

How Could We Be Greater than John?

Introduction

The Text

“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Luke 7:28)

John Is the Greatest

- A. According to Jesus’ estimation (the only estimation that truly matters), “among those born of women none is greater than John.” He’s speaking, of course, of John the Baptist.
- B. Certainly, we are not willing to argue with Christ at this point. We have already seen much about John in Luke’s gospel that would commend such an estimation of him.
 1. Luke has already made note of the fact that John’s ministry was actually prophesied in the OT—in Isaiah and Malachi in particular (Luke 3:4-5; 7:27).
 2. When he finally does enter the world, he does so in miraculous fashion. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were both advanced in years and without child, because Elizabeth, we’re told, “was barren” (Luke 1:7). But God touches her womb and John is conceived.
 3. And perhaps you remember what the angel Gabriel says to Zechariah about John: “[H]e will be great before the Lord. And . . . he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). And this is precisely what we see next. For when Elizabeth comes into Mary’s presence, both with child, he leaps for joy, and, in effect, turns his own mother towards the Messiah (Luke 1:39-45).
 4. And then he is born, and we read that “the hand of the Lord was with him” (Luke 1:66), and that he “grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (Luke 1:80). He was austere, disciplined in his devotion to God, unwilling to enjoy the comforts of this life, living in the desert places, wearing camels hair, eating locusts and honey (Matt 3:4).
 5. And then we’re told in Luke 3:2 that “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” And so, with unflinching boldness, John begins his public ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2).
- C. So, John was great. But what sets him apart as the greatest person born of a woman is not so much who he is or what he does but where he stands in God’s unfolding plan of redemption.
 1. When we think about it, truly there are others in the OT who would rival John in the things mentioned above—Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. Miracles, faith, boldness.

- a. What really sets John apart as the greatest above all is his privileged place within God's redemptive timeline.
 - i. Where all these previous servants of God were looking forward to some shadowy silhouette of a coming King, John alone gets to look that King in the eyes. Where every previous prophet proclaimed that the King is coming, John alone gets to proclaim that the King is now here: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matt 3:2).
- D. So it is John's privileged place near the Messiah that tips the scales in his favor. John is the greatest born of women because he is the last finger in a great line of prophets pointing forward to the Son of God—his is the finger that finally touches the King!

But We Are Greater?!

- A. But here is the question that we are now going to spend the rest of this morning attempting to answer: If John is so great, how in the world could I, little old me, possibly be greater?
 - 1. Because that's what Jesus goes on to say: *"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*
- B. Brothers and sisters, if you have repented of your sin and received by faith what Jesus accomplished for you on the cross, then you are in the kingdom of God, and, no matter how little, how unimportant, how insignificant you feel, in Jesus' estimation (the only estimation that truly matters), you are greater than John.
- C. And I want to know: How can that be?! The reasons are myriad, but I'll give you three.

(1) We Have a Greater Revelation

Turning the Lights Up

- A. First, we are greater than John because we have a Greater Revelation.
- B. It should be said here that John is a transitional figure in the Scriptures and in God's plan of redemption. He serves as a bridge between the old era and the new, though he himself remains within the sphere of the old.
 - 1. The old era, the OT really, was an era of promise and anticipation—God is going to come and make things right.
 - 2. The new era, the NT, is an era of fulfillment and arrival—God has come in the person of Jesus Christ and He has inaugurated this great renovating, redeeming work.
- C. The Bible speaks of what's happening in this transition from old to new as the revealing of mysteries.

1. A mystery in the Bible is something hidden in the promises and prophecies, the symbols and shadows of the OT, that's now been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
 - a. So, in Rom 16:25-26, Paul says that his "gospel" and "preaching of Jesus Christ" is "^{25b}the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages^{26a} but has now been disclosed . . ."
 - b. Or, later in Col 1:26, he says: "[T]he mystery hidden for ages and generations [has now been] revealed to his saints" . . . in Christ.

- D. It might help us to see our Bibles as if it were a sort of dimmer switch. With each turn of the page—from the Torah, to the Writings, to the Prophets, from Genesis to Malachi—the light is getting brighter and brighter until it is finally maxed out in the person of Jesus Christ.
 1. The author of Hebrews puts it this way: "¹Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.³ He is the radiance of the glory of God" (Heb 1:1–3a).
 - a. He is light—"the Light of the world" (John 8:12), in fact. And we now walk in this light.

- E. And, can I just say it? John did not. Not fully at least.
 1. And this recalls what we said last time when we talked about John's doubt there in Luke 7:18-19 in particular. He didn't understand how things would transition from promise to fulfillment, from shadow to substance.
 - a. He got tripped up, confused, doubtful. He couldn't yet solve the mysteries of fulfillment.

