



“He Who Is Least, Is Greater than He”  
(Matthew 11:7-11)

Introduction: Last week we saw how John, after he had been imprisoned for some time, began to doubt whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. Perhaps it was because he expected that Messiah would have more of a political impact than He did, or maybe it was that the length and difficulty of his trial in prison was taking its toll. But whatever the reason, John began to waver. He began to question whether or not Jesus was the expected One, or whether they should look for someone else. And so he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him that question. And remember how Jesus responded. He did not simply tell them who He was, but rather pointed to the evidence which the Father had given Him. He pointed to His works and His Word. He was doing the works which only the Messiah would do, and He was preaching the Gospel. This, more than anything, would strengthen John's faith, for John would immediately know that Jesus was indeed the Christ. These things should certainly strengthen our faith in who Jesus is as well.

But now having pointed the messengers to these things, and the messengers having gone away, Jesus now uses this opportunity to turn the crowds' attention to John, in order to help them see more clearly who John is and through this to give them a clearer picture of who He is. What we will see from this passage is that

***John is the greatest prophet God ever raised up among men. But Jesus is greater.***

**I. The first thing our Lord draws our attention to is the character of John. Just who is this man who was preaching in the wilderness?**

A. He does this by asking the crowds what they thought of him.

1. “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” Jesus asks. Was it to see a reed shaken by the wind?
  - a. Did you go out to look at some eccentric, an unstable man who easily changes his mind, ranting and raving in the wilderness?
  - b. Certainly they didn't see John like this. They considered him to be a prophet. Even king Herod recognized this about John, and he feared him.
2. If that wasn't the reason, then why? Was it to see a man of rank and stature, a man distinguished for his greatness by the luxurious clothes that he wore?
  - a. No, it wasn't that. John's clothing was coarse and humble: a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt (Matt. 3:4).
  - b. Those who wear luxurious clothing live in king's palaces. John was not a great man by the world's standards. He did not have the things by which the world judges a man to great. He lived humbly and poorly.
3. If they didn't go out for these reasons, why did they go out? Was it to see a prophet? Jesus reminds them, Yes, it was.
  - a. They knew that John was sent by God. Matthew wrote in 3:1, 5-6, “John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. . . . Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan river, as they confessed their sins.”
  - b. Realizing that he was a prophet, they came out to hear him preach. They wanted to be right with God. There were those who came out to try and discredit him as well. There will always be those who are enemies to the truth. But for the most part the people believed his word, and they showed that they did by submitting themselves to his baptism of repentance. Yes, John was a prophet.

B. But he was no ordinary prophet. Jesus wants them to understand that John was more than a prophet.

1. He was the one spoken of by Malachi the prophet.
  - a. The Lord said through Malachi, four hundred years before John came, “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts” (3:1). John was that messenger, sent before the Lord to clear the way before

