

Matthew 11 John the Baptist – True Greatness

Matthew 11:1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. 2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" 4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." 7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Why is John in prison?

Pastor Steve did a great summary on the political structure at the time, all the ins and outs of the Herod family and if you listen to the sermon online you will hear his take on this Soap Opera, a modern day Reality TV Show.

For now, suffice to summarize with Mark telling us in Mark 6:14: 14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Herod Antipas was in power for 42 years, through the entire life of Jesus. Now, many of the references to Herod Antipas have this connection with John the Baptist because he was the one who arrested John and ultimately, as we see here, had him killed. Why? Herod had a brother (Philip), who lived in Rome. He stayed in Rome as a private citizen because, for some reason (we don't know) he was disinherited. He had a wife and her name was Herodias. She was the daughter of another son of Herod the Great, so she was a daughter of one of her husband's half-brothers. So she married her uncle, her father's half-brother---so already, they are in an incestuous relationship. Herod Antipas goes to Rome to visit his brother. While he is there, he is attracted to Herodias and they plan to divorce their spouses. She will divorce his brother, Philip. Herod will divorce his wife and they will get together. This happens.

Then, a "bigger title comes up"--- but Herod Antipas was not given that role and his wife was not happy. Herod Antipas, went to Rome to see Caligula (who was one up to Herod Antipas) to seek a bigger title, to have a bigger kingdom and so Herodias could be a bigger queen. By the time Herod Antipas arrived, starting to make his case, Caligula had been convinced that he was a treacherous and dangerous man to Caligula's power (by Herodias's brother no less!) and so both he and Herodias were exiled and died in exile. It was a bad day when Herod Antipas met Herodias.

As Paul Harvey would say, 'that is the rest of the story.' Listen to the sermon online for all the other details of this soap opera of a family! There was more!

Now we understand why John the Baptist said, and is now in jail for saying:

Mark 6: 18 "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

While it is tragic that John the Baptist is in prison and will ultimately be killed, the other tragedy is with Herod.

Mark 6:20 Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

And yet... salvation eluded him.

Our sermon today will focus on the characteristics needed to make true greatness. Jesus says this:

Matthew 11:11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

How do we understand these two things Jesus says about John the Baptist here and how we might apply this to our lives. ***What makes true greatness?***

1. Humility

Matthew 11: 2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

John, who was John the Baptist, showed his humility in expressing his doubt. He knew that he knew, and yet he was humble enough to question and ask to be sure. God has big shoulders and can handle our questions, our unbelief.

Matthew 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

James 4:6 "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

James 4:10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Mark 9:24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

A characteristic of greatness is humility.

2. Conviction

Matthew 11:7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?"

John could live as he did in the world because of his CONVICTION. God had a plan for his life, he knew it and understood it and because of this, he LIVED IT OUT. Feelings and emotions come and go, but CONVICTIONS are BELIEFS that cause action. James says, faith (or belief) without deeds (or action) isn't a 'real faith.' Your life should show your conviction, we should not have to continually use our words to show others our conviction.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Thessalonica says this:

I Thessalonians 1:4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Where does that conviction come from? God. We find it in God's word.

II Timothy 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Peter writes this:

II Peter 1:5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a process. Growing up in your salvation (I Peter 2) is a building process. It never ends. That process does not happen on our own:

Ephesians 4:11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

They went to the desert to see a man who was not tossed back and forth in his beliefs, he was not a reed. John the Baptist was deeply rooted and had conviction. That is why he could say "this is not lawful". If you want to be GREAT in God's eyes, you must have CONVICTION. If you are going to live your life for God, you must have CONVICTION.

3. Self-Denial

Matthew 11: 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

True GREATNESS will require self-denial. Matthew 3 and Luke 3 and Mark 1 all speak about John the Baptist's outward appearance.

Matthew 3: 4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

His leather belt was just an ordinary strap, radically different than the priests and pharisees and teacher of the law. John was set apart. The Lord prophesied about John:

Luke 1:15...he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

This is the Nazarite vow. There would be an obvious, conscious decision – rooted in CONVICTION – of self denial. Just as we are called in our salvation to be 'in the world,' but no longer 'of the world.' Peter writes this in his first letter:

1 Peter 2:1 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Does that mean that we have to live a certain lifestyle to be saved? No. It does mean that we will begin the process of justification and growing up in our salvation and our lives will change.

