them, because we would never notice them.

Not many of us can claim to be even city-wide great, much less nationally, or internationally. But we can still drag low-level ambition into the life of our community and into the work of God. Are we, for example, disappointed that we are not on a trajectory toward greatness? Or, are we discouraged that we do not receive greater recognition for our service to the church or fellowship? Do we silently criticize those who receive greater attention? If our ambition is to imitate Jesus, we will serve without begrudging either the work or the lack of recognition.

Day 5: Luke 22:28-30 They will be great enough in the end.

Jesus offers two additional reasons why the apostles should not be concerned about their respective ranking on the scale of greatness. For one, he is merciful in assigning credit for work well done. Consider this: just before he predicts their desertion and Peter’s denial, he commends them, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials” (22:28). ‘Standing by him in his trials’ is exactly what they are about *not* to do. Still, he gives them credit for whatever they are capable of. For the other, without condoning their competitive drive, he assures them that they will eventually have sufficient glory to satisfy: “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may ... sit on the thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (22:30). In short, they eventually receive a whole lot of

glory, so much that it no longer matters who gets most.

These assurances are, of course, directed to the twelve apostles. There is no hint that the kingdom of God has other thrones, on which we might sit, provided we are faithful and effective. (Revelation 3:21 suggests that we will all sit on Jesus' one throne, but this is all imagery, so it is not possible to identify precise details.) But still, since Jesus remains the same, it is reasonable to work from greater to lesser: if these promises hold for the original apostles, so similar – albeit less grand – promises hold true for us. He will be gracious in attributing credit, and generous in apportioning glory. This is enough for us.

Day 6: Luke 22:31-34 Is anyone actually great?

This discussion of greatness turns out to be ironic on all counts. So far, we have seen two ironies. First, they seek greatness in the presence of the divine son who sacrificed himself for them: by this standard, none of them comes close to initial greatness, and none of them has yet acted with greatness. Secondly, they are already in line for more greatness than their performance warrants. Now is the third irony: all the good that they have done, for which they might lay a modest claim to greatness, they are about to forfeit through cowardice. All will fall away, and Peter, the greatest – or, at least, the most conspicuous (and is that not how we still measure greatness?) – will fall the worst: he will deny Jesus three times.

Three more features of this brief anecdote deserve comment. For one, Satan is behind Peter's failure. This does not absolve the apostle from blame, any more than it absolved Judas. That connection is actually the point: Satan brought about Judas' destruction; now will Peter also be destroyed? Which introduces the second notable feature: Peter survives, yet not by his own skill, but by virtue of Jesus' intercession. Otherwise, he would have no hope; his faith would surely fail. So, for the third, the greatness to which Peter aspires is quite beyond his reach, and the greatness which he eventually obtains owes itself to Jesus' intercession rather than to Peter's abilities.

Ironically, Jesus rewards us to for what he works in us and achieves through us. Is anyone really great? No, at least, not one of us. Though Jesus does great things for us, and in us, and occasionally through us. And, eventually, he accords us high status for what he has done. Let this be the sort of prominence to which we aspire.