

Luke 3:15-22

Attributes of Greatness

We are going to Luke 3 today.

In Luke's gospel, one of the shocking surprises is that people who are considered to be great and powerful in the eyes of the world are small and inconsequential, while those who seem small and inconsequential are great in the eyes of God. We've seen it already with Caesar Augustus who was thought to be great by the world, but was really just an extra in God's plan as God incarnated in the world.

But barren and aged Elizabeth is a major player, the virgin teenager named Mary gave birth to the Messiah. True greatness is found in the unexpected places. In this new kingdom that Christ is bringing, the greatest are the least and the least are the greatest.

In this section of scripture, we have been looking at part of the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Later on, Jesus would say of John the Baptist: **"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28)**. John the Baptist would be called the greatest man alive by the only one qualified to judge that kind of thing.

So it is worth looking into who this John was. What made him so great and so unique?

Because we already know from the rest of the story that, whatever it was, it couldn't have been the things that we think make a person great. But it was true greatness.

So today we'll keep going through this passage looking for what it was about John that was great and admirable, but then, more than that, we'll look at the even greater greatness of the one John spent His life pointing to.

If John the Baptist were in our world today, he certainly wouldn't look like a great man.

There were certainly aspects of his personality that would be strange to us. He didn't care what people thought about him, he wasn't concerned with conforming to cultural norms. You saw it in the way he dressed, in rough camel hair clothes. You saw it in what

he ate: locusts and wild honey (which you get from bee hives.) He lived in the wilderness, not with the sophisticated religious people in the city. He would have been seen as Jesus's eccentric, red-neck cousin who lives in the woods and has honey and bees in his beard.

And his ministry was totally unique. In the past, people had baptized gentiles who confessed their sins and converted into Judaism, but John was calling the Jews, the religious people, to confess their sins and be baptized. Everybody loved a guy who said their enemies were bad people who had to repent, but John was saying, "No, the ones you all think are the good guys need to repent! It isn't that the bad guys are out there and the good guys are here, but he called the good religious Jews and their leaders a brood of vipers.

And John worked outside the system. In the past, these baptisms and ceremonial washings would take place in the temple courts. But John was operating outside the temple in the waters of the Jordan river.

But despite his rugged clothes and lack of a venue and his strange way of doing things, through his fiery and bold messages, the whole nation was going to him in the river to confess their sins and repent. He had such huge reach that in our passage today it will say (3:21) that all the people were baptized by John. This guy was having massive influence in Israel.

Which got people wondering:

**Luke 3:15 - "As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,**

So John has a huge following, so huge that they are wondering whether he might be the one that God would send to lead their nation and liberate them.

From the very beginning, as early as the garden of Eden, God had been promising that He would send the anointed one, the Christ, to save His people from their sins. David sang about the coming Christ in His Psalms, Daniel wrote about Him (Daniel 9), and they all anticipated the day the anointed one would come to rescue them.

And those promises that God would send a Christ also resonated with a universal longing in human hearts. People everywhere are waiting and longing for the one true leader to come to make the world better. You see it in most presidential election cycles:

there's a buzz and a hope that this person is the one who will finally make the difference we are all after, and there are messianic hopes on many election days. (On others we are just thinking, 'who will do the least damage and lead us into the abyss most slowly.')

But often you'll see misplaced messianic hopes.

You see hopes like this misplaced on spiritual leaders and pastors, on new company presidents, on new quarterbacks - *finally the leader we are after is here*, we think. *Could this be the one?* Everytime the Bills get a new quarterback, which is on average once a year since 1996, people ask, "could this be the next Jim Kelly?" There's an anticipation that *the one* is coming to lead us to a better day.

So they look at John, and he is really changing things here. He challenges the political leaders as we'll see in a minute. He has a massive following, so they think, "Maybe he's the one!"

