

Greater Than John the Baptist?

Call to Worship: Psalm 84

1st Scripture: Luke 7:18-28

2nd Scripture: Matthew 11:1-11

Introduction

Before the holidays, we left off considering the Lord's response to John the Baptist's inquiry about whether or not He was truly the Messiah. As we saw, John, having been unjustly locked up in prison, by King Herod, had begun to wrestle with doubts, as his expectations about the Christ, were not fully lining up with the ministry of Jesus. And so, Jesus sent a gentle rebuke back to John.

As the two disciples of John walk away, the Lord then turns to the multitudes who are surrounding Him, first to speak very highly of John (affirming the gentle, loving and restorative nature of His rebuke), and then to say something profound about those who are in the Kingdom of Heaven, concerning how they measure up to John. This morning, we will consider these comments, keeping in mind the immediate context that we have already gone over, which is ultimately what has provoked these words from our Lord.

I. John: the Greatest of All Prophets

“As they (John's disciples) departed (to bring the Lord's response back to John), Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see?’”

And so, here our Lord brings the attention of the multitude to John the Baptist, in light of the brief interaction that He just had with John's disciples. And He is going to bring out an important point to them, which will both, elevate the faithfulness of John, while highlighting a significant privilege that is given to those in the New Covenant Kingdom, which John will not get to enjoy. And to this end, brethren, we find in the Lord Jesus Christ, a precious model of graciousness, which ought to teach us how to handle those who offend us amongst our brethren, or with whom we disagree about some matter. There is a way of bringing about correction, while

showing our love and respect for the individual that we are correcting. And Jesus models that so well here. And in this case, it is done publicly, because the disciples of John brought John's concerns to Jesus, in the presence of the multitudes. And so, all in all, Jesus sends a gentle rebuke to John, highlights the great integrity of John before all who are listening, and then, gets down to a particular limitation which helped serve to impede John's judgment about the ministry of Jesus. Let's then unravel how the Lord does this.

First, he calls the attention of the multitudes to what they saw when they beheld John in the wilderness. Remember, the great majority of the Lord's disciples were first disciples of John. And probably the great majority of the multitudes that were following Jesus around, were earlier baptized by John. John was a well-respected, well-known prophet, before he was unjustly locked up by Herod. And so, Jesus asks the multitudes, "What did you see when you went out into the wilderness?" "How would you describe that rustic man, who drew the attention of the Jews out into the desolate wilderness, such that, word about him spread, and many went out to see, and be baptized by him?" "What kind of a man was he?" "What was his track record?"

"Was he a reed shaken by the wind?" In other words, was he a man of very weak conviction, who could be easily swayed one way or another? Was he a pushover, who simply catered to popular opinions and thrived on a fear of man? Now, the obvious rhetorical answer was, "No! John was anything but that! Indeed, he was very forthright and upfront about our sins, and he even challenged the Pharisees and the religious leaders, calling them a den of vipers. They came out to his baptism, but he saw right through them, and called them out for their sin. He spoke fervently about the Kingdom of God, the coming judgment, and the need to repent. And he never budged. Indeed, he is in prison right now, for calling out King Herod for his adultery! John was no reed, shaken in the wind!"

The Lord moves on, "But what did you go out to see?" "What observations did you make about this John? How would you describe him then? Was he "A man clothed in soft garments?" In other words, "Was he a man of material wealth, committed to the comforts of this life? Did he wear soft, expensive, comfortable clothing?" And the Lord then answers his own rhetorical question by adding, "Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses." If John was a materialistic man; if he was compelled by 'high living,' then why did he remain out

in the wilderness? He could have used his position and popularity to pursue ‘ease of life,’ but clearly that was not John. Such individuals live in king’s houses. John wore camel’s hair for clothing and his choice delicacies consisted of a regular diet of locusts and wild honey. No, John was not wearing soft, expensive garments when you went out to see him. You knew that he meant business, and he really believed what he preached. He was no pushover. He was not a material-driven, worldling.

