

Article of the Month

December, 2022

Which Is Greater?

(Luke 22:27)

THE QUESTION

There appears to be a difficulty in interpreting Luke 22:27. Jesus asks the question, “For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth?” (KJV)

There can be no question that our NORMAL response would be that the served is greater than the server. And yet, the INTENT of Jesus’ **lesson** SEEMS to be that the server is greater — a lesson quite contradictory to the normal human response.

Nevertheless, seemingly in negation of his own teaching, Jesus says (KJV), “Is not he that sitteth at meat [the greater]?” Is Jesus’ answer mocking the normal answer? Or is he seriously saying that the served is the greater? What are we supposed to learn?

SEARCHING FOR AN EXPLANATION

We might learn from John 13:13-17. In these verses (KJV) Jesus says,

“Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye may well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his Lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye so them.”

Among other things, this establishes clearly that the “servant is not greater than his Lord.” It also establishes that “he that is sent” — (that would be US who are sent forth by Jesus) — is not greater than he (the Lord) that sent him.”

Since this entire context is abundantly clear, we MUST conclude that in Luke 22:27, Jesus is serious that the one sitting at meat IS, indeed, the greater.

But what does that do to Jesus’ LESSON? After all, Jesus IS NOT making himself LESSER just because he is the one doing the SERVING!

THE APPARENT LESSON

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As usual, the context helps us greatly. Luke 22:24 begins discussing a “dispute” among the disciples about who was regarded as “the greatest.” How unfortunate that our flesh makes us do things like this! But we can have a sympathetic understanding with these disciples, seeing that they were not yet in possession of the holy spirit. Besides, Jesus had just warned that one of them was a betrayer. Their minds, knowing that someone could be SO LOW, would automatically ask, “Well, who then is the greatest?”

It is in response to this dispute that Jesus sets up a lesson. In verse 25, Jesus points out what is the “norm” among the mighty of this world. Paraphrased, he says, “The world’s authorities only think about the power they have. And because they are the sole source of anything that comes to the people, these kings are called ‘benefactors’ — but not because they really are!”

In the 26th verse, Jesus (again paraphrased) and in order to create CONTRAST, says, “YOU are to be different. If, indeed, you have any power or authority, you must become like the youngest (the ones with least position) — in other words, you must have deference to those beneath you. And, if and when you exercise leadership, you must use it only to benefit others — not to lord it over them, and not to take advantage of the position for your personal welfare.”

When we come to the 27th verse which we are examining, Jesus asks the disciples two rhetorical questions: (1) “Is the one being served or the one serving the greater?” (2) Then he asks: “Isn’t it the one who is being served who is the greater?”

In his first question, Jesus EXPECTS the disciples to give the CORRECT answer. THAT answer is that the served is greater in terms of station, power, and circumstances. The answer to the second question is: “Yes.” Thus, with two questions (with obvious answers), Jesus has made the accurate point. The person receiving service was “greater.” And THAT was the answer Jesus needed in order to make his next point.

He had said to them in John 13:13-17 that it was RIGHT that they should call him Lord. In other words, he WAS greater than they. But by washing their feet, he was demonstrating what he said in Luke 22:26. Being VERY MUCH greater, he was showing that that required that he be as the younger and as one who serves. The Greater One among them was demonstrating his superiority over them by washing their feet and serving them food — all to the contrary of the world’s leaders.

It is not unreasonable to include verse 28 in this discussion. The disciples were now in a VERY GREAT position as disciples of the Messiah! But Jesus acknowledges in this verse that they have NOT been lords over others, but, rather, that they have served by standing by Jesus in his trials — despite what it would cost them. What a complement from Jesus! He had just handled a question (verse 24) where they needed

a little bit of rebuke. But he ends the lesson by saying, “I see in you the spirit of

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dedication and service.” Then (verses 29 and 30), he promises them the pinnacle of rulership so that they may, indeed, serve others.

IN SUMMARY

Jesus’ lesson seems, simply stated, that the greatest among us is the one most willing to serve — even when he is in a position of great authority. That person will never take position as an excuse for privilege — except for the privilege of being of most service to others.

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