And if we were advising John, we might say, "John, don't throw away your shot. The whole nation is following you. You could become the new king of Israel, and you would do it the right way. Don't waste this opportunity. All these people lined up to get baptized by you would also line up with swords to fight for you. You could be the one!"

So John has an opportunity here. He has a following. He can cash this in. He can get political power. He has the opportunity to live for himself here, he has the opportunity to be huge, to be big, to be exalted.

John catches wind of what they're thinking. He immediately gives a clear answer:

**Luke 3:16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

John says, without hesitation, "I am not the one. I'm not to be worshipped. I'm not your ultimate leader. I'm not even close to being the Messiah. There is one who is mightier than I coming, and I am not even worthy to untie his sandals.

In Jewish practice, untying sandals was considered to be a super menial job. It was the work of slaves, but such a low task that in their culture, they couldn't ask Hebrew slaves to do it, only gentile slaves.<sup>1</sup> And John says "I am not even worthy to untie His sandals. I

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, Luke 1:1- 9:50, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1994). 320.

am so far beneath the Savior.” Again, it was a greatness that wouldn’t look great in our day. It was a counter-intuitive greatness, and certainly one that would be counter-cultural in our day.

### **1) John made himself small so Jesus could be big**

In our culture, the primary religion is the worship of the self.

Our culture believes that the best life is the one where we exalt ourselves - live for ourselves, we think of ourselves first, we esteem ourselves. There are social media memes galore to urge us toward self-worship and self-centered living.

And if there’s any story that sums up the cultural religion of our day, its the story of Narcissus in Greek and Roman mythology. Narcissus was a great hunter who was known for his beauty. And the goddess Nemesis led Narcissus to a still pool where he could see his reflection, and when he looked in and saw his own beauty, he was captivated by it. And, in the Roman version of the myth, he wastes away and dies of starvation because he cannot pull himself away from his own reflection that he loves so dearly.

And in our culture, we are people who are wasting away because we are so enamored with our own reflection. We were raised on the gospel of self-esteem, and now with social media, we’ve found our reflecting pool. We love our selves, and parade ourselves in front of everyone, and thrive on their likes for the things we show them about ourselves. We live for our own glory and seek our joy in being as big as we possibly can.

And often within the church, we don’t allow the gospel to challenge that religion. We want Christianity to fit. So we take verses out of context to make our own memes that call us to worship ourselves. We take verses like Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” out of context to say, “This means you are unlimited, you are infinite, and it is worth giving everything to be as awesome as you know you are.”

But to be a Christian is to have a totally different object of worship. It is to point away from self as ultimate and toward Jesus. Nothing is more counter-culture nn our age than saying that Jesus is more important than the self.

If Jesus is just another religious teacher he can be easily added to our lives and can help us pursue the idols we were after. But if Jesus is who John announced Him to be, the mighty one, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, then he must be greater than us.

The pursuit of Jesus must be greater than self-centered pursuits. We can't make much of ourselves and make much of Jesus. We can't be ultimate and have Jesus as ultimate at the same time, no one can serve two masters.

We don't try to adapt Jesus to our culture and hijack Him to get Him to help us serve the gods everyone around is serving. If He is God, he must be the new center. Everything is shaped around Him.

And that might sound scary and oppressive, but remember who He is. Because he showed his heart for us in giving his life for us, we can know that anything He tells us to do or live for can only be for our good.

He knows that the self can't bear the weight of worship. We can't be the infinite thing that can satisfy our own hearts. We will fail, we will disappoint. While we might enjoy being the object of worship for awhile, that nagging knowledge that "this isn't real" won't go away. We know that we're flawed and sinful, so even for the brief moments that we are praised by the people we respect will ring a bit hollow. Because we know we're not worthy of it, so we feel insecure, knowing that eventually they'll find that out.

This is why we see a really well-worn path with child stars in hollywood. They spend their young lives being praised and worshipped, but almost inevitably they turn to hard drugs to numb themselves to life's reality along the way. We weren't meant to be worshipped as gods and it always wrecks us eventually, whether we're pursuing the praise from others or just trying to praise ourselves, we are following a vain pursuit.

