

## Greater Than John (Part 2)

Last Sunday we left John the Baptist in a state of utter confusion and doubt regarding whether or not Jesus was in fact the Promised Messiah of God or should he and his disciples continue to look for another yet to come (7:19-20). At this point of doubt, we considered last week how many throughout the history of Christianity have preferred to look for another savior and especially those who have rejected the claim of exclusivity that Jesus is the only way to God. We responded to those who find it repugnant that Jesus would be the unique, exclusive way to God by arguing first that if Jesus is not the only way, then He is no way to God. He will never accept a second or third place among other possible redeemers for He Himself excluded all other paths to God but Himself alone (cf. **John 14:6**). Second, we argued that if you have a problem with Jesus being the ONLY way, you need to ask the far more interesting question of why there is any way to God at all. If you understand fully the condition we all find ourselves in as sinners in treasonous rebellion against the Creator then why should He take any thoughtful consideration of man that God should care about him? By reducing the question to why God would allow only one way in Jesus is to miss the more fundamental sickness that plagues on humanity before the Holy God.

But now we want to consider how Jesus graciously and tenderly addresses John's doubt, so that we not only grow in our appreciation for Jesus' gentleness but also so that we can all learn how to comfort and assure our brothers and sisters in Christ when they are plagued with doubts about Christ.

Very briefly consider once again with me why John is so perplexed about Jesus. We have covered the things Jesus has taught about loving our enemies by doing good to them, blessing them, praying for them, and forgiving them rather than judging and condemning them (**Luke 6:20-38**). We have also seen how Jesus "wastes" time healing the servants of Gentiles and raising a dead son for a poor widow woman so that she would not be left destitute in this world (7:1-17). To add insult to injury, though John thought Jesus should be assigning the sinful oppressors of God's elect to the flames of unquenchable fire, instead he finds himself sitting unjustly in a dank, dark dungeon at the hands of his enemies (cf. **3:20**). It is as if all John's thoughts of the righteous and just judgment of God have either failed or John and his disciples must continue to look for another yet to come.

When John's disciples finally approach Jesus, carrying John's question to Jesus, they find Jesus doing much the same thing He has been doing: He is healing many people of their diseases, plagues, and evil spirits and he was restoring the sight of those who were blind (v. 21). He answers John's doubts (v. 22) by essentially once again quoting from **Isaiah 61** (the text he preached from in **chap. 4**):

**Isaiah 61:1-2** The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,

Or perhaps He is quoting from **Isaiah 29:18**:

**Isaiah 29:18** <sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

Or, even **Isaiah 35:4-6**:

**Isaiah 35:4-6** <sup>4</sup> Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

Not only are those who have been physically racked with disease and pain being restored to a full life – a foretaste of the eschatological life of heaven itself – but the poor – the outcasts along the outer fringes of society – are having the Gospel (the good news) preached to them (v. 22). Contrary to John's expectations, Jesus brings John to the Scriptures to assure him that He is fully and unashamedly satisfying God's promise of Messiah. Without any doubt, John has to look no further: Jesus is the Expected One to come!

Jesus follows up His confirmation of His true identity by the Word of God with a benediction upon all who accept Jesus fully and are not ashamed of Him:

**Luke 7:23** Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

What is Jesus essentially doing here for John? Where John is tempted to be offended by Jesus – to cast Jesus to the side in search of another – Jesus tenderly takes John by His sovereign, almighty hand and leads John back to Jesus. Here we see that the Gospel come alive when it is being challenged. Always remember that – the Gospel flourishes

exactly to the degree that it is doubted. Jesus always meets the challenge by proving He is more than sufficient against all doubts! What John needed most in the hour of the darkness of his soul was not to run off and find other alternatives to Jesus – to examine those challengers to His sovereign authority in light of Jesus – NO!, what John needed most was more of Jesus. He needed to take a closer look at Jesus. He needed to be drawn into the marvelous person and work of Jesus to see that He truly was and is exactly what God promised Him to be. No longer did John need to look at Jesus through the lens of what John **expected** Jesus to be. Jesus doesn't fit into our expectations – He will not be limited by a box of our own design. He is not a lion that can be tamed by what we want a savior to be. He is God incarnate who has come to fulfill His agenda not ours. He has come to carry out a mission of which we are not the author – a purpose and plan that was ordained before the foundations of this world were ever laid by God.

