



JOHN THE BAPTIST: NO GREATER PROPHET

WEEK 13
2.26.17



FOCUS VERSE

Matthew 11:11

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 11:2-14

2 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples,

3 And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

4 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see:

5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

14 And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.



FOCUS THOUGHT

The greatest purpose in life is the work of helping individuals with God.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Middle Busters

The Christmas for Christ program that inspired sacrificial giving during the Christmas season to help plant new churches in North America was an idea fostered by Pastor Jack Yonts from Wisconsin. The idea was to present a significant gift to Jesus on His birthday, even to the sacrificing of other things often bought at Christmas for family and friends.

With the program came the idea for seasoned pastors to leave their churches and go to unchurched areas of North America to start new home mission churches. It was believed that seasoned ministers with good churches would be more successful than younger, less-experienced ministers. Unfortunately, in many cases the seasoned ministers were not successful in starting new churches in these non-churched areas.

In analyzing these failures, one of the elder ministers from the targeted New England area explained that as a boy growing up on a farm, he learned that to break new ground a different kind of plow called a middle buster was used rather than those plows used later in tilling the soil. Based on this observation, it seemed that a certain kind of personality with determination to succeed mixed with a willingness to sacrifice significantly seemed essential for a person seeking to start a church in unchurched areas. Those with more refined aspects of ministry and administrative skills were not always productive in opening new churches in such areas.

Somewhat like middle-buster plows, fore-runners have a different purpose. They seem to be made of different steel.

OUTLINE

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- A. The Closing Voice
- B. The Burden
- C. A Renewed Hope

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST

- A. John's Life
- B. John's Ministry

III. NONE GREATER AMONG MEN

- A. John's Imprisonment
- B. Jesus' Commendation

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Greatness is determined by the commitment one makes to a cause. A cause usually has many contributors, but few rise to the level of greatness. Those who exceed expectations rise to leadership. Those who significantly exceed expectations become group leaders or managers. But those who understand the purpose of the cause and contribute to its existence by growth and

expansion as visionaries willing to sacrifice, rise to greatness.

Such was the contribution of John the Baptist to the kingdom of God and the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus said of John, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). John was proclaimed great by the greatest of all, Jesus Christ, in association with the greatest of all causes, the kingdom of God.

John was the greatest man to be born of women, but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John (Matthew 11:11). Those who involve themselves in the cause of Jesus Christ—the work of reconciling humanity with God—are counted as great. Such greatness is recognized by Jesus Christ and does not need human approval. The number of people who can attain greatness with God is unlimited. Greatness is perpetuated by desire and commitment to the cause of Jesus Christ. Salvation and greatness are to whosoever will.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. MALACHI

A. The Closing Voice

Malachi is the last book of the prophets. As the last voice of the Old Testament, Malachi offered hope sufficient to carry Israel into the coming era of grace, to the voice of John the Baptist announcing the arrival of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

The four hundred years of silence that followed Malachi's prophecies were typical of God's pattern of speaking in the Old Testament. Long periods of time passed between the Lord's speaking in His distinctive, fresh voice. Following Creation and the communion the Lord had with Adam in the Garden, roughly a thousand years passed before Noah, and another thousand years passed until Abraham. Approximately five hundred years passed from Abraham to Moses and another five hundred from Moses to Samuel, David, and the prophet era. Malachi prophesied last, more than five hundred years after Samuel and four hundred years before John's introduction of Jesus.

Regardless of the origin or frequency of the Word, it is sufficient to sustain through time. It is forever settled, forever fresh, forever true, dependable, and applicable to our lives. What has been spoken and written remains as powerful today as it was when it first appeared. That is the inspiration of the Scriptures, the confidence of our continuing hope (Psalm 119:89). Malachi's words lived on to sustain Israel until John appeared.

B. The Burden

Malachi referred to his prophecy as a burden (Malachi 1:1). His was to be the last voice, the anchor of all who preceded him and all who hoped to follow. The history of Israel's relationship to God had vacillated continually between hot and cold, faithful and aloof. Malachi's message was not to be one of encouragement as were those of Haggai and Zechariah some eighty years earlier. Rather, it was a straightforward call to repentance in preparation for the forthcoming judgment. Such preaching and prophecy is ineffective unless it is passionately presented from a

burdened heart. The only way to preach about judgment and Hell's fire is with tears of concern laced with hope and opportunity to change. Malachi expressed his words with a burdened heart.

