

Who Shall Be Greatest?

Opening Hymn: #215 — “Earthly Treasures Vain”

Matthew 18:1 The disciples came unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

On the face of it, this appears to be a reasonable question, God is pleased we are interested in His plan and want to know more. A healthy curiosity on the part of the disciples. was frequently rewarded with information they might not otherwise obtain. But as it turns out, they had other things on their mind. They weren't interested in how heaven was organized. They wanted to know about their own personal status.

Luke 9:46 Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest.

Rivalry and competitiveness had developed within their association to the point where this became a key question: Who **among them** was best! They had walked with Jesus a couple of years, had served him, had sacrificed earthly advantage. Perhaps now it was time to talk about reward, and particularly who would come out on top. Even today many are not interested in doing anything unless they know what's in it for them.

So what answer did they get? Who would be the greatest one? If they were looking for names—and there's no question they were—they had to be disappointed. For Jesus took yet another opportunity to teach a lesson he had taught before:

Matt. 16:25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

This is the great paradox of the Bible. [Paradox: a statement seemingly self-contradictory, yet explicable as expressing a truth.] If you go after life directly, you'll never get it. If you go after rewards directly, you'll not get them either. So the Master didn't tell them who would be greatest. Instead he taught the lesson of service:

Mark 9:33-35 [Jesus asks] What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace, for by the way they had disputed among themselves who should be the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all and servant of all.

The lesson is very clear. Instead of debating about the **rewards** of service, they should be concentrating on how they might serve others. They were supposed to be servants, not masters. Did this settle the matter? Not at all.

Mark 10:37,41 [James and John] said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand and the other on thy left hand in thy glory. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John.

I suspect that in the earlier “disputing” James and John were of the opinion that they deserved very high, if not the highest position in the kingdom. Here they are bringing up the matter again. And rather

than let the master deal with it, the ten jump right in to contribute their words of criticism. Once again the master takes time to teach the lesson they don't want to learn:

Mark 10:43,44 (Knox) Whoever has a mind to be great among you, must be your servant, and whoever has a mind to be first among you, must be your slave.

Now the King James doesn't say "slave"; it says "servant." I suppose there was a natural resistance to use the much stronger word "slave" even though that's exactly what the Greek shows Jesus said. (The King James' translators used the word slave only once in the Bible, and that time it was simply supplied. The word slaves appears only once.) The Greek word here is 1401: a slave (lit. or fig., involuntary or voluntary).

Slaves

This is a word most of us don't like. Lincoln freed the slaves. Slavery is dehumanizing and debases the individual. So we prefer to think about everybody as being free to do what they want to do. You serve if you want to serve. And when you get tired, you stop serving. But slaves have no such freedom. They must work whether they like it or not. And that, brethren, is exactly the position we are in.

Luke 17:7-10 (Goodspeed) What man among you, if he has a servant ploughing or keeping sheep, will say to him when he comes in from the field, "Come at once and sit down at the table," instead of saying to him, "Get my supper ready, and dress yourself, and wait on me while I eat and drink, and you can eat and drink afterward"? Is he grateful to the slave for doing what he has been ordered to do? So you also, when you do all you have been ordered to do, must say, "We are good-for-nothing slaves! We have done only what we ought to have done!"

The slave doesn't work on just one day of the week (perhaps just on Sunday, say). He doesn't get vacations or days off. He works. Nothing he can do **earns** him special favors. It is his duty to serve his master. If he didn't do it, his life was in jeopardy.

Christians today are in that same position. There is no room for pride or a feeling of some special merit because of what we do. It is our duty to serve our master so long as life shall last. And even when we think we're doing a reasonable job, perhaps we should reflect on the words of this parable. At best we are unprofitable (or good-for-nothing to use Goodspeed's word) slaves. Even though he loved them greatly, **Jesus** often found the disciples disappointing in their lack of progress. But **they** probably thought they had done a pretty good job and had learned their lessons well.

What is particularly interesting in this lesson of the slave, is that the scriptures show us something that is almost contrary to nature: The slave is expected to do nothing more than what the master himself has already performed. In fact, **we** are serving a master who takes pleasure in serving **us**:

Luke 12:37 (Goodspeed) Blessed are the slaves whom their master will find on the watch when he comes. I tell you he will gird up his robe and make them take their places at table, and go around and wait on them.

