

Great in God's Sight

by J.R. Miller

John the Baptist's greatness is a model for us to follow, and we can become all that we might have been if we had always obeyed God's Word.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 5:19, Matthew 11:11, Luke 3:3-6, John 1:23, John 3:30, Romans 8:17, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 1:6

Topics: "True Greatness", "Potential in Christ"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the true greatness of John the Baptist as seen through the eyes of Christ, who declared him the greatest born of women. He contrasts human perceptions of greatness with God's view, highlighting that true worth lies in spiritual qualities and moral strength rather than outward appearances. John's life exemplified courage, self-forgetfulness, and a commitment to truth, even at the cost of his life. Miller encourages believers to recognize their potential in Christ, suggesting that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John, as they share in the divine blessings and possibilities of life in Christ. Ultimately, he calls for a reflection on how we appear to God and the greatness we can achieve through obedience to His Word.

Transcript

Few men have had higher honor, than that which was conferred upon John the Baptist in Christ's estimate of him. "Among those who are born of woman--there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist," were the strong words which fell from the lips of the Master. It was a great thing to have our Lord speak such praise. He knew what was in men, and He never spoke an insincere word.

Human estimates of greatness are oftentimes defective, sometimes false. Men see only the outward appearance. Many people are not so great--as they seem to be. They practice tricks which deceive the world. They pass for great--while in reality, they are very small in character. Strip off their gaudy tinsel--and but little would be left.

Other people, however, are greater than they seem. They lack the popular qualities which attract attention and win applause. Yet they are great in their souls, great in spiritual qualities, in heart-power, in the elements of true manhood, in moral strength. But there is an Eye that sees all things as they are. It pierces all thin disguises, penetrates to the core of things, and discerns the poor shriveled soul--which is hidden beneath the external glitter. On the other hand, it sees in the humble life--which gets but little praise of men, whose outer form is homely and plain, the true worth, the qualities the character which bears the

marks of divinity.

It is well that we sometimes stop to think--how we appear to God, what God thinks of us. One says, "There is some things in every man's heart, which, if we could know--would make us hate him!" Perhaps this is true; but it is true also that there is something in every Christian man, in even the most repulsive, which, if we could know, would make us love him.

As God sees us, we are both worse and better than we seem to any other eyes in all the world. He sees the hidden faults and the secret stains; He sees also the feeble yearnings which at length will be splendid spiritual qualities.

The artist's picture is born in his brain. At first it is only a vision--but by-and-by it stands on the canvas, and thousands admire it. There are in every true heart noble dreams of beautiful character, only dreams yet, faint visions, shadowy aspirations and longings. These will all at length be realized, and will stand on the canvas of the life as attainments. I love to think of this side of the lives of my fellows--not the poor stained fragments of being which my eyes now see--but what they will be when God's work of grace in them is finished. We are all greater in the possibilities of our lives, than we dream of.

What were some of the elements in John, which led Jesus to speak this wonderful commendation of him? It is well that we should know, for a character so highly praised of the Christ, we may well study as a pattern for our imitation.

John was great in his birth. A singular glory hung over his cradle. An angel came to the good priest as he ministered at the altar, announcing to him that a child should be born in his home, whom he should call John, who should bring to his father joy and gladness. "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord," said the angel. But few men have been thus honored before their birth by angelic pre-announcement of their greatness.

John was great also in his place among the prophets. He was the immediate forerunner of Christ. There was a long succession of holy men before John, all of whom foretold the Messiah. Abraham saw His day--but it was then two thousand years off. Moses foretold the coming of Christ, as that greater Prophet like unto him whom the Lord should send. David sang of the glory of his greater Son, who would sit upon his throne forever. Isaiah uttered sublime prophecies of the Messiah who should come to bring deliverance; whose name should be Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; who should bear His people's sins and carry their sorrows, by whose stripes they should be healed. Zechariah foretold the place of the Messiah's birth--the little town of Bethlehem which should be made great in the land, henceforth, by this wonderful event. Malachi, last of the line of prophets before John, spoke of the Lord coming suddenly to His temple, and sitting as a refiner and purifier of silver.

