

The Tyranny of Self

Luke 22:24-38

Raynald the Third, was a 14th-century duke in what is now Belgium. He was grossly overweight. After a violent quarrel, Raynald's younger brother, Edward, led a successful revolt against him. Edward captured Raynald but he didn't kill him. Instead, he built a room around Raynald in the Nieuwkerk castle and promised him he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room.

The room that Edward built had several windows and a door of near-normal size, and none of them was locked or barred. The problem was Raynald's size. To regain his freedom, he needed to lose weight. But Edward knew his older brother, and so each day he sent a variety of delicious foods to his room. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, Raynald grew heavier.

When someone accused Duke Edward of cruelty, he had a ready answer: "My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills." Raynald stayed in that room for ten years and wasn't released until after Edward died in battle. By then his health was so ruined he died within a year - a prisoner to the tyranny of his own selfish appetites.

Raynald wanted his physical freedom, but the desire to satisfy his appetite for food had far greater control. When there are two competing desires, the stronger one wins. How foolish Raynald was! If he'd only disciplined his eating, he could've been free in a fairly short time. Once he was free, he could've eaten whatever he wanted. Like him, we can become so enslaved to self and its appetites that we can't accept even temporary discomfort for long-term gain.

Now most likely, you haven't had an experience like Duke Raynald; nor have I. But all of us have experienced the tyranny of self; the cruel and oppressive rule of our own appetites. We know from experience, to a greater or lesser degree, the tragic results of trusting in ourselves.

As we continue our study in Luke's gospel we come to verses 24 to 38 in chapter 22. The setting is the Upper Room where Jesus was commemorating the Passover with the Twelve and giving them final words of counsel. Not long after the events of our text Jesus would be betrayed and arrested. The next day He would be crucified. He had communicated to them His earnest desire to have this last fellowship with them. He knew His death was near.

But what about the Twelve; what were they thinking as they pondered Jesus' words and deeds at this final Passover? What they were thinking is revealed in our text, and their interaction with Jesus provides a warning for us today.

So listen carefully as I read the text, **Luke 22:24 to 38**.

This text reveals several CHARACTERISTICS of "The Tyranny of Self." It shows us the folly of trying to live for Christ in the power of the flesh and what the remedy is for that folly.

The First CHARACTERISTIC is,

Self Promotion

Think of it; here were the Twelve with Jesus in the final hours before His arrest. He had just invited them into a covenant relationship with Him and the Father; a covenant that could only be ratified by the shedding of His blood.

He had told them many times before what was coming; how He would suffer and be killed. But they refused to believe it. It didn't fit their concept of Messiah. All they could conceive in their minds was a kingdom modeled after the earthly kingdoms they were familiar with. They knew kingdoms had a king, the king had a court of trusted advisors, and those advisors had subordinates who carried out the king's decisions. There was a clearly identifiable hierarchy of leadership in the kingdom. Power flowed from the king downward to his subjects.

Using this model led to a dispute among the Twelve; who would be the greatest? The word *strife* or *dispute* carries the idea of an inclination, or eagerness, or fondness to contend. Can you relate to that? Does the desire to be first ever bring you into conflict with others? This isn't the first time the Twelve have gone down this path of self promotion.

In Luke chapter 9 they had a similar experience. There, they had a dialog or reasoning among them which one should be the greatest. Each one put forth his ideas about why he should be preferred above the others. In that case, Jesus brought a child into their inner circle to remind them of the need for simple faith and trust in Him. He also reminded them that the one who is perceived as "least" is, in fact, the one who is truly great.

By virtue of our humanity, you and I have a problem just like the Twelve did. Well, perhaps I should just speak for myself; but I have a hunch you struggle with this characteristic of self promotion to one degree or another.

Because of my role as Bible teacher on our radio programs many people know who I am. When I meet some of them in public settings they express appreciation for the teaching they hear from God's Word. I have to be on my guard not to allow the praise and gratitude of the listeners to stir up pride in my heart.

And, sometimes when I'm visiting another congregation, other than my home church, I hope the leadership will notice me sitting in the pew, maybe even ask me to read the Scripture or lead in prayer. I'm in a setting where God is being worshipped and I want to be noticed; that's wrong. I acknowledge that desire for what it truly is – self promotion – and it is not of God!

You may struggle with this characteristic of self-promotion in different ways than I do. Perhaps, for you, it's not getting the position at work you think you deserve. Maybe someone else gets the credit for your hard work. So you become surly and highly critical of your boss.

