

THE DEEPER CHRISTIAN LIFE

Luke 22:24–38

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Luke 22:24–38 (NIV)

“Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’ But he replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’ Then Jesus asked them, ‘When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ ‘Nothing,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: “And he was numbered with the transgressors”; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.’ The disciples said, ‘See, Lord, here are two swords.’ ‘That is enough,’ he replied.”

My title of the message today is “The Deeper Christian Life.” Living the deeper Christian life is like diving into the ocean. The deeper you go, the greater the pressure. Today’s Scripture finds

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Jesus on the edge of diving into the greatest ravine in His life. Physically, He's getting ready to go down into a ravine from the upper hill of western Jerusalem, Mount Zion, down into the Kidron, to the foot of the Mount of Olives. In a spiritual, emotional, and psychological sense also, He is getting ready for the descent into hell. He carries the pressure about Him that we will never know, a pressure that involves His suffering on a cross for our sins. But if He has a pressure that we will never know, we also own up to the fact that, in following Him, we will experience our own pressures. And staying with Him in those pressures will deepen our own experience, deepen our life.

There are three such areas of the deepened Christian life that are referenced to in our text today.

I. One is that the call to the deeper Christian life involves a call to service (verses 24–30).

The disciples are having an argument in the room where Jesus is having the Passover meal. The argument is: Who's the greatest? Who's going to have the chief place in His administration? It is an argument which had been going on—we know from reading the Gospels—for some time. In fact, it started months earlier. Back at the Mount of Transfiguration in Galilee, when Jesus had come down from that mountain, Peter and James and John had been with Him and Jesus had told them not to tell people what had happened. So I can kind of guess what happened. They came back very smug and self-satisfied that they had been the inner three with Jesus, and the other nine disciples said, "Where have you been?" "We've been with Jesus." "What have you been doing?" "We can't tell. Too bad you couldn't be there."

Right away a quarrel breaks out, who's the greatest? And of course the three thought that they were the greatest. But two of the three thought that they were greater than the other: James and John, who had a mother who was domineering and wanted to push her boys forward. So she comes with James and John, because she wants to get Peter out of the number one spot. She says,

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“Put my boys on Your left and right.” They have another big argument. In another place in the text, it says that they were discussing on the way: Who is the greatest?

Now they’re at it again. The underlying tones become so bad that John’s Gospel tells us that, during the course of the dinner, Jesus gets up, takes a towel and washes their feet. That’s the context for the event here that Luke records. They are arguing about who’s the greatest.

Before we criticize them, we ought to at least take a moment to commend them. On the evening of Jesus’ crucifixion they believed He did have a kingdom and that He was going to have a throne to offer. So they were expressing their faith in Him in that down moment in their life and that’s positive. But Jesus then turns around and teaches them that He will not have an authoritarian leadership style, either, in Himself or in them. There’s a difference between having authority and being authoritarian. Jesus instead calls His disciples and us to a life of service, a life of doing the quiet, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love. We see Christian service, not as something we do as a stepping stone to some better position or higher advancement. But rather, serving in a lowly way is in itself, from Jesus’ definition, greatness. If you try to get on top and be in power, it means that the people under have got to suffer. Jesus is not into power. He’s into love. That doesn’t mean He doesn’t have power. It’s just that He rules through love. We will never be an effective servant in the body of Christ if we’re looking for a place to shine. We must look for a place to serve. Don’t find a ministry. Find somewhere where there’s a need and go do that. And let that need be your ministry.

You will be an effective server if you can overlook indignities that are dashed out to you. You can be an effective server if you’re not looking to be recognized or thanked. You can be an effective server if you truly do things unto the Lord. In fact, when it comes down to it, the only

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way we can explain Jesus' behavior is love. He wasn't doing it for points. He was doing it because He loved us.

II. The deeper Christian life involves service. The second facet of the deeper Christian life is that such a life involves times of sifting (verses 31–34).

Jesus tells the disciples, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat." If you look in the New International Version, "to sift you" there's a little "a" after the word "you." At the bottom, the footnote says "the Greek is plural." Which means what Jesus said is, "Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to sift you all. Not just you, Simon, but everybody in this room. Satan has desired to sift. But I have prayed for you [singular—Simon, because he knew that Simon was going to have the biggest test that night.] I've prayed for you, that your faith not fail."