All of these were great men, highly honored in the line of the heralds and prophets of Messiah. But John was greater than any of them, because he was the immediate forerunner of the Christ. It was his privilege to go into the wilderness, and to call the people to prepare for the appearance of the Messiah, who even then was among them, though unrecognized, and who was about to make Himself known to them. It was his privilege to go close before the Messiah's appearing, and make ready the path for His feet. It was his privilege, one wonderful day beside the Jordan, to baptize a young man, on whom the Holy Spirit then descended in bodily form, like a dove, over whom the heavens were opened, revealing a glimpse of glory, and of whom a divine voice declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It was John's privilege to introduce the Messiah to the people as the Lamb of God, and to testify to all men concerning

His glory and greatness. Thus John held the highest place in the glorious line of prophets. He was the morning star which heralded the sun.

John was great also as a preacher. His training was peculiar. He did not attend the schools as other teachers did. He went away into the wilderness. He lived as a hermit. He wore a camel-hair garment. His hair and beard were never cut, for he was a Nazarite. He ate locusts and wild honey for his food. Thus he lived in the desert, apart from men. God was his only teacher. In his heart, the great truths of divine teaching burned. At length he came forth from his seclusion, and began to preach. For four hundred years since the days of Malachi, no prophet's voice had been heard speaking to men from God.

The people were now startled in their spiritual slumber, by the unusual tones which fell upon their ears. No man had ever spoken as this strange man from the desert spoke! He told them of their sins. He said the Messiah was coming, and that he was sent to prepare the way before Him. He called them to repent, to put away the evil out of their lives, to turn their hearts to God for forgiveness, that they might be ready to receive their coming King.

John's public work was short. The time was counted in months--but he crowded into the brief period, an intensity of life and utterance that changed the moral history of the world. Life is not measured by the number of its years--but by what one puts into the years. One day of intense living, full of the Holy Spirit, burning with love--is better than a whole year of such mild, indolent, lukewarm living--as too many of us give to the world. A young man may die at three-and-thirty, as John did, as also did Jesus, and yet leave impressions on the world's life--which shall make all the human story of after years mean more.

John was great also as a man. He was great in heart. His rugged strength made him tower majestically above the men of his day. To be a great preacher, one must first be a great man--great in all the elements which belong to true manliness. Words amount to little--unless there is a noble soul behind them. It is character which gives force to what a man says. It is character which impresses the world. It is what a man is--which breathes out in that mysterious impartation of life, which we call 'influence'. John's character was great.

John was great in courage. He stood before the throngs, in which were the most religious, and most learned, and most powerful of people--and told them of their sins. He did not do it, either, in delicate and decorous phrases--but in baldest, plainest speech! A little later, when Herod had committed a grievous offence against purity, and against the sacredness of marriage and the home--it was John who met him with denunciation of his sin. John knew well what he was doing. He knew the evil heart of Herod, and the wicked fury of the woman who was sharer in Herod's sin. But he faltered not in his faithfulness as a preacher of truth. It cost him sorely. He was cast into a dungeon in the "Black Fortress," where he lay in gloom and chains. By-and-by his life was taken from him to gratify the vengeance of the woman whose dishonor he had so faithfully condemned.

All this was the cost and consequence of his fidelity. But he was never sorry for being fearless and true. He never regretted that he had lifted up his voice for righteousness. It is by such fidelities, that the cause of truth is advanced in the world. No matter that they cost so much, that noble lives perish in being true--the result is worth the price paid. It seemed, indeed, a fearful price to pay the quenching of this great light, the brutal slaughter of this noble man, the cutting off of this useful life in its very prime, the untimely ending of this worthy career in blood--all as the consequence of one faithful word spoken against sin; spoken in vain, too, as it seemed, for apparently the reproof did no good.

"What a waste!" we are apt to say. No, it was not a waste. Herod and Herodias lived on in their sinful relation--as if John had not spoken. But John's testimony made the moral atmosphere of the world a little purer. The shedding of John's blood in the dungeon, enriched the soil of the earth. John's faithful testimony was not lost--but became part of the great spiritual force of the world. John's life was not wasted, though ending in such a tragic way; his spirit lives in the world's life, his soul is marching on.

Another fine thing in John's character was his utter self-forgetfulness. In his great popularity, the people began to think that he was the Messiah. They came to him asking him if he was the Messiah. A weak and unscrupulous man would have accepted the homage. But John instantly put it away. "Oh no!" he said, "I am not the Christ. I am only a voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Thus he hid himself out of sight, and put honor upon the Messiah who was to come.