“But what did you go out to see? A prophet?” “Ahh, yes, now you are getting somewhere. Everyone knows that John was a prophet, right? That much is clear. But, listen up.” “Yes, I say to you, John was a prophet... *and more than a prophet.*” A prophet, in itself, ought to secure a high level of respect, as a mouthpiece of God. But here, our Lord states that John was even more than that. He was even greater and more privileged than a prophet. Why? Jesus provides the reason then in verse 10: “For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.’ “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist...”

And so, here we find the reason for why John was more than a prophet, and particularly the greatest of all Old Testament prophets. First, John himself was prophesied about by some of the prophets. We just read Malachi 3:1, where Malachi, speaking of John the Baptist, said, “Behold I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare Your way before You.” And again, in Malachi 4:5-6 (the concluding words of Malachi’s Book), Malachi speaks of John, when he states, “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I strike the earth with a curse.” And then in Isaiah 40:3, Isaiah speaks of John who would be the “voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God...” And so, John himself, was not only a prophet, but he was a prophet who was prophesied about, concerning a significant role he would play as the Old Covenant would begin to make its transition into the New Covenant.

That said, I don’t believe that this is the main reason for why John was “more than a prophet,” and the “greatest of all prophets.” John was the greatest of all prophets for the same reason that Mary was ultimately “blessed among women,” namely, his close affiliation with the

Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, John was the greatest of all prophets because he was given the great and glorious privilege of being the forerunner for the Lord Jesus Christ. He would prepare the way of the Lord, calling all people to repentance and to prepare their hearts for the revelation of God incarnate, who would be the Savior of the world!

Now, understanding this is significant because it will help us to unpack the meaning of the word “greater” here, which will further enable us to unlock the meaning of its use in the remaining portion of verse 11. You see, this is one of those times in Scripture where we have to avoid bringing our own modern use of a term, into a context, where the word actually takes on a different meaning. And this is why “context” is extremely important when seeking to define terms in Scripture, rather than immediately running to our own modern use of words. Now, why do I say this? Because generally, when we think of the term “greater,” our minds run to some form of *qualitative* reality. We tend to equate “greater” with “better” in some sense. For example, if I said to you that, “George is the greatest basketball player on the team,” you would rightly assume that I believe that George is the most skilled, or the best player on the team. He is qualitatively better than everyone else. This, however, is not what the Lord Jesus Christ is saying in our text. Well, what then is He saying? He is saying that John is the most privileged of all the Old Testament prophets. It is not that John himself is naturally better in any sense, but rather, John has been given a position of honor that is greater than what anyone else has ever been given, before him. As the forerunner to the Christ, John is greatest, not as to the quality of the man, but as to the quality of the privilege and position, within which God has placed him. And to this end, John was to be honored, because God had sovereignly and graciously chosen to put John in such a place of honor. It is God’s sovereign choice, in fact, that determined John’s position of greatness. And so, this is what our Lord means when He describes John in this way, as affirmed by Malachi’s prophecy.

Now, as I said, this is absolutely critical for helping us unlock the remaining portion of verse 11. Because, while Jesus is highlighting the most honorable position of John, He moves on to say something absolutely profound, which also helps explain the limitation and weakness of even the greatest of Old Testament prophets.

II. The Least in the Kingdom of Heaven is Greater than John

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; *but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*“ (vs. 11).

As great as John was, concerning privilege and position, there are many who are even greater and more privileged than him. Even the least in the kingdom of heaven (implying that all who are greater than the least, would be included here), is greater than John. What exactly does our Lord mean by these words? Well, let’s begin by defining what exactly our Lord means by “the kingdom of heaven” here, which will serve to help unlock the meaning of the overall statement.

What is the Kingdom of Heaven here? Well, this is not referring to heaven, as that eternal place where all of God’s people will dwell with God forever, in contrast to those who will be sent to hell. It would be absolutely ludicrous to assume that John the Baptist (and all of the Old Testament prophets for that matter) will not be in heaven with the people of God forever. No, this is not referring to the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God, in that sense. Well, what then does our Lord mean here? He is speaking about the official inauguration of the New Covenant Kingdom of God, which Christ instituted at the Lord’s Supper, and which officially commenced when the Lord dealt with sin on the cross, and was raised victoriously from the dead. We might put it this way. All of those who are brought into the Kingdom of Heaven, after the cross; and even the least of those who are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, after the cross, are greater than John.

