

Who Is Greatest?

Luke 22:24-27 | November 8, 2020 | Bryce Beale

You cannot get at joy directly.

Take almost any of the pleasures you find on earth—if you extend your hand to grab one of them, it will dissipate like mist within your grip. You cannot go direct at it.

Perhaps honor is the joy you seek, to be well thought and spoken of. If you fix your eyes on that honor and pursue it directly, what happens? Misery and, usually, dishonor to boot. You fish for compliments in every conversation, you crave approval, you are always looking in the mirror—and you are never satisfied. And, probably, others will see through your ploy, recognize that you are conceited and seeking your own honor, and so refrain from giving it to you. You went at honor directly, and you lost it. Or, even if you got it, you lose the relish and enjoyment of it. You need more.

Again, you may seek your joy in relationships with members of the opposite sex. You are jumping from boyfriend to boyfriend, or girlfriend to girlfriend. One dating relationship is so emotionally powerful that you crave another, and another. But as you reach for the joy of that relationship which you felt before, it suddenly goes away. As soon as you make relationships your aim, trying to strain from them every ounce of pleasure and joy, you find them a dry rag.

Pick any source of joy in this world—it is only when you are looking for something else than the joy that you find the joy. The man who gives himself to serving others in the end gains honor; the young woman who marries and makes it her aim to please the Lord in her marriage, she finds—or better, is found by—the joy of that relationship.

To seek the joy directly and impatiently is much like picking the apple before it is ripe—now you have it, but it means nothing, it offers no pleasure.

God has designed this world in such a way that you may either reach your hand for pleasures directly and get only the slightest buzz from them, before losing them altogether, or you may seek higher joys which come, not directly but indirectly. But these are

true, are deep, are rich, and they do not disappoint. They are the true joys, the true pleasures.

How do you seek the true joys? Do the will of God. Make that your aim and your ambition. And what is the will of God? Our text today will tell us the crux of it as it is on earth: serve others.

If you demand to be served by others, you may get your cheap pleasures right away but then they will rot in your teeth, like manna on the seventh day. But if you serve others in obedience to the will of God, you will drink deeply of joy.

You will come to understand why those who have the most immediate pleasures in this world—the rich, the famous, the powerful—are often the most miserable. They reach for what they want, and it disappears.

But serve others for Christ’s sake, and joy will fall into your lap almost as a surprise to you, and not like a mist but full and substantial and solid and lasting.

You will prove the unfailing words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”¹ There is more joy in the giving than in the getting.

Jesus teaches us this again today, in our text in Luke. He is still with his disciples in the upper room, celebrating the Passover meal just before his betrayal, one day before his death. And here he pauses to offer to his disciples and, through them, to us, several lessons, made more powerful by the fact that they are, in a sense, his last will and testament.

Let us see the first of these lessons, about taking and giving.

LUKE 22:24-27

Here Jesus sets side by side the worldly way to seek joy, and the Christian way. They are different.

The rulers of the Gentiles, who represent the lost world, seek their joys directly. They take. But Jesus is not like them. He gives. He serves. And he calls his followers to the same path, that we too

¹ Acts 20:35 (ESV).

might have not some light and fluffy happiness, but deep and abiding joy.

We then will consider the two portraits set side by side in our text: first, the way the world seeks its joy, by taking; and secondly, the way Christ and Christians do, by giving. We will see that Jesus has in mind specifically leaders, but the principles he gives apply quite well to all of us.

Take

First then, let us look at the Gentiles.

A Gentile is, strictly speaking, a person who is not Jewish. But since salvation came through the Jews, who alone at that time worshipped the true God, to be a Gentile was to be lost.

The Gentiles here represent the lost and godless world.

When the disciples in that upper room argue, not for the first time, about which of them is greatest, Jesus first points to the way the world defines greatness.

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.”²

Here are kings and men in authority. They are as mortal and as human as any other person, but they are set apart in that they have power. They are “those in authority *over them*.” They can enact their desires in a way others cannot.

Take then a man of the world and give him the freedom to seek his own will, to pursue his own pleasure unhindered, and what does he do?

“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them.”

