

“Are You Greater than John the Baptist?”

Luke 7:24-28

Last week we looked at a question John the Baptist asked Jesus and how Jesus responded. Today, we are going to see what Jesus said to the people about John the Baptist. In particular, I want to draw your attention to verse 28 where Jesus said, “For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

The title for the sermon this morning is a question: “Are you greater than John the Baptist?” Jesus said that whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist.

I. “When the messengers of John were departed.”

These were the disciples of John the Baptist who were sent to Jesus with the question we looked at last week: “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?” In the verses that we are about to look at, Jesus said some very positive things about John the Baptist.

Imagine, on a human level, how encouraging some of these things could have been for John. Jesus called John a prophet. Yea, much more than a prophet. Jesus specifically said that John the Baptist was a fulfillment of the prophecy about

a messenger in Malachi 3. Jesus said, “Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.” It seems like this would have been very encouraging for John, but this was not the message Jesus sent back to John.

Jesus waited to say these things until the messengers of John were departed. John the Baptist may have never heard what Jesus said about him on this occasion. When John the Baptist was struggling Jesus didn’t build him up by pointing to John the Baptist. Jesus pointed to Himself: to His work, to His fulfilling prophecy, and encouraged John’s faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

By way of application for ourselves: When we are struggling, when we are discouraged, when we are full of doubt we don’t need to look to ourselves. We don’t need someone to come along and say, “Look at all the good things you have done. Look at that you have accomplished.” Or even, “Look at how God has used you.”

No! We must stop looking to ourselves and we must look to Jesus Christ. Look to His work. Look to His Word. Look to His promises. We find our rest in Him, and not in ourselves. I’ve heard it said from this pulpit many times and it is very sound, biblical advice: our problems don’t come from low self-esteem, but from low God-esteem. We think too highly of ourselves and too little of God. Better self-esteem won’t fix your problems because you don’t have the power to fix the problems you have. You have the power to make problems, but you don’t

have the power to fix them. You must look to Jesus Christ. Rest in Jesus and Jesus alone.

The disciples of John the Baptist left, and then Jesus began talking to the multitude about John the Baptist. And He began this discussion by asking the same question 3 times.

II. “What went ye out into the wilderness for to see?”

First, at the end of verse 24, “What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?” Did you go to see a reed? Was it the flora of the wilderness that attracted you? Did you go to see reeds growing along the Jordan river? Did you go to see a man who was like a reed: Weak and flimsy, uncertain, shaken by every blowing wind?

The same question begins v. 25, “But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts.” What did you go to the wilderness to see? Did you go to see a man in soft raiment. If you did, you went to the wrong place. You should have gone to a king’s court.

We learn something here about mankind: Pretty clothes and delicate lives are the best men can do on their own. Those who have reached the pinnacle of this world: kings, celebrities, the ultra-wealthy, what do they have? Pretty clothes and delicate lives, and then they die and face judgment, and that’s it. “What shall it

profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

Jesus asked the people, “Did you go to see a man in soft raiment?”

Finally, in verse 26 Jesus asked: “But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.”

A prophet: they went out into the wilderness to see a prophet. A prophet is not a man like a reed: weak, uncertain, shaken by every wind that blows. A prophet is not a man in soft raiment: successful in the world and leading a life marked by wealth and delicacy. A prophet was a different sort of man entirely. A prophet was a man commissioned by God to deliver God’s word to God’s people. The people went out to see a man they believed was a prophet.

Why was there so much interest in a prophet? If you read the Old Testament, prophets seem commonplace. There were a lot of prophets in the Old Testament, especially from our perspective. For example, in just a few hours we can read all the minor prophets. And we might forget that there were sometimes generations between prophets that God sent to His people.

And often when there were prophets, they were not sought-after. They were hated and rejected and people did not want to go find them and listen to them. Remember what God told Ezekiel when he was commissioned as a prophet in Ezekiel 3:7, “But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted.”

In Matthew 23:29-34 Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.”

Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, “You are just like your fathers who killed the prophets.” And Jesus’ words were proven true as they went on to crucify Jesus and persecute the early church. In contrast to the normal reception prophets received in Israel, the people flocked to the wilderness to see and hear John the Baptist. Why was there so much interest in a prophet?

John the Baptist was the first prophet since Malachi. For over 400 years God did not send a prophet to His people. This was very unusual. This long of a period of prophetic silence had never happened before. It actually caused a major shift in Judaism with a greater and greater focus being placed upon the written word of God, because there were no inspired prophets who were giving new revelation.

But then, finally, after 400 plus years, a strange man began to preach in the wilderness. He wore rough, camel-hair clothing. He ate the food he found in the wilderness: locusts and honey. He preached a message of repentance. He baptized Jews, which was very strange.

The people said, “It is a prophet!” And they went to see him and hear his message of repentance.

The religious leaders said, “No. There are no prophets anymore. John the Baptist isn’t a prophet.” Many of them still went to see him and hear him, but they did not receive his message of repentance.

On this occasion, Jesus directly confirmed what the people already believed: that John the Baptist was indeed a prophet. And not only a prophet, he was “much more than a prophet.”

