

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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THE LEAST IN THE KINGDOM IS GREATER THAN JOHN

Matthew 11:11

The Lord Jesus had a very high view of John the Baptist. He is ‘more than just a prophet,’ Jesus said in Matthew 11:9. He was more than just a prophet because he was prophesied. He is someone that the word of God had predicted. Jesus also said that when we compare John to the people of the OT, we do not find anyone greater than him. Then in Matthew 11:11, Jesus makes another comparison concerning John. He compares the people in the kingdom of God to John the Baptist. And his statement is very surprising. Let’s read this verse. Matthew 11:11. We will also read v. 12.

Matthew 11:11. Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.

The greatness of John the Baptist

The importance of this passage is highlighted by Jesus in two ways. First, He opens this sentence by the word ‘truly.’ *Truly, I say to you...* Whenever the Lord says ‘truly’ at the beginning of a phrase, you know that He is about to say something very important. And secondly, He closes this section with the statement in v. 15, *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.* This is a formula that invites the hearer to explore the implication of what has been said. ‘If you have the spiritual discernment to understand what I am saying, then discern carefully what I just said. Because what I just said is very important.’

Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. This is a stunning statement indeed. Jesus is talking about the greatness of John the Baptist, but He is also talking about the believers, the greatness of the believers. And He seems to have very high expectations for his disciples. ‘John the Baptist is an exceedingly great man. And yet, even the least important person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.’

‘Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist.’ The expression ‘born of women’ means ‘among human beings.’ Jesus is not saying that in the spiritual world, among spiritual beings, there is nobody greater than John the Baptist. He is only saying that among human beings, since the beginning of mankind until now, no human being is greater than John.

Notice also that Jesus did not say that John the Baptist is greater than Abraham, Moses, or David. He only said that those people were not greater than John. Perhaps we could put them in the same category of greatness. They may have been equal to John, but they were not greater than him.

A quality of life

Now in what sense is John the Baptist greater than anyone else born in this world among human beings? What kind of greatness is Jesus talking about? He is talking of course about spiritual greatness. And when we speak about spiritual greatness we are speaking about a quality of life. For example, we are saying that Abraham was great because of his total obedience towards God, even to the point that he was willing to give up his son for God. Relatively speaking, I think it is less difficult to give your life than to give the life of your son. We sometimes hear people say, 'I'd rather take the pain of my child than to see him suffering.' But Abraham obeyed God when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. So we say that he is a great spiritual man. Moses was a great person, in what sense? His greatness is seen in the quality of his life, in his meekness towards men, in his complete obedience towards God. His relationship with God was so close that God was able to speak through him to Israel so that His people could receive the word of life. He went up to the high mountain to commune with God, and he brought back the word of God to the people. God showed with many mighty works that Moses was a great servant. What about Isaiah? In what sense was he a great man? His greatness was seen in his clear discernment of the word of God for Israel and in the fact that he was able to deliver that word to the people of Israel even though it was not necessarily pleasant to hear. Many times, God had to punish Israel for their continued sinfulness.

Notice that spiritual greatness has nothing to do with status. David was not great because he was a king. He was great because of the quality of his heart. The Bible says that he was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). John the Baptist had no particular status. He did not hold any special rank in the nation of Israel. Yet he was the greatest. So rank or status count for nothing when it comes to spiritual greatness.

I take the time to explain that because some people have this erroneous interpretation of Matthew 11:11. They say, 'The reason why the least in the kingdom is greater than John is because John was just a servant but in the kingdom of God, we are the sons of God.' So we, who are in the kingdom of God, we are greater than John because we have the status of being sons of God. The problem with this explanation is that the title 'sons of God' is not confined to Christians. The Bible uses this term, 'sons of God', for various groups of people. Israel was called 'sons of God.' The angels are called 'sons of God.' Even disobedient angels are called 'sons of God' in Genesis 6. When Israel was disobedient to God, they were still called 'sons of God.' The fact that you are a 'son of God' does not automatically mean that you are spiritually good, or that you are spiritually great. It counts for nothing in the matter of spiritual greatness. So it is difficult to support the view that believers are greater than John because they are the sons of God. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus is comparing spiritual greatness, not status, not even spiritual status. We cannot compare spiritual greatness with status.

