

True Greatness

Luke 7:24-35

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The world has many standards by which it measures greatness. There is intellectual greatness; you're really smart, which I'm not. If you have a high IQ and great intellect like Albert Einstein, he was considered great. But he could have had a better hairdo. He could have combed his hair, yet he was smart and that's all that mattered. There is also political greatness; we have George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and other great leaders of our nation. We have military generals, who led armies into battle and are considered great. We have scientific researchers, who have discovered things that have benefited humankind, and are considered great. And another worldly standard of greatness is wealth. If you're an Elon Musk or Bill Gates, you're great, just because you have money. And other worldly standards are greatness in fame, fortune and athletic skill. But that's not necessarily God's estimate of greatness.

For the Christian, how does God measure greatness? I hope that you want to be great in God's kingdom, to be great in the eyes of the Lord; not great in the eyes of men and in what they think about you.

The key is verse 28 of our text. Jesus said, "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." Jesus affirmed the greatness of John the Baptist, and then He made this mind-blowing statement that whoever is the least significant in the kingdom of God is greater than even John the Baptist.

So the question is, what made John so great? We will answer that from our text. He was called greater than Moses, Abraham, Elijah and all the major and minor prophets. He was a great man. We, in the kingdom of God, have a privilege, so we are greater in that sense than even John the Baptist.

There are four sections to our text. Number one is John's personal character, in verses 24-25. This is why John was great. "When the messengers of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?'" The answer is "No." "But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts.'" Again, the answer is "No."

Here we see Jesus speaking to the crowd about John the Baptist. Last time we saw that John was in the grip of Giant Despair locked in Doubting Castle. And he began to believe his doubts and doubt his beliefs. So he told some of his disciples to go to Jesus and ask Him, "Are You the Coming One..." referring to the Messiah "...or do we look for another?"

Jesus knew that the crowd was listening to John's questions. When they returned to John, they told him that Jesus was healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead and the

Gospel is preached to the poor. Jesus told them to tell John “the things you have seen and heard.” These are the signs of Messiah.

But the crowd listening could have said, “Well, what’s up with John? Is he truly a prophet? Was he from God? Should we follow John’s message? Should we believe his preaching? If John is doubting so much, maybe Jesus isn’t the Messiah.” So Jesus wants to bring clarity, and our entire text basically deals with Jesus bringing clarity, affirmation and confirmation about John the Baptist and his ministry, in case there was anyone in the crowd who doubted because of John as to whether or not his message was true or false. John’s question, in verse 20, might have led some to wonder about John’s commitment to Jesus as the Messiah.

Now honest questions are not a sin or a sign of weakness. If you honestly question and have doubts, God will answer your questions. But unbelief is a matter of the will; you refuse to believe God. If you are just doubting, God will come to you, condescend to you and answer your questions.

Here are a couple of background thoughts. Jesus said that John was the greatest prophet born of a woman. That’s pretty good, when you consider all the great prophets. But Jesus did not tell his disciples to tell John that. They didn’t hear what Jesus said about John. They left and returned to John, verse 24. Jesus didn’t say, “By the way, not only tell John what you’ve seen and heard, but from Me personally, tell John that I like him. Tell John he’s awesome! He’s doing a great job. Keep up the good work.” So John never heard what Jesus said about him as he languished in prison.

And John ended up being executed in prison. He was the greatest prophet who ever lived, yet he died a violent death, because he didn’t live for the approval of man. He was a man of character, and that brought him into conflict with the culture he lived in.

It’s the same that is true of us. If you’re going to stand for truth, for God’s Word, you had better be ready to go to jail and be executed. Or you’ll be swayed by the opinions of man.

Another point is that God very rarely lets us see the good that we’re doing in His service. God very rarely lets His servants see or know all the good that they’re doing. God can be using you, you’re a blessing to others, you’re having an impact for the glory of God, but He may not let you know all that or see that right now.