4. Purpose

Matthew 11:9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

True, Godly GREATNESS comes thru fulfilling your God-Given PURPOSE. This too was prophesied of John:

Luke 1:16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Fulfilling your purpose cannot come without HUMILITY, CONVICTION and SELF-DENIAL. We see it time and again in scripture:

Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Matthew 5:39But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Matthew 10:37“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

We could go chapter by chapter and find these concepts. But why? To fulfill our PURPOSE, back to:

1 Peter 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

There is a world out there desperately seeking the truth. They were out there as Jesus walked on this earth and they are still out there all around us. **THAT is our PURPOSE.**

Matthew 9:36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Ephesians 2:10For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

True GREATNESS understands it’s not about YOU. Humility, Conviction, Self-Denial, and Fulfilling your Purpose.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Self denial is the giving up of a lesser, legitimate joy for the sake of a greater one. This whole concept is basically incomprehensible in our society. In our society, at large, it is incomprehensible that we would forfeit the experience of good, enjoyable things for the sake of a spiritual, invisible joy that we claim is greater.
 - a. A: Why do you think this is so? Why do you think biblical self-denial is so incomprehensible (and uncommon) in 21st-century America?
 - b. And yet, though biblical self-denial is largely incomprehensible and uncommon, there is an aspect of self-denial (or personal sacrifice) that is respected in our society. There is something about it we find captivating. Consider some popular stories for a moment, whether in literature or movies. Can you think of some examples that include an element of self-denial or personal sacrifice? (Pixar movies often include these themes.)
 - c. What do we learn about self -denial from a marathon runner in training? What do we learn about self -denial from marriage? What do we learn about self-denial from singleness?

- d. Can you think of a personal example where self-denial was especially difficult, and perhaps didn't go so well?
 - e. Most of us could grow (and would like to grow!) in becoming more self-giving. What kind of change would need to happen in your life to make you deny yourself more? What might compel you to give more of yourself?
2. In today's culture, how is humility often misunderstood or undervalued? How does Jesus' example and his example of using John the Baptist challenge our society's values?
- a. Why do you think it was necessary for Jesus to empty Himself and become a servant in order to demonstrate true humility? How did John the Baptist exemplify that?
 - b. Why do you think it was necessary for Jesus to empty Himself and become a servant in order to demonstrate true humility?
 - c. In what ways can we practically follow Jesus' example of humility in our everyday lives, especially as teenagers facing various challenges?
3. Imagine if your religious beliefs and lifestyle were on trial in a court of law. In this hypothetical trial, your beliefs and conduct are examined and scrutinized by people who take a very critical view of your faith. They are examining you to determine if your beliefs are convictions or just preferences.
- a. How would you fare?
 - b. Do Christians have nonnegotiable beliefs, and if so, what are they?
 - c. When it comes to my beliefs, what is important and why?
 - d. Are there any conditions you could face that would cause you to compromise your beliefs?
 - e. Would you be willing to suffer loss to maintain your beliefs?
4. Jesus is a real person and faith in him means following him — pursuing him, walking with him, loving him. It is fundamentally about relationship. And since that is the case, it means that we can know Jesus more. There is a depth to the Christian life — which is one thing that makes Christianity unlike any other religion. We can know Jesus more. We can walk closer to him. We can experience more of his nearness in our lives.
- a. When you think about your relationship with Jesus, what comes to mind? What do you often associate with it?
 - b. Has there been a time in your life when you felt especially close to Jesus? Were you more passionate about following Jesus in the past than you are right now? What was that like? What has changed in your life, positive or negative, since that time?
 - c. What might it look like for you to walk more closely with Jesus tomorrow?
 - d. One day we will be face to face with our Savior, what do you think it means to see Jesus on that day? Take a few minutes and share about how the future hope of seeing Jesus could impact more of our everyday lives.