Malachi's message was one of stern rebuke from the Lord for both the people and the priests (Malachi 1–2). Israel had dishonored God, polluted His altar, turned spiritual things into personal profit, and profaned the name of the Lord to the point that the Lord had no pleasure in the people and refused to accept their sacrifices (Malachi 1:6–10). It was a strong rebuke and carried with it a dreadful chastisement from the Lord (Malachi 1:14).

In Malachi 2 even stronger language was used concerning the priests if they refused to hear the commandment concerning the covenant of peace and truth God made with Levi (Malachi 2:5–9). Their blessings were to be cursed, their children lost, their lives disgraced, and their sacrifices despised if they refused Malachi's message (Malachi 2:2–5). Because the priests were God's messengers, responsible to the people, they received an even stronger rebuke (Malachi 2:2–8). Those chosen of God as spiritual leaders, be they priests of the law or preachers of the gospel, must give an answer to God for their care of the flock (Hebrews 13:17). The burden of the messenger is subject to the seriousness of the sin and the shortness of time to repent.

Malachi painted a painful picture of Israel in chapter 3. From their fathers, it was one of repeated failure to keep the ordinances of the Lord (Malachi 3:7). He contrasted it with the faithfulness of the Lord, who changes not, and therefore Jacob was not destroyed. God's commitment to Israel was unconditional. Love commits. With the condemnation of their sin came a clear call for repentance. "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:7). Love calls to repentance. The Lord's desire is not to curse but to save, to restore, and to bless. His mercy endures forever (Psalm 118:1, 29).

C. A Renewed Hope

Revival sprang forth in Malachi 3:16. New hope always comes with repentance. Israel seemed to be so far removed from God's righteousness and commandments that one

might question, “Is there any hope?” But God’s love has restorative power like no other. “With God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). Through repentance, Israel’s ugly, dark description of her shameful acts was changed to become the delight of the Lord in His collection of jewels (Malachi 3:16–18). The Lord promised healing, prosperity, and deliverance to those who feared His name (Malachi 4:1–3). What a change when “the Sun of righteousness” begins to shine into our lives (Malachi 4:2).

Malachi declared a second prophetic blessing with the coming of the messenger of the Lord in the spirit of the prophet Elijah. This messenger was to be John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament–type prophets and the forerunner of Jesus. John was to come in the spirit of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (Malachi 4:6; Luke 1:17). There is no restoration equal to that of internal family relationships, for family separations are the most painful of all separations. The ministry of John was to bring hope to the deepest and most critical schisms of the house of Israel, the individual family, and ultimately to the collective body of Christ. Our lives can change from lumps of coal in ashes of ruin to jewels of sparkling clarity in the presence of God when we respond to the Word of the Lord in repentance.

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST

A. John’s Life

John was the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth, a faithful priest and his wife who were “both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6). John’s parents were both advanced in age. Elisabeth suffered the reproach of barrenness. Zacharias, an elderly priest, had light duty burning incense in the Temple.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias as he offered incense, the angel said, “Thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth” (Luke 1:13–14). The prayers of the righteous

never die. They result in joy and gladness for the one who prayed as well as others. Faithfulness is the strength of righteous service and is observed by the Lord and by those being served. John’s parents prepared him for unusual service unto the Lord with humility and strength.

Some may feel advanced age prevents them from normal service to the Lord. But the four basic actions of the early church—teaching apostolic doctrine, fellowshiping, breaking bread, and praying—are not subject to age (Acts 2:42). It is plausible that prayer is the greatest of these Christian actions. Certainly the Lord observes the prayers of elders, and they become an inspiration to the entire body of Christ.

Prayers are not limited by the physical strength of the one praying or destroyed by the physical rebuffs of closed doors, difficulties, or distance. God heard Daniel’s prayer the first day he prayed, though the answer was delayed (Daniel 10:12–13). He heard Simeon’s prayer every day until it was answered (Luke 2:25–32). God heard the prayers of visionary prophets to whom He gave insight to the kingdoms of the world in ages to come, but He also hears the prayers of ordinary people who want to see the Lord’s presence manifested. Prayer works if we will work at praying.

