

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## GREATER THAN JOHN THE BAPTIST

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### Matthew 11:1-11

In today's lesson, we are going to look at John the Baptist. John is a very important prophet and there are many things we can learn from his ministry and his character. Let us read Matthew 11:1-11.

*Matthew 11:1. Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.*

*2 And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples  
3 and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"*

*4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see:*

*5 "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.*

*6 "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."*

*7 As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*

*8 "But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.*

*9 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet.*

*10 "For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'*

*11 "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

### John's question

Here we find that John the Baptist is sitting in prison because he rebuked the king for taking his brother's wife to himself. That was a very daring thing to do to a king. But such was John's character. He feared no man. When it came to speak the truth, he carried out that responsibility fearlessly.

While he was in prison, he heard that Jesus was preaching the gospel. But he was puzzled. What he heard from his disciples was always about Jesus' kindness to the people. He was not comfortable with that because he expected the Messiah to do something else.

In his preaching in Matthew 3 and Luke 3, John was saying, 'The One who is coming will cleanse His threshing floor. He is going to burn the chaff with fire.' You see, John's message was centered on judgment, not on grace. The main emphasis of his preaching was that when the Savior

comes, He will bring judgment. But John did not see Jesus judging anybody. He did not see the fire burning away the chaff. He did not see the judgment against sin burning up Israel. Rather he saw that Jesus was eating with publicans and sinners. John was very puzzled. Where is the judgment?

And so in v. 2, we read that John sent his own disciples to Jesus with this question: ‘Are you the Messiah? Or is somebody else the Messiah?’ In other words, he was asking Jesus, ‘Help me to understand. What I hear about you is not what I expected. My understanding of the Messiah does not match what you are doing. Am I missing something?’

### **Jesus’ answer**

Jesus answered John the Baptist in a very gentle way. He said to the disciples of John, ‘Come with me and watch what I am doing. Then go back to John and tell him what you saw with your eyes. Tell him that the blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers become clean. The deaf can hear. Even the dead are raised. And the poor hear the good news.’ Then Jesus adds one more sentence. ‘Tell John, ‘Blessed are those who don’t get offended in Me.’”

The strange thing about Jesus’ reply is that there is nothing in it that John the Baptist doesn’t already know. Everybody knew what Jesus was doing. Everybody in Israel knew that Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. So what is the point of Jesus’ answer to John?

John the Baptist was a man well versed in the word of God and Jesus knew that when John hears His answer, he would understand. John is going to understand that Jesus’ answer is in fact a quotation of three passages in Isaiah, three passages which were interpreted by Jewish teachers as signs of the Messianic age. Jesus is saying, ‘You see, John, your mistake is that you have not understood the work of the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah. If you have understood what the word of God says about the Messiah, you would not have been offended in Me. Have you not read Isaiah 29:18? Have you not read Isaiah 35:5-6? Have you not read Isaiah 61:1? If you had understood these prophecies, you would have not asked your question. You would not have taken offense in what I am doing. You would have seen that what I am doing is fulfilling the OT prophecies about the Messiah.’

### **More than a prophet**

And as these disciples of John went back to their teacher, Jesus says to the crowd, ‘Do you know who John the Baptist is? Do you know how great is this man? Now, what did you go out in the wilderness to see? Some weak things being shaken by every wind? Or did you go out to see somebody dressed in beautiful clothing? No, you went out to see a prophet. And let Me tell you, John is more than a prophet. John the Baptist is greater than any prophet, greater than anyone born of women.’

Wow! This is a very surprising statement. Our first reaction is to say, ‘How is this possible? Can he be greater than Abraham? Greater than Moses!?’ In the eyes of the Jews, no man was ever greater than Moses. It is God who said, ‘I speak to no man in the way that I speak to Moses (Numbers 12:8).’ And yet, Jesus says that there is nobody greater than John the Baptist.

The question we need to consider is this. What did John the Baptist’s greatness consist of? When we examine what he did, we don’t seem to find anything that qualifies him for this title of the greatest. As far as we know, he never performed any miracle. He never healed any sick person. It is true that many people came to listen to his preaching and that he baptized thousands of people unto repentance on the banks of the Jordan. But after all, many great preachers have done the same thing. What did he do to be called the greatest among those born of women? Isn’t Jesus ‘exaggerating’ a bit?