Let's repeat this verse again because it is such a striking statement. I would like it to sink deep into our mind. 'Of all those of women, no one is greater than John. Yet, the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.' John the Baptist is so great that he is at the same spiritual level as people like Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah...But the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. If you are really in the kingdom of God, then you can say that you are spiritually greater than John the Baptist.

The kingdom of God: a current reality

Notice another point. The Lord Jesus does not say, 'One day, when you get to heaven, you will be greater than John the Baptist.' He does not use the future tense. The sentence is in the present

tense. 'The least in the kingdom is greater than John.' In fact, we see in the following verse, v. 12, that the kingdom of God is spoken of as a current reality. *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.* If the kingdom of God were not a present reality, Jesus would not be able to say that now some 'take it by force' or cause it to 'suffer violence.'

How is the kingdom of God a present reality? In the Lord's teaching, the kingdom of God is present now in a hidden form. It does not stand in an obvious way before our eyes. We have to look for it. The kingdom of God is present by the coming of the Spirit of God and by the preaching of the word of God. When the word of God, by the Holy Spirit, is being proclaimed to you, you can take hold of the kingdom of God by taking hold of the word of God. Since the time of John the Baptist, through the proclamation of the word of God, the kingdom of God has been coming.

And people were doing violence to it. *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.* This means that the kingdom of God has been working with power, and because of that, it produces a very strong or even violent reaction among people. Whenever the preaching of the word (i.e. the kingdom of God) comes with power, it creates a radical reaction in the hearers. It can make you very uncomfortable or it can make you feel very much at peace. You either love it or you hate. It is hard to remain neutral to the message of the gospel. The reaction is strong also because the kingdom message calls for a radical decision. That is why the kingdom of God 'suffers violence.'

Any believer is greater than John

In what sense is 'the least in the kingdom greater than John the Baptist'? We touched on that subject in the previous lesson. We interpreted the words 'the least' in a superlative way, and we said that they refer to Jesus. Jesus is the least in the kingdom because He humbled himself to be the least. And because He humbled himself to be the least, God exalted him to be the greatest, greater than John the Baptist.

Now today, after pondering over that verse one more time, I would like to bring up further explanations. First, I would like to say that 'the least' does not refer exclusively to Jesus. This is different from the position I presented in the previous lesson on this topic. Why do I say that now? Well, I think that if the Lord merely wanted to say in this passage that He is greater than John the Baptist, He could have said it in a more direct manner. It is not in his style to leave his hearers guessing. He usually makes his point very clearly and very directly. For example, in John 5:36, talking about greater works, Jesus mentioned that the testimony of John concerning the fact that He was the Christ was very important. But more important than that was the testimony of his own teaching and his own works. *But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish-- the very works that I do-- bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.* Jesus was very clear. The very works that He accomplished testified that God had sent him more than what John had said about Jesus.

Concerning the greatness of those in the kingdom, Jesus leaves it open to anyone. When we deal with greatness in the spiritual world, the main criteria to consider is the criteria of humility. Jesus said in Matthew 18:4, *Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* 'Anyone who is like this child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus makes the same point in Matthew 20:27. *And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.* You are great because you are small.

This is a recurrent point of the Lord's teaching. Many times, He said, 'He who is least in the kingdom, he will become the servant of all and will therefore be the greatest in the kingdom.' We find this for example in Mark 9:35: *If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.* You become first by being among the last ones.

So my point is that ‘the least’ in Matthew 11:11 is not exclusive to Jesus. It applies to anyone who is in the kingdom of God. Anyone in the kingdom of God is greater than John.

Divine greatness implanted into the believer

How then should we understand Jesus’ words? What does it mean that any believer is spiritually greater than John the Baptist? I did some more thinking lately. Let me share my thoughts on this verse first by quoting John 14:12. This is what Jesus says in John 14:12.

John 14:12. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father.

