

## Ambition: Selfish or Selfless?

Luke 22:24-38

David Sunday

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We are continuing in our exposition of this wonderful Gospel of Luke and in this passage, we are in the final 24 hours of Jesus' life before His death on the Cross.

<sup>24</sup> A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. <sup>26</sup> But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. <sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, <sup>29</sup> and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, <sup>30</sup> that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

<sup>31</sup> "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, <sup>32</sup> but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." <sup>33</sup> Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." <sup>34</sup> Jesus <sup>fn</sup> said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me."

<sup>35</sup> And he said to them, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." <sup>36</sup> He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. <sup>37</sup> For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." <sup>38</sup> And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough."

This is God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God!

Amy Carmichael founded the Dohnavur Fellowship mission in India, where she served for 55 years without furlough until her death at the age of 83. If you wanted to serve as a missionary in Dohnavur, you had to answer twenty-five simple questions—questions like these:

- Do you truly desire to live a crucified life? (This may mean doing very humble things joyfully for His Name's sake.)
- Does the thought of hardness draw you or repel you?
- Do you realize that we are a family, not an institution?

- Are you willing to do whatever helps most? . . .
- Have you ever had opportunity to prove our Lord's promise to supply temporal as well as spiritual needs?
- Can you mention any experience you have passed through in your Christian life which brought you into a new discovery of your union with the crucified, risen and enthroned Lord?

Later in her life, Carmichael summarized the mission's expectations with this brief statement: "Do not come unless you can say to your Lord and to us, 'The Cross is the attraction.'"

Now tell me, should this kind of lifestyle be required only for missionaries? Or was the Dohnavur Fellowship describing what should be expected from any normal Christian?

In this passage, Jesus is less than 24 hours away from His death. He's going to die on the cross in about 12 to 15 hours. It's Thursday evening before Good Friday and no one understands what lies ahead but Jesus. His disciples don't even realize what's happening. They're thinking that the moment of triumph has finally arrived; the moment when Jesus will liberate them from Roman rule and restore the Kingdom to Israel. They're not ready for the cross. They don't desire to live the crucified life. The thought of hardness does not draw them; it repels them.

We're a lot like them. It's one thing to sing The Old Rugged Cross,

Oh that old rugged cross, So despised by the world,  
Has a wondrous attraction for me...

(The Old Rugged Cross, George Bennard)

But when the reality of the cross looms across the landscape of our lives, our nature, just like the disciples, is to shrink back from it. The same heart issues that hinder the disciples from being attracted to the cross and from embracing the crucified life are alive in our hearts today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But there's hope in this passage because Jesus knows our weaknesses just like He knew the weaknesses of His disciples. That does not stop Him from going to the cross. The cross is the attraction for Jesus. He goes alone to the cross. He dies for us so that He can transform us into people who no longer live for ourselves, but for Him Who died and rose for our sake.

We're going to look at these disciples and see, in them, reflections of the heart issues that we all struggle with and it's going to point us afresh to a Savior Who bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders alone. We're going to thank Him for the mercies that flow to us from what He did for us, all alone on that cross.

So what keeps us, as the disciples of Jesus, from embracing the way of the cross, the crucified life?

## 1. We, like the disciples, are distracted about our own status.

This was common throughout the Gospels. We see this in verse 24.

*A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.*

Some people like to talk about the weather. Some people like to talk about sports. Some people like to talk about politics. The disciples liked to talk about who's the greatest and the fairest of them all. The timing of this conversation was grossly inappropriate. Jesus has just announced that one of them is going to betray Him and they're talking about who's the greatest? This was Jesus' last night with them. They're talking about who's the greatest? Jesus has just served them Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. They're caring about who's the greatest? Jesus is about to be crucified for their sins. They're saying, "Who's the greatest?" This is the way of the world.

Jesus says in verse 25 that the kings of the Gentiles, pagan kings, exercise lordship over their people. They're called benefactors or "friends of the people." They want all the honor, all the prestige, all the status. But Jesus says in verse 26, "Not so with you." This desire to pull rank and be higher in the pecking order infiltrates every sector of society. If you've watched Downton Abbey at all, you've seen this same heart issue is operative upstairs and downstairs. Apart from God's grace at work in our lives crucifying this tendency in us, we are hopelessly addicted to our own self-importance. That's our nature.

Theologians have described the effects of sin like this, "Our hearts, deformed by sin, curve inward on themselves." There's this inward curvature of the heart, always turning in on ourselves. "Give me attention! Notice what I do! Admire my work! See how smart I am, how beautiful I am, how talented I am!" Jesus says, "Not so with you, My disciples. This addiction to status, prestige and how people think of you has to die." Jesus isn't just saying, "Listen, if you want to rise to great heights in My church, you must first prove yourself in a lowly place." No, Jesus is saying, "The greatest position in My Kingdom is faithful service in a lowly place. In My Kingdom, greatness is defined by faithful service in lowly places. That is what true greatness is!"

