

So what do you think? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The Pope sure seems to be, at least in the US right now. Or more locally, maybe Eaglebrook with its 6 campuses and plans for more. Or maybe Joel Olsteen down in Texas with his prosperity Gospel. Who do you think is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?

That's the question that was going through the disciples' heads as they made their way along the path to their adopted hometown, Capernaum. Of course, Jesus noticed that the disciples had been arguing about this very question among themselves and more importantly, that they were coming up with the wrong answers. And so he asks them about their conversation in order to help them get the right perspective on who really is *the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven*.

Sadly, this is a question that still plagues the Christian Church today some 2000 years after it was first asked. People still ask forms of that same question, "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" In fact, it has even caused churches to invent a false theology (Pastor Cordes referenced it last Sunday): we call it the theology of glory – glory to self and not glory to God. As you can imagine, this is not the theology of the Bible. No, the Bible teaches what we call the theology of the cross. And today, as excitement runs high with a new associate pastor, as visions of a grand and glorious future dance before us, we're going to take a look at both of these theologies and see why we embrace and preach the theology of the cross of Jesus Christ. And...

*[The disciples] came to Capernaum. When [Jesus] was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* The first and foremost problem with the disciples arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, is that they still didn't understand what the kingdom of heaven actually was and still is. They still thought the kingdom of heaven was going to be an earthly kingdom and they wanted to know which of them would be the greatest in that *earthly* kingdom.

At first glance, it may seem kind of presumptuous on their part, ridiculous, even. But before you judge too quickly, put yourselves in their shoes for a moment. They had walked and talked with Jesus. They had learned at his feet. They had faithfully carried out his bidding. You can understand why they were looking forward to what they thought was coming: Jesus, in all his glory, ruling over an earthly and glorious Kingdom of Israel with the twelve disciples ruling right beside him. How great would that be!?! But then Jesus asks them about their argument. They must have sheepishly realized how self-absorbed they'd been. So... *They kept quiet*.

Few would admit it today either, but this misunderstanding of the kingdom of heaven being an earthly kingdom is still around today. (In fact, we'll be talking about it in greater detail in Sunday Adult Bible Class this Fall (beginning today) with the series, Revelation Rewind.) You see, many churches in America teach that the kingdom of heaven will be revealed soon in that Christ will come to reign here on earth for 1000 years. They believe that during this reign, the Church will blossom and have no problems here on earth, that believers will be triumphant over all their enemies, that peace and love will reign supreme.

Sadly, they miss the truth. They want heaven on earth and misunderstand the kingdom of heaven to be an earthly kingdom. And in the process, they place emphasis on the wrong things: they give glory to the church and to believers rather than to Christ. They believe it is their mission to bring peace and love to the whole world, peace and love that is, in an earthly sense. That's why so many church bodies are involved in politics, they believe it's their job in order to bring the glorious kingdom of heaven here to earth as quickly as possible. They want to say that they made a difference. They want to say that they brought the most people into the church.

But when they can't increase their numbers enough, when they aren't receiving the earthly glory that a fast growing church brings through the preaching of law and gospel, sin and grace, they end up resorting to any gimmick that will bring people through the doors. They convince themselves that no one wants to hear that they are a sinner so they throw out the Law of God and replace it with a circus in the parking lot, because that's what gets people in their doors, that's what

increases their numbers, that's what brings them earthly glory. That's what makes them *first in the kingdom of God*.

I had a great meeting earlier this week with Sandy Iverson talking about strategic planning for New Life. I can't tell you how blessed you (now we) are as a congregation. We have an abundance of blessings and opportunities. And it can be heady stuff when the conversation turns to dreaming about programs and facilities and growth. Our conversation was a beautiful balance of ideas and Scriptural priorities. But it is so easy to slip into that same idea of glory seeking. The new pastor has arrived. Now we can *really* show people how great our building is, how great our people are, how great our growth is...yet losing our laser focus on how great our Savior is.

How typical of the "me-first" society that we live in today. Our love of glory wants all attention to go to us. *"Hey, look what I did!"* We want credit where credit is due. We work hard, expect to be rewarded and want other people to know how hard we worked. Just turn on the television today after church and watch a professional football game. After scoring a touchdown, most athletes do something to draw attention to themselves.

And if you still have doubts about the theology of glory, consider this: The Bible never talks about it. In fact it says quite the opposite. The Bible never talks about the Church ruling in an earthly sense. The Bible never talks about earthly glory. The Bible never promises a packed church. The Bible never says that the Church's mission is to bring earthly peace and joy to the world, but that its mission is to tell that world that they already have true peace and joy through the cross of Christ.

And that, my friends, brings us into our study of the theology of the cross. You see, while the theology of glory seeks to bring glory mainly to churches and members, the theology of the cross gives all glory to Christ. In fact, the teaching of the theology of the cross can best be summed up with Jesus' words in our text today, ***"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."*** That's the basic message of Scripture. No gimmicks. No games. Just the facts.

Where in that statement is there anything about earthly glory? Where in that statement does

it say anything about what we Christians must do to bring about the kingdom of heaven? Nowhere. It tells us that it's already been done. That's the mission of the church: to preach, proclaim, share witness to, not what *we* do, but what *Jesus* has *already done*.

Jesus makes it very clear that the kingdom of heaven is not an earthly kingdom when he tells Pilate, ***"My kingdom is not of this world"*** (John 18:36). And he's even more clear when he says, ***the kingdom of God is within you*** (Luke 17:21). That's right, the kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom with earthly glory. It is a spiritual kingdom with spiritual glory. When we talk about Christ's kingdom we're talking about his rule in our hearts. We're talking about the forgiveness of sins and our future life in heaven because of what Jesus did on the cross. You see, all things point back to the cross, the cross where God punished sin and won our salvation.

But the disciples and the world today just don't understand it. They don't want an ugly old cross, they want earthly glory. They want to be first. So Jesus gives them an answer entirely different from what they expected. ***Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."***

Yes, in the kingdom of heaven, greatness is not a matter of titles and authority. To be first means to be the last of all, to be the servant of all, to serve all - sacrificing your time, your talents, your very self for the sake of others, even when they do not realize or appreciate it; helping a child in Jesus' name to grow spiritually, physically or emotionally in the kingdom of God; eagerly proclaiming the light of the gospel to a sin-darkened world; faithfully administering the Sacraments to the new birth and continued nourishment of Christ's holy people. This is true service. This is true greatness. This is understanding the theology of the cross. For the kingdom of heaven is not about *our* glory and accomplishments, it's all about giving glory to Jesus. May our ministry together be marked by a desire to serve others in love in thanksgiving for how he has first loved us. God grant it! **Amen.**