

Greatest Among Men

We return again today to these precious words of Luke chapter 7. And here, in verse 28, we find the Lord Jesus describing John the Baptist as being a “great” man. A “great” man.

Unfortunately for you and for me, we live in a day and in a society in which hyperbole, exaggeration and overstatement is common within our ordinary conversation. That is because “pride” rules most every thought and behavior of daily life. And one of the words that we so often use within our prideful striving is the word “great”. We speak of “great leaders”, “great philosophers”, “great scientists” and on and on, always adding the word “great” in front of the prideful compliment that we are paying to a person.

And in some ways and to some extent there truly are some great men and women among us. I especially like to refer to some men as being “great” Christian theologians, teachers, and preachers. And in some small ways, they seem truly great.

And again, here in today’s passage, the Lord Jesus chooses to use the word “great” in His description of John the Baptist. But may I say that there was no “pride” involved in this compliment of John. It was a simple and profound truth.

On this occasion, two of the follows of John the Baptist had been sent to Jesus to ask if He was truly the Coming Messiah, sent from God to redeem His people from their sins. And Jesus had just finished answering their questions when He said these words here beginning in verse 27 concerning John the Baptist. Listen.

²⁷This is *he* of whom it is written:

*‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.’*

²⁸For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 7:27-28)

I must confess to you that for all the years that I have been reading these particular words concerning John the Baptist, I have dwelt only on the first part of verse 28, not venturing on to giving adequate consideration to the last part of the verse. Listen again to all of the words of verse 28,

²⁸For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:28)

The first few words of this verse are a powerful compliment to this man, John the Baptist, the greatest of all endorsements that could ever be given to him in his ministry as a prophet.

And as I have said to you on other occasions, of all of the people who would say good things on your or my behalf, and of all of the praise we might receive from people over our lifetime, there is no witness and no testimony that we should desire more than the witness and the testimony of the Lord Jesus. It is His praise and His acceptance alone that will make the difference both in this life now and in our eternal life to come.

And note too, in these words, the length to which Jesus goes with His words, saying that there never has ever been a greater prophet than John the Baptist.

Remember folks, Jesus is God and He is not given to exaggeration or overstatement as you and I are often apt to be. This is pure truth. Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist. not Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, or David, not even Moses or Isaiah, none of them were greater than John the Baptist.

But why would that be so? Why would John have such higher honor than all of those other great men? It's because worth and honor and greatness are measured very differently on God's scales, than the measurements you and I are accustomed to using.

And while we can't know all that God counts as worthy, three of the most important conditions of worthiness are revealed for us here within these words. First is the uniqueness of the calling that is given to a person, secondly, is the humility within the heart of the person as they go about their calling, and thirdly, is the faithfulness with which that person carries out their calling to completeness.

Why would I reach immediately for those three measurements? It's because those exact measurements were found in the Lord Jesus as He carried out His calling. In Philippians chapter 2, we read,

⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

A special and unique calling was placed upon the heart of the Lord Jesus. He was to lay aside His crowns of glory, humble Himself to be born of one of His lowly created beings, become like them in their suffering, then die on the cross to make them holy. That was His calling and with great humility, He was faithful to carry it out.

And note within those words describing Jesus that there was no hyperbole, no exaggeration, no overstatement, just simple truth. But in His being, Jesus truly was God of creation, maker of all things, King of all Kings and Lord of all Lords. He should rightfully have come to the earth adorned in robes far greater than Solomon, but He instead humbly laid aside all His glory to come among us as little more than a peasant.

And while He should have been received in a better fashion than any king on earth, He was instead despised and rejected of men, spit upon and killed.

And through it all, He did not lift a proud hand to stop them. He could have called ten thousand angels. Or He could have simply spoken and all living creatures would have perished from the earth.

But that was not His calling and purpose. His calling and His purpose was far greater than any mistreatment He might receive. He had come to defeat sin on the earth and to redeem men and women's souls from their bondage of sin. And He was faithful to that calling, even unto death.

And some of those same measurements can be seen in the prophet, John the Baptist. No, John was not a king but he was rightfully a priest of high order and deserving of human respect. But with great "Humility" he laid it all aside to carry out his unique calling.

He would spend his days wandering in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey and giving forth a message that no man before

him had ever given, the proclamation that the “kingdom of God” had come to earth, that the long awaited Messiah had arrived, the one who would save mankind from their sins.

He was the one prophesied about in the Book of Isaiah, and spoken about in these words of the Lord Jesus in verse 27.

²⁷This is he of whom it is written:

‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.’ (Luke 7:27)

John was to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus by calling all men and women to repentance for their sins, an absolutely essential step in the pathway to salvation. Yes, Jesus would bring salvation to men’s souls, but without repentance, a soul cannot receive it.