Let’s try to answer that question. Could it be that John’s greatness derived from his office, i.e., from the function that was given to him? He was the messenger that God has sent to prepare the way

of the Lord. That was a very special office, a very high office. So perhaps he himself is not that great but his office is very great. He is the one that God chose to be the forerunner of the Messiah. The trouble is that this kind of explanation doesn't work very well. In the Bible, a person's greatness is never connected with his office. For example, we read in the OT of many kings; yet only a few of them were of any spiritual significance. In other words, the fact that they were kings did not make them great spiritually. The Bible does not connect greatness with office. Therefore John's greatness cannot be explained by the fact that he had the privilege of being the messenger of God who announced the coming of the Messiah.

The Lord Jesus does not just say that John the Baptist is a great person. He says, 'The least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist.' John is the greatest person born of women. But the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Now we are confused. Is John great or is he not great? The least in the kingdom of God. Think about this. If you and I are the least in the kingdom of God, then we are all greater than John the Baptist. Anyone in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. If that is what the Lord Jesus is saying, then what is the point of saying that John the Baptist is the greatest born of woman since we are all born of women anyway?

### **Is John in the kingdom of God?**

This verse raises another question. Is John the Baptist in the kingdom of God or not? We ask this question because we feel that the only way we can be greater than John the Baptist is if John the Baptist is not in the kingdom and we are in the kingdom. You see, we are in the kingdom of God and John is not in the kingdom. And because we are in the kingdom, even though we are insignificant, we are greater than the John the Baptist. With this kind of explanation, we think that we have solved the problem.

Well, I don't think that we have solved anything. It is often asserted, and taken for granted by many, that the kingdom of God began on the Day of Pentecost, after Jesus' ascension. And so John, belonging to the OT dispensation, was not in the kingdom of God. He had no connection with it except to predict its approach. But if this is so, where did the ministry of Jesus belong to? Jesus' ministry took place before the Day of Pentecost. Are we going to say that Christ Himself did not belong to the Christian dispensation? That would be a very strange thing to say.

Moreover, in the following verse, in Matthew 11:12, the Lord Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven as already in actual existence. He says, *From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence.* The kingdom of God has been coming since the days of John the Baptist until now. This statement implies that the kingdom of God began to exist with the beginning of John's ministry. Can we really say that John the Baptist was not in the kingdom of God?

And then, when we read Matthew 8:11, we have another problem. In that verse, Jesus says, *And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.* Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all in the kingdom of God and we are going to sit with them in the kingdom of heaven. Now, if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are in the kingdom of God, how can we say that John the Baptist is not in the kingdom of God? We just learned from Jesus that John the Baptist is greater than Abraham, Isaac and all these great people. They are in the kingdom of God and John the Baptist would not be in the kingdom of God? It is hard to make any sense of that.

### **A principle of spiritual greatness**

How are we going to understand all this? Let me give you the key to understand this verse. It seems to me that the only way to understand this verse is to understand the principle of spiritual

greatness. What does it mean to be great in God's eyes? What is true greatness? How does a person become great spiritually? These are the questions that we must ask.

Throughout the pages of the Scriptures, we see that it is very often the least who becomes the greatest. Take for example Joseph in the OT. When he was about 30 years old, Joseph became one of the officials next in rank to Pharaoh. But he has not always been an important man. He was the youngest, the least in his family. He was the one who was sold off into slavery by his brothers. And yet, he became the greatest in his family. Now, think of Gideon. Gideon received a call from God to lead and save Israel. Do you remember what he said when God chose him? *O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is **the weakest** in Manasseh, and I am **the least** in my father's house* (Judges 6:15). But Gideon was the one that God wanted.

So we can find numerous examples in the OT in which God chose the one who was the least in his family, or his tribe or his nation. The people that nobody wants to look at, these are precisely the people that God is looking for. God does not choose the mighty and the nobles. His eyes are upon those who are weak, who are meek and lowly of heart.

The spiritual greatness of a man in the Bible does not consist of how much he did or did not do. Spiritual greatness has to do with the quality of your spiritual life. That is what is important to God. We are looking at John the Baptist from a human perspective when we say, 'In what sense was John great? He did not heal any sick person. He did not perform any miracle.' The assumption behind this kind of thinking is that he had to do something spectacular to be a great person. I repeat again. John's greatness did not consist in what he did or what he did not do. The greatness of John the Baptist consisted in the quality of his person.