Notice how Jesus begins this sentence. He uses the same word as in our passage. ‘Truly, truly.’ This time, He says it twice to emphasize even more the importance of his declaration. Think about those words. ‘He who believes in me will do also the works that I do.’ He did not say that only the apostles will do the works that He did. He did not say that only the prophets will do the works that He did. Listen carefully. He said, ‘He who believes in me will do the works that I do.’ ‘Anyone who believes in me.’ If you are a believer of Jesus, you will do the works that He did.’ Take the time to reflect on that. Now you understand why I said at the beginning of this lesson that the Lord seems to have high expectations for his disciples. What kind of person does Jesus expect a believer to be? He expects every believer to be a reflection of himself. In other words, his greatness will be implanted into every believer. ‘The works that I do, you will do them.’ You get the idea? The believer is great not because he is somehow morally great. The believer is great because Jesus is the greatest and that greatness is implanted into the believer. Jesus wants to implant his greatness into every believer so that every believer becomes a reflection of Him. Wherever the believer goes, people will see Jesus reflected in that believer in his actions and his attitude.

‘The works that I do, you will be able to do them. My greatness will be implanted in you.’ But there is something more than this that Jesus said. He said, ‘You will perform even greater works.’ **Greater works than these will he do.** This reveals the humility of Jesus. Do you see it? He did not reserve the greatest works to himself. He said, ‘I want to do greater works through you.’ We recognize here the mentality of Jesus. He is always willing to lower himself. No wonder He is the least, and therefore the greatest. I can almost hear Jesus say, ‘I could have done all the mightiest works during my earthly ministry, but I won’t do that. I want to do the greater works through you so that you have a part in my greatness.’ You see why a believer is greater than John the Baptist? He is greater than John because Jesus has imparted his own greatness, Jesus’ greatness, to him.

This idea of greatness, of Jesus’ greatness in the believer, is also seen in John 7:38 in this manner. Jesus said, *He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.* Notice how this statement applies to any believer, and not just to the apostles. ‘He who believes in me.’ ‘Anyone who believes in me.’ You are a believer of Christ? Well, then, living water will come out of you. And not just one stream of water. Rivers of living water! This is the kind of Christian that Jesus expects. And John tells us in the following verse that when Jesus talked about living water, He was referring to the Holy Spirit. *When He said this, He meant the Holy Spirit* (John 7:39). This is another way of saying that Jesus’ greatness will be seen in the believer through the works of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see the picture? Let me describe it in this way. The world is like a desert. In that desert, people are thirsty. But there is a great news. The desert is being pushed back because water is brought into the desert by people who believe in Jesus. They bring living water with them when they come to the desert. And soon, the land is transformed by this water. The desert becomes gradually a fruitful land. This is actually a miracle, a miracle that only the Holy Spirit can accomplish. When we understand this, there is no problem understanding Jesus when He said that anyone in the kingdom of

heaven is greater than John the Baptist. It is all about Jesus' greatness being imparted into the heart of the believer, any believer.

Filled with the fullness of God

Amazingly, this point of the Lord's teaching is also reflected in the writings of Paul. Here is how this is seen. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul expounds on the greatness of the Lord Jesus. In the first chapter of Colossians, from v. 9 to v. 18, he speaks about the preeminence of Christ. And in v. 19, he explains why Jesus is so great. *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.* Why is Jesus so great? Because God's fullness dwells in Jesus. In fact, not just God, but the whole person of the Godhead. Colossians 2:9: *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.* Why is Jesus great? Because God's greatness dwells in him.

Now listen to this. Paul makes the same statement about the Christians. Let us read Ephesians 3:19: *To know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the **fullness of God.*** What does Paul pray for here? That this same fullness in Jesus will be part of you. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 11:11, but put in a different way. Being filled with the fullness of God means that the greatness of Jesus is in you. In Ephesians 4:13, we read, *Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the **fullness of Christ.*** This is Paul's deepest desire, to see every believer become like Christ in all his fullness. And it is for this reason that he labors so diligently. Colossians 1:28-29: *Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. **To this end** I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.*

Has anyone told you, 'You got something special, something I like. I'm not sure what it is exactly, but I would like to have it if you could tell me how I can get it'? If somebody has made that comment about you, you can be certain that you have begun to experience the power of the new life in Christ, a power that makes you to be greater than the John the Baptist. It is God's desire to make everyone in his kingdom, even the least of them, to be greater than John the Baptist and all the saints of the OT. He is able to take ordinary people, like you and me, and through his transforming power, through the power of the Holy Spirit, He will make us spiritually great men and women in whom people will see his glory, in whom the world will see the greatness and the fullness of Christ.