

“The Power Grab”
Luke 22:24-34
November 20, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

Ironies abound in this passage. The most obvious one is that the disciples are busily arguing with one another about which of them is the greatest on the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion. The one who is truly the greatest, Jesus, is willing to give up all power in order to serve his disciples, and the ones who are so weak that all will leave Jesus in his hour of need are clamoring for power.

There is another irony that is more subtle. The weak ones who are seeking power are completely oblivious to the extent of their weakness. Peter had boasted to the Lord, **“Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death”** (v. 33). In reality, Peter would melt in fear when a powerless servant girl recognized him as one of Jesus’ disciples. This irony leads to a big problem for us. Let me explain by telling you what happened to me as I was studying this passage this week. I found myself behaving as Peter, overconfident in my own abilities. I was assuming that had I been present with the disciples on the evening of the Last Supper, I would not have engaged in the dispute about who’s the greatest. In other words, I fell into the same trap as Peter, not listening to Jesus because of overconfidence in my own abilities. So the irony is that we become weak by thinking that we are strong.

The third irony is the one I really want us to focus on this morning. Jesus calls us to give up power, and it is only when we do so that we can have a healthy self-confidence. Peter seems to have self-confidence here when he boldly claims to be willing to follow Jesus to prison and death. But it is a fragile self-confidence that melts away at the first sign of trouble. The way to have healthy self-confidence is to follow Jesus into a serving lifestyle that gives up power. Let’s look further at the power grab of the disciples.

I. The Power Grab

Not for the first time, the disciples were engaging in an argument about which of them was the greatest. It is likely that the argument arose this time over the proper seating at the Last Supper. In this culture, Jesus would sit in the middle of the table and the others would situate themselves in relative order of their importance by proximity to Jesus. The first honored guest would sit on his right, the second on his left, and continuing in that fashion. I’m sure Jesus didn’t much care where they sat, but the disciples certainly did. In jockeying for proximity to Jesus, this argument broke out.

John tells us in his gospel that it was on this occasion that Jesus took up the towel and began washing the feet of the disciples. After modeling such servant leadership, he teaches them about the same. Jesus points out how this leadership is contrary to what they have seen among the leaders of the world. The Gentile kings love the sense of power they have in telling others what to do. They also enjoy being called “benefactors”. If someone else is dependent on you for support, that dependent person will always show great deference to you. For these Gentiles, greatness is measured by how many people you can order around and how many treat you with that contrived deference.

The disciples were acting like the world in their view of leadership, lusting for power. Jesus offers an alternative model. The greatest among you shall be the servant-leader. What are some of the ways we fall short of the servant-leader model and instead grab for power and greatness? There are some obvious similarities. I have felt the temptation to boast in gatherings with other pastors. There is a pecking order of greatness among pastors that is determined largely by the size and wealth of one’s church. Among church members, there is the seeking of greatness by association with the influential and important people rather than the weak and insignificant.

In a way, we seek greatness in the church today exactly opposite from the disciples. For them, the best seats were the ones closest to Jesus. For us, the best seats are the ones closest to the aisles and the rear. Our view of power and greatness is to make sure we never lose our choice to opt out at any time. We grab for power by being neither servants nor leaders, but aloof critics.

Jesus turns the pursuit of power and greatness on its head, defining it not as how many people are under you, but how many you are under, supporting in a servant’s role. True greatness is to give up power and serve. It may be something as simple as taking time to get to know the custodial staff at your workplace. It may be a willingness to make a commitment to some ministry at church, limiting your free time to do what you want to do. It means to do what Jesus did, giving up power and serving to the point of death.

II. The Effects of the Power Grab

We see in this passage some of the ill effects of seeking greatness and power. Let me point out two of them. First, we become vulnerable to Satan and his desires to destroy us. Jesus told Peter that Satan has demanded to have him and the rest of the disciples. He wants to sift them like wheat. After wheat was threshed and winnowed, the only part left was the head of the grain. But that had to be taken apart so that only the seed kernel would be left. The taking apart of the head of grain was accomplished with a sieve. In other words, Satan wants to take apart the disciples, in order to destroy them.

Notice that Jesus reports Satan as “demanding” to have them, as if he is claiming some right. I think the sense is that they are behaving in such a manner as to exhibit themselves followers of Satan rather than Jesus. Satan is the one who clamors for greatness, striving to be greater than God himself. Satan has appeared before God, as in the book of Job, and he says, “I demand that you give me full access to these disciples. You have invested so much in them, but they would obviously rather follow me than you because they are acting like me. Give me what is mine.” There is some comfort in these words, because they teach that Satan requires God’s permission for anything he is allowed to do to us. But there is also the curious situation of God granting Satan this demand. As in the case of Job, Satan is allowed to do his destructive work in their lives, only to be thwarted in the end.

The application is clear. When we strive for power and greatness, we are acting like Satan and thereby open ourselves to his destructive purposes in our lives. So instead of acting like Satan, act like Jesus and become a servant. This brings us to another irony. Jesus says, **“You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”** (v. 28-30). True greatness is received, not achieved. Those who seek to acquire greatness only get destruction, while those who seek to follow Jesus into service get greatness. The only greatness and power that won’t destroy us is that which Jesus conveys, rather than that which we achieve.