The human body is very sensitive; if you pat it on the back, the head swells. That’s not to say that God doesn’t encourage us. I’m thankful for the letters of encouragement. But it’s hard to know how much you’re accomplishing for the kingdom of heaven. So the backhanded way to be encouraged is that God doesn’t let us see and know now. When we get to heaven and see and understand all things, we’ll understand how that malady or hardship was being used by God to bless and encourage others while we thought it was a bummer.

So God very rarely allows His servants or His children to see and know all the good they are doing in this world. Paul the Apostle was used mightily by God. But God had to give him a

thorn in his flesh. He allowed “a messenger of Satan to buffet [him], lest [he] be exalted above measure” (2 Corinthians 12:7) and not be useable.

God doesn’t always allow us—nor did He allow John—to hear what He had to say about the greatness of John. This was speaking of John’s character.

In verse 24, we see that John was a man of strong conviction. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” There are going to be three questions, and one question has two aspects. The first two questions, in verses 24-25, expect a “No” answer. They are rhetorical questions that expect “No” answers. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” The answer is “No.”

What is “a reed shaken by the wind”? I don’t know what kind of reed. But it’s like tall grass or a reed that grows along the banks of the Jordan River. They would sway in the wind. You’ve seen flowers or grass swaying in the wind. So John wasn’t waffling or swaying. John wasn’t being influenced by the trends or opinions of mankind. John was a man of courage, conviction and character. So he wasn’t “a reed shaken by the wind.”

So John’s disciples are now gone, and Jesus turns to the crowd of people to tell them that John was not a man who was influenced by the crowd.

It’s interesting that a lot of people today are looking for the world’s approval rather than God’s approval and applause. If you’re a child of God, you should be living for God’s approval, not man’s. And John did not hear this description of his greatness.

John was a man of unwavering conviction; he stood up to the scribes and the Pharisees. He wasn’t “a reed shaken by the wind.” And the reason he was in prison was because Herod had stolen his brother’s wife, was living in an illicit relationship with her, so John told them it was sin and called them to repent. He could have compromised and said, “You do what you want. I’ll leave you alone, and I’ll just be a ‘happy preacher.’ I’ll smile and tell you everything’s okay. God loves you.” Everything’s not okay. John the Baptist preached against sin.

We don’t have a lot of preachers like John the Baptist anymore, who are willing to go to jail for the convictions they stand on in the Word of God. John was ready to stand even against the popular opinion of the king.

And John stood up against the scribes and Pharisees when they came to hear him preach. He started his sermon with, “Serpents, brood of wipers!” (Matthew 23:33). How’s that for an introduction to your sermon?! “Welcome to Revival Christian Fellowship, you snakes! Repent. Turn from your sin.” They were appalled by such preaching. “I’m not a sinner! I don’t need to repent. Who is this man talking to?!”

Again, John was great because he had conviction; he stood on what he believed in the Word of God.

Last Sunday I mention John Bunyan's story, Pilgrim's Progress. There is another character in the story named Pliable. John Bunyan made this statement: "Pliable does not go to prison for the truth." I like that.

So John the Baptist was not Pliable; he would rather suffer than be silent. He would rather die than lie. He would not play to the crowd to win their approval.

The great Puritan preacher, William Penn, said, "Right is right, even if everyone is against it. And wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it." Isn't that great? I'll add to that: wrong is wrong, even if it's legal. I don't care what the state or federal governments pass as legal; if God says it's wrong, it's wrong. So we have conviction that stands on the Word of God. It's not prejudice, but God's conviction in our hearts.

James 1:8 says, "A double-minded man..." which is a reed that is shaken in the wind "...[is] unstable in all his ways." In Ephesians 4:11-12, some of my favorite verses, it says that God has given to the church "pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints," which means for their maturing. Why? Verses 14-15, "...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ."

Someone said, "The problem with these people is that they are always under the influence of the last person they talk to." They are reeds blowing in the wind.

Do you have conviction? Do you stand on God's Word? Do you know the truth? Has the truth set you free? (John 8:32). We must be standing on the truth and the Word of God. It's so very important.

How do you become a person of conviction? Let me give you three ways or three, positive steps to take to become a man or woman of conviction. Number one, you must love God and fear or reverence God. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). You are to love God supremely above everyone and everything else. And the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). That means that you reverence God and respect God; you don't want to do anything to disappoint God.