Sifting is very fresh in my mind, because as a kid in the orient up in northwest China, I can still remember seeing the women out with their flat baskets loaded with grain, wheat, and they would be waiting out in the open air for a breeze to arise. When the breeze would come, they'd take the basket and shake the grain up in the air, so that the wind could come along and blow away the chaff. There was a shaking time for the grain.

Jesus, taking that imagery from agriculture, says to the disciples, "Now is the time you're going to be shaken." Peter says, "No, Lord. I'll go with You to prison or to death." In the room with Jesus or in church or in a Bible study or whatever, we feel secure and safe. And, "O Lord, that would never happen to me. I would never do anything to disappoint You!" But it's when we get out there in the world that we find that the confidence we had in the nest with other believers becomes a matter that is shaken.

Last October 6th the *LA Times* ran a column. It was the day after the major baseball season ended and they put all the major league standings. The win/loss record of every team, the

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percentage of wins and losses, games behind. They also had what games they had won at home and what games they had won away from home. All during the year, I had followed the baseball standings, but I had not seen the home record or the away-from-home record. As I got to looking at that, I thought, “There’s a marvelous spiritual truth in this baseball record.” Out of the twenty-six major league teams last baseball season, twenty-four of the twenty-six had winning seasons at home. Only two lost at home. Twenty-four of the twenty-six were winners at home. They won more games than they lost at home. Even the lowly Cubs, they were thirty-seven games out of first place—a little worse than the Dodgers. But the Cubs, last year at Wrigley Field, their home, won forty-two games and lost thirty-eight. They won four more games at home than they lost. How did they get to be such a bad team? Thirty-seven games behind! Because they won twenty-eight games on the road and lost fifty-two, that’s why they were so bad. Twenty-four out of twenty-six teams won more games at home than they lost. Only six teams in all the majors, six out of twenty-six won more games on the road than they lost. Only six had a winning record on the road. Out of those six, all four division winners had a winning record on the road. That’s why they were the champions. They won on the road.

I thought, “That is an analogy of the Christian life!” We all can win when we’re together in worship and Bible study, and when we’re receiving those positive vibes and hugs from other believers. But it’s out there in a workaday world, it’s out there in the home with all the stresses and sins in our culture that we don’t have quite as good a record sometimes.

Jesus knows that that’s the case with His disciples. He knows we’re going to face some failures out there. What He says to Simon “Satan has desired to shift you all, but I’ve prayed for you that, your faith fail not. And when you’re turn back [because He knows Peter’s going to have a failure] strengthen the brothers.” He says, “Pray that your faith fail not.” Jesus knows that Peter,

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out there on the road, warming his hands by the fire, is on the road; he's in a hostile audience, out there on the road he's going to lose a game. But Jesus says, "You're not going to lose the season. I've prayed for you that your faith fail not." That is, this one thing in your life that's been a setback is not going to derail your discipleship. So when you're turned again, strengthen your brothers. Which means, when God does a thing in Peter's life, he's going to turn around and share it. He's going to have to be open and honest and say, when he's been turned again, "I really failed the Lord. I denied Him."

If we never talk about our weaknesses, if we never talk to one another about the deep valleys we've been through, how can we give anybody encouragement or hope if we just tell our successes? Part of strengthening the brothers and the sisters in the body of Christ is having the transparency to share with one another how God brings us through even our weak times.

I read a book this last week which was a great encouragement to me. It was sent to me by Lee Ezell, the author. She and her husband are serving the Lord in a very volatile political system. She wrote this beautiful book, *The Missing Piece*, which is the story of her birth daughter. When she was eighteen years of age, she was raped and she decided as a new Christian (she was only a Christian for a very short time when she was raped) that she would not abort this child, but that she would carry this child to term. She felt that she was not capable—at the age of eighteen, with her family situation—of raising that child. So she would put the child up for adoption, asking the welfare agency to see that the child got a Christian home. She never saw the daughter that she birthed. The daughter was taken from her in the delivery room. She never saw the girl. She never really let anybody know. She's become a very successful writer. She has a daily nationwide syndicated radio program and is in demand continually for conferences. Nobody knew that in her life she'd had that moment of pain, and as a new Christian, she said, "God, I just started to serve

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You and You've let me be raped. What's happening?" It was a real cross for her to bear in that pregnancy.