There’s a second effect of grabbing for power. Like Peter, we become susceptible to self-deception and end up overestimating our own abilities. Peter was confident that he was willing to follow Jesus to prison and even death. His perception of himself was overly optimistic. He couldn’t see what was actually there. This is not just an effect of seeking power, but a symptom as well. When we strive for greatness instead of serving humbly, we lose the ability to see ourselves as we truly are. I was reading an article this week from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by a man using a pseudonym. He used a pseudonym because his paying job is to write papers for college and graduate students. He helps people cheat, and he wrote this article about how common this practice is. Listen to his description of one group of his clients.

I do a lot of work for seminary students. I like seminary students. They seem so blissfully unaware of the inherent contradiction in paying somebody to help them cheat in courses that are largely about walking in the light of God and providing an ethical model for others to follow. I have been commissioned to write many a passionate condemnation of America’s moral decay as exemplified by abortion, gay marriage, or the teaching of evolution. All in all, we may presume that clerical authorities see these as a greater threat than the plagiarism committed by the future frocked.

III. The Answer to the Power Grab

Jesus tells us what the answer is in his words to Peter, after warning him of Satan's desire to destroy him. **"But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers"** (v. 32). The first answer to their lust for power and its resulting problems was prayer. It is significant that Jesus is the one giving this answer. Satan is attacking and Jesus responds with what we normally consider a weak answer, one to be employed when we don't know what else to say. "I'll pray for you." Maybe this is not such a weak response after all. Jesus, who has all power and authority, beholds all the weapons available to him to defend his friend from Satan's attack. He can call on armies of angels. He could simply speak a word of rebuke to Satan, and the one who created galaxies by the power of his word could easily silence Satan with the word of his power. But the one with any weapon available to him looks over them all and chooses the weapon of prayer. If Jesus considered prayer such a powerful weapon, perhaps we should as well.

Note secondly what Jesus prays for. **"I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail."** Jesus didn't pray for Peter's removal from the onslaught of Satan, but his ability to fend off Satan by faith. Peter said in his first epistle that Satan is a roaring lion seeking to devour us (5:8). Jesus believed that Peter's faith was sufficient to fight off this lion bent on his destruction. When did Peter's faith become active? We know what happened in the ensuing hours. When Jesus was arrested, Peter, intent on making good on his promise to follow Jesus either to prison or death, pulled out a sword and aimed it in the middle of the head of the man closest to him. It turned out to be not a soldier, but only the servant of the high priest. Peter's aim was bad, and he managed only to chop off the servant's ear. Jesus took the sword from Peter, healed the man's ear, and went with those arresting him. There was no faith in any of this, since Peter was only laboring out of his own strength. He decided to follow Jesus, and found himself in the courtyard of the high priest, where Jesus had been taken. As he was waiting there, a servant girl recognized him as a follower of Jesus and said so. Peter instinctively denied everything, just as Jesus had said he would. After three denials, he heard the cock crow and remembered the words of Jesus. He immediately began weeping. Still, I don't think we are seeing Peter's faith yet activated. Judas was sorrowful and regretful for his sin, but there was no faith in it. I believe that Peter's faith rescued him, as Jesus had prayed it would, when he began to believe that there was hope after his failure. All was not lost after all. Judas didn't believe there was any hope, and his life was destroyed. Peter clung to the hope of God's mercy through Jesus and was delivered from Satan's efforts as a result.

It is the same with us. Our central battle is to preserve faith. That's why Peter wrote later in life that faith is more precious than gold (1 Peter 1:7). Two applications emerge from this truth. First, we can do the most good for others

by praying as Jesus did for their faith not to fail. This is why Paul often prayed for the faith of those he addressed in his letters. Second, when you are in the midst of a trial, remember that nothing is more important than your faith. Our tendency is to think that our biggest need is for relief from the circumstances leading to the trial. But that is not so. Our biggest need is to keep believing and trusting. From time to time over the last several years, we have had various people in the church lose their jobs. I keep a prayer list of those unemployed and underemployed and pray for them regularly. I do pray for God to give another job. But I pray with greater urgency for their faith not to fail. That is an enemy far bigger than unemployment or poverty. If your faith stays intact, everything will be okay. If your faith fails, all is lost no matter what kind of job you may get. Be willing to lose everything before your faith. Hold on to the hope of the gospel at all costs. Through Jesus, God loves you and can and will deliver you from all your sin and will lead you into a bright future.

The third truth we see in Jesus' statement to Peter is his command to minister out of his brokenness. **"And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers"** (v. 32). This is an amazing statement. Peter is the chief apostle of the church, and it is clear from this passage and others that he is deeply flawed. Jesus tells him that it is his brokenness, mixed with faith and repentance, that will be the source of great strength to others. The central message of Christianity, communicated here by the chief apostle of Christianity, is not that if you work hard and try really hard you can pull your life together. Rather, it is the message that we are all deeply flawed and broken people, but people with a God whose grace runs deeper than we dared hope or imagine. Like Peter, we are to minister out of our brokenness.

My favorite story of ministry out of brokenness is of the Scottish evangelist who fell in to sin and left the ministry. But he eventually came back to the Lord and later returned to ministry and began traveling and preaching again. He was scheduled to preach one night in Aberdeen when he was handed a sealed, unsigned letter just before the service began. It described a shameful series of events from his past life. His stomach churned as he read it. The letter said, "If you have the gall to preach tonight, I'll stand and expose you." He took that letter and went to his knees. A few minutes later, he was in the pulpit. He began his message by reading the letter, from start to finish. Then he said, "I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I'm ashamed of what I've read, and what I've done. I come tonight, not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven." God used that letter and the rest of his ministry as a magnet to draw people to Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION:

God's call to us today is to give up the power grab and be weak and broken sinners before a gracious God. In our weakness, let us serve God and others.