They, literally, “lord” it over their subjects. They treat their subjects as mere slaves. If Caesar wants a census of a nation he has stolen by force, then all have no choice but to travel to their hometown—it does not matter that Mary is pregnant and will have to give birth in a barn. Caesar does not care. What does that

² Vv. 24-25.

have to do with him? He wants the numbers, he makes the numbers happen.

King Herod the Great demonstrates his greatness by sending some soldiers and slaying every male child in Bethlehem two years old and under. Yes, the agony this would cause his subjects is immeasurable—but why should he care? He is the lord, they the subjects. He does what he considers convenient to himself. He lords it over them.

These are men who seek to grab hold what they want directly, as with an iron fist. They domineer, they control, they are confident and unopposable.

They are always the first set of persons that Jesus describes in verse 27: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves?” They recline at table and demand that others bring them food, as they rest and enjoy themselves.

When Israel first demanded of God a king, that she might be like the Gentiles round about her, he warned her of the way kings operate in this world:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”³

³ 1 Sam. 8:11-18.

Earlier in Luke Jesus commented that “those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts.”⁴

Here is the natural man and how he pursues what he thinks will be joy. Give him the power to do what he wants, and what does he do? He immediately reaches right for his happiness. He forces others to satisfy his cravings, to indulge his desires.

But do not be deceived—the kings of the Gentiles are not only interested in physical leisure and pleasure. After all, rulers do many things to benefit their people. Even what appear to be quite sacrificial things. They may provide bread and circuses, or conduct large building projects which benefit their subjects. They seem to be serving those under them.

But Jesus sees behind the mask: “those in authority over them are called benefactors.” Even bad kings do some good to their people because they seek honor for themselves. They confer a benefit in order to be called a “benefactor.” That is a title of honor.

They are like the scribes and Pharisees, of whom Jesus said in Matthew 23,

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

Likewise these Gentile monarchs do all their good deeds to be seen and called “benefactors.”

When the crowds are eager to receive some benefit they cry out, as they did to Herod Agrippa, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!”⁵ The crowds are pleased to flatter kings, and the world’s kings are pleased to receive that flattery.

The kings of this world reach out one hand to take hold of pleasure, and they extend the other to grasp honor. And they go at these things directly.

What is the consequence? Are these the men in this world who are greatest? Is this what greatness is—power thrust like a weight

⁴ Luke 7:25.

⁵ Acts 12:22.

on the necks of others for my own selfish gain? Getting what I want, taking and taking, going out with the most toys?

Jesus says no. He says that this looks like greatness, but it is not great. For one thing, it does not produce lasting joy.

Despite what almost everyone in the world thinks, more money and more popularity do not equal more happiness. The evidence is before our eyes in every bit of entertainment news, but it is hard to stomach. We by nature think the way the world thinks: the most important thing in life is to become great and powerful and rich, because then you can reach out and take hold of joy.

This is why your Bible includes that little enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes. God gave to one man, Solomon, more wealth than anyone has ever had, and more wisdom and power and prestige. He was the billionaire, the basketball star, the president, the chart-topping musician, and the mega CEO all in one. There was no upward mobility left for him, he was at the very top.

And the world assumes that there, on the peak of human existence, Solomon must have found exhilarating joy. Here is what he found, in his own words:

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a

striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.⁶

He reached out to take hold of pleasure with an arm stronger than any other on earth. And as soon as his grip closed, he watched the vapor wisp away into the air.

Really, the only certain thing that results when a person sets their mind to get this sort of greatness is conflict. You see it in our very text, among the worldly-minded disciples: “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.”⁷

If you would like to enter into bitter controversies with everyone around you, then make it your life’s ambition to take hold of pleasure directly, to get for yourself what you want.

“What,” asks James, “causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”⁸

Seek joy the way the world seeks it, and you will end up losing even what little joy you may have now. Relationships will deteriorate, divorce will occur, hatred and bitterness will grow. The world says, “Take! That is the way to happiness.” But try to take happiness directly and it will wither in your hand like a rose killed by plucking.

Give

This is a bleak picture. Worldly rulers take, but they are not great. They are not even happy.

But now that we have this bleak picture in mind, we are ready for an alternative. And Jesus provides an alternative, a path to true joy, though it is counterintuitive.

We think we must take to be happy; but Jesus turns that around. If you want joy, you must learn to give.

See again our text, starting in verse 25: “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are

⁶ Eccl. 2:4-11.