- Him.
- b. But how does this make him more than a prophet? The answer is that, though the other prophets prophesied years before Messiah came, and that through visions and shadows, John stood right on the brink between the Old and New Covenants. He was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, and at the same time the first of the New Testament prophets. He was not heralding someone who was yet hundreds or thousands of years off, but One who was near, One whose time had arrived, and John had the wonderful privilege of announcing Him.
2. And because he had been prepared for this very thing, he was also a man tremendously gifted by God. Jesus says, "Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (v. 11).
    - a. In John's Gospel, Jesus calls John "the lamp that was burning and shining" (5:35).
    - b. He was the light that God had sent to Israel to reveal His truth, after they had been in darkness for some time. He was the morning star that was the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who came to introduce the dawning of the Gospel age into the darkness of the shadow of death, to give the people the knowledge of salvation. Zacharias prophesied concerning John, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in the darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79).
    - c. Because his ministry was the heralding of the New Covenant age, the Gospel was more clearly revealed in his preaching than in the prophets who came before him. He pointed to the Great Redeemer and declared that Jesus had come into the world as a sacrificial lamb to take away the sin of the world. He pointed to the people, even the most religious of them, as being a generation of vipers, who stood in need of the cleansing which Christ was bringing. And he pointed to the spiritual nature of the kingdom, which did not consist merely in outward circumcision or baptism or observance of the Law, but in the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit in the heart, for the Messiah was coming to baptize them, not with water, but with the Spirit and with fire.
    - d. John was a burning and shining light in that he preached the gospel message more clearly than it had ever been preached before, and in the fact that he lived the kind of life that he was calling all men to. He had left the world and all of its enjoyments to labor for God and His kingdom. He was not partial to any, but spoke the truth to all men without distinction. He humbled himself and tried to get all men to look to Christ, while he himself faded into the background. And he lived a life of faith and courage, continuing to declare the mind and will of God, even though it cost him his life.
    - e. These things made him more than an ordinary prophet.
  3. But finally, Jesus says that John was Elijah who was to come (v. 14).
    - a. The closing words of Malachi's book, the last words uttered by God before the closing of the Old Testament canon and the four hundred years of silence which followed, were, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6).
    - b. The Lord did not mean by this that He was going to raise Elijah up from the dead and reincarnate him, but that someone would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare His way (Luke 1:17). John was that prophet. Jesus says, "He himself is Elijah, who was to come."
    - c. John was like Elijah in many ways. He was a man full of the Spirit and fire. He was filled with the Holy Spirit even while in his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). This was most evident in his love for Christ. He was called the friend of the Bridegroom who greatly rejoiced because he heard His voice (John 3:29). His great desire was that Christ may increase, while he decreased. But because he loved the Lord, he was also full of holy zeal for Him, like Elijah.
      - (i) Elijah spoke against the corruption, apostasy and idolatry of Israel in his day. John also testified against the wickedness of the Jews in his.
      - (ii) Elijah reproved the sins, not only of the small, but also of the great, such as Ahab, Jezebel, Ahaziah and the prophets of Baal. John the Baptist reproved publicans and soldiers, Pharisees and Sadducees, and even Herod himself, even though Herod sought to kill him, even as Ahab sought to kill Elijah.

- (iii) John also warned the people to flee from the wrath to come, even as Elijah had warned the people to flee from God's wrath for their idolatry.
  - (iv) John was a great prophet, the greatest man born of a woman, who ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah, and whose task it was to prepare Messiah's way.
- d. Jesus asked the multitudes, "Why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. . . . Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there had not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

**II. But having said all this about John, Jesus now says a very remarkable thing. Notwithstanding all that He said about John, He says, "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11). What does Jesus mean by this?**

- A. It's not really clear what He means, and because it isn't, there are several views.
1. Some believe that since John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, he stood on the outside of the New, while he called others to enter the kingdom of heaven.
    - a. Those who entered the kingdom were greater than he was, since they were now a part of the New Covenant.
    - b. The problem with this view, however, is that John is also the first of the New Covenant prophets. Jesus tells us in verse 13, "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John." John is the hinge, or the dividing point. He is the end of the Old and the beginning of the New. He is the one who begins to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom. Should we assume that while he called others to enter the kingdom, that he himself did not enter? Should we assume that as great as John was, even the smallest and most insignificant saint in God's kingdom is greater, even though John's life evidenced more love and zeal and sacrifice than virtually any man who ever lived? And isn't it also true that Old Covenant believers are also a part of God's kingdom, as much as the New Covenant believers are?
  2. Was Jesus then referring to those who were already in the eternal kingdom of God, or in heaven. Are those who are there greater than any saint still on earth? Perhaps this is true, but is this was Jesus meant?
- B. I think the best view is that Jesus is pointing the people to the principle of true greatness in His kingdom and to the One who is the greatest of all.
1. The Scriptures remind us again and again that the way to true greatness in God's kingdom is to become the servant of all.
    - a. This principle opposes everything that we are by nature, but that shouldn't surprise us since the kingdom is the opposite of everything worldly. By nature, we are prideful. If there is anything that we hate more than anything else, it is the thought that somehow someone is better than we are, more intelligent, stronger, more beautiful, more talented or more important. We are always trying to climb over each other in order to get to the top, if not in the world's way, then at least outwardly in Christ's way, trying to outdo one another in humility.
    - b. But Christ tells us it shouldn't be this way. He says if you want to be great, you must become the servant of all, not just outwardly in your actions, but inwardly in your heart. He says in Luke 9:48, "He who is least among you, this is the one who is great," and in Mark 9:35, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all."
    - c. The one who is truly great in God's kingdom is not the one who is the most gifted, or the one who appears to be the most gifted; he is not the one who does the most for God, or appears as though he does the most; he is not the one who is the most exalted in the eyes of others; but he is the one who has truly lowered himself to the very least, who doesn't think highly of himself, who sees himself as he really is, not worthy of any favor from God, but only a debtor to His mercy and grace. This is the one who is the greatest.
  2. Therefore, the one who has lowered Himself further than John to become a servant also to him, He is the One who is greater than John. But John was a very humble and godly man. Who could outstrip him in humility and servanthood? Who lowered Himself to become a servant to him? The answer is Jesus.
    - a. Luke writes, in Luke 22:24-27, "And there arose also a dispute among them *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and