### **The greatness of John the Baptist**

John is the person who said, 'Don't you ever call me 'Messiah.' I am not even fit to untie the laces of His sandals.' And this is spoken by a person who had an extraordinary story behind him. John's birth was announced by an angel. It was not just any angel. It was the archangel Gabriel, the same one who announced the birth of Jesus. He came from a very good family in Israel, from a family of priests, the most respected order in Israel. The Bible tells us that he was filled with the Holy Spirit since birth. He was given the mission of preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. I think that anyone with such a background would have a pretty big ego. With this perspective in mind, we can understand better the humility of John. 'I am not fit to untie His shoelaces.' People were wondering whether he was the Messiah. 'If you are not the Messiah, what are you anyway?' And John said, 'Well, let's put it this way. I'm just a voice crying in the wilderness. I'm just a voice and nothing more.'

When John the Baptist was preaching repentance, people became increasingly attracted to him. Multitudes of people came to the Jordan to get baptized. One day, the disciples of John noticed that Jesus had a lot of success. They said to John, 'Jesus is baptizing more people than you now. You are losing out to Him. It used to be that all Israel was coming to you. And now they are not coming to you anymore. They are going to Jesus because you keep saying that He is the Messiah.' What was John's reply? 'I am very happy about that. Like the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice, I rejoice at the sound of the voice of Jesus. I have no greater satisfaction than to hear that multitudes go to Him and believe in Him.' And then he goes on to say his most famous sentence. *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30). 'He must increase in honor and dignity in the world. As for me, I must disappear.'

Do you see the humility of this man? And humility is an important theme of Matthew 11. In Matthew 11:19, we read that Jesus is a friend of publicans and sinners. He is a friend with those who are lowly, with the social outcasts. In v. 23, the Lord Jesus gives this warning to Capernaum: 'You who exalt yourself to heaven will be brought down to hell.' In v. 25, Jesus speaks of his disciples as

babes. He says, 'I thank You, Father, that You have revealed these things to babes.' To simple-hearted people. And finally in v. 29, Jesus says, 'Learn of Me because I am meek and lowly of heart.'

Meek and lowly of heart. Isn't that what we see in John the Baptist? 'He must increase; I must decrease.' Now, this is spiritual greatness! Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 9:48. *For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.* He who is lowly, and meek and humble, this one shall be great. In the kingdom of God, the really great person is the lowly one. Now we can understand Jesus when He says that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. Who is the least in the kingdom of God? It is Jesus Himself. Jesus humbled Himself to be the least in the kingdom. And that is why He is the greatest.

### **Jesus: the least and the greatest**

Remember Philippians 2. Though Jesus was equal with God, He came to earth as a man. And then from being a man, He humbled Himself to the position of a slave, of a servant. In Mark 10:45, He said, 'The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve everybody else.' Then He took a towel and began to wash the feet of His disciples. This task was normally performed by servants in that society. By this action, Jesus put himself in the position of a slave to His own disciples. But He didn't stop there. He was going to give His life to save them. Now, do you see the progression? From man to slave, and from slave to the death on the cross, that is, from slave to the position of a criminal. Jesus died as a criminal on the cross. This is as low as you can go in the human society.

As Isaiah prophesied, Jesus *was numbered with the transgressors* (Isaiah 53:12). He humbled Himself to the lowest position. He was the least. And as we see in Philippians 2, it is precisely because He humbled Himself to the lowest possible position that God raised Him up to the highest position. *He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name* (Philippians 2:8-9).

The least in the kingdom. In the NT Greek, it is in the singular. The least here does not refer to just anyone in the kingdom of God. It refers to Jesus and to Him alone. That was the interpretation of the church fathers. They viewed 'the least' as a superlative. And in the superlative, there can only be one who is the least. And Jesus, who humbled Himself to be the least, is also the greatest because God the Father exalted Him.

Now the meaning of Matthew 11:11 becomes clear. John the Baptist was the greatest among those born of women with one exception. Jesus was greater than John. And not only is He greater than John, but as we read in Matthew 12:6, He is greater than the temple for He Himself is the true temple, the very manifestation of God's presence.

The disciples once asked Jesus this question: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God? Here is the answer: *Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 18:4). In the kingdom of God, the way to be great is to be humble. Why is that so? Because when you humble yourself before God, that is when God will exalt you. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up* (James 4:10). 'Humble yourself.' This should be the starting point of any talk about spiritual greatness.