To Us It Has Been Given to Know

- A. Later, Jesus, in private discussion with His disciples, will say something quite profound on this point: "¹¹To you it has been given to know the secrets [mysterion] of the kingdom of heaven . . .¹⁶ [B]lessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matt 13:11, 16–17).

- B. And John is on the side of those in the dark. We're not told that he ever heard Jesus' preaching. Nor are we told that he ever saw Jesus' miracles. It wasn't given to him to know these things.
 1. Sure John saw the Holy Spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus, he directed his disciples to Him, but he was locked up in prison and beheaded before he could ever hear or see much else.
 - a. He would die without an understanding of the mysteries entailed in: Jesus' death for sinners on the cross; His resurrection from the dead as ultimate victory; the

outpouring of the Spirit; the second coming of the Lord; the final judgment on the last day. All of these things would be lost on him.

- i. Though, unlike the prophets before him, he was granted to look in the face of Christ, still, like the prophets before him, his understanding of who this Christ is and how He would inaugurate His kingdom was still shrouded in shadow.
- C. O but not for us! We have the gospels recording for us the person and work of Christ, the epistles explaining to us the meaning and implications of it all, the revelation of John outlining for us the end of all things. We have a Greater Revelation.
- D. Now, I know some of us feel like our knowledge of the Scriptures is woefully inadequate. We're actually a bit ashamed of how little we understand or know. We hear those people quoting Scripture in their prayers or spouting off about how rich their devotions are and we feel like the least in the kingdom of God.
1. But, brothers and sisters, if you have heard, understood, and believed that Jesus died for your sins on that cross, rose again triumphant for your justification, and is coming again to bring you with Him into glory . . . then you know more than John ever did! And, in this sense, you are greater.
 - a. We have, in Christ, a Greater Revelation.

(2) We Have a Greater Salvation

From a Flicker to a Flame

- A. Secondly, now, we are greater than John because we have a Greater Salvation.
- B. Now, I need to be careful here, because I am not saying that OT saints are saved in a different way than NT believers—and our way now is greater. No! We are all saved by grace through faith in the work of the Messiah.
1. But our salvation is greater in the sense that our understanding and experience of it is deeper, fuller, richer now on the other side of the cross.
 - a. Again, as with revelation and its dimmer switch, so now with salvation. It's as if the wattage has been increased in the coming of Christ. And what was a flicker in the saints of old is now a fire in us.
- C. You see, even John didn't fully understand what this salvation would look like. He had an earthly, more physical perspective on it. But Jesus is going to go much deeper than he realized.
1. Edmund Clowney writes eloquently about this: "Christ's kingdom is a kingdom of grace . . . The cross is the way of his saving grace. His disciples did not understand this; to them Messianic salvation meant political deliverance from the Romans. In Herod's prison, John

the Baptist was dismayed that Jesus did not use his power to bring in the judgment (Luke 7:18-19). He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' (Luke 7:20). Jesus sent John's disciples back to him as witness of the Messianic miracles that fulfilled prophecy (Isa 35:5-6; 61:1). He added a word for John: 'Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.' (Luke 7:23).

Jesus was in fact telling John, 'Trust me to bring in my kingdom my way.' Had he brought judgment, Jesus could have spared neither Herod nor any sinner, not even doubting John. Jesus came in the flesh not to bring the judgment, but to bear it; not to slay with the sword of his lips, but to receive the nails in his hands and the spear-thrust in his side. In no other way could his kingdom come and God's will be done in earth as in heaven" (The Church, p. 188).

- a. "John, I'm going deeper than Rome here. I'm taking down the evil powers behind Rome, the satanic forces of darkness that animate Rome. And not only that, I'm going after the evil within your own heart—sin that has you at odds with a holy God. If I save your head from Herod, I will lose your soul to hell.
 - i. So I'm going to the cross. And by My work there, I will bring you into the true and everlasting kingdom of God!"

Copies of the Heavenly Things

- A. The OT is earthy, physical—with its kings, its animal sacrifices, its temple complex, its Holy Land, etc.. But in all these things God is trying to get at deeper spiritual realities—realities that will ultimately be brought to light in Christ.
- B. The author of Hebrews calls these earthly forms "[copies \[or 'shadows' \(10:1\)\] of the heavenly things](#)" (9:23). But in Christ we move from the copies to the ultimate realities behind them.
 1. The promised Davidic King is fulfilled in Him as He is crucified and then raised and seated at the right hand of His Father in heaven ([Acts 2:22-36](#)).
 2. All the sacrificing of animals for our sins is fulfilled in His death upon the cross: "[For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified](#)" (Heb 10:14).
 3. The tabernacling of God with man in the temple is fulfilled in the outpouring of Christ's Spirit where we become the temple, and He dwells, not out there, but in us: "[Christ in you, the hope of glory](#)" (Col 1:27b).
 4. And the land of promise is not some boundaried plot of land somewhere in the Middle East, but a heavenly land, a New Jerusalem, that will come down out of heaven from God ([Rev 21:2](#)).
- C. Ours, brothers and sisters, after the cross of Christ, is a Greater Salvation.
 1. That's why the author of Hebrews goes on to say that, though OT saints were saved by grace through faith in their shadowy understanding of the Messiah, "[apart from us they should not be made perfect](#)" (Heb 11:40b).