those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines *at the table*, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines *at the table*? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

- b. Whatever grace the Holy Spirit produces in our lives, the Lord Jesus already had it in its most perfect form. Jesus humbled Himself and became the servant of all. He even humbled Himself to die for John. Paul writes, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus humbled Himself the most, and therefore was exalted the most. He was exalted to the greatest in His kingdom, much greater than John.
- c. In closing, I would like to read for you a quote from Jonathan Edwards, which brings this truth out even more clearly. As I read it, allow the Lord to convict your heart concerning your own pride, and allow Him to teach you about true humility and greatness in His kingdom.
- d. Edwards wrote, “These sayings of Christ in Mat. 20:25, &c. and Mark 9:35, were spoken on occasion of the disciples manifesting an ambition to be greater in his kingdom, by which they meant his state of exaltation and glory; and so it is in some sort, even with respect to the man Christ Jesus himself, who is the very highest and most exalted of all creatures, and the head of all. He, to prepare himself for it, descended lowest of all, was most abased of any, and in some respects became least of all. Therefore, when Christ in these places directs that those that would be greatest among his disciples, should be the servants of the rest, and so, in some respects, least; he enforces it with his own example. Mat. 20:26-28. “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even so the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” And Luke 22:26, 27. “He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doth serve, for whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he that serveth.” None in the kingdom of heaven ever descended so low as Christ did, who descended as it were into the depths of hell. He suffered shame and wrath, and was made a curse. He went lower in these things than ever any other did, and this he did as a servant not only to God, but to men, in that he undertook to serve us, and minister to us in such dreadful drudgery, while we sit at meat in quietness and rest, and partake of those dainties which he provides for us. Christ took upon him to minister to us in the lowest service, which he represented and typified by that action of washing the disciples feet, which he did chiefly for that end. Thus Christ is he that seems to be intended in Mat. 11:11, by him “that is least in the kingdom of heaven;” who is there said to be greater than John the Baptist.

The design of God in thus ordering things, is to teach and show that he is all, and the creature nothing, and that all exaltation and dignity belong to him; and therefore those creatures that are most exalted shall in other respects be least and lowest. Thus, though the angels excel in wisdom and strength, and are advanced to glorious dignity, and are principalities and powers, and kings of the earth, yet God makes them all ministers to them who are much less than they, of inferior nature and degree. Thus, also, the saints who are most exalted in dignity are servants to others. The angelic nature is the highest and most exalted created nature; yet God is pleased to put greater honour upon our inferior nature, *viz.* the human, by causing that the Head and King of all creatures should be in the human nature, and that the saints in that nature in Christ, should be in many respects exalted above the angels, that the angelic nature may not magnify itself against the human; and the man Christ Jesus, that creature who is above all, owes his superiority and dignity, not at all to himself, but to God; *viz.* to his union with a divine person. Though he be above all, yet in some respects he is inferior; for he is not in the highest created nature, but in a nature that is inferior to the angelic. To prepare him for his exaltation above all, he was first brought lowest of all in suffering and humiliation, and in some respects in office, or in those parts of the office that were executed by him in his state of humiliation.”

- e. Do you desire to be great in God’s kingdom? All of us should. But the way to true greatness is to stop trying to make others think we are great, and to begin truly humbling ourselves and becoming

servants to one another. It is the path which our Savior took. Shouldn't His servants go in the same direction as well? May God grant us all the grace to walk in it and to achieve true greatness. Amen.