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16).

“For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (Mark 11:23–24).

The hand of the Lord was upon John from his mother’s womb. His life from the

beginning to the end was filled with great purpose. The spirit and power of Elijah was to rest upon him for the purpose of turning the hearts of fathers to their children, the disobedient to wisdom, and to make a people ready for the Lord (Luke 1:17).

Purpose is filled with knowledge, ability, and commitment. Knowledge gives direction, ability gives confidence, and commitment provides strength to accomplish the task regardless of the difficulty or opposition. Purpose is fulfilled in preparation, perspiration, and presentation. John had a cause, a calling, and a commitment to Christ, which made him a man of great influence with great humility (Mark 1:4-5; John 3:30).

B. John's Ministry

John the Baptist was the messenger of the Lord whom Malachi prophesied would come to prepare the way for the Lord (Malachi 3:1). In his manner and ministry, he was an Old Testament-type prophet. His ministry was one of refining fire from the rekindled coals of Old Testament altars in Israel's past to the sudden, glorious appearance of the Lord in a new Kingdom era. He served as the capstone and personification of all the prophets of Israel before him. His prophetic words concerning Christ's kingdom unfolded within days and weeks of being spoken. His message was profound: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

John's message was threefold: repentance, water baptism, and Holy Ghost baptism.

Repentance. John's preaching of heartfelt repentance brought admiration and respect from the people to the point that they wondered if he might be the Christ (Luke 3:15).

- His followers confessed their sins in order to make their paths straight (Mark 1:5).

- They were expected to make their wrongs right, thus smoothing out the rough ways (Luke 3:5).

- They were expected to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance and not rest in the false hope that they were righteous because they were Abraham's descendants (Luke 3:8).

- They were expected to become caring, honest, and gentle, neither doing violence to any nor falsely accusing any, and they were to be content with their wages (Luke 3:8-14).

- The ax was laid at the root of the tree, and repentance was the only way to escape the judgment to come. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5).

Water baptism. John preached water baptism "for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). There must be true repentance for baptism to be effective. John's converts confessed their sins before he baptized them (Mark 1:5).

John baptized by immersion, as did Jesus and the apostles. (See John 3:22-23; Acts 8:36-39.) The Greek word for baptism, *baptizo*, means to immerse. When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, Jesus came up out of the water, indicating He was immersed. (See Mark 1:10.)

Holy Ghost baptism. John said he baptized with water, but the Lord, whose shoes he was not worthy to loose, would baptize them with the Holy Ghost and fire (Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16).

John's message was in essence the same as the message Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, with the exception of the identification of the name of Jesus in water baptism and the infilling of the Holy Ghost, which was not poured out until after John's death and Jesus' ascension.

Two decades after Pentecost, Paul met some of John's disciples at Ephesus. After he discovered they had not received the Holy Ghost, he instructed them to be baptized in the name of Jesus. When he laid his hands on them, they received the Holy Ghost. (See Acts 19:1-7.) Paul confirmed the intent of the original message of John with the full experience of salvation received at Pentecost.

John's ministry was focused on identifying the Lord, who was to suddenly appear in His temple, and prepare the hearts of the people for His coming. (See Malachi 3:1-3.) Therefore he lived righteously and preached repentance and remission of sins in order to behold the Lamb of God (John 1:29-36). His message continued to resonate within the ministry of Jesus and the apostles in the establishment of the New Testament church. Jesus is the Savior, the sacrificial Lamb, who alone has the power to cleanse the sins of mankind and transform believers into the likeness of His own nature (II Peter 1:4).

From the angelic announcement preceding his birth to his closing prison cell, John's

mission, ministry, and message were about Jesus Christ. John proclaimed, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The strength and joy of John's ministry was the exaltation of Jesus as a friend of the bridegroom (John 3:25–36). When Jesus was lifted up at Calvary, it was for the purpose of drawing all men unto Him (John 12:32). The practice John instituted in lifting up the Lord through preaching and sincere rejoicing has remained the primary principle of evangelism to this day.

John's ministry was short, lasting approximately six months. His ministry was never about his heritage as a priest's son of angelic proclamation, his unusual dress or dietary habits, or even his fiery preaching, but always about Jesus (Luke 1:5–25; Mark 1:7). He built no kingdom around himself, but from the very beginning he pointed his converts to follow the Lord who was to come.