Well, in what sense does our Lord mean this, then? Keeping in mind the Lord’s use of the term “greater,” He means to say here (again) that those in the Kingdom of Heaven (those who are transferred into the New Covenant) will be in a greater and more privileged position than John, because the fullness of the Gospel and the complete unraveling of God’s will concerning the accomplishing of eternal redemption, will be made known to them. The high noon sun of God’s revealed will had not yet reached its peak. And, in fact, John would die before that would happen. John would die just as the New Covenant was preparing to dawn upon mankind. And so, in this sense, John (as a prophet in this world) was very limited, and even less than the least of those in the Kingdom, because he would not be brought into the full

understanding of God's revealed will in the New Covenant. And this falls right in line with our context, because what did this limitation prevent John from understanding? It prevented him from understanding that the Lord was not immediately preparing to build His kingdom here on earth. John didn't understand the fullness of the necessity of the cross, or the coming building of Christ's church, including Jews and gentiles being brought together as one, in the New Covenant. John didn't understand the glorious dispensation of the Holy Spirit, who would descend upon all of the people of God, beginning at Pentecost. John was limited to Old Covenant light. And that is why he began to question the Lord, as to whether or not He was truly the coming One, or should they be looking for someone else. After the cross, all things would be made clear, and the confusion that presently overcame John as he sat in a prison cell, would then be removed, for even the least of all who are brought into the Kingdom of Heaven. In this sense then, the least in the Kingdom of Heaven would be greater than even the greatest of Old Testament prophets, by way of privilege and position, and not personal quality. In fact, probably most in the Kingdom of Heaven, certainly including myself, could not hold a candle to John the Baptist, when it came to personal quality and overall faithfulness and commitment to God. And so, John was the most privileged of the Old Covenant prophets; he prepared the way for the Messianic King! And yet, he was less than the least of all in the New Covenant Kingdom of God, because, *in this life*, he never followed that King into His Kingdom, at His resurrection from the dead. To be sure, there's no lack (or limitation) for John in glory, but as to the nature of his position (and privilege) in this life, all in the Kingdom of Heaven are greater than John was.

Consider two texts that further affirm this, with respect to all of the Old Testament prophets. [Read Matthew 13:10-17 & 1 Peter 1:6-12].

III. Concluding Applications

1) Recall again, brethren, this fact. More often than not, the prophets of God, including John the Baptist, had very little to enjoy in this world. In fact, from the standpoint of the world, they were most to be pitied. They were the world's "rejects." They often suffered horribly and were put to death in some of the most heinous and torturous of ways. Their job was anything but easy.

And yet, they were great in the sight of God, and most privileged to serve Him. You see, while this life was their mission field; while they “lost their lives” in this world, they had a far, far greater reward in glory. Remember, the days of enjoyment in this life are temporary, fleeting and never fulfilling (in the long run). Think about it, Christian. When you are in glory, some ten thousand years into eternity, and you look back to the brief moments you have enjoyed in this life, what will all of that mean then? Without saying that we should never enjoy things in this life, consider that all that will be remembered then, are the investments that we have made in Christ and the Gospel. John the Baptist lived into his early thirties, and enjoyed none of life’s luxuries, before being beheaded by King Herod. But, since then, he has enjoyed almost two thousand years in the presence of God, in glory! You think he has any regrets? Remember, God’s greatest and most privileged, are often this world’s worst and most dejected.

2) If you are a child of God, ponder the profound privilege that you have in the New Covenant. You see and understand things that even the greatest of all Old Testament prophets could not see. The fullness of the glory and mystery of the Gospel is laid bare before you. And furthermore, you have 2000 years of church history to look back at, to see God’s faithfulness to His church throughout all ages, in keeping with His promise to be with His people to the end of the age. We are thoroughly blessed, brethren! Let us make good use of what we know, so that, we might stand firm and faithfully testify to the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ, during these very dark and difficult times.

3) To the unsaved; you have been given light which most, throughout all of history, have not enjoyed. Don’t spurn the light of the Gospel which has graciously come to you. Take hold of the Gospel, call upon the Lord and be saved before it is too late.

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25