

Message #14**Luke 3:15-20**

When Gabriel appeared to Zacharias to inform him that his wife would have a son named John, he told him that, “he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15).

When Jesus Christ addressed the multitudes of people, He said concerning John that, “...among those born of women, there is no one greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

What exactly was it that John did that made him so successful in God’s estimation? Was it numbers? Was it dollars? Was it popularity? Was it his reception by the people? Was it the duration of his ministry? If we analyze John’s ministry by this criteria, he was a big flop. He didn’t have big numbers of disciples; he didn’t have much money; he wasn’t too popular; he was not well received; and he didn’t have a ministry that lasted very long. He ended up being rejected, jailed, and beheaded.

If we analyze John by man’s criteria, he wasn’t a success; he was a failure. Yet both Gabriel and Jesus said he was great. Dr. Luke must have been interested in that, because in this text, he shows what really made him great.

JOHN WAS GREAT IN GOD’S SIGHT BECAUSE HE KNEW THE TRUTH OF GOD; HE PROCLAIMED THE TRUTH OF GOD ABOUT JESUS CHRIST AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD, REGARDLESS OF CONSEQUENCES.

This is what made John great in God’s sight. He knew truth; he preached truth and he would not back down or back away even in the presence of the most powerful people on earth.

This is what makes a ministry great. Great ministries are not numbers oriented, they are righteousness oriented. Great ministries are not proud, they are humble. Great ministries are not self-focused, they are Christ-focused. Great ministries are not about appeasing people, they are about communicating God’s truth to people. Great ministries are not always popular with everyone and sometimes they are rejected. That is the way it worked for John, and there was no one greater than him.

Now in this text Luke gives us a look at John’s ministry. In fact, Luke is the only writer that points out the fact that John’s preaching “created a stir of popular speculation” (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, p. 318). There are five ministry observations we may make concerning John that in God’s sight made him great:

**MINISTRY OBSERVATION #1 - John proclaimed his inferiority and Christ’s superiority.
3:15-16**

John’s preaching produced a “state of Messianic expectancy” with the people. In other words, there was a high level of expectation that the things John was predicting were very near.

People were so moved by John's preaching about the coming Messiah that many believed John could be the Messiah. Actually in Greek, Luke makes it clear that John was not the Messiah, but many were wondering that in their hearts.

The Jews were being dominated by the Romans and as David Garland said, "The miserable oppression of Israel, represented by the crushing taxation and strong-arm intimidation by its rulers, sparked a desperate longing for God's intervention" (*Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Luke*, p. 158).

There is not a phony religious leader or cult leader who has ever existed who would not want to be in the position of John. According to **verse 15**, many people actually thought John was the Messiah. False religious leaders would love that accolade, because it would feed their egos and give them power and wealth. But it was not so with John. He was quick to point out his own inferiority. He was not some egotistical limelighter; he was a humble servant of God. There are three differences between him and Christ that he is quick to point out:

Difference #1 - John's baptism is far inferior to Christ's baptism. **3:16a**

John was baptizing people in water in the Jordan river, and he told people that his baptism was far inferior to Christ's, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John's water baptism could not save anyone; but Christ's Spirit baptism could save any sinner (Acts 19:1-5). John saw a major dispensational difference between his baptism and Christ's baptism, and he saw his baptism as far inferior to Jesus Christ's.

No water baptism can save someone from sin. In fact, the washing that brings salvation from sin and gives one regeneration is not a washing in water, it is a washing with the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul said it this way: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6).

John's baptism was a national baptism for Israel in which a Jew acknowledged and admitted he did not have the righteousness necessary to get into the Kingdom. It was a baptism in which a Jew admitted he was a sinner and needed a Savior to make him clean.

John was a dispensationalist. He understood that his ministry was for a specific time, and he clearly understood that Christ's ministry would be far superior to his. He knew that his water baptism was not on the same level of Christ's Spirit baptism.

Great ministers understand dispensationalism, which is why Paul said, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (I Cor. 1:17).

Now what does it mean that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire?

- 1) A reference to Pentecost in Acts 2:3 when there was some visible appearance of fire.
- 2) A reference to fiery judgment that the Holy Spirit will eventually authorize for unbelievers.
- 3) A reference to the offer of Spirit baptism that will either save or condemn one to fire.
- 4) A reference to Spirit baptism that purges bad things from one's life.

Difference #2 - John's strength is far inferior to Christ's strength. **3:16b**

John says the One who is coming is much stronger and mightier than me. The One who will come after me has all power and might and strength. He is the mighty God (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 220).

Difference #3 - Jesus' worth is far superior to John's worth. **3:16c**

When John says he is "not fit to untie the thong of His sandals" what he is saying is I do not have the sufficiency as a sinner to even touch the least esteemed article of His clothing. John says I am not "fit," which means I do not have the sufficiency, ability, and competency to even loosen the straps on his sandals (*Ibid.*, p. 215).

John uses a verb tense that would teach that he continually saw himself as unworthy of even touching the sandals of Jesus Christ.

In the world in which John lived, the job of taking off someone's sandals was the job of the lowest class slave. Frederic Godet, in his commentary on Luke, brings out an interesting point when he says that John is actually saying that he is not even worthy enough to be the lowest class slave of Jesus Christ.