The years came and went and she, on occasion, would reach out to pray for that child she never knew what had happened to. Just last year, the telephone rang, and through a mutual friend, this birth daughter had managed to track down a phone number that was twenty years old, the person who had it twenty years ago still had the same number. Through that linkage, Lee was told, "Your birth daughter is looking for you." She, with great fear and trembling, placed the call to this girl not knowing anything about her. Her daughter said to her on the phone, "I don't want to intrude into your life. I'm not here to do that at all. I don't know the circumstances of my birth, but I have one major concern in looking for you. I have found someone who makes all the difference in my life and I wanted to make sure that you knew about Him. His name is Jesus Christ." I just wept as I read this. It was like God was turning this moment in her life of sifting, when she was raped as an eighteen-year-old, had taken that moment of sifting and had turned it, again, to say to the body of Christ something Lee said to me as she hand wrote the presentation, "Romans 8:28 is true. God works good in all things."

The circumstances of life can indeed sift us. We wonder if they're going to have a positive outcome. I'm not naïve enough to suggest that all outcomes in life are positive, this side of the story. But, I'm saying, to those who follow Christ the ultimate is that everything ends on an upbeat.

Christ calls us to serve Him when we are being sifted, and our Christian life will deepen as we serve Him in that time.

III. The third element this Scripture talks about of the deepening Christian life is that the deeper Christian life involves pressing on when it is difficult (verses 35–38).

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I think these verses are some of the most difficult verses to understand in the gospel. They seem so otherworldly to us. What is He talking about? “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything? Now if you have a purse, take it. Also a bag. If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.” What’s He talking about?

Jesus is reminding the disciples that, years earlier, when they just followed Him for a short time, He had sent them out on a teaching and healing mission, two by two, to the villages of Galilee. He told them at that time, I think, to build their faith, “Don’t take anything with you. Learn to live on faith.” But they had found that everywhere they went, people opened their home to them. People fed them. Jesus was popular. They were riding on the crest of His popularity and it was just wonderful. They came back with such a glowing report, that even the demons were subject to them. They were jazzed about how well-received they were.

Now Jesus is saying, “The tide has turned. It’s not going to be easy like that now. People aren’t going to open up their homes to you. They’re not going to feed you. You’re going to have to take preparation instead, and you better get a sword.” And, of course, Jesus here is speaking symbolically and figuratively and, it is sometimes the case that the disciples, especially Peter, mistake Him and think that He’s speaking literally. So Peter says, “We’ve got two swords!” Jesus says, “It’s enough. What are two swords going to do against the arresting army that comes out against Me? I wasn’t talking literally, Peter. Wake up! I was talking symbolically. It’s a time of conflict. You’re going to be in the fight of your life. You’re going to have to fight.”

I think what Jesus is saying is that, in our Christian walk, there is a discipleship which rides the crest of enthusiasm and success. Then there’s the aspect of discipleship that rides the trenches of suffering and the cross and loneliness and hardship. Jesus is present in both moments. The tide

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has turned for the disciples, Jesus is saying. It's going to be tough right now. It's going to be difficult to continue to serve Me.

A missionary-evangelist was sharing in a dinner I attended this week. In Peru alone, in the last few months, because of the communist insurgency of the guerilla movement in Peru—which we hear nothing about in western papers, but forty of our Assemblies of God pastors in Peru have been executed in the last few months, many of them in the presence of their congregations, many of them in the presence of their families—they're finding what Jesus has said here, "It is going to get difficult."

It's easy to follow Jesus when you've got a job and you have money in the bank. It's easier to follow Jesus when you're happily single or happily married. It's easier to follow Jesus when your parents or your children respect and honor you in the highest way. It's easier to follow Jesus when there is no conflict with anyone in the church or outside the church. It's easier to follow Jesus when we can sing the language of the great American western ballad, "Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play. Where never is heard a discouraging word..." I was singing that the other day. Wow! What a life! "Where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day." No wonder we like that song so well. It gives us all a free moment of fantasy. But life doesn't always take those directions. Our job can be filled with frustration. And our finances can get below zero. We may struggle with singleness or be in a marriage that is a disaster zone. Or we may be hurting through the process or through the aftermath of divorce. Our parents or our children may turn on us and not love us in the way that we need in our darkest moments. We may seemingly pass from one conflict to another, one reverse to another, and perpetually, for a period of time, not hear an encouraging word but only a discouraging word.