Or maybe it's among your peers where you seek the leadership position. You want to be the one they look to as "having it all together." You want to be the one other people try to copy or imitate in your lifestyle, or your dress, or your leisure activities. You and I have much in common with the Twelve. So let's look at how Jesus responded to their dispute.

As a writer, Luke is less concerned with chronology than with he is with message. So we're not sure what triggered this dispute; but it could've been Jesus washing their feet prior to the Passover meal. If that's the case, Jesus' actions supported the words He was about to speak.

He began with their understanding of how a kingdom worked. He reminded them that the kings of the nations "lord it over" their subjects. Even that very designation, subjects, indicates a lower stratum of existence. It sets others apart as lower than the ruling class. The king tells the people what they may and may not do, and how, and when. As subjects, they obey.

I understand the kings of Egypt and Syria, during that time, used the title of "Benefactor." Most likely the Twelve knew this. Benefactor means "champion of the people," but in many cases these rulers were ruthless tyrants. Their leadership was a way to get what they wanted; a way to get others to serve them. Isn't that what we desire when we seek the highest position? We want other people to serve us, don't we? Jesus clearly stated that is the way of the unbelievers.

And He says very emphatically; **“But NOT SO you!”** In other words, my kingdom doesn’t work that way. Instead, let the greater assume the condition of the younger. Because of his youth he feels like he must stand back with sincere humility. Let the one who is chief, the one who is governing, assume the position of those he serves. Can you imagine the difference in the church today if most pastors and leaders had this kind of attitude and practice?

Jesus continues; *“for which is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Isn’t it the one who is reclining at the table?”* This was a rhetorical question the Twelve had no trouble answering. Certainly the one being served was of higher standing than the one doing the serving! I mean, that’s a no-brainer.

But then Jesus upends that idea by stating *“But I am among you (or I am surrounded by you – using the picture of reclining at a U-shaped table) as one who serves.”* Jesus had previously made the circuit around that table washing the feet of each disciple. He was the greatest among them by far; yet He was the only one willing to act as a servant and perform that menial task. John’s gospel records Jesus’ words to them following this act of service.

“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 should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.” That’s John 13:14 to 16. I count it a privilege to be a part of a fellowship that includes this humble act of feet-washing in the observance of the Lord’s Table.

Jesus then went on to show them the rewards of service. He was preparing for them a kingdom that was so much greater than what they envisioned. Focusing on self makes one’s world very small. Most of us have had the experience of being around persons who are shamelessly self-promoting. It is neither pleasant nor appealing.

Jesus wanted to enlarge their vision to a much greater and more glorious kingdom. So He said *“You are those who have been continuing with me in my trials and testing.”* You have stood with me even when many others have turned away. His use of YOU is emphatic; in contrast to those who turned away. Because of that, “I, on my part, legally assign to you a kingdom just as my Father assigned a kingdom to me.” Again, the use of I, ON MY PART, is emphatic to match their faithfulness. You held out...and now I appoint.

The reasons Jesus was assigning to them a kingdom are stated in verse 30. “The purpose of this kingdom I’m giving you is so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom. And that you may sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” You will dine as kings and rule as kings. In the Jewish mind this was the greatest honor God could bestow on anyone; to be a part of that heavenly banquet.

Here were the disciples, envisioning an earthly kingdom and what their status would be in that kingdom. They felt it necessary to argue the case for their elevation to the chief place. But even if they would’ve been given that place it would only be temporary. Eventually, death or someone with greater power would take their position. But Jesus is offering them something eternal, something that will last forever.

So do you see how small our ambitions truly are when we engage in self promotion? Self is an oppressive ruler; it is small-minded, harsh, and unjust. It ignores the feelings and gifting of others. It puts them down in a vain attempt to elevate itself.

Can you see its evidence in your life? Have you experienced its effects? I have; but Jesus offers you and me a better way – the way of servanthood.

However, because selfishness is so deeply ingrained in our psyche, Jesus isn’t finished with the subject. So let’s move with Him to the next characteristic of the tyranny of self.

The Next CHARACTERISTIC is,

Self Presumption

Oh, the delusion of self presumption! Proverbs 28:26 states it so clearly “*The one who trusts in his own heart is a fool...*” So we observe Jesus’ ongoing conversation with the Twelve, and especially Simon.