Now this is the man of whom Gabriel and Christ both said is the greatest prophet. This is a very godly man and his perspective of himself is "I am not fit to untie his sandal." What a contrast to ministers who say, "I am so worthy and scholarly that I deserve to be in ministry." What a contrast to those who say, "I am so wonderful that I am needed." **Great ministers in the sight of God always testify of their own unworthiness and deficiency.**

Paul saw himself as the chief of sinners and he was the great grace age Apostle. **Greatness in God's sight sees the inferiority of self and the superiority of Jesus Christ.** That was John.

MINISTRY OBSERVATION #2 – John proclaimed Christ's judgment of either saving or burning. **3:17**

John says Jesus is the ultimate judge, and the winnowing fork of judgment is in His hands. He will either save and gather one into His barn, or He will burn one with "unquenchable fire."

A winnowing fork was a large wooden shovel with a sharp end. It looked like a large wooden fork. This shovel was used to throw wheat and corn up into the air.

The farmer would take the wheat and toss it with this shovel into the air and the good wheat would fall to the ground but the chaff would be blown a little distance away by the wind. When a pile of chaff had been accumulated, the farmer would take it and burn it, because it was worthless.

What John is saying is that when Jesus comes, He will judge everyone. He will determine who is truly right with Him and who isn't. He will let various winds blow on the people to determine who believes on Him and who doesn't. Those who believe on Him will be gathered up by Him, and those who don't will be cast into everlasting fire that is unquenchable.

Now as you can imagine, that message to the political and religious leaders of Israel did not go over too well. They were teaching that by following them they could get into the Kingdom. John came preaching about One who could send them to everlasting fire.

What John preached was if you reject Jesus Christ, you will not only be separated from believers, you will be burned.

MINISTRY OBSERVATION #3 – John preached the gospel to the people. **3:18**

John preached the gospel to “the people.” The tense of the verbs “exhortation” and “preached” indicate that he was continually preaching the truth about the good news of Jesus Christ. There is an article “the” before the noun people, which means specific people. The specific people was Israel.

So as John baptized people in the Jordan who were admitting they were sinners, he was continually proclaiming that Jesus Christ, the One who would come, would be the One who could save them from their sins. In fact, we know from the Apostle John that this same John actually preached the grace of God (John 1:15-17). He apparently proclaimed that Jesus Christ would put an end to the law, and if they would believe in Him they would be saved.

John was constantly exhorting people to believe on Christ and preaching to them. This is part of what made him great. Nothing will ever replace the greatness of preaching the truth in the mind of God. Nothing will ever replace a preacher who will continually proclaim the Word of God as it connects to Jesus Christ and His grace. In God's estimation, that is a great ministry.

MINISTRY OBSERVATION #4 – John proclaimed the guilt of the law to those in high places. **3:19**

John stood for the Word of God and proclaimed the truth of the Law of God, no matter who the audience.

Now Herod had done many godless things and he was strutting around telling people he was right with God. One of the more recent things he had done was that he stole his brother's wife Herodias and he married her (Mark 6:17-18; Matt. 14:4-5).

Now there were two major violations of the law in this matter: 1) They had both left their mates to enter this marriage, which constitutes adultery; 2) Herodias had been married to the half-brother of Herod, which means this marriage is a near blood relative. Herodias was Herod's niece, which is a violation of Leviticus 18:16; 20:21.

Apparently the people of Israel were talking about this, and when John learned of it, he said what they have done is a violation of the Law of God. John said this is a wicked violation of the Law of God and the Word of God.

Verse 19 says John “reprimanded” him, which means he rebuked him with the Word of God in a way that fully exposed the evil of what he had done. He told him what he was doing was against the Law of God (Matt. 14:4; Mark 6:18). Well, the Pharisees reported it to Herod.

Herod saw this as a real threat to his power. This would undermine his political credibility.

Great ministries cannot exterminate sin, but they will expose it. In fact, the Apostle Paul said, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them” (Eph. 5:11).

What John did was expose the sin by using the Word of God and the Law of God. That is what in part made his ministry a great ministry.

MINISTRY OBSERVATION #5 – John suffered for his faithfulness. 3:20

There is something very interesting to observe here. John was the greatest prophet of God, and yet he was hated by the greatest religious and political powers on earth. John was locked up in jail by Herod.

Those who are great in the sight of God often end up being hated and mistreated by many people in this world.

One of the greatest fears that we should have is the fear that everyone likes us. The moment we discover that all men are speaking well of us, that is the moment we may realize we are not in tune with God (i.e., Luke 6:26).

Great ministers don't have as their primary objective to make friends with the world. Their primary objective is to communicate truth to the world. That does not mean that we go out of our way to antagonize people or ostracize ourselves from them. But when we tell the truth about God and His Word, there will be times it will not make people happy. They will be hateful.

Just think what happened to those who preached truth. This John was jailed and beheaded. Stephen was stoned. Andrew was hung on a cross for two days. Peter was crucified upside down on a cross. Paul was beheaded, and history says that James, Matthew, Mark, and Luke were all eventually executed for their message.

All of these preached the truth about sin and Jesus Christ. What is so sad is that most of Israel rejected their message. Don't you make the same mistake.

No one will ever be right with God until he is willing to confront sin in his or her own life. But John preached that salvation may be found in the One who would come after him, and that One is Jesus Christ.