So God in His Truth and Mercy calls us to worship Jesus. To make much of Jesus and less of self.

John refuses to be made much of, but makes much of his Savior. He refuses to see his role in God's kingdom as a means of making himself great, but knows he is there to point to the Savior.

In John's gospel in **John 3:30, he looks at Jesus and says, "He must increase, but I must decrease."**

In our day, we often see Jesus as the means we use to increase. Serving Him can get me noticed, giving to Him can get me a pay-day for myself. I can use Jesus to get into a spotlight.

But John said, "Jesus needs to be big, and I need to be small."

This man that Jesus said was great didn't see himself as playing a leading role in the story God was telling, but a supporting role. It wasn't about Him, but about Jesus. And he was quick to take the attention off of himself and put it on His Savior. There aren't too many people like that in our day.

John, counter-culturally in his day and in ours, refused to be made much of. That would make him strange in our world today, but surely was one of the reasons Jesus called him great.

On two occasions in the rest of Luke's gospel, you see the followers of Jesus get in arguments about who is the greatest. And both times Jesus teaches the same lesson:

**Luke 9 “46 An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. 47 But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side 48 and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”**

And you see John here, the greatest one, with great influence, making himself small and pointing to Jesus. Which is something for all of us to aspire to.

To stop thinking Jesus is privileged to have us on his team serving Him, but to realize the privilege is all ours and we are not worthy to untie His sandals.

To step out of spotlights and into obscurity so that Jesus can be made much of.

To refuse to be thought of as bigger or better than we are and to find real joy that we'd ever be included in the story God is telling at all.

John refused to be big. He refused praise. He pointed to Christ - and would be totally out of place in our world and even in the church in many ways.

- 2) Another counter-cultural attribute of John was that **He boldly preached a hard but true message of judgment.**

He said here already that Jesus would come to baptize with the Spirit and fire. People have disagreed about what he meant here, but in context he is talking about how Jesus is coming as judge.

John looked at his nation and saw that they had strayed. He called them a brood of vipers (3:7) and told them to repent to escape the wrath that was coming upon them.

In our day, Christianity has become very happy-clappy, and we feel a need to make it all positive and encouraging so it can be marketable. And there is a lot to be happy about and encouraged by in the faith for sure.

But true preaching of Jesus includes a message of sin and judgment. That isn't all it includes. But it is a vital part of understanding our story.

**Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

The story of the Gospel starts with our fall into sin and the consequences, eternal death. It starts with the fire and brimstone message that God is holy and punishes our sin accordingly. And, left to ourselves, we would be punished in hell for our sin.

And this is a difficult doctrine, and a difficult one to preach. Even CS Lewis said *“There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”*

This doesn't seem to fit with a modern view of God at all.

And it didn't fit in John's day either. The Jews would have been OK with hearing there was hell waiting for gentiles, but that *they* had to try to escape God's wrath as Jews would have been unthinkable. They would say, “What do you mean we could be judged? We are children of Abraham! We are OK, judgment is for the gentiles! Don't tell me I could be judged”

In fact, the Jewish religious leaders didn't accept the baptism of John:

**Luke 7:28-30 “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” 29 (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, 30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.**

People who knew they were sinners and deserved God's judgment were happily turning from sin and repenting. But those who thought they were OK and would never be judged by God missed God's purposes for them altogether.

To truly be right with God, people had to accept the fact that because of their sin, they weren't right with Him on their own. They had to know that they had to flee from God's wrath.

Now we hear this and think, "OK, but that's old school religion and old-testament God. Jesus is different."

But John, speaking of Jesus, says:

**Luke 3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

John says his winnowing fork is in his hand.