Jesus addresses Simon in verse 31 in a voice, I imagine, as full of pathos. Jesus knew what was coming and I believe His heart ached for Simon. The double use of Simon’s name is significant. Other instances of this in Jesus’ earthly life were his conversation with Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus. “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.*” That’s Luke 10:41 and 42.

When Jesus lamented His rejection by the people of Israel in Luke 13:34, He cried, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!*” Here again we can only imagine the deep emotion in Jesus’ voice.

There’s something very interesting in these next two verses that we must note. Although Jesus specifically addresses Simon in verse 31, both uses of the word *you* are plural. In verse 32 all four uses of the word *you* are singular. So let’s look at them with that awareness.

While Jesus specifically addresses Simon by name, He knows that each of the eleven disciples will be tested. Jesus’ statement reveals the cosmic nature of what is taking place. He draws back the curtain of the spirit world to show them that Satan is behind the ordeal they would soon be passing through.

The literal meaning of Jesus’ statement is “Satan has asked and obtained permission to sift you (all of you) like wheat.” What does that statement remind you of? It reminds me of Job 1:6 to 12 where Satan approaches God and secures permission to test Job.

Think about the metaphor Jesus is using here. All of the disciples could readily connect with the sifting of wheat; something they’d seen often in their lifetimes. Sifting implies a violent shaking, of being tossed into the air. The shaking causes the wheat to fall through the screen and be separated from small stones and larger weed seeds. The tossing into the air allows any remaining chaff to blow away.

As I meditated on this metaphor I had to ask myself; if Satan was given permission to sift me, what things would be left in the sieve that Satan could use to accuse me before the Father?

Jesus could not keep Satan from attacking Simon; God had already given Satan permission to do that. Satan had already captured Judas, had entered into his heart. Jesus too, was repeatedly attacked by Satan; and those attacks weren’t over yet. Some of the severest tests lay just ahead.

That’s why verse 32 is such a comforting word! “But I have prayed, I have interceded, for you (Peter) that your faith will not fail.” Remember the use of *you* in this verse is singular. Jesus’ words are directed to Simon. So while Jesus couldn’t protect Simon from Satan’s attack, He could and did pray that his faith would not fail. The word, fail, is *ekleipo*. It is the root of the

English word, eclipse. Jesus prayed that Simon's faith would not prove undependable; that its existence and activity would not cease.

We know that Simon's faith failed. Jesus knew it would fail temporarily so He said, "When you have returned to the Rock of your faith, establish your brothers." That is, build up their determination and their resolution. Simon was the one among the eleven who fell most deeply. And Jesus instructs him, by virtue of that horrible experience, to lift up his brothers and solidify their faith. Because he would fall so deeply, he would be competent to strengthen his fellow disciples. What a prescient warning; what an encouragement to Simon to reaffirm his faith in Jesus. But look what he does.

Here is where we see Simon's self presumption. Instead of acknowledging his weakness, and saying "Oh Master, with your help and by your grace I will stand," he presumes that he is going to stand in his own power.

"Master, you can count on me! I am completely prepared, I am immediately available, to go with you to prison, and even to the point of death." Remember the words of Proverbs 28:26, "*The one who trusts in his own heart is a fool...*" How often have you and I uttered words similar to Simon's? How often have we trusted in our own heart, in our own strength? How often have we failed miserably as Simon was about to fail – and denied our Lord and Master?

So Simon had his say; he predicted the future as he saw it. But Jesus knew the future, and He knows Simon's heart. He speaks with authority in His contradiction of Simon's self confidence. "I TELL YOU, Peter, you rock, here's what's going to happen. Before the rooster crows to herald the morning, you will have denied that you know me three times." Peter, the rock, the one who was supposedly unshakeable, he would not only deny his Master publicly, but he would do it three times in succession with increasing vehemence.

You'd think that Jesus' words would have struck Peter to his very heart. He knew from previous experience that Jesus knew all things. Yet he didn't "walk back" his self presumptuous answer. But when he heard the rooster crow, it brought Jesus' words to his mind. And that was the beginning of his "turning again" to Jesus.

My friend, beware of the tyranny of self and its characteristic of self presumption. I'm reminded of Paul's words in First Corinthians 10:12 and 13. "*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man;*

but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” Peter didn’t look for that way of escape, and he fell miserably. The same will happen to you and me if we presumptuously trust in ourselves.

The Final CHARACTERISTIC is,

Self Preservation

The final verses of our text are found only in Luke’s gospel, and they connect closely with the preceding events. It is a bit more challenging to interpret these verses than the preceding ones; especially to see this characteristic of self preservation.