This is not the usual behavior of an earthly master at all. Throughout the Bible we are told to copy the characteristics of this very perfect master, Jesus.

Philippians 2:3-8 (Weymouth) Do nothing in a spirit of factiousness or of vainglory, but with humility let everyone regard the rest as being of more account than himself; each fixing his attention, not simply on his own interests, but also on those of others. Let the very spirit which was in Christ Jesus be in you also. From the beginning He had the nature of God. Yet He did not regard equality with God as something at which He should grasp. Nay, He stripped Himself of His glory, and took on Him the nature of a bondservant by becoming a man like other men. And being recognized as truly human, He humbled Himself and even stooped to die; and that too, a death on the cross.

This word “bondservant” is the Greek 1401--a slave. The lesson in this scripture makes it clear we are not to be looking for some earthly advantage. We can't do that. We're slaves! But the old human nature within us makes it so easy to forget.

Parable of the Penny

Suppose we were unemployed and didn't know how we were going to feed our family. And suppose we were given the chance to do one day's work and get one day's pay for it. Would we be grateful for the opportunity? Maybe yes, and maybe no!

Matt. 20:1-16 (Goodspeed) For the Kingdom of Heaven is like an employer who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He agreed with the laborers to pay them \$25 a day, and sent them to his vineyard. He went out about nine o'clock and saw others standing in the bazaar with nothing to do. And he said to them, “You go to my vineyard, too, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. He went out again about twelve and about three, and did the same. About five he went out and found others standing about and he said to them, “Why have you been standing about here all day doing nothing?” They said to him, “Because nobody has hired us.” He said to them, “You go to my vineyard, too.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last and ending with the first” When those who were hired about five o'clock came they received \$25 each. And when those who were hired first came they expected to get more, but they too got \$25 each. And when they received it they grumbled at their employer and said, “These men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have put them on the same footing with us who have done the heavy work of the day and have stood the midday heat.” But he answered one of them, “My friend, I am doing you no injustice. Did you not agree with me on \$25? Take what belongs to you and go. I wish to give the last man hired as much as I give you. Have I no right to do what I please with what is mine? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.

There are a lot of good lessons in this parable. Clearly we can all understand the expectation of those who had labored all day. Although they knew what they had been promised, we can't help but see how they thought this generous employer would be even more generous when he came to them. What they failed to see was that they were at best unprofitable servants and lucky to have been selected by the master at all.

This parable has troubled some because it looks as though some who get into heaven are going to grumble about it, expecting to have a higher position of status than some others. But that's the wrong interpretation. This parable is not talking about what happens in heaven. It's talking about what happens right here on earth.

At the time Jesus preached the kingdom, his audience was typically divided into scribes and Pharisees, and publicans and sinners. The Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus because he associated with the sinners. They believed they were the ones who had served God "through the heat of the day" and thus deserved special consideration. They could not understand how the publicans and sinners should have the same opportunity as those who were obviously more faithful. The "penny" being paid was clearly the opportunity to enter upon the narrow way, and everybody got the same opportunity no matter how long they may have served in what they perceived to be the "vineyard of Jehovah". In this respect, this parable is like the parable of the Prodigal Son. The elder brother doesn't want the younger brother to get anything because he doesn't deserve it. But God's generosity isn't earned. Whatever we get is a gift. We do nothing to earn it. We do not merit it. [see Z5473]

Luke 10:2 Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.

Although spoken of the harvest of the Jewish age, the circumstance is the same today during the harvest of the Gospel age. Rather than grumble about opportunities given to others who perhaps in our judgment don't deserve them, let us rejoice over every labourer in this harvest. Let us not begrudge the generosity of the Lord. He can bestow his favor on other friends, other classes, other groups just as he has been bestowing his favor on us.

I once heard a radio minister who had as his slogan "Blessings Now." It's an appealing slogan. Everyone, given their choice, would want blessings now. But that's not the way it's supposed to be.

Matt. 6: 1,2,8 (Weymouth) Beware of doing your good actions in the sight of men, to attract their gaze; if you do, there is no reward for you with your Father who is in heaven. When you give in charity, do not blow a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and streets in order that their praises may be sung by men. I solemnly tell you that they have received in full their reward. (vs. 8) Do not, then, imitate them; for your Father knows what things you need before you ask Him.