Number two, to be a person of conviction you must hate sin. Hate the things that God hates, and love the things that God loves. Before you were saved, you loved the things that God hates, and you hated the things that God loves. Now that you are a Christian, you hate what God hates and loves what God loves. So we are to hate sin.

Number three, you are submitted to the authority of Scripture, and you have a high view of Scripture.

This list could go on, but these three are important, foundational truths. If you are going to be a

person who stands on conviction, you must love and fear God, hate sin and submit to the authority of Scripture, because you have a high view of it. Our lives, like John's, must be marked by strong conviction.

Jesus asked a second question, in verse 25. "But what did you go out of see? A man clothed in soft garments?" The answer is "No." It's a rhetorical question expecting a "No" answer. They didn't go out to see a vacillating reed blowing in the wind. And they didn't go out to see a man in fine clothes. Then Jesus said, "Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts." John was where? He was in the king's dungeon. So John was a man of strong conviction.

And John was a man of strong consecration. He had conviction and he had consecration. His whole life was a picture of protest against self-indulgence. John was a Nazarite. He wore camel skin. John did not wear a Rolex watch. He wouldn't have worn one if they existed in his time. He did not drive a fancy car. He was a man of the desert. He wore a leather girdle. He ate grasshoppers and honey.

No wonder people repented. He wore camel hair, a girdle and bit grasshopper heads off, saying, "Repent!"

"Yes, sir! Whatever you say! Right away!"

He was gnarly. John was not living delicately, so he was not a man of self-indulgence.

A lot of preachers today brag about their material wealth. I've heard them on TV. "I have this jet. I have this million-dollar house. I'm buying that jet." They brag about their "faith," their prosperity and their wealth. But Jesus said "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). I've even heard these preachers say that Jesus had a house—and it was a big house! Jesus didn't have a house, thus He didn't have a big house. If you don't have a house, how do you have a big house?!

And John the Baptist was like Elijah. "John came neither eating nor drinking" (Matthew 11:18); he was a Nazarite. Unlike Samson, though, he didn't yield to his lusts or to sinful pleasures.

What a contrast to this world! The world goes for the lust of the flesh—your passions; lust of the eyes—your possessions; and the pride of life.

What made John great was that he had conviction and consecration. He not only stood on his principles; he lived a life of self-denial. In 1 Peter 2:11-12, Peter says, "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation." Don't drink the Kool-Aid, the poison. The J.B. Phillips translation of Romans 12:2 says, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." That would be keeping up with the Joneses, buying things with money you don't have to impress people you don't like. It's stupid.

The Bible says, in 1 Timothy 6:6-8, "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."

When my four children were born, none of them came out with a wallet or a credit card or a watch. They came in naked; they'll go out naked.

So don't buy into the world's saying, "I've got to have more! I've got to make more!" That's not greatness. Greatness is conviction and based on godly character. It's consecration, being separate from the world, living for Christ and for His glory.

So courage, conviction and consecration should be true of us as it was of John.

In the second section, verses 26-28, we see John's privileged calling. John was great because of his personal character. He also was great because of his privileged calling. "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'" This was written in Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. John's ministry was prophesied. "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

All this was being said, because John had expressed his doubts. So Jesus wanted to bring clarity to the crowd that was listening that John was a true messenger from God, and his message about Jesus was substantiated and true. He was the Messiah.

In what way was John "more than a prophet"? Not only was John a prophet, but his ministry was prophesied. Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1 and Malachi 4 reference the coming of John, the forerunner. And he had the privilege of being the last, great prophet of the Old Testament and the first, great preacher of Christ in the New Testament. He bridged the gap. Unlike Isaiah, John was privileged to literally see the Messiah, the promise of God, and to point to Jesus and say, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). So John was greater because of his position as the last Old Testament prophet and the first New Testament preacher, and his coming was prophesied.

Notice John's privileged calling, in verse 27. "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You." This is a privilege given to no other prophet than John. This is why he is called the greatest of the prophets, greater than Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel—all of the prophets.