And a winnowing fork was a big farmer's fork that he would use just after the harvest to separate the wheat from the chaff. Wheat would grow all summer along with chaff, which was the inedible part of the plant. And once it was harvested, a farmer would toss it all into the air with a winnowing fork so that the lighter chaff would blow away and all he would be left with was the fruit. This was how a farmer judged between wheat and chaff. This was how what was fruit was separated from what wasn't.

And John says, "Jesus has his fork in his hand. He is ready to separate what is real from what isn't. And there will be unquenchable fire for the chaff."

When Jesus comes on the scene, he will come as a judge. He can separate what is real from what isn't. And those whose lives do not bear fruit are not treated the same way as the fruitful. They're judged, they're purged.

John wasn't concerned with pleasing people, he was concerned with saving people. And part of the message that saves is the message of what we need to be saved from: our own sin and the punishment that our guilt deserves. It is countercultural to say it, and it isn't the people that we think are great that do. But it is true and necessary to say.

But to balance this truth, look at what verse 18 says:

**Luke 3: 18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.**

John's preaching wasn't just a hopeless doom and gloom fire and brimstone angry rant against the nation. He was preaching good news to the people. Good news about the one who was coming after Him.

To cure souls, there are two things that are necessary. One is the diagnosis and the other is medicine. The first is law and the second is Gospel.

The law of God is the set of commands from God that show God's righteousness, show how much we fall short, and prescribe the penalty for breaking them and promises for keeping them. But many think that's the sum of Christianity - rules and threats, with promises of heaven if you're good.

But that's a hopeless message, because we all fall short of the glory of God. But John preached good news to people. The rules and threats were real, but there was good news about the coming Messiah who could save them.

A faithful messenger of God preaches law and gospel.

The law shows God's holiness our our guilt, but the Gospel is the good news that God made a way to take that guilt away. And John understood that his role was to announce Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

In Israel's law, there was guilt and punishment, but then regular offerings of the life of lambs. There was transferring of guilt to the lambs. There was covering of sin with the blood of lambs. But all of that pointed to the true lamb who would come to offer the only solution. But we will get to Him in a second.

But first, it's important to see the consequences for John's faithfulness here:

### **3) Willingness to suffer for the truth**

**19 But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.**

So king Herod, Rome's puppet king who ruled over the jews, had been called out by John the Baptist. Herod was corrupt all the way to the bottom, and John kept calling him

on his sins. The fact that Herod held himself out as the king of the jews and the ultimate jew probably made John angry and compelled him to call him out for it, but also Herod was a local guy who may have been in the crowd listening when John called him specifically to repent.

One thing in particular that Herod did was he divorced his wife and ran off with Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife. He committed adultery and she committed adultery and John called him out on it.

Which led to John being thrown in jail and eventually beheaded there.

But John stayed faithful, and was willing to suffer to tell the truth.

Which is another way John just wouldn't fit in our world today.

We have become, as Christians in our country today, very afraid of speaking the hard truths of Christianity because we know it will lead to our being mocked and mistreated and not invited to our culture's cool-kids tables.

If we speak against some of the idols of our day, we are afraid of being cancelled. If we say what scripture says, however kindly, about biblical sexuality or marriage, or if we talk about sin and righteousness, we won't be taken seriously and may well be hated and excluded because of our faith. So there is a massive pressure to change the content of our faith, to water it down, to make it pleasing to the culture, to run a PR campaign.

But John was willing to tell the truth and suffer for telling the truth. And among those born of women there was no one greater than John the Baptist.

The guy who was strange, who was holy, who was bold, who was willing to speak hard truths to power, who was willing to suffer, and who made little of himself so he could make much of Jesus was the greatest man alive. Except one.

**Luke 3:21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased**

So Jesus comes down to be baptized by John.

And at the baptism of Jesus, you see every member of the Godhead at work: the Father is speaking from heaven, the Son is being baptized, and the Spirit is descending like a dove. You see, on full display, the superior glory of Jesus, and the work of the whole trinity in bringing about our redemption.