Jesus reminds them of His earlier provision for them when He sent them out two by two to preach the gospel of the kingdom in the towns and cities of Galilee. You can read about that in the opening verses of Luke chapters nine and ten. He had instructed them not to take a money bag, don’t take a knapsack, no extra bread, and no extra coat.

Reflecting on these earlier commands He asks them a question. “When I sent you out with those instructions, was there anything that you were lacking?” Jesus frames the question in such a way that He confidently expects their negative answer. And they said “No, we didn’t lack anything; we had everything we needed.”

Why did He ask them this? Well, I’m not one-hundred percent sure, but I think I have a good idea. If they could trust Him then, in those circumstances, they could trust Him now. Earlier, He had sent them forth as lambs among wolves. He had protected them and met all their needs. If that was true then, it was even more true in the events looming just ahead of them.

But notice how Jesus changes this command. That was then, this is now. “If you have a money bag, take it with you. If you have a knapsack, take that too. If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.” After the resurrection, the disciples would be going out into different world. They would not experience the same kind of hospitality among the Gentiles as they had among the Jews. They would need to be prepared to face animosity and hostility. But even in these preparations they must remember to put their trust in Him.

Some feel Jesus was telling them to get a sword for self protection or self preservation; and it may be that they understood His words that way. But Jesus nowhere instructed His

followers to use violence against another human being in order to protect one's own life or property. In fact, He said the very opposite in the Sermon on the Mount. And when Peter attempted to protect Jesus from being arrested, Jesus reminded him that all who live by the sword will die by the sword.

But there's something else in play here, and Jesus mentions it in verse 37. Part of the reason for these preparations, and especially of the sword, is the need to fulfill prophecy. Peter's actions with the sword at the time of Jesus' arrest helped to "reckon Jesus among the transgressors." And Jesus died on the cross with that misunderstanding accepted by most of His fellow Jews – that He was a lawbreaker. Jesus closed this section of teaching by reminding the disciples that the things concerning Him were rapidly approaching the goal, i.e. His crucifixion.

That goal was not about self promotion, or self presumption, or self preservation. No, Jesus was going willingly to the cross to lay down His life for them and for you and me. This whole section of teaching is meant to show us the real kingdom values Jesus embraced. And He calls us as His followers to embrace those same values.

In the last verse of the text the disciples show Jesus that they have two swords available. And Jesus responds "*It is enough.*" We know the disciples didn't carry swords, so we can only presume they were hanging there in that upper room belonging to the owner of the house. And apparently, Peter borrowed one of them when they left that room. He obviously felt he needed it for self preservation.

What did Jesus mean when He said "*It is enough?*" It seems His reply is designed to end the discussion. He had said enough for them to understand the importance of servanthood, and of dependence on Him to be victorious in temptation. The time for words was finished; the time for action was at hand.

Friend, where do you find yourself in this final scene in the Upper Room? I know you weren't there, but this is more than just the historical record of those events. This text speaks to you and me today.

The tyranny of self is something we will struggle against as long as there is breath in our bodies. Even the apostle Paul stated that he needed to die daily and live in the power of Christ. We are oppressed with the false idea that we must promote self, because nobody else will do it

for us. But that's not what the Living Word and the written Word tells us. No, learning to serve others in genuine love is the key to advancement in Jesus' kingdom.

And far too often, like Peter, we put confidence in our ability to stand firm in the face of temptation. Oh, he was in for a rude awakening and much bitterness of soul and spirit! And so will you and I be if we presume that whatever toughness we can muster will be sufficient to get us through life's trials. We have an enemy who is canny and creative. One moment he appears as a roaring lion, and in the next as an angel of light. When he's given permission to sift us we need the grace of God to carry us through to victory. Our victory will help us to strengthen our brothers and sisters in their battles.

And finally, while we must be prepared to face hostility and opposition in our pursuit of Christ-likeness, we must not trust in ourselves for protection and preservation. We must look to Jesus who *"When he was insulted, he did not respond with an insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly."* First Peter 2:23

The remedy for trusting in the tyranny of self is to surrender our lives to the control of our Master. As we follow His example we will serve with humility. We will exercise trust in him versus confidence in ourselves. We will trust His protection rather than relying on our own self preservation. And like Jesus, and many faithful saints who've gone before us, we'll discover that what He offers is enough. Amen.