Now we see the blessing of living in the kingdom, verse 28. Jesus said, "But he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." In spite of John's great position, we have a privilege in the kingdom of God today in the church age that John did not have. We are greater in the kingdom, because we live as children of the King, not messengers of the King. John was a messenger of the King. Believers today are children of the King.

John lived and died before the Cross; before the Resurrection; before the coming of the Holy Spirit, in Acts 2, which was the birth of the church. John didn't get to enjoy the New Covenant, didn't get to enjoy living in the church. We today have a privilege, as God's people, to be partakers of the New Covenant, to live in the church and to live in the kingdom of God. What a marvelous blessing that is.

There are seven blessings that all Christians have living in the kingdom, which is why Jesus said, "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John]" (Matthew 11:11). In Ephesians 1:4, it says that "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." That is the first blessing.

This is something that is beyond my comprehension. Remember in elementary school at recess, which was my favorite time, teams would be picked for sports? The two captains picked their teams. Do you remember what it was like if you were the last one chosen? "Okay, we'll take him. Come on. If the ball comes to you in right field, don't pick it up! Don't do anything!"

But now that I'm a Christian, the God of all the universe chose me "before the foundation of the world." Spurgeon used to say, "It's a good thing He chose me before I was born; if He waited until afterwards, He may not ever have chosen me."

I believe in the doctrine of election. I don't understand it, I can't comprehend it, I can't fathom it, but it is clearly taught in the Bible. If you're a Christian, God saved you by His sovereign choice, by His grace. He chose you; you didn't really choose Him. If you try to figure that out, you'll blow a fuse. Just accept it and be glad that you're chosen. That is why "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John]."

Second, we've been adopted, Ephesians 1:5. "...having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself." Not only have we been born again into God's family, we have been chosen and adopted as sons and daughters.

Third, "He made us accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6). In Him we are accepted.

Fourth, we have been redeemed, Ephesians 1:7. "In Him we have redemption through His blood."

The fifth blessing of living in the kingdom is that God has forgiven us of all of our sins, Ephesians 1:7.

Sixth, He has made known to us His will, Ephesians 1:9. "Having made known to us the mystery of His will."

And the seventh blessing is He has sealed us with the Holy Spirit until the day of redemption, verse 13. "You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." That's a blessing that all people who live in the kingdom possess.

So why are we greater in the kingdom? We're not greater in character; we're greater in privilege of living under the New Covenant in the church age and having all the blessings that are ours in Christ. We, who are in the kingdom, are greater in position, not in our character or in our ministry.

In the third section of our story, in verses 29-30, we move to the people and the counsel of God. In these verses, Luke is giving us a parenthetical statement. It's Luke's editorial comment on John's ministry. These verses are not in red letters; those start again in verse 31. "And when all the people..." the general populace of the common people "...heard Him, even the tax collectors..." who were Jews working for Rome and despised and synonymous with sinners "...justified..." or "vindicated" of "...God, having been baptized with the baptism of John." So there were people who believed John's message, repented and were baptized.

Now we see the contrast, in verse 30. "But the Pharisees..." the religious sect of Jews who set themselves aside to keep the law of Moses "...and lawyers..." theologians who translated the Scriptures "...rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him."

in verse 29, the people and publicans, who were sinners, were vindicated by God and were baptized, while the religious leaders of John and Jesus' day rejected John's teaching. One group was vindicating God; the other group declared God to be invalid.

What hardened the hearts of the Pharisees and lawyers was that they would not repent. Let me mention a few ideas. Number one, they were familiar with the Scriptures, but they didn't have a relationship with God. Familiarity is a very dangerous thing. You can be raised in church and still not be a Christian. You can raise your children in all the things of the Lord, but God has no grandchildren, only children.

Just because I'm a pastor and my wife and I trained our children in the way of the Lord doesn't necessarily mean that they're all going to be saved and go to heaven. There's no guarantee. They must repent, they must believe in Jesus, they must be born again. So if you come to church and think you're saved because you come to church, you know the songs, you've read your Bible, don't be deceived. You can become so familiar with the things of God that you can begin to disdain them.