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Our ways of coping reveal how we are: “We’ve only got two swords, Lord.” The Lord says, “You’re not going to make it through this on your own power.”

Jesus is telling us in these verses, “You’re going to have to fight for your existence. Whatever you do, don’t go limp, don’t go passive, don’t stop breathing. Stay alive. Keep fighting. Keep insurgent. Keep your hearts glowing. I’ll give you power. Don’t give up. In your darkest moment, don’t give up. Get out the sword. Get ready for the conflict. And keep living.”

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk put it eloquently. I think these two verses are among the most beautiful in all of the Bible: Habakkuk 3:17–18, the words of the farmer, “Though the fig tree does not bud and though there be no grapes on the vines and through the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food. Though there be no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls yet [a marvelous three letter word—yet. Yet in spite of all the reverses and the economy being wiped out] I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior.” Habakkuk is saying, “They can take everything from me but they can’t take God.” They can take your family, take your financial resources, they can take your health, they can take your security. But they can’t take God.

Those who go with Him down into the Kidron, down into the ravine at the low point of the Mount of Olives, will also be the ones standing with Him a few days later at the top when He leaves for heaven. It’s that way with Christ. If we go with Him through the valley, it is not only through the valley. It is not permanently in the valley. We shall climb higher.

I want to close with this personal story. We lost a member of our church this week to death. Gail, age fifty. Twelve years ago, Gail was coming through a divorce. It was a terrible experience for her. But in that experience, she found Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior. She grew up in a Jewish family that had, not up until that time in her life, received a testimony as to who Jesus was. When she heard of Jesus and what He could do in her life, she embraced Him as her Savior.

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She successfully raised three outstanding young sons who are now all doing really well in their professions. In 1982, Gail was ill and required surgery, and the surgery required some transfusions. It was in the days before they were screening blood. And in the course of a transfusion, she received blood that had the AIDS virus. That virus was not diagnosed in her until last year, because it acted very atypically for the AIDS virus. It did not have the normal kinds of things, like loss of weight and carcinoma and other kinds of things. It was the virus, not the AIDS related complex that goes with it. There is a distinction medically between the two. As a result, she had a continual fever that would crop up and they just didn't seem to be able to put their finger on the diagnosis. Then last fall, she had her gall bladder out and following that, surgery (it turned out not to be the gall bladder). I remember the morning she called me. Saturday morning on the phone, sobbing incoherently, unable to talk; just to say, "George, please come to the hospital. I have terrible news." So Jewel and I went over to the hospital. We cried with her and prayed with her as she told us that she had AIDS. For the last six weeks, she has been in a comma. Then she passed away on Wednesday. Of course, as her pastor and friend, I was asked to lead, preside, over the memorial service. I found that very difficult. It again opened up why's in life that I don't have answers for, because she was a friend and somebody I know who would love to be here in worship service. If anybody loved to go to church, it was Gail. I thought, Lord, what in the world can I share with the family and even in my own heart that makes some sense in all this?

I thought of that delightful space in my life where Gail and I became friends. I don't remember exactly how it begun, but she had sought me out and said to me, "Pastor, I know you don't really know me, but I'm a painter. I do portraits for a living. I'd like to give you a gift. I'd like to do your portrait. But I need you to sit for me." I thought, "I don't really want my portrait. How do I

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get out of this diplomatically?” After being pastor in one place for sixteen years, hopefully you develop some diplomacy. I was trying to get out of this without letting her down. I said, “You’ve got other things to do.” Actually, my real reason was she had something big in mind and if she got the thing done, where in the world would you put it? If somebody sees it and puts it in the church, somebody else would see it and go, “That egomaniac. He’s got his picture in the hall!” So the only other place I thought I could put it was in the house. But the only room that’s appropriate to show a painting like that is the living room and that meant the first thing that anybody that comes as a guest in our house would see is me on the mantle! So I tried to get out of it. But she was very insistent. She said, “It will require a number of sessions that you sit. But I want to do this for you.” So finally the day came. I really reluctantly agreed to sit. Over the course of eight sittings, at two hours a time—she joked with her friends that getting me to sit still for two hours was probably the toughest thing that I’d ever been asked to do in life. I think she was right.

