Luke Lesson 85 (2021)

**LIVING AS NEW COVENANT PEOPLE**

(Subtitle: A Servant Leader)

Luke 22:23-38

Key Verse: 22:26

“But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”

In the previous passage, Luke 22:1-23, we learned how Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples and explained the meaning of his impending death as the Paschal Lamb. As he broke bread and shared the cups, he highlighted that the bread was his body and the cup was the new covenant in his blood. And he commanded them by saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Today’s passage continues his dialogue with his disciples, in which Jesus teaches them the essential principle of life as New Covenant People. It was Jesus’ last and one of the most critical dialogues he had with his disciples before he suffered on the cross. This morning, let’s pay attention to what Jesus taught on that evening.

Look at verses 23-24. “They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this. A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.” At the end of the Last Supper, Jesus announced to his disciples the shocking news that one of them would betray him. Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, knew that it was him who Jesus meant. Yet, other disciples had no clue. In their puzzlement, they began to question among themselves, saying, *“Oh my! Who would do such a terrible thing to the Lord among us? Not me!”* It shook them off. John, who was always competitive with Simon Peter, might have commented*, “It’s not you, Peter?”* Peter didn’t like what he said, so he reacted in anger. *“What are you talking about, John? Are you crazy?”* I am sure that everybody was frustrated and said something about it.

Now, it seems that this questioning of who would be the betrayer of their Lord degenerated into pride. And an argument broke out among them as to which of them would be considered the greatest. The phrase “Considered to be the greatest” may mean many different things. Under their circumstance, however, it could mean *“considered to be the most important or most influential among them.”* It’s embarrassing that even on the eve of the crucifixion, the disciples quarreled as to which of them should be regarded as the most important. They were egocentric. Even though Jesus had often taught them that his kingdom was spiritual and heavenly, they could not break away from their human expectations to get higher or more critical positions for themselves.

Acknowledging that the way his disciples thought and acted was not different from, but was just like what the world people did, Jesus made a sharp distinction between what is considered significant in the world and what is considered important in the sight of God. Look at verses 25-26a. “Jesus said tot hem, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that.” In these verses, Jesus showed the contrast between worldly value and godly value. Worldly leaders exercise their authority and power over others and make their inferiors realize that they are the boss. We experience this everywhere in the world, at work, government, hospitals, either public or private. The leaders tell people what to do, and people have to comply. And those who exercise authority over others are called Benefactors.

What does it mean “called Benefactors”? It means *“considered very important.”* In this world, whoever acts with the most dominating force is regarded as the most important. Under such circumstances, people constantly compete to get a higher position and possess greater power over others. They look for fame and honor to be considered important and influential. Indeed, the underlying mentality of this worldly value is that it’s better to lead than be forced to follow; as a Japanese proverb says, *“It is better to be the head of a small chicken than the tail of a large bull.”* (pic#1)

However, such a hierarchical concept of leadership principle has no place in God’s kingdom among the New Covenant people. Look at verse 26. “But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules, like one who serves.” In this verse, Jesus tells his disciples what true greatness looks like. He says two things about true greatness.

**First, true greatness comes from humility.** Jesus said, “the greatest among you should be like the youngest.” (26a) He didn’t say that the greatest is the youngest or the youngest is the greatest. But he said that the greatest should be **LIKE** the youngest. What does it mean to be*“like the youngest*”? In the hierarchical system, the greatest is the one who is at the top and the youngest at the bottom. So the youngest is the least powerful and least assuming member of the family or the community. So to be like the youngest means more of the attitude, not the position. In other words, it means to be humble.

If we have a big ego, it’s hard for us to be humble. But pride is not the problem of certain people. It’s a common problem of all fallen men and women. We tend to brag about our achievements, human and spiritual, trying to impress others to recognize us as important and influential people, often in a subtle manner. Sometimes, we are not even aware of it. Yet as Christian disciples, bragging even in a subtle way is disgraceful. Therefore, as Christian disciples, we must intentionally deny our selfish pride and learn to be humble.

Apostle Paul was the greatest of all the apostles. Even though he worked harder than anyone and had the most fruitful ministry, he considered himself the least of all the apostles, saying that he did not even deserve to be called an apostle. He was saying, “I am an unworthy servant.” I am sure he was humble not by nature but by his spiritual struggle before God.

He also said in Philippians 2:3, “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.” (NLT) The phrase “Thinking of others as better than yourself” does not mean pretending to be humble. It’s easy to look down on others by comparing them. But we should never compare ourselves or others with someone else. We should learn to genuinely respect each person for who they are as God’s creation and God’s beloved children. True humility embraces and respects all people for who they are.