John knew his role and purpose in life, which qualified him as the forerunner of the Lord and made him great. He knew who sent him to baptize and for what purpose, and he knew the Lord would be revealed to him in time (John 1:29–34). Therefore, when the Spirit descended as a dove from Heaven upon Jesus at baptism, John knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God and not just his cousin. He thereafter directed his converts to Jesus (John 1:19–42). Christian ministry remains the same as John's pattern. We are to preach Jesus and to keep His commandments. We are to win converts to the Lord.

III. NONE GREATER AMONG MEN

John's childhood and early manhood, like those of Jesus, were obscure. Zacharias, Elisabeth, and Joseph may have all passed away before either John's or Jesus' ministries were active. But without doubt, parental guidance and holy anointing accompanied them and equipped them for their roles in life. Their love for God, His house, and His Word perpetuated their greatness. Successful ministries always have many influences that contribute to desire, confidence, ability, determination, knowledge, and gracefulness.

John's unusual ways and wilderness life may have been dictated by his circumstances and necessity rather than choice. But

his calling was from God. His image and influence cast a long shadow back across a thousand years of prophetic history, but what stood before him—Jesus and the Kingdom—were a brilliant light to the world, the light John came to introduce (John 1:6–10).

A. John's Imprisonment

John's imprisonment brought a conclusion to his public ministry. His ministry rose in popularity and effectiveness to unprecedented heights but was destined to diminish. His prophetic ministry, as a grain of wheat fallen into the ground, was to blossom forth in the new and more fruitful ministry of Christ Jesus.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24).

Two views emerge as to the confirmation John sought of Jesus' identity as the One to come (Matthew 11:2–3). The first is that John was uncertain of Jesus' authenticity and needed personal confirmation. This supports his humanity, his possible confusion, or even doubt because of the sudden turn of events and imprisonment. It is plausible to think there was less or no anointing since there was no audience. The feeling of a renewed confirmation seems justified.

The second view is that John was acting in keeping with his pattern of pointing his disciples to the Lord. Even in prison, his followers were loyal, believed in him, and would have done anything possible to liberate him. Perhaps John wanted to confirm in the minds of his followers who Jesus was so their allegiance would be transferred to Him.

John had received personal confirmation of Jesus' identity when the Spirit descended upon Him at His baptism, but John sent his disciples to Jesus concerning the works Jesus was doing. The works were a confirmation of the Word spoken by Isaiah concerning Jesus' anointing of the Spirit (Isaiah 61:1–2; Luke 4:14–21). Therefore, John sent his disciples to Jesus with this question: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look

for another?" (Matthew 11:3). The key word here is *we*.

Jesus' response to John's disciples was to tell John of the wonderful works that were being performed. It was a confirmation of the prophetic word spoken by Isaiah, which Jesus quoted in opening His ministry (Isaiah 61:1–2; Luke 4:17–19).

Jesus concluded His comments to John and his disciples with an unusual, but powerful, remark. It was a blessing—the blessing of no offense. Offenses are often focused around physical dynamics. Jesus was ministering to all kinds of physical needs around Him with miraculous healings and manifestations. John was in prison physically. While the prisoners of blindness, lameness, leprosy, deafness, and even death were being liberated, John remained incarcerated. Offenses are easily acquired when the focus is strictly on the physical. But John's life and ministry were centered on the spiritual, the introduction to a new and better way of life that was to lead to life eternal. He was blessed.

B. Jesus' Commendation

When John's disciples left Jesus after inquiring about His identity, Jesus took advantage of the moment to speak to the multitudes concerning John's ministry. The people loved John. From the king's court in Jerusalem to the banks of the Jordan, his ministry impacted multitudes. His ministry paved the way for Jesus, and the Lord wanted the people to know how truly great John the Baptist was as a person committed to a cause.

Jesus asked, "What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? . . . A man clothed in soft raiment? . . . A prophet?" (Matthew 11:7–9). Note the ascending order of importance in Jewish life, the prophet being greatest. To this highest order, Jesus remarked concerning John, "Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:9). Jesus affirmed John was what the people believed him to be, a prophet. But he was much more, Jesus said, for he was the subject of prophecy. He was the messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus, which he did with his preaching.