In verse 27 Jesus told the people that John was the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Malachi. The reference for it is Malachi 3:1 in our Bibles. This is what Jesus said in v. 27, “This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.”

Now I’m going to read Malachi 3:1, “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me.”

Did you notice the difference? In Malachi, the pronouns are “me.” In our text, the pronouns are “you.” From Malachi’s perspective, the one sending the messenger and the one coming after the messenger are one and the same: God. From Jesus perspective, the one sending the messenger is the Father and the one coming after the messenger is the Son. And Jesus is careful to never present himself as the Father, thus the distinction we see here is necessary.

Working backward from this, we learn something about the nature of God. God is one in essence with three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We see that in our text, as Jesus makes distinction between persons in the trinity, but the prophet Malachi makes no division in God.

We also see in this reference that Jesus claimed to be God. This prophecy in Malachi, where it refers to God, Jesus applies it to Himself.

Earlier on in John the Baptist's ministry there had been some questions about who he was and what prophecy he could possibly have been fulfilling. We find this exchange in John 1:

In John 1:19 some priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John the Baptist, "Who art thou?"

In verse 20 John replied, "I am not the Christ."

Then they asked, "What then? Art thou Elias?"

And he saith, "I am not."

They asked, "Art thou that prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

Then said they unto him, "Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias."

In our text this morning Jesus pointed directly to the prophecy in Malachi 3 and told the multitude that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

III. Jesus further commended John the Baptist before the people.

Verse 28 begins, “For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.” Jesus said that there was no prophet greater than John the Baptist. Think about that statement.

What about Elijah and Elisha? They prayed and God sent fire down from heaven. God raised people from the dead through their ministry. Through them God healed the sick, provided for the needy, parted the Jordan River (twice!) and worked many other mighty miracles. John stood in a river and preached. John 10:41 says, “John [the Baptist] did no miracle.” And yet Jesus said, “John is greater.”

What about Moses? God talked to Moses as a man talks to his friend (Exodus 33:11). God used Moses to write the first 5 books of the Bible. Through the ministry of Moses God delivered His people from Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the desert for 40 years. God called Moses the meekest man on earth (Numbers 12:3). How could John the Baptist possibly compare to Moses? Yet Jesus said that John was greater.

What about Daniel? What about Jeremiah? What about Isaiah? There are all these Old Testament prophets that God worked through in mighty ways. And yet, Jesus said that John was greater than all of these.

Why? Why was John the Baptist the greatest prophet? He was the greatest because of his position in redemptive history. He was the forerunner of the Messiah. Unlike every other Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist saw Jesus in the flesh. He touched the Messiah, the Son of God. He pointed to a man walking on the shore of the Jordan river and said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Because of John’s position in redemptive history, Jesus called him the greatest prophet.

Then Jesus made an incredible statement. Look at the end of verse 28: “But he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” Jesus had just said that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet. Then he immediately said that whoever is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. This is an incredible statement.

What is the kingdom of God? This phrase “the kingdom of God” is used over 30 times in Luke’s gospel. We have taught on it before, but we are going to go over it again as we seek to understand what Jesus taught in this verse.

What is the kingdom of God? The kingdom is God’s reign, God exercising his divine kingly authority. God the Father has given this authority to the Son and

He will exercise this authority until He has subdued all that is hostile to God (I Cor. 15:24-28). The object of this rule is the redemption of men for the glory of God.

There is a hostile kingdom that is opposed to God's kingdom. In Luke 4:5 the devil boasted of his power in the kingdoms of the world and even offered this power to Jesus. In Luke 11 Jesus refers to demonic possession as part of Satan's kingdom among men. In II Corinthians 4:3-4 we have a summary statement of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. II Corinthians 4:3-4, "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Entrance into the kingdom of God means deliverance from the power of darkness. Colossians 1:13 says, "[God] hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son."

The ultimate fulfillment of this kingdom will come at the end of the age. Jesus Christ will return in His glory. He will sit on the throne of judgment. The wicked will be condemned and the righteous will "inherit the kingdom." (Matthew 25:31-46). But the kingdom is not just something out there in the future.

The kingdom of God has entered history in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The redemptive rule of God invaded the kingdom of Satan and now delivers men from the power of sin. In Luke 11:20 Jesus asserted the presence and power of the kingdom when he said, "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no

doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you.” One day Satan will be destroyed, He will be cast into the lake of fire and tormented for ever and ever (as Revelation 20:10 tells us). But Jesus has already defeated Satan. The kingdom of God has come into the hearts of men and women through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is supernatural. Divine kingly authority belongs to God and God alone. Only the supernatural power of God can bring the kingdom of God. Only God can destroy Satan and redeem men from the power of sin.

So what is our responsibility? We can preach the kingdom of God. When Jesus sent out the 70 he told them to preach: “The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you.” (Luke 10:9). In Acts 8:12 we are told that Philip went to Samaria and preached the kingdom of God. The book of Acts ends by telling us that Paul spent 2 years in Rome preaching the kingdom of God.