- a. We who are now in the kingdom of God in Christ, are not on the side of the copies or shadows, we are on the side of ultimate realities.
- D. You might feel like your life is a wreck, like things couldn't be going worse for you here, like Herod is coming for your head.
 - 1. But you will not experience the dungeon in the same way as John. You have now what he didn't. You have Christ in you. You have the hope of glory in a way John could not yet conceive. And, in this sense, you are greater.
 - a. We have, in Christ, a Greater, a fuller, Salvation.

(3) We Have a Greater Commission

- A. Now, lastly, we are greater than John because we have a Greater Commission.
- B. At first such a statement might sound crazy: "Greater Commission? For goodness sake! John was the voice crying out in the wilderness prophesied in Isa 40. He was the forerunner to the Messiah. We saw it at the beginning: He was the first prophet in a long line of prophets to actually see and touch the Lord.
 - 1. And now you're telling me that I—sitting here in south San Jose, in the 21st century—have a greater commission than this?!"
 - a. Yes. On this, the other side of the cross, you do.
- C. Think about this with me:
 - 1. John is called to point to Jesus from the side of promise. We get to point to Jesus from the side of fulfillment.
 - 2. John could speak of Jesus as the Christ. But only we can speak of Jesus on the cross.
 - 3. John could call people to repent. But we get to call people, not only to repent, but also to receive all that Jesus has accomplished for them.
 - 4. John was called to baptize in water. But we get to see people baptized by the Spirit of God.
 - 5. John was sent to the nation of Israel. But we are sent to the ends of the earth!
 - a. Now you tell me: Which commission is greater?!
- D. To put a capstone on this point, consider the story narrated for us in [Acts 19](#). During Paul's third missionary journey, he comes upon some disciples in Ephesus and we're told this in [vv. 2-6a](#): " ²[H]e said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'³ And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They said, 'Into John's baptism.'⁴ And Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.'⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.^{6a} And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them . . ."

1. The baptism of John is incomplete in itself. It was always intended to give way to the baptism of Christ and His Spirit.
 - a. And that is the baptism that we are privileged, even commissioned to bring to the nations.
- E. You may feel like your ministry is nothing to John's. Look at all the people who were coming to be baptized by him in the Jordan. Look at the great impact of his life.
 1. But, brothers and sisters, if you have shared the cross of Christ with just one person, you have shared more than John ever did or could. And, in this sense, you are greater.
 - a. We have, in Christ, a Greater Commission.

Conclusion

- A. Now I want to conclude by quickly addressing the unbeliever, the non-Christian in our midst. You might feel like all of this has been irrelevant for you, but I assure you it's not. Let me take our points here one by one.
- B. Everyone is looking for Greater Revelation. We're all looking for someone who can tell us how the world works, how the facts of the universe fit together. We all would admit we are finite—meaning: we don't see all the facts. Most would admit we are fallen—meaning: what facts we do see we don't see rightly, we twist and turn them for selfish ends. We need help. We need someone to tell us what life is all about, why it is the way it is, why we are the way we are, and what's the way forward. You're looking for someone to make sense of the facts for you. Some authority, whether a scientist, philosopher, politician.
 1. But the Bible says you're not going to find that from another man—finite and fallen. You need the only One who sees all the facts, the only One who is not twisted and bent, to speak. And He does that in the Scriptures. He stoops to share with us, to speak to us, to interpret this place for us. He gives the Greater Revelation.
- C. You're looking for a Greater Salvation. You know things aren't right. That's why you go to that psychologist, pop those pills, drink that booze, get that degree.
 1. The Scriptures say that this world is passing away and you know it. No matter what you do, you're not going to be able to save yourself from death. Jesus gives the Greater Salvation.
- D. You're looking for a Greater Commission. You want to be a part of something bigger. You're looking for a purpose, something worth living for. So you join all these causes. You try to get your name on a wall. But it always falls flat. It's never enough.
 1. Until we fall in line behind our Savior and say: "Your kingdom come." You get to be included in His mission to redeem all things. What a rush!