John was truly a man sent from God (John 1:33). He was set apart as the son of a priest, the proclamation of Gabriel concerning his birth and life, the relationship with Jesus' family, the proximity to Jerusalem and the Temple, and the stability of Judea—all contributed to his upbringing, positioning him to be a person of significance. But even more, he was the person of Malachi's prophecy, the heir to the spirit of Elijah, the heir to the right of scriptural proclamation by the priesthood, and chosen to be the forerunner of Christ, to bear witness of the Light (John 1:7). John knew he was chosen and sent of God, the highest of all authority. Herein was his confidence, strength, and greatness.

Jesus declared John to be the greatest person ever to be born of women (Matthew 11:11). His greatness was in his purpose and calling. Service to royalty has always been deemed a privilege, not a sacrifice. John was no ordinary servant, and Jesus was no ordinary royalty. Neither was either of their sacrifices ordinary. John was the greatest man every born of a woman because of his contribution to the greatest cause ever to face humanity, the cause of salvation. He paved the way for the Lord to make the gift of life eternal possible for whosoever would come and drink of the waters of life freely (John 3:16; Revelation 22:17).

Jesus then added another thought of equal grandeur; a greater than John was possible. How could anyone be greater than John? What could one possibly do to surpass John's role as the forerunner of Christ? The answer is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. One who follows Jesus is greater because he is a part of the kingdom of God. John could only say the kingdom was coming and point to Jesus as the King to come. But now the kingdom is here and those who love the Lord and follow after Him have the privilege to be a part of His kingdom as sons of God, not servants. (See John 1:12; 15:15; Romans 8:14; I John 3:2.)

To follow Jesus is to believe in Him and to be filled with His Spirit. With the infilling of the Spirit comes power to become witnesses of the grandeur of Christ, to share His nature, and to join His cause (Acts 1:8; II Peter 1:4; Matthew 28:19–20). This privilege is far greater than John's experience, for it allows one

to participate in the full salvation experience. John was privileged to baptize unto repentance and point his followers to Jesus. But now, individuals can repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus, receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, and actively share their experience with others (John 7:38; Acts 1:5–8; 2:38–39).

John pointed to a physical Christ destined to die, but believers today experience a living Christ who reigns forever. Therefore, he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist because of the infilling of the Spirit. The writer of Hebrews declared it to be “so great salvation” (Hebrews 2:3). Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). No other experience can compare to “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). And there is no joy like sharing our experience with others.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

“The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it” (Luke 16:16). John the Baptist was the bridge between the Old Testament and the New, between law and grace. When there are great transitions in God’s plan, He always has a person to make the transition. Consider Noah, Abraham, Samuel, John the Baptist, and Paul as men who stood on the mountain peaks of time viewing that which was behind and that which lay before them. Paul said it well in Philipians 3:13–15:

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God

in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.”

The believers’ experience is dominated by two great transitions. First is that of salvation. When a person makes the transition from sin to salvation, everything changes with that person. The old habits of life become subject to the new ways as the believer takes on the divine nature of Christ (II Peter 1:3–8). We become more and more like our Lord in the way we think, the way we act, and the way we judge all things in life. (See the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5–7] for a Christian’s thoughts, chapter 5; actions, chapter 6; and judgments, chapter 7.) “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Second is the transition from the earthly sphere to the heavenly. This comes either by death or by the rapture of the church. This ultimate transition is also made by the power of the Spirit. “If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you” (Romans 8:11). This is a permanent transition into a totally new world where we shall see the Lord as He is and be like Him (I John 3:2).

The great joy at the final transition of life will be to know we have helped bring others to Christ to experience eternal life. This is the way to greatness. We can walk with Jesus in the fullness of the Christian experience and lead others to the experience of the Holy Ghost. The Kingdom waits for those who will be great! ■

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss greatness by standards of the world compared to those of Scripture.
- Discuss how God honors the prayers of the faithful long after they are first prayed.
- Discuss the things John was to accomplish to make him great in the sight of the Lord. (See Luke 1:15–17.)
- What was it about John that attracted the multitudes?
- Apply Jesus’ blessing of no offenses to some current situations. (See Matthew 11:6.)