This was a most unique calling that was placed upon John the Baptist and with great humility, he carried it out to the fullest.

But why would Jesus consider John’s prophecy to be greater than any of the other prophets, even Moses’? It’s because of the message itself. Moses gave the law, and the other prophets revealed and explained the law. But knowledge of the law and efforts to obey the law are not enough. None of that can save a person’s soul from their sins. Only the salvation that Jesus offers can do that.

And John’s message and calling was to prepare men’s hearts to receive salvation, a far better calling than any that had come before him. John truly was the greatest of all prophets.

But with that being said, why then does Jesus seemingly reduce John in his importance by saying,

²⁸but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 7:28)

Jesus’ words were not at all intended to denigrate or minimize the importance of the person of John the Baptist. Jesus’ words were simply a statement of truth regarding the profound difference that exists within a person’s soul when they enter fully into the Kingdom of God.

John, who was of the highest order as a prophet, still had the fullness of a sin nature remaining within him. Neither prophecy nor the law could remove that. With the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, and the salvation He would bring, the era of a law had come to an end.

In the Lord Jesus, a far better thing had come to the earth. The fullness of the "Kingdom of God" was now present among men, not yet fully effectual until Jesus would die on the cross, and make the acceptable sacrifice for sin, and then be resurrected. But the inevitable change had begun its invasion into every form of existence upon the earth.

Yes, John the Baptist would be saved from his own sins. But unfortunately, his complete salvation would come from the other side of eternity. He would soon die at the hands of the wicked King Herod and he would not see the "Kingdom of God" come to full fruition while on the earth. His salvation would come from looking forward to the salvation that Christ would bring, rather than as we are able to do in looking back to His salvation.

It would be by Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection that the "Kingdom of God" would be fully ushered in, but once it came, it would begin to sprout and bloom and take root throughout the entire world. Listen to the way that Jesus explained it, first in Luke chapter 13,

¹⁸Then He said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."

²⁰And again He said, "To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? ²¹It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Luke 13:18-21)

The "Kingdom of God" would begin with one Person, Jesus Christ, as He died on the cross. It would spread first to His disciples as He breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Then, at Pentecost, as more and more began to receive the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God would continue its growth.

As Jesus described it in these words, the Kingdom of God would grow as a mustard seed turning into a tree, and the Kingdom would swell in size as a batch of flour swells when leavened by yeast.

And it was taking place exactly as God had purposed it to grow, within the hearts of men. Listen to these words in Luke chapter 17,

²⁰Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; ²¹nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

I must confess, I do look forward to seeing Jesus bursting forth out of the clouds, along with His heavenly host of mighty angels, majestic and powerful, with every knee bending and every head bowing low and every tongue confessing that He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And we do have that to look forward to should our bodies tarry that long on this earth.

But folks, for you and me now, His kingdom is already here among us. Through His Holy Spirit, the "Kingdom of God" resides and grows within the heart and soul of every one of us who truly believe in Him.

Those words again from Luke 17,

²⁰ . . . "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; ²¹nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

The Kingdom of God resides within the heart and soul of each one of us who truly believes in the Lord Jesus. And yes, we are far more fortunate than John the Baptist. As he lived and ministered there in the wilderness of Judea, he could only look forward to what you and I have now, the fullness of Christ living within our hearts with pure and unsullied redemption.

Folks, think about it! John the Baptist, the greatest prophet that ever lived did not have the simple comfort and pleasure of the Holy Spirit residing within him as you and I do. Yes, the Holy Spirit was in and around him, even before he was born. But not in the same way He is within you and me, in full and complete and continual residence within us. It was not until after Christ had died and fulfilled His calling and purpose that the Holy Spirit was fully given.

So yes, lowly you and me are far more blessed than that dear and dedicated prophet, John the Baptist.

But what are we to do with this great blessing that we have received? We are to do as the verses we just read tell us to do. We are to be as that “mustard seed” and that “leaven”. We are to be the vessels through which the “Kingdom of God” grows and flourishes and thrives. We are to purposefully and intentionally and enthusiastically invite the “Kingdom of God” to grow mightily within us, so much so that it will burst forth out of the boundaries of our own souls, out into the souls of many, many other people.

Folks, the salvation of God is too big, too important and too needful for you and me to keep it only for ourselves. We must allow His grace to flow out of us into the lives of many others.

I challenge you to ask God for just a “soul a week” to share His good news with. Then as that becomes comfortable, ask God for a “soul a day” to minister too. That is how God intends His “kingdom” to grow.

You and I are to be God's little “mustard seeds”.

Listen to these words as we close . . .

¹⁸Then He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.” (Luke 13:18-19)

May we pray.