**Second, true greatness comes from servant-leadership (26b-27).** Look at verses 26b-27. “And the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” Jesus was aware of how his disciples thought and acted based on worldly values. To them, one sitting at the table was more important and honorable than one serving him, just he said, “Is it not the one who is at the table?” Yet, Jesus turns that thinking upside down as he goes on to say, “But I am among you as the one who serves.” The way the world looks at things is not the way God looks at things. Jesus is the prime example of true greatness. Jesus is God the Son, but he did not come to be served but to serve. (Mk. 10:45)

Of course, it does not mean that Jesus didn’t give any command. He gave the orders as a commander in chief in spiritual warfare. However, his life was a life of serving. In verses 26 and 27, the word **“serve”** is repeated three times to underline the importance of serving. In John Chapter 13, we see that while his disciples were arguing about who would be considered more significant, Jesus showed an example. He took off his outer garment, took a towel and a basin, knelt behind each of them, and began to wash their dirty and stinky feet (Pic#2). After washing their feet one by one, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me, ‘Teacher and Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.” (Jn. 13:12-14)

We should indeed serve others, just as Jesus did to us. Serving others, however, is not easy. We also should be careful in serving others. Sometimes, we may offer help to others not necessarily for the sake of their well-being but for our sake, like being recognized as loving and sacrificial. We might also be very generous and kind to them so that they may be on our side, listening to what we tell them to do. We may feel disappointed and discouraged when those we serve do not appreciate our serving and even remain with us. If our serving has strings attached, it’s not genuine servant-leadership. If we are not aware of our hidden motives, it can be extremely dangerous both to us and those we serve. We want to serve others. However, we should not neglect to ask ourselves, *“Do those whom I serve become healthier, wise, more autonomous, not dependant, and more likely themselves to become servants, growing in the image of Christ?”*

It seems that the primary goal of Jesus’ discipleship is to learn servant leadership. Servant leadership is the leadership of Christ Jesus. It’s not just about serving. What matters more is how we serve. We should serve others. Servant leadership is genuine and the highest level of leadership. Unlike worldly leadership, Jesus’ leadership does not dominate or manipulate others. Instead, it shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps them grow as persons, and empowers them to develop and perform as highly as possible. It requires a lot of self-denial and self-discipline. So it’s not attractive to many people, even among Christians.

As I grow older, I wonder if I should continue to serve, which involves constant self-denial and discipline. Honestly, I don’t want to suffer too much in my older age. But the question is, can I ignore God’s high calling and live an easy and comfortable life? Maybe or maybe not. But I don’t want to miss God’s blessing in servant leadership. Jesus calls each of us to learn servant-leadership because it’s the way that leads us to ultimate happiness. That’s why Jesus said to his disciples in John 13:17, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Look at verses 28-30. “You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Here, we see what Jesus promised to give his faithful disciples was not earthly glory and comfort but joy and more significant responsibility in heaven. The phrase “judging the twelve tribes of Israel” does not sound exciting to me. I don’t fully understand what it meant to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Is the kingdom of God a hierarchical kingdom? I am not sure. But it may mean servant-leadership in heaven. Indeed, servant leadership is the principle of God’s kingdom now and forever.

In verses 31-34. Jesus predicts the downfall of his top disciple, Simon Peter. It would be an embarrassing failure to him who was self-confident in his loyalty to Jesus his Lord (33). The time of Jesus’ suffering and death would be the time of God’s test for all his disciples. Yet, Jesus reassured his unchanging love and prayer support for failing Peter and encouraged him to strengthen other brothers and sisters' faith when he turned back. Despite his failure and weakness, Jesus reassured his spiritual leadership over the flock of God’s sheep in the early church. We can see how Simon Peter grew to be a servant leader as we read what he said to the elders. “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” (1 Pet. 5:2-3)

Look at verses 35-38. “Then Jesus asked them, ‘When I send you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: “And he was numbered with the transgressors”; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.’ The disciples said, ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That’s enough!’ he replied.” When Jesus, because of his miracles of healing and powerful teaching, was popular among the people, people treated his disciples with respect. Although he sent them out to preach without taking purses or sandals, they lacked nothing because they were hospitably received. But the hour has now arrived when everything is going to be different. From now one Jesus will no longer be with his disciples, and they will no longer be honored and entertained as before. Jesus, their Lord, would be arrested, sentenced to death, and violently killed on the cross. His disciples would also be despised and persecuted. Now, they will have to find a way through a hostile environment.

So to prepare them for the upcoming spiritual battle, Jesus told them to take the purse and money bag and even buy a sword. However, he didn’t mean it literally. But his disciples were still blind to the spiritual nature of Jesus’ kingdom work and said to Jesus, “See, Lord, here are two swords.” Jesus replied, “That’s enough.” When Jesus was arrested in the Olive Garden, his disciples were frightened and asked Jesus, “Lord should we strike with our swords?’ and one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, “No more of this!” (22:51) The fact of the matter is that Jesus never wanted his disciples to fight by the sword or use any violence. He wants us to engage in a spiritual battle with the full armor of God.

Let me close the sermon. Today’s passage teaches that we should never try to dominate or control others as new covenant people. Instead, we should humbly serve others, following the prime example of Jesus. Human history is the continuation of violence, one war after another. We remembered the horrible violence in 9/11 20 years ago. Yet, what have we done to defeat terrorism? Violence! Another violence cannot solve the problem of violence. Hate and revenge cannot conquer hatred. It gets worse. The world today is full of violence and hatred.

Is there any solution to end the vicious cycle of violence and hatred besides the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection? No. Jesus is the prime example of love and forgiveness. The fact is that he allowed himself to be violently killed, pouring out his blood on the cross so that our sins may be forgiven and cleansed, and we may live a new life in his unconditional love. Even though we may not change much in the world, we can do one thing. It’s time for us to renew our faith in Jesus Christ and practice Jesus’ humble servant-leadership personally at home, church, school, work, and everywhere. And when we do so, we can experience God’s kingdom and his presence in us and among us. May the Lord help us grow as humble servant leaders.