The second thing that familiarity leads to is shallowness. Satan works hard to keep us from thinking too deeply about sin and our need of a Savior. The Puritan preacher, John Owen, said, "He that has slight thoughts of sin never had great thoughts of God." I like that. So you become shallow.

Thirdly, you reject the counsel of God, because you become self-righteous. Familiarity, shallowness and you don't believe you're a sinner, and now you become self-righteous. "I don't need salvation."

Fourthly, you are taken captive by your sin. You don't want to forsake your sin.

So the Pharisees and the lawyers put themselves outside the blessings of God by rejecting God's counsel. They would not give Jesus an open hearing when He came. They closed their minds and hearts to Christ, to His messenger and to His message.

A lot of people are like that today. They can come to church every week, hear the songs, hear the message, but they reject it. They are outside the kingdom.

The fourth section of our story, in verses 31-35, is a parable of the spoiled children, which is a reference to "the Pharisees and lawyers," in verse 30. Jesus has to explain why John's ministry was rejected by the religious community. Jesus is profiling His and John's rejecters. "And the Lord said, 'To what then shall I liken the men of this generation, and what are they like?'" The reference to "the men of this generation" refers to "the Pharisees and lawyers" of verse 30.

Verse 32, "They are like children..." or like "spoiled children" or "brats," some translations say "...sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not weep.'" And then He applies it. "For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man..." referring to Jesus "...has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" I thank God for that! "But wisdom is justified..." or "vindicated" "...by all her children."

This is an amazing section. Jesus said, "To what shall I liken this generation?" He wraps this whole section up by explaining why the religious community rejected John's message. He said they are like spoiled brats in the marketplace.

When you were little and had friends who you played ball with, if it was their ball, you played by their rules. If you played in their yard, it was by their rules. If you wanted to change the rules, they whined and complained and took their ball and went home. Like little brats!

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance." That's referring to a wedding. "Let's play wedding. Let's have fun! Let's pipe a wedding."

"No, we don't want to play wedding."

"We mourned to you, and you did not weep." That's referring to a funeral. "Okay, then let's play funeral."

"No, we don't want to play funeral."

"What do you want to play?"

"I don't know, but I don't want to play that."

How sad. A lot of people are like that today. "Your sermon's too long! Your sermon's too boring! The sanctuary's too cold! The worship music's too loud! I don't want drums; I want a

piano!" They're just making up excuses. The problem is that they don't want to forsake their sin, hear God's Word and be obedient to that.

They're like spoiled kids. Verse 30 is an indictment of the Pharisees and the lawyers.

Then Jesus explains it in verse 33. "For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'" How sad. Verse 34, "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

Remember when Jesus went home with Zacchaeus? Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (Luke 19:5). In my Sunday school class, we used to sing, "Come down from the tree, I'm going to your house for tea." Everyone saw that and said, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). How sickening! They stood outside and disdained Him.

I'm glad—aren't you?—that Jesus is the friend of sinners. I'm glad He forgives us and receives us. Jesus not only went to people's house to eat, He invited Himself over to eat. It's Biblical. And they said He was "a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

William McDonald said, "Fast or feast, funeral or wedding, John or Jesus, nothing and no one please them." How sad. We must give up the idea of trying to please everyone. Have you ever thought about that?

If I please you, that's a blessing. If I please my wife, that's a blessing. If I please my kids, that's a blessing. But that's not what I live for. I live to please only one—God. There's one thing I want to hear when I die: that the Lord says, "Well done, good and faithful servant....Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matthew 25:21). That's what I want to hear.

Closing this section, in verse 35, Jesus said, "But wisdom is justified by all her children." It means vindicated. The wisdom of God is vindicated by the way that we live. John and Jesus were vindicated, the truth is known. The New Living translation has "But wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it." So the vindication of John's ministry and message, of Jesus and of the Christian life is in the way we live.

Don't listen to the world. Don't let the world press you into its mold. Live to be great in God's kingdom and in His sight.