This is a strong statement that it's not "Blessings Now." If you do anything to gain blessings now, there will be no blessings later! It is a clear act of faith to believe our Heavenly Father will take care of us, that we don't need to have the approval of others around us. As we gain in Christian maturity, we should remind ourselves of this lesson.

Sometimes if we know **we** aren't supposed to get some special reward, we want **others** to get punished. That way we have a subtle indication that God's favor is shining on us, not upon those who disagree with us. It was immediately after the lesson about who should be greatest that we read these words:

Luke 9:52-56 (Weymouth) And He sent messengers in advance, who entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for Him. But the people there would not receive Him, because He

was evidently going to Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Master, do you wish us to order fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But He turned and rebuked them. And they went to another village.

It never dawned on James and John that the Master was perfectly capable of calling down fire from heaven himself if that was the right thing to do. Somehow James and John wanted to show those Samaritans just who they were rejecting. But again, it’s all in the same category of doing things to show how important they were. Who would be the greatest always seemed to be affecting their judgment.

Baruch

There’s a little-known character in the Old Testament who illustrates some of what we’ve been talking about. His name was Baruch.

Jeremiah 36:4-6 Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book. And Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I am shut up. I cannot go into the house of the Lord. Therefore go thou and read in the roll which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord’s house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities.

This was quite an experience for Baruch. He started out as Jeremiah’s secretary, writing what Jeremiah dictated. But since Jeremiah had been barred from speaking in the temple court, Baruch was sent to do it. And Baruch did read the prophecies of Jeremiah to the people. Some of the princes heard the reading and requested a private audience. In vs. 15 Baruch reads it a second time just for the princes. Without question, Baruch took great pride in this experience and expected to accomplish what Jeremiah was unable to accomplish. Baruch thought he could convert the hearers to follow the ways of the Lord. How do we know Baruch thought this?

Jeremiah 45:2-5 Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, unto thee, O Baruch: You said, Woe is me now for the Lord hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing and I find no rest. Thus shalt thou say unto him, The Lord saith thus; Behold, that which I have built will I break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up, even this whole land. And seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not.

Seekest thou great things for thyself? Yes indeed. The record seems clear in its implication that Baruch expected to accomplish great things. And it’s a very human failing. Even today we may want our class to grow in numbers more than other classes, or we may want to belong to the largest class, or do things better than they’ve ever been done before. It’s so easy to say we’re doing these things for the glory of God. But I suspect that if we could read the heart, there would be a little Baruch in all of us: We’d like to do it for our own glory as well. Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!

Some of the words Jeremiah dictated to Baruch were found in...

Jer. 9:23,24 Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise

lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.

How could the wise, the mighty, or the rich glory in those things? As far as the Lord is concerned, all are unprofitable servants and at best have only done those things that they ought. If there is to be any glory at all, it belongs to the Lord.

Paul probably had this citation from Jeremiah in mind when he wrote...

1 Cor. 1:27,29 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; that no flesh should glory in his presence.

So when you start to feel particularly proud of your relationship to God, remember that you and I are part of these foolish and weak things selected by God so that we might never glory in what we have.

The Gift

Slaves in the old days could be born into a household, work from dawn to dusk in that household, and die without even a word of thanks. That was slavery, and it was the way things were. Even though we all are unprofitable slaves and **at best** do what it is we ought to do, we know we're working for a master who knows how to reward his own.

Luke 18:28-30 Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all and followed thee. And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time and in the world to come life everlasting.

Peter wanted to know about the rewards. They had just heard a rich young ruler ask what he should do to inherit eternal life. And the ruler went away without making the commitment they had made. Jesus told them that they would be rewarded far beyond their expectations. It was similar to some of the words they had heard at the sermon on the mount:

Luke 6:22,23 Blessed are ye when men shall hate you...for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven.

Our treasure is in heaven, not upon earth. The promise is that if faithful we will receive the crown of eternal life, the divine nature. Although we have many blessings today as a part of the present inheritance of the saints, we must recognize that this is not the time for reward. We must not seek great things for ourselves. The increase from our efforts belongs to the Lord. It is not the result of our special abilities.

Luke 12:31,32 Seek ye the kingdom of God and all things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

If we fix our eyes on that great prize of the high calling and if we look for opportunities to serve those around us, ours will be an abundant entrance into the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the Lord help us all so to do.

Closing Hymn: #177 — "I Delight To Do Thy Will"

[First given in Los Angeles, February 1979]