



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Proximity to the King (Luke 7:24-35)

APRIL 16, 2013

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It is hard not to be impressed with Jesus as we encountered his interactions with countless people in a variety of different circumstances. We have just seen the manner in which he addressed a question regarding his messianic identity by John the Baptist, the one who held the position of forerunner to the Messiah. From a worldly perspective this charge could have had irreparable consequences to the ministry of Jesus. Yet the Lord does not modify his ministry approach or consider how to make his message more palatable for those who begin to doubt. He points to the evidence of his divinity and challenges those who would follow to place their trust in him, not the preconceived ideas that cloud their understanding of his ministry. In this interaction the light of his divinity is seen not only through these miraculous signs and wonders, but it shines through in the unshakable confidence Jesus has for the arrival of his kingdom and its power to transform the world.

This confidence is also apparent as Luke's narrative continues; Jesus does not hide this interaction with the disciples of John from the crowd or seek to minimize the significance of John's ministry. He does however properly identify the reason for John being considered the greatest prophet ever born. This is found in the role he played in preparing people's hearts for the Messiah and pointing the way to him upon his arrival. The greatness of John is tied to his proximity to Jesus. As the last of the Old Covenant prophets, he brings to a close this age and prepares the way for Christ's establishment of his new order. Many prophets and righteous people longed to see what was taking place in this transitory period; however it was John who had the privilege of proclaiming and witnessing the arrival of the King. It is the comparison of these two ages that Jesus explicates in this text, for the glory of the Old Covenant as demonstrated by the greatest prophet of that era pales in comparison with the splendor of the kingdom of God and those who become its faithful subjects. Due to the depth of this topic, the first part of this subject which focuses on the greatness of John will be covered in this study "Proximity to the King." In the next study "Superiority of the Kingdom," a comparison will be made of the greatness of John with the supremacy of God's kingdom as established by Jesus.

Luke 7:24-35 - (24) When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? (25) What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. (26) What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (27) This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

(28) 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.) (31) "To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? (32) They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep."

(33) For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' (34) The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (35) Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

THE GREATEST OF THE PROPHETS

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" – As John's disciples depart the scene to carry Jesus' response to their teacher, Jesus does not leave the subject of John's ministry. He engages the crowd by asking them, "What did you go out in the wilderness to see?" This question appears three times. The first two are asked in a rhetorical manner with an expected negative response. The first reference, a "reed shaken by the wind" is either an allusion to the scenery at the location of John's ministry or a figurative reference to John as a weak-willed man. The second, a "man dressed in fine clothes" could reference the spectacle of the crowds that flock to see a man of prominence, or of the lack of substance that permeates those who are their rulers and have achieved success. These types of people would not be caught in the desert, but only live in the comfort of their palaces. Those who went out to hear John did not go to the countryside to take in the scenery or the unusual sight of a man dressed in fine clothes. They went out to see a prophet, a man of character and conviction who proclaimed God's truth to all who dared to listen.

"Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." – In answering his own question that John was indeed a prophet, he calls to the audience's mind the contrast of the poetic language used with that of John's ministry. If one considers the imagery of a "reed shaken by the wind" or a "man dressed in soft clothes" with how John discharged his duties as a prophet, this language could not have been farther from what the people experienced in relation to his ministry. When considering a "reed shaken by the wind," was John spineless

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in his conviction, afraid to stand for the truth, and so compromise the message given him to win the favor of the crowds? Luke portrays John as one who preached repentance, called the crowds a “brood of vipers,” and challenged them to not place their confidence in their heritage but in a life that produces the fruit of repentance. He challenged the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers to specific ways in which they should repent. He even rebuked Herod for the evil of taking his brother’s wife, and for all the evil he had done. John was not a reed swaying to and fro, but an oak that proclaimed the message of good news which centered on calling the people of Israel to repent of their sins in preparation for the Lord.

John’s greatness as a prophet was not limited to the message he preached, but his life also exemplified one whose willing sacrifice and service prepared the way for the Lord. John’s focus was given completely to the mission that had been entrusted to him. He sought not his own self-interest or comfort, but willingly pointed the way to Christ. When the murmurs of the crowds reached his ears on whether he was the Messiah, he quickly dispels them and witnesses to the superior nature of the Christ. John was not seeking to secure for himself the comforts of this world, but he understood that his life was bound to the purposes of God and longed for their accomplishment, even when this understanding was hidden from his sight.

“None is greater than John” – In recounting the qualities of John as a prophet, even against the backdrop of his doubts, it might be tempting to think that these qualities, in themselves, make him the greatest of the prophets. However Jesus is pushing us to a more profound level of understanding, to grasp the greatness of John we must see it in the light of the passage he quotes from the prophet Malachi. It is also necessary to understand that when a Jewish rabbi, like Jesus, quotes an OT passage it is used as a means of referencing the entire contextual understanding of that passage.

Malachi 2:17-3:3 - (2:17) You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?” (3:1) “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (2) But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. (3) He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.

“You have wearied the LORD with your words” – There are three main characters in this text: “my messenger,” “messenger of the covenant,” and “the Lord.” Jesus references this passage to identify John as “my messenger.” As John arrives on the scene we find the Lord is wearied with the words of the people because they no longer understand the difference between good and evil. They believe that God is pleased with them, and yet the arrival of the Messiah signals a time when the nation will be refined so they can once again bring offerings in righteousness to God. As we reflect on John’s ministry his understanding of this role is seen; he preached an uncompromising message of repentance to both small and great alike. However, he also understood the fact that he was only the first act, and that his mission was only preparatory to the arrival of the “messenger of the covenant.”

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – Jesus fulfills the roles of both the “messenger of the covenant,” and as God in flesh “the Lord” who will suddenly come into his temple. Jesus not only brings the message of this new order, but he came at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:26). He is the one whom the Lord of hosts delights in, for after his baptism a voice from heaven declared this is “my beloved son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). In seeing the greatness of Jesus as he fulfilled each of these significant roles in God’s plan of redemption, what is revealed is the privileged position of the one who prepared the way for Jesus? John’s greatness, as view by Jesus, was based primarily on his proximity to the King, and the role he played in pointing to the Promised One of God.

APPLICATION

In looking deeper at the passage from Malachi, John’s question regarding the ministry of Jesus becomes easier to understand. The Messiah’s arrival signaled a time of judgment in which the uncleanness of man would be purged from the land. What mind dared think God chose to deal with man’s uncleanness through judgment on himself? This is the message the gospel declares, and yet for us we are tempted to focus on the external as the primary means in which evil is addressed. However, the power we possess is the gospel and it is power to transform the hearts of those who place their faith in Jesus. Like John, we must continually ask ourselves; do we trust Jesus’ method of transforming his world, or our own?

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007).