But from eight to ten on Monday mornings, I sat while Gail painted. I especially remember the first time she came to my office. She wanted to do the painting in my office, with the books in the background and a cross I have. She brought in her paint box and her brushes. She had a big canvas and an easel. She sat it all up. Then she kind of looked at me. She made a few wiggles I couldn’t see on the canvas, then backed off and look again. This went on for two hours. When the two hours were done, I said, “Gail, let me look at the painting.” She said, “It’s not ready really to see it at this point.” She was right. This gorgeous handsome face had not been put on the canvas. I thought, “What kind of painting is this going to be?” It didn’t add up. There were brush strokes that didn’t seem to cohere together. But she kept coming back, and every time she came back, there was more and more refinement until the picture snapped out. The portrait was

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there. It had all the details. And finally, when she was done, there was this masterful detailed portrait which is in our living room today if you come and see us.

I shared this at Gail's service yesterday. I thought how life is so often like sitting for a portrait.

God is the master artist. He doesn't do the portrait of our life all in one blow, does He? He doesn't do it in one sitting. He just seems to take a lot of time working on His portrait. We want to get up and say, "God, how are You doing? How's my life coming?" He says, "Ok, I'll let you look." But nothing seems to be adding up. Lines going this way and lines going that way. It doesn't make sense. How can anything beautiful come out of that? "Just wait. I'm not done yet."

And by the way, God may not be done until we're in His presence. I'm not suggesting that the portrait gets finished. With Gail, it obviously didn't get finished in this life. The master artist in that day will have to show us He added some strokes. The way to die is certainly not dying of the AIDS virus. That's no way to die.

But I have to say, God is the master painter. I took the poem of the weaver and made it the poem of the painter.

"Not till the brush is silent and the paint begins to dry, will God roll out the canvas and explain the reason why. The dark hues are as needful in the painter's skillful hands. As the tints of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned."

Closing Prayer

Lord, we all want to live the deeper Christian life. We'd like that deeper Christian life to include greater spirituality, more and a stronger prayer life, a more effective study of Your Word, mystical and supernatural experiences which encourage us and ennoble us. We all want those dimensions of a deeper Christian experience. We make ourselves available for them. Lord, they're part of Your grand design in our life. They're the bright colors, the helpful colors. But

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they're also, Lord, those aspects of the deeper Christian life that You call us to that we would not elect on our own. We would not elect the serving places. Maybe some would. But the kind of service that You consistently call us to, maybe we would not elect. We certainly wouldn't elect the sifting times, the times where we're tossed around, wondering how in the world we're going to emerge through this moment in our life when each day seems to involve a fight for life, to keep our attitudes wholesome and our perspectives positive and our thoughts upon You. We know what it is to be sifted. We wouldn't choose the difficult path, the way to Gethsemane and Golgotha. We wouldn't choose that. Yet it's part of Your process in our life of allowing ourselves to be stretched and deepened and matured. Lord, if we've had the joy of following You in moments in our life when all's been well, when the living's been easy, then also, Lord, You impart that same joy to us when the living is not so easy and when we're pressed, as Paul says, on every side. We are knocked down but not knocked out. We pray, Holy Spirit of God, that You will infuse every tired heart and every wounded life and every struggling person in this audience today with a new power and energy from Your Holy Spirit. To have a pressure within them that corresponds to the external pressures they face, so they can dive into whatever depth and not burst in the depths, but have a corresponding strength from You to meet it. There are friends here that are facing situations that are so outside their own power to deal with; it's as useless to try to apply human ingenuity to their problem as it was for Peter to say that Your kingdom would rest upon two people having a sword. In those moments, Lord, when whatever we've got isn't enough, we ask that You would be more than enough, that You would fill our hearts with Your Spirit and with courage. Lord, in every moment of our life we believe that You are never through with us. Until that day when we stand in Your presence and You say to us, "Well done good and faithful servant," and You wrap your arms around us and You, the Lord of all the earth, say to

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us, “I make all things new.” We believe, Lord, that that day’s coming. And therefore our hearts are set on You. We choose to run with patience the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despised the shame and now is sitting down at the right hand of God. We identify with You in Your mission, knowing that if we suffer with You we will also reign with You. Thank You, Lord, for Your purpose in our hearts and that You will never leave us or forsake us. Minister to every heart, we pray today. Let the weak places become strong. We ask, in Christ’s name. Amen.