*But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. (Luke 22:26)*

Service that is prompted by selfless ambition is watching out for the needs of others and taking action, without even needing to be asked. Selfless service is not taking offense when others are recognized before we are. It is being willing to do work gladly, no matter how lowly the task or how great the personal cost.

I'm so grateful for the many ways our church family is engaged in this type of service. Being able to come to worship together requires so many people doing lowly tasks. Preparing bulletins, preparing sound, serving in the nursery, working in children's ministry. And out there in the body, what a joy to hear of people preparing meals, ministering to neighbors, doing Bible studies in jails, visiting shut-ins, opening your homes and allowing people to live with you for weeks on end because you understand that greatness in the Kingdom is servanthood.

Often we wrestle with selfish ambition. The test really is: What happens when your service goes unnoticed? How do you respond when the role you think you deserve or the recognition that you think you deserve is given to someone else? How do you feel when others are recognized and thanked and appreciated, but you are not? Jesus says in verse 27, "*For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves?*"

We think certainly it's the one who reclines at table, the one who's getting served. He's the greater one. But Jesus turns that value system upside down when he says in verse 27, "*I am among you as the one who serves.*"

Jesus says, "I am among you as the One Who is in the form of God but did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped or held on to. I am among you as the One Who emptied Himself by taking the form of a Servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form. I humbled myself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. I am among you as the One Who came not to be served but to serve" (Philippians 2:6-8; Matthew 20:28). Jesus went to the cross in order to destroy our addiction to self-importance and to give us new hearts that are no longer curved inward upon ourselves but that delight in taking the role of servants.

Some of you know Doug Nichols, founder of Action International Ministries. He's a missionary that some of us have known for years. Doug has a really colorful and humorous personality. He tells this story about back in 1996 when he joined Operation Mobilization, a ministry that's all about getting out there and proclaiming the gospel to people. A lot of young people were in that mission, living very simple lives in order to make Christ known. He says,

"In 1966 I joined Operation Mobilization. . . While in London that summer, at the one-month OM orientation, I volunteered to work on a clean-up crew late one night.

Around 12:30 a.m. I was sweeping the front steps of the Conference Centre when an older gentleman approached and asked if this was the OM conference. I told him it was, but almost everyone was in bed.

He had a small bag with him and was dressed very simply. He said he was attending the conference, so I said, 'Let me see if I can find you a place to sleep'. Since there were many different age groups at OM, I thought he was an older OM'er.

I took him to the room where I had been sleeping on the floor with about fifty others and, seeing that he had nothing to sleep on, laid some padding and a blanket on the floor and used a towel for a pillow. He said it would be fine and he appreciated it very much.

As he was preparing for bed, I asked him if he had eaten. He had not as he had been traveling all day. I took him to the dining room but it was locked. So after picking the lock I found cornflakes, milk, bread, butter and jam — all of which he appreciated very much.

As he ate and we began to fellowship, I asked where he was from. He said he and his wife had been working in Switzerland for several years in a ministry mainly to hippies and travelers. It was wonderful to talk with him and hear about his work and those who had come to Christ. When he finished eating, we turned in for the night.

However, the next day I was in trouble! The leaders of OM really got on my case. 'Don't you know who that man is on the floor next to you?' they asked. 'It is Dr. Francis Schaeffer, the speaker for the conference!'

I did not know they were going to have a speaker, nor did I know who Francis Schaeffer was, nor did I know they had a special room prepared for him!

After Francis Schaeffer became well known because of his books, and I had read more about him, I thought about this occasion many times—this gracious, kind, humble man of God sleeping on the floor with OM recruits! This is the kind of man I want to be."

Why does this story surprise us? Because we're not used to leaders who want to take a lowly place. We know what's in our own hearts and how easily this impulse for recognition, honor and status rises up in our own hearts. We know how often we have to wrestle against these temptations of self-importance. We know how often that gets in the way of our embracing the cross, living the crucified life and walking in the steps of the One Who came among us as One Who serves.

We're going to come to verses 28-30 a little further on in the message, but let's move to the second hindrance that we see in verses 31-34.

## **2. We are naïve about our own strength—"I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." (vv. 31-34)**

John Calvin began a sermon once by talking about all the dangers out there in the world that we protect ourselves from and then he made this insightful remark: "There are a hundred times more dangers within us than we see around us."

It's not just self that wages war against our souls; it's Satan. Satan is ravenously greedy for souls. Jesus says in tenderness to Simon Peter in verse 31, "Simon, Simon. Behold and pay attention, Simon. Satan has demanded to have you." The "you" there is plural. "All of you—all

of you disciples, Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat.” He’s not just plotting to kill Jesus; Satan is scheming to sabotage the faith of all of Jesus’ disciples. The Christian life is a fight. It’s a battle of spiritual warfare all the time. We underestimate the personality, activity and power of the devil to our own peril.