John was great, but clearly this man was greater. John didn't have a voice from heaven calling him his son, or the Spirit descend on him like a dove. John called for repentance and baptized with water, but this was the greatest one.

But you have to wonder - why is Jesus being baptized by John?

In Matthew 3, John actually protested this. Jesus came to be baptized and John, at first, said no. He wasn't worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus let alone baptize him. John wanted Jesus to baptize him, but Jesus insisted.

Which is incredibly strange because remember how John introduced his baptisms.

**Luke 3:7 “He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”**

Everybody is repenting of sin, and to symbolize their being washed and forgiven, they're baptized. So there's a whole line of sinners coming down to the Jordan, they come confessing that John is right, they have been vipers. They deserve God's wrath. Their nationality won't help them, their outward religious observance won't help them, they need grace, they need washing, they need to be saved.

Then comes Jesus, who is sinless, needs to repent of nothing, needs to be washed of nothing, and he gets baptized?

Why would the sinless one receive a baptism of repentance?

This is where the really good news comes in. The meaning of the baptism of Jesus goes to the very heart of the Christian faith and how it is DIFFERENT from the other world religions.

Other world religions have their founder - the great teacher - Mohammed or Buddha or Moses. And they say, "He is our great example, so follow his teachings and be like him. That's what makes you acceptable."

Christians DO say that Jesus is our great example. We should be followers and emulators of Christ. So there is some similarity there.

But at the core of our Christian faith is not Christ our example, but Christ our substitute.

Now there is no better example for you to follow than the example of Christ.

BUT if Christ is your example and not your substitute, you are not a Christian, you are not right with God, and your sins are not forgiven.

Baptism, we said, was the symbol of washing and of turning from sin. Jesus came down to the water having no sin to be cleansed and no wrong direction to turn from. He was perfect. But Jesus came to be more than just our perfect example, but our perfect substitute.

**2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Jesus was our substitute!

Jesus didn't need to be washed or cleansed or turned around. He came to take the place of millions of people who DID need to be washed and cleansed and turned around.

**He needed no repentance, but he repented on our behalf.**

**And in his baptism, he humbly announced that he was there to take our place.**

He came down to the water to be baptized, not as a sinner himself, but was being baptized for the sins of everybody else.

Every religions says, "Live a righteous life and then give it to God and he'll be pleased with you."

Christianity says, "Jesus lived a righteous life and gave it to you. Jesus took your sin on himself. And now because of him you are loved and accepted by God."

The things that made John great were present infinitely in Jesus.

John made himself small, but Jesus who was greater made Himself smaller. He went to

the low place and fully identified with sinners, then to the lowest place and died a sinners death in our place. Jesus prea

It isn't the religion we would have invented - God comes as substitute. We would have invented a religion that says be good to pay God off and he will accept you.

It was unexpected, but it is what we need.

Jesus comes as better judge, with better baptism. Accepts more suffering than John, not only for preaching the truth, but for us.

Lord's Supper

Scriptures Referenced:

Luke 3:15

Luke 3:16

John 3:30

Luke 9:46-48

Romans 6:23

Luke 7:28-30

Luke 3:17

Luke 3:18

Luke 3:19-20

Luke 3:21-22

Luke 3:7

2 Corinthians 5:21

### **Attributes of Greatness**

#### **Luke 3:15-21**

- 1) John made himself small so Jesus could be big**
- 2) John preached a hard but true message of judgment**
- 3) John was willing to suffer for the truth**
- 4) As someone greater than John, Jesus went to a lower place, suffered for the sins of many, and was judged for our sin.**

### **Questions for Discussion in Small Groups:**

- 1) How are we tempted to be "big" instead of allowing Jesus to be big?**

- 2) Why is speaking about God's judgment necessary? Can we take that too far?**
- 3) In what ways might we expect to suffer for believing in and communicating truth about Christ?**
- 4) How do the law of God and the gospel of God work together?**