All through his ministry it was the same. When Jesus came and began to preach, the crowds melted away from about John--and flocked to hear the Galilean peasant, whose gracious words were such music in their ears. Was it easy for John to bear this waning of his own power and popularity, in the more winning attractiveness of the new preacher? It was very hard--but John's noble spirit endured the test. When his disciples said to him, "Teacher, He to whom you bear witness is preaching, and all the people are going after Him!" his answer was most beautiful, "You yourselves remember that I said, 'I am not the Christ--but only one sent before Him. I am the bridegroom's friend. My joy is fulfilled in seeing Him honored. He must increase--but I must decrease.'"

It is hard, when one has been first--to take a second place. It is hard, when one has been the center of attraction for a time in any circle, and when another comes in and takes the favored place, for the former to yield gracefully and keep sweet. It is hard, when one has led for a time in some important work--to step down into obscurity and yet continue to work there as faithfully and earnestly as before, while another fills the old place. Few tests of character are greater than this. The man who will do his work only when he is in a prominent position, and who will sulk if asked to work in an obscure place, lacks one element of the finest manliness.

It has been said that the hardest instrument to play in all the orchestra, is the second violin. Yet somebody must play it, and he must be a good player, too. The hardest places to fill in all the relations of life, are the second places; yet they must be filled, and well filled too, with those who can do beautiful work. Blessed are those who will do their duty--and do it well and sweetly, wherever they may be appointed to stand. We are working for God's eye, and the most godly workers, as He sees them, are those who do their part the most conscientiously and the most cheerfully, even without praise or recognition. Jesus said that those who serve the best--are greatest in His kingdom.

Having spoken with such unstinted praise of John, Jesus said further, "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven--is greater than he." Evidently, He did not mean that in all the elements of greatness, the weakest Christian is superior to the Baptist. He was speaking of the two dispensations. John was greatest in the old. But Christ, by His life, teachings, death, and resurrection, lifted humanity to a loftier height than it had ever held before. He revealed the love of God, the fatherhood of God, and the privilege of divine childship, for every penitent soul. The least in the kingdom of heaven--is sharer in all heaven's blessedness. We do not realize, what exaltation the grace of Christ brings to a Christian. Wonderful are the possibilities of life in Christ. If we only understood how great we may become, it would fire our souls with zeal and earnestness, and impel us to grandest, loftiest flights.

A recent writer puts solemn truths in the form of a dream. He dreamed that he died and a spirit guide led him toward the bar of God. He saw before him what seemed the form of a man, having marvelous beauty, grace, and strength. In every feature nobleness and worth were traced. His guide asked him who he thought it was. "Jesus," he answered, almost overcome with awe. "No," said the guide; "not Jesus--but yourself." "Myself!" he replied, thinking his guide was only trifling. "Yes," said the guide, "yourself what you might have been--if you had always obeyed God's Word."

Then he saw spread out before him a panorama of his life, showing him every point at which he had chosen the wrong way. He saw what he had missed, and how he had missed it. Here was what he might have been.

The next night he dreamed again. Again he was led into the divine presence, and a form appeared; but oh, how different from the one he had seen the night before! All that was evil seemed to live in the features. He hated and loathed the wretch as his enemy. "Who is it?" asked the guide. "Satan," he answered. "Satan, the father of lies, the prince of all evil." "Nay," cried the guide, "it is yourself!" He was indignant. "Yes; it is yourself what you shall be, that toward which you are tending." Again all his life swept before him, and he saw the end, the culmination, the ripeness, of all the selfish and wrong choices he had made, of all the bad feelings, appetites, and passions he had cherished. It was a vision of what a sinful life will come to at the last.

Before each human life are these two same possibilities--as far apart as heaven and hell. In Christ we may grow into all strength, nobleness, and beauty. If we live apart from Christ, we shall see ourselves at last hideous in all sin's awful fruitage and harvest. We shall either be a saint, wearing Christ's image, all the nobleness of true manhood, all the beauty of holiness; or demon, bearing the outworking of all vileness, curse, and unholiness.

Behold that form of radiant loveliness that rises before you, as you think of Jesus. All nobleness is in the features. All manly qualities shine in the character. There is no spot, no blemish. How rich, how beautiful, how radiant is the life! Who is it? It is yourself--what you may become in Jesus Christ!

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