Someone wrote in a British newspaper, "We don't believe in the Devil, do we? The trouble is, the Devil believes in us." The Devil believes in us and he prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, ravenously greedy in his appetite (1 Peter 5:8). “Simon, Simon do you know how much danger you’re in?” Simon Peter did not. We read in verse 33 what someone has called “the titanic of all testimonies.” Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” We see our selfish ambition, sometimes in the way we seek status in comparison with others. But do we recognize that sometimes our great announcement of spiritual strength and what we’re going to do for Jesus is prompted by selfish ambition? We’re overconfident in our own spiritual strength and abilities. We’re too naïve to the power of the evil one and the vulnerability of our own faith. Naïve to how absolutely helpless we are apart from Jesus upholding us.

Peter was naïve and overconfident. Jesus tells him in Luke 22:34 that he’ll soon be weeping with gut-wrenching agony and shame. Jesus says, “I tell you, Peter. The rooster will not crow this day until you deny three times that you know me. Take heed if you think you stand.” You’re praying in your heart, “Lord, do not leave me to myself for if You leave me to myself, I will quickly ruin everything. It’ll all be in shambles.”

Our only hope is found in verse 32. “Satan has demanded to have you, Peter, but I have prayed for you.” This “you” is singular. “Satan’s demanding all of you, But Peter, I’m praying for you. You’re like a man, half the size of David, standing before the army of 100 Goliaths, but I am praying for you, Peter.” And God the Father always hears and always answers the prayers of God the Son. He’s a Prayer Warrior Who will never die. He is holy and faithful; He has permanent, constant, immediate access to the presence of Almighty God.

He ever lives above, for me to intercede;  
His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead:  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

(Arise, My Soul, Arise by Charles Wesley, 1742)

He knows precisely what to pray for. Look at verse 32. “I prayed for you, Peter, not that you will never sin. I prayed for you, Peter, not that you would not fall.” Our Lord, right now, even works through our sin and failure to cast us more fully upon His grace.

This is what He does pray for: “I prayed for you that your faith may not fail. That you will not stop trusting in Me. That you will not stop clinging to Me. That you will not stop saying, ‘In Christ alone, my hope is found.’” Friends, if our faith fails—if we stop trusting in Jesus—we lose everything. This is what Jesus is praying for. In our financial troubles, He’s not just praying that we’ll have enough money; He’s praying that we’ll have faith to trust God in the midst of those adversities. In our relationship struggles, He’s not just praying that everything is going to go smoothly; He’s praying that we will rely on God to bring peace. In our battles with illness and disease, He’s not just praying that we’ll be healed; He’s praying that we will learn to trust in Him alone. In our addictions, He’s not just praying that we’ll be able to conquer these things; He’s praying that we will learn to trust Him, moment by moment, as our only Hope and the only power that can free us. He’s praying that our faith will not fail.

Hebrews 7:25 beautifully says,

*Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost, those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong and perfect plea.  
A great high Priest whose Name is Love  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

(Before the Throne of God Above by Charitie Lees Smith, 1863)

Jesus says, “When you have turned again, Peter—when you’ve converted again, when you’ve repented—strengthen your brothers. Minister to them. Let the grace that I’m working in your life be a source of encouragement and strength to them.” In just forty days, Peter is going to stand up on the day of Pentecost and proclaim the gospel with such power and clarity. He who denied Jesus three times is going to be the instrument through whom God the Holy Spirit brings 3,000 people into His church in one day. The grace and mercy of God—the only way that we can ever continue in ministry. The only way our lives can ever be a source of grace and mercy to someone else is because we have a Savior Who intercedes for us. A Savior Who does not give up on us. A Savior Who prays for us.

So we see our selfish ambition here in this passage, both in our desire to be the greatest and in our overconfidence in our own abilities to remain faithful. We’ve seen that we have two enemies so far: the flesh that loves to be important and regarded; and the devil who prowls about demanding to have us.

But there is a third enemy who wages war against our souls; a third enemy who makes us averse to the way of the cross and that’s the world. The world system that’s opposed to God and

this world is always working to detour us from the way of the cross and this is what we come to in the final section, verses 35-38.

### **3. We are ill-prepared for the opposition of the world—"Look, Lord, here are two swords."**

These verses are not the easiest to interpret but what's clear is they're pointing to the mission of the gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus, in verse 35, reminds them how He sent them out into the tribes of Israel as "sheep among wolves" (Matthew 10:16) and all their needs were met (Luke 22:35). He asks them, "*When I sent you out...did you lack anything? They said, 'Nothing.'*" You remember that they came back to Jesus and reported how Satan fell like lightning from heaven. Jesus said, "*Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven*" (Luke 10:20). All their needs were met. People opened up their homes. People took care of them. Jesus made sure that their first foray into gospel missions was going to be greatly successful to His disciples.