We can persuade men about the kingdom. Acts 19:8, “And he [Paul] went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.”

We can reject the kingdom and refuse to enter into it. Jesus said in Matthew 23:13, “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”

We can look for the kingdom of God (like Joseph of Arimathaea in Luke 23:51), we can pray for its coming (Jesus told us to pray “thy kingdom come” in the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6:10), and we can seek for it (Matthew 6:33, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”), but we cannot bring the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God works in and through men, but it is altogether God’s doing.

To summarize: The kingdom of God is God’s divine reign. The Father has given this authority to the Son and he will ultimately subdue everything that is hostile to God. The ultimate fulfillment of this kingdom will come at the end of the age, but the kingdom of God has entered this age in the gospel: person and work of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is supernatural. It works in and through men, but it is altogether God’s doing. That is the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be “in the kingdom” as Jesus said in verse 28 of our text? To be in the kingdom of God, you must be born again by the Spirit of God. This is what Jesus said in John 3:5-7, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.” The only way to be in the kingdom of God now is to be born again by the Spirit of God. To move from opposition to God’s divine rule (the kingdom of darkness), to the kingdom of God, you must be born again.

Now we need to answer a difficult question as it relates to our text: could Old Testament saints enter the kingdom? Ultimately at the end of the age: yes. But temporally, during the period of their lives: no. And the answer is no for this very simple reason: the kingdom of God had not yet come. Jesus Christ had not yet entered history as the Redeemer to establish his kingdom in the hearts of men.

Now, we need to avoid confusion about salvation. There has always been only one way of salvation: Looking in faith to the king, the Messiah, the Redeemer: Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament believers looked forward in faith to the King who would come. In the New Testament, believers look back in faith to the King who came.

Have you ever looked to Jesus Christ in faith, as the king who came to purchase your redemption? There is no work you can do to redeem yourself. There is no suffering you can endure to pay for your sins. There is no righteousness you can attain that will increase your standing before God. There is now and has always been only one way of salvation: through Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one can go to the Father but through Him (John 14:6). Jesus doesn't help you along on your way to God. He calls upon you to abandon your way, for it is a way of sin and rebellion, and to repent, to turn around, and go his way. The way of salvation found in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only true way of salvation. You must look to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance. And in God's

plan of redemption, Jesus, the promised King had to come, He had to enter His creation as a man at a point in time, to establish his kingdom.

Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 16:16, “The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.”

Now combine that with what we read in verse 28 of our text: “For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Up to John it was the law and the prophets. After John the kingdom of God is preached. And the least in the kingdom is greater than the greatest prophet. Everyone who is in the Kingdom of God occupies a greater position than the greatest of the prophets: John the Baptist himself.

Compare the apostles with John the Baptist. Who was the least of the apostles? Maybe Thomas who doubted. Or maybe James the son of Alphaeus, about whom Scripture tells us virtually nothing. Or maybe Paul who called himself “the least of the apostles” (I Corinthians 15:9). But whoever was least among the apostles was greater than John the Baptist.

The apostles had better access to Jesus to see what He did and hear what He taught. The apostles performed miracles, something John never did. The apostles preached the gospel with clearer insight than John, especially after the Holy Spirit indwelt them on the day of Pentecost. The apostles were able to preach Christ not

only as having come in the flesh, but as having suffered, died, and risen again to complete the work of redemption. The apostles saw Jews and Gentiles alike repent and turn to God for salvation. The least of the apostles was greater than John the Baptist as they occupied a place of greater revelation of God's redemption.

The least gospel minister is greater than John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah. He announced Jesus' coming in the flesh. He looked for the kingdom Jesus would bring. But we follow after the Messiah. We point to the finished work of Jesus Christ. We live in the kingdom Jesus brought.

The least Christian is greater than John the Baptist. You and I, we might not possess a measure of faith anything like the faith of John the Baptist. Yet we are greater because of the privileges we possess. As John was greater than all the other prophets because of the place he occupied in redemptive history, so we are greater than John the Baptist because of the place we occupy in redemptive history. Because of what has been given to us in the completed work of Jesus Christ. Because we enjoy the kingdom blessings that John never knew. We have a clearer view, greater understanding, better revelation, and the indwelling Holy Spirit: all these blessings that John never had. And with all these privileges comes tremendous responsibility. Woe unto us if we squander the grace of God on careless living, on the pursuit of the things of this world. Woe unto us to who has been given the kingdom of God if we turn from it for the kingdom of this world.

This leads back to where we started, to this question: Are you greater than John the Baptist? Anyone who is in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist.

Are you in the kingdom of God? Are you resting in Jesus Christ for salvation this morning? You must be born again. There is no other way.

If you are a Christian, we should be in awe at what Jesus taught in this verse. The least apostle, the least gospel minister, the least Christian is greater than John the Baptist. Not because of what you have done, but because of what has been given to you in Jesus Christ. As believers, we occupy a very high place of privilege and revelation.

That's good news. That's cause for rejoicing. And that's also a tremendous responsibility. To whom much has been given much will be required. We are joint heirs to the kingdom of God. We have a high calling. By the grace of God, may we be found faithful.