When John's disciples leave Jesus to deliver Jesus' words to John, Jesus turns to the crowds and heaps praises on the greatness of John the Baptist (**v. 24**). He begins by asking the crowds a few rhetorical questions. Now the tables are turned. Jesus is asking about the expectations of the crowds. What did you expect to find in the wilderness? A reed shaken by the wind (**v. 24**)? John was not someone who was easily rattled or unsettled by those who challenged his calling as forerunner of the Messiah. He rebuked those who opposed him as a "brood of vipers," he warned them to flee the wrath to come, and charged them that having Abraham as their father was no basis for finding favor with God for God could raise up the stones to become children of Abraham (**cf. 3:7-8**).

But neither did the crowds go out into the wilderness to find politician, a refined gentleman, or a king dressed in fine, luxurious robes who will typically tickle peoples ears by telling them what they want to hear (**v. 25**). No! John came dressed in a garment of camel's hair, tied with a leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey (**cf. Matt. 3:4**). What the crowds went out to hear was a prophet from God and what they found was the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets which came before him (**v. 26**). No one before him – not Moses or Samuel, not Elijah, no, not even Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel was greater than John – because none came to actually prepare the current generation for the physical coming of the LORD to earth (**v. 27**). In fact, Jesus declares that no woman on earth has given mankind a child that is greater than John (**v. 28**). Jesus then makes a rather enigmatic statement which upon a first hearing sounds rather superficial – the very least in the kingdom of God is greater than John (**v. 28**). How can that be? Are we really to believe that when all mankind stands before God one day that

the very least one in the kingdom of God will be honored and blessed more than John? The one who builds his life on wood, hay, and stubble will receive a greater reward than John?

What could Jesus possibly mean by this statement? Well, remember where John is placed in redemptive history. He comes at the conclusion of the Old Covenant – the Old Testament. He is one of the prophets who Peter describes as:

**1 Peter 1:10-12** Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

John, and the prophets who came before him, were like the holy angels who stretched their necks forward to try and understand the mystery of the ages – how God was going to sum up all things, in the heavens and on earth, in Jesus Christ (**cf. Eph. 1:10**). John is not a transitional figure between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The New Covenant would not be cut by God until the cross, which was brought about by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. John belongs squarely in the Old Covenant as one who came to prepare the way for the kingdom of God (**cf. Matt. 3:2**). The transition between the Old and New Covenants comes in Jesus. He is the one who came to inaugurate the New Covenant that made the Old Covenant obsolete and ready to vanish away because:

**Hebrews 8:6** Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

What Jesus is saying is found exactly here in what the author of Hebrews is explaining. The reason that even the very least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John is not because those individuals are greater than John but because they are united to the One who is greater than John. Jesus is the King of the Kingdom of God and those who are united to Him are recipients of the better promises of the New Covenant.

Yet there were many who refused to rejoice at the coming of the Kingdom of God. Those who were broken sinners, who saw their desperate need for the Savior willingly submitted and fled to the coming Kingdom of God (**v. 29**) but many who were

righteous in themselves have rejected the Kingdom of God (v. 30). Jesus will later tell the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray. While the Pharisee thanked God he was not like the tax collector, the tax collector could only stand far off beating his breast, crying out to God, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:9-14). Because the religious leaders were righteous in themselves they looked at John the Baptist and said, "We won't go into that water." That might be what the sinner needs, but have no need of a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." But how is this possible that so many completely missed the Kingdom of God right in front of them?

Jesus answers this question by comparing the present generation of those who refused the baptism of John to children playing in the streets (v. 31). Some of the children played the flute happily as if they were celebrating a wedding feast and yet those who heard did not respond appropriately by dancing. Other children sang a dirge as if they were attending a funeral and yet those who heard did not respond appropriately by mourning (v. 32). When John came and preached repentance of sins and warned this generation of the coming wrath of God, the religious leaders concluded he had a demon (v. 33). When Jesus came as the Bridegroom rejoicing at His wedding feast that the Kingdom of God has come, the Pharisees and lawyers accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (v. 34). Jesus and John are simply damned if they do and damned if they don't. There is no way to get through the hardness of the hearts who are well and have no need for a physician. They are already righteous in themselves and have no need for a Savior.

Then Jesus sums up this problem with a wonderful statement: Yet wisdom in justified by all her children (v. 35). When God's wisdom came into the world and was incarnate in the flesh of man, those whom the Father gave to the Son (His children) recognize the Wisdom of God and flee to it as if their lives depended on Him – because they do. They are glad at the appearance of God's Wisdom and they are willing to look like fools and accept the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins because they know that there is no other salvation than in the Expected One that God has sent to save them from their sins. They are not ashamed of Jesus but are forever blessed because they are coming to the Promised One of God and are being welcomed into the Kingdom of God that John came to announce and Jesus has come to bring.

**Amen!**

**-SDG-**