But in verse 36, Jesus tells them times are changing. It's going to get more difficult. "You're still going to get sent into the world as My ambassadors. You're still going to be sent forth on mission, but the terms and conditions of employment in My mission are changing." And the reason for this is what we read in verse 37—the key to understanding what Jesus is saying in this short little paragraph.

Jesus says,

*"For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment."*

Now where is that Scripture found in the Old Testament? Think back.

*"For he was numbered with the transgressors"* (Isaiah 53:12).

The suffering Servant, God's Servant King, is going to take the place of sinful man. He Who knew no sin is going to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). He's going to be numbered with the transgressors. And in doing so, in standing in our place, He's going to be treated as an outcast—an outlaw—by the world. Jesus is saying, "Disciples, as you follow Me on mission, as you go forth into the world to proclaim the gospel, the way they treated Me and opposed Me—the way they treated Me as an outlaw and an outcast—is the way they're going to treat you. No servant is greater than his Master. So don't expect any reward, recognition, food, provision or defense from this world. You're going to need to provide for yourselves. You're not going to get help from this world."

Now verse 36 makes sense:

*He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one.*

In other words, "You are going to need a defense system that is strong and powerful." Now is Jesus saying that it's through the loud clashing of swords and military might that His gospel is going to go forth into the entire world? Can you think of any place in the New Testament that would advocate an aggressive, hostile, brute-force method of sharing the gospel?

Right here in this chapter, when Peter takes out his sword and cuts off the soldier's ear, what does Jesus do? He rebukes Peter and heals the soldier. What about the book of Acts? As the disciples go into the entire world proclaiming the gospel, when do you ever see them pull out a sword, forcing people to convert to Christ by brute force? You never see this at all in Scripture. Jesus was not intending for His disciples to think that their power or strength came from a visible sword.

In fact, when they come to Him in verse 38 and say, "Look, Lord! Here are two swords!" Jesus just says to them, "That's enough. End of discussion." It's not what He's talking about. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal or of the flesh. God has given us divinely powerful weapons to destroy strongholds. He's given us an armor to protect us spiritually. He's given us a sword—the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). Jesus is saying, "You are going to need to be armed for battle in order to withstand the hostility that is in this world toward My followers." When we're not spiritually armed for battle with the full armor of God firmly in place, we will shrink back in cowardice when the world's opposition heats up. Just look at the disciples actions over the next 48 hours to see this illustrated.

So Jesus is showing us the weaknesses of His followers through these accounts. He knows the fault-lines of our faith, where we're weak and vulnerable. He knows we are vulnerable to seeking status and recognition. He knows we get over-confident in our own strength and are insufficiently attentive to the power of the evil one. He knows we often have grandiose ideas of how triumphant we can be. He knows when we really come up against the hostility of this world we're tempted to shrink back in fear. We're really no different than these disciples.

But there's grace and good news in this passage. Where?

First of all, it's in Luke 22:37. "...*He was numbered with the transgressors.*" He goes alone to the cross. The cross is the attraction for Jesus. The "we" struggles with selfish ambition. Jesus is filled with selfless ambition. He serves and becomes obedient to the point of death on the cross. Even though He has to go all alone, that doesn't stop Him from standing in our place. That's where see the third piece of good news. He's not afraid to share that Kingdom with us.

Even though we fail Him so often, He shares the fruits of His victory and triumph with us. We're weak, often failing, disciples.

Let's read verses 28-30 again? In light of all that we've seen of the failures of these disciples, isn't it amazing that Jesus says these words in verse 28? "*You are those who have stayed with me in my trials.*" Really? They're all going to abandon Him. They're not even going to be able to stay awake for an hour in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus says, "You've been with Me. You're My friends. You've walked with Me and stayed with Me in my trials. Now I assign to you, as My Father assigned to Me, a Kingdom."

What did we do to earn or deserve this? Nothing. But so often, He says, "I assigned to you as My Father assigned to Me, a Kingdom. Fear not little flock, it is My good pleasure to give you the Kingdom (Luke 12:32); that you may eat and drink at My table in My Kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30). You're going to have authority and blessing. You're going to enjoy fellowship in My presence in My Kingdom. You've stood with Me in My trials. I thank you." It's like He's saying, "Disciples, thank you for walking with Me thus far. You don't get it right now and you don't understand what I'm about to do for you, but someday you will. You will!"

I read those words and I think,

Jesus! what a Strength in weakness!  
Let me hide myself in Him.  
Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing,  
He, my Strength, my victory wins.  
Hallelujah! what a Savior!  
Hallelujah! what a Friend!  
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,  
He is with me to the end.

(Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners by J. Wilbur Chapman, 1910)

Jesus, we thank You!

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