⁷ V. 24.

⁸ Jas. 4:1-2.

called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.”⁹

It is possible that you long for greatness—you want your life to be grand and significant, not small and meaningless. You want to be great. And you may have dismissed this desire as mere pride. Well, if you seek greatness like the Gentiles do, by climbing to the top over the heads of everyone else and subjecting them to your petty will, then yes, that is pride.

But Jesus here proves there is also a good and pure desire for greatness, when you have the right definition of greatness. If you wish to be great, then become like the youngest and most subservient of those around you.

In Jesus’ day, the youngest lacked two things: power and honor. These young persons are precisely the opposite of Gentile kings, who lord it over others (power), and are called by the title “benefactor” (honor). In Jesus’ day, as in all traditional cultures, with age comes a greater esteem. Your word is taken seriously, if you have the crown of gray-haired glory. If you are young, you are easily ignored. Like David, you are made to go out and watch the sheep while Samuel seeks a king among your older brothers. You are told, you do not tell.

At another time when the disciples had this same dispute, Jesus took a child and set him in their midst, and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰

The key attribute of a child is humility—a child is not powerful and highly distinguished in the world. We read history books about men and women, not about boys and girls.

If then greatness is youngness or childlikeness, how do we become like children? What do we actually do?

“[T]he leader,” says Jesus, must become “as one who serves.”

⁹ Vv. 25-26.

¹⁰ Matt. 18:3-4.

This is the main thing. The world thinks that greatness and joy come by taking. Jesus says they come by giving.

And he offers himself as the chief example in the next verse: “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.”

It is a sad fact of history that most of what has passed as Christianity has been conducted by grown-up exertions of power and pragmatism. Popes and bishops, and in more recent times pastors, have taken high titles for themselves and domineered over their flock. They are the people who “get things done,” who enact their will, sometimes by trampling over the wills of everyone else.

They sit at the table and with a motion of the hand summon servants to do their bidding, to bring them food and wine, to wash their feet.

But in contrast to this very Gentile manner of leading, there is Jesus. Luke does not include this detail, but we know from John 13 that Jesus, during this Last Supper, dressed himself in a towel like a mere servant and washed the feet of his Twelve. They were so surprised that they tried to stop him! But he proceeded and then explained himself with these words:

Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.¹¹

Jesus did not mean by this to institute an ongoing ritual of foot-washing—we wear shoes today and shower, so this act of service no longer benefits us.

He means, “Serve each other, like the youngest, like the least, like servants—like me.”

One of the most important figures in worldwide evangelism in the last three centuries was the high-born Count Zinzendorf. He was part of a noble family and destined for greatness, but while

¹¹ Vv. 12-15.

touring Europe as a young man he was in an art museum and came upon a painting called, “Behold, the Man.” It was Jesus, with the thorny crown across his head, and beneath him was this inscription: “I have done this for you; what have you done for me?”¹²

Taken the wrong way, this might make you feel that you must earn salvation somehow. But that is not true. Christ has washed not only our feet but all of us, serving us upon the cross to clear us of all guilt, to win us the full acceptance of the Father. It was a free act, and it is freely received.

He has washed our feet as an example, but now he rightly asks, “What have you done for me?”

Conclusion

This is not a burden—he is nudging us toward joy. The world will make you believe that taking is the path to happiness, but it is not and never was. We know better, we have the crucified Savior set before us, who for the joy set before him gave his very self.

And now here you are, part of the body of Christ if you have truly believed and, as the Scriptures promise, you have received a spiritual gift that you may gift it to the people around you.

You and I like the disciples sometimes slip into old habits of thought and act like Gentile kings and queens ourselves, wanting to be served and having our small feelings hurt when we are not. But when we operate that way, we know something is off because we become quite miserable.

No, you cannot reach out your hand and take hold of happiness directly.

If you want to be great, if you want real and lasting joy, then put aside your royal robes and gird yourself now with a towel of service. Seek this week and in all weeks to come dirty feet that you can wash, ways that you can get at joy indirectly by giving it to others.

That is the example of giving that our thorn-crowned and towel-clad Savior has given to us—that is true greatness.

¹² “The Rich Young Ruler...Who Said Yes!” Christian History Institute, christianhistoryinstitute.org (accessed Nov. 8, 2020).