

Greater Than John (Part 1 of 2)

Jesus Christ rarely meets the expectations of others. Rather, Jesus always far exceeds what others expect of Him. This is understandable because as Isaiah records:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (**Isa. 55:8-9**).

And as the apostle Paul says:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways (**Rom. 11:33**)!

The things Jesus taught and the way He lived before men left John the Baptist in a state of utter confusion. Is it a strange thing that God's prophet had serious doubts about the ways of God? John wasn't the first prophet to be left absolutely dumbfounded before God's purpose and plan. When Jeremiah was fed up with the way the people of Israel responded to God's Word he cried out before the LORD:

Jeremiah 20:8-9 ⁸ For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long . . . "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," . . .

The prophet Elijah, when he could take the abuse no more complained before the LORD:

1 Kings 19:10 ¹⁰ "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

We could go on to mention many of God's prophets who were left befuddled before God's inscrutable ways. John expected Jesus to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He described Jesus as:

Luke 3:17 ¹⁷ "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John's expectations remind us of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, when they saw how the Samaritans treated Jesus and they asked Jesus:

Luke 9:54 "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

You can get a glimmer of John's perplexity in how Jesus responded to James and John:

Luke 9:55-56 ⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, *and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of;* ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Word has gotten back to John that Jesus has been telling His disciples that being poor, hungry, and mournful is a state of blessedness – for theirs is the Kingdom of God (6:20-21). His disciples are to rejoice – be glad and leap for joy – when men hate them, ostracize them, insult them, and scorn their name as evil for the sake of the Son of Man (6:22-23). Further, they are to be loving toward their enemies by doing good to those who hate them, blessing those who curse them, and praying for those who mistreat them – in sum, they are to treat others the same way they want to be treated (6:26-27, 31). Jesus even has gone so far as to set the standard before His disciples to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36). They prove to be their Father's children when they refuse to judge and condemn their enemies, but forgive them as they have been forgiven (6:37).

You can see why John was so puzzled. None of this sounded like the incineration of God's enemies with unquenchable fire which John anticipated. Further, look at how Jesus treated sinners. It was reported to John that Jesus actually healed the servant of a “Gentile” centurion – the epitome of the enemies of God's people - and even marveled at the great faith of that Gentile officer, which Jesus had not seen in all of Israel (7:1-10). Next John's disciples told him that Jesus wasted precious time when He stopped and gave a poor widow back her son from the dead when Jesus should have been busy baptizing the world with fire (7:11-17).

John's confusion is only compounded by the fact that the very one who was sent by God into the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming of the LORD is sitting in a dank, dark prison within the clutches of King Herod, about to die at the hands of his enemy (cf. 3:20). The words and actions of Jesus leave John so bewildered that he can't take it anymore - he feels the burden to send his own disciples to Jesus to question Jesus whether or not He in fact is the Promised Messiah or not and if Jesus is not the Expected One, should they be looking for another (7:18-20).

Many throughout the centuries following Jesus' first advent have looked at Jesus and decided to "look for another."¹ Think of the many religions which have been created over time by rebellious man for the purpose of looking for another. The whole Jewish religion today is based on a rejection of Jesus as the true Messiah of God and therefore they continue to look for another. Billions of Muslims believe that Jesus was not the One to come and the true prophet to God. We could multiply these by looking at the many religions which are older than Christianity who upon hearing the truth about Jesus, rejected Him and chose to continue follow a lie rather than the truth of God. There is a thread running throughout the history of Western civilization in which many have been searching for a hero – a superman – who will deliver them out of their misery and fallen condition.

Or we could add to these many who might concede that Jesus is "a" way to God but they fiercely oppose any such notion that Jesus is "the only" way to God. Can you think of anything more repugnant to our culture than the absolutist declaration that there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ alone? But Jesus declared clearly and unapologetically:

John 14:6 "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The apostles agreed saying:

Acts 4:10-12 ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

The apostle Paul reminded Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:5 ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

There is only One who made the sufficient, once-for-all atonement for our sins and only One who is able to boldly stand in the full impenetrable light of God's glory and holiness, which no sinner can penetrate, in His own merited righteousness for us. There

¹ I am indebted to R. C. Sproul's sermon on Luke 7:18-35 "Message from John the Baptist (Part 1)" preached on February 04, 2016 for the following material.

is only One whom God raised from the dead for your justification (**Rom. 4:25**) and appointed Him to be judge of the living and the dead (**Acts 10:42**). "To Him (alone) all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name" (**10:43**). The apostle Paul makes clear that:

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the word of the cross is folly (foolishness) to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

And that is why Paul can forthrightly declare:

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus sends John's disciples back to John that Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who are not ashamed of Jesus:

Luke 7:23 blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Many will respond to such exclusive claims about Jesus being the only way to God with absolute belligerency, thinking God to be rather narrow-minded and rather frugal with His grace. And if you are here this morning finding yourself repulsed by the fact that God declares His Son as the only way – in the strictest sense – to God, as Dr. Sproul often reminds us, you need to ask the question, "Why is there any way?" What is man that God would be moved in mercy and kindness to provide any way into His all-consuming holy presence? You must ask with the Psalmist:

Psalm 8:3-4 ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? **Psalm 8:9** ⁹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You must understand this morning that the fact that God provides any way to Himself, much more that He would give up His only begotten Son to possess you, is purely by His grace and mercy alone. God didn't have to give you any of His favor – the fact that He would give you what was eternally most precious to Him, to allow you to take His Son into your ungodly, hateful, and merciless hands and torture Him by nailing Him to the cross is without doubt the most excellent display of love that any creature has known. Do not be ashamed of your LORD and the cross He came to bear for you – many will think you foolish for believing in such things, but "to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (**1 Cor. 1:18**). **Amen! –SDG–**