

ADVENT 3, DECEMBER 13, 2015 SERMON: GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

TEXT: LUKE 7:18-28

OTHER LESSONS: ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; PSALM 85; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

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Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. ¹⁸ I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. ¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

²⁰ At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord.

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 7:18-28

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹ calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ²⁰ And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" ²¹ In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

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."

Greatness in the kingdom of God

One could say, "While there are no degrees of heavenly bliss, since all the saints of Christ shall see God and so will be completely blessed, Scripture does teach that there are degrees of glory, commensurate with the faithfulness and sufferings of Christian believers in this life." Said another way, there are "higher and lower" positions at the feast table of God. In terms of heavenly bliss, all believers are at that table. In terms of glory, however, some will have places of higher honor than others, such as

Lazarus, who was called home to heaven and seated at the high and honorable position of Abraham's bosom. Normally, however, I would say, "I don't care where my seat is at that table, so long as I'm at that table."

In verse 28 of the Gospel lesson Christ says, **"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."** Or one might say that they understand; on earth, no one is greater than John the Baptist. However, being the least in heaven is better than being the greatest on earth."

Let's look at this a little closer. John is still on earth when Jesus is speaking this. He's locked up in a prison cell, but he hasn't been called home to glory yet. It is true: Among men on earth up to that point in time, no one outranks John the Baptist. How can we (along with our Lord) say such a thing? This was a guy whom God specifically sent into the world to herald the coming and presence of the promised Messiah. When you think about it, this guy was given the task of pastoring Jesus! John preached...and Jesus was there listening! Jesus came to John to be baptized! John had the unique opportunity to preach and teach and the first to point others to "that guy, right there in the flesh." **"Behold, here, in the flesh, standing right here, physically in our midst, is the Messiah; the Lamb and promise of God, made flesh, who has come to us take away the sin of the world."** No one in all of history has had such an important task and calling.

So how can we understand this part, **"least in the kingdom of God being greater than he."** We did already say that being the least in heaven far outweighs being the greatest on earth, but that's not what Jesus is saying here. Jesus says that the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. Some might say, Kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven, there is no difference. It's just one way of saying the same thing. To that point I will say that Matthew and Mark agree. Matthew and Mark record both John and Jesus proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" or "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." They're using different words to describe the same exact thing.

But, this is precisely where our misunderstanding comes into play. We hear Jesus speak of the kingdom of God/heaven and automatically assume that He's talking about that far way distant place that faithful souls go for eternal life.

Here in verse 28 Christ is saying something different. In the proclamations recorded in Matthew and Mark, the meaning is quite clear. When it says that the kingdom of God/heaven is at hand, it's not that heaven is physically coming down here to replace earth. this language of "kingdom" isn't a territory or a boundary that makes a kingdom. It's the reign and rule and power and majesty of the king that makes the kingdom. Wherever the king's reign and rule and power and majesty extends to, there is the kingdom. So a better way of translating these proclamations

would be, "Behold, the reign and rule and power and majesty of God draws near. It's here. It's at hand."

It's this same exact understanding that Jesus is speaking of when He proclaims that the least in the kingdom of God are greater than John the Baptist. Jesus isn't talking about the dearly departed who now reside in heaven. He's not talking about degrees of heavenly bliss and heavenly glory. He's talking about you, right now. You, my fellow redeemed are greater than John the Baptist. Let me explain.

I'll start by asking you a question. Are you, right now, under the reign and rule of Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior and King? The answer, of course, is "yes." You see, from the perspective of history, we are greater than John the Baptist because we know and believe the whole salvation story. We know the truth that "It is finished." We know that Christ Jesus accomplished all of salvation in His all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection. Not even John the Baptist understood all that. Remember: John, the greatest of anyone on earth, still didn't fully understand what Christ and His ministry was all about. He didn't understand that Christ's glory necessarily involved a cross. John only saw the victorious, glorified Jesus at the end of salvation history. He only understood the triumphant Christ, who would bear the righteous winnowing fork and put the axe to the tree. He didn't get that this same victorious Christ had to first suffer and die. As a consequence of this misunderstanding John struggled. When times got really tough and he was languishing on

death row in prison he struggled and wavered and doubted, and understandably so.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, John wore sinful flesh, just like everyone else. When life got tough, John struggled with doubt, just like we tend to do in our own lives. Your Lord knew this, which is precisely why He sent the messengers back to the prison to tell John all that they had personally witnessed Isaiah's prophesy fulfilled. No longer was it a future hope. No longer was it something to be waited for. In Christ it was now present reality. The blind were receiving the gift of sight. The deaf were receiving the gift of hearing. The dead were receiving the gift of life. The poor in Spirit are having the Good News preached to them by the Word of God Himself.

Right after this Gospel message our Lord speaks these words regarding the greatest and the least. The new deed of salvation, now that God has begun to physically reign in the work and person of Jesus Christ, is so wondrous that even the least person who by faith now comes under this reign and rule of blessing can be regarded as greater than John. The "least in the kingdom of God/heaven" refers to any faithful disciple of Jesus, which includes us!

Now, clearly, Jesus is not excluding John from the reign and rule of God either in the present or the future. John the Baptist is in heaven. In these words of greatest and least, Jesus is proclaiming that God's reign and rule, now spreading in Israel through the work and person of Jesus Christ, really and truly offers the salvation and

hope that Israel and all people yearn for and need. There is no greater identity than to belong to the kingdom of God under the blessing of the King; the King who rules graciously in this world in the person of Jesus. Jesus' words are as true today as when He first spoke them. Even the newest, most timid believing disciple is greater than John, not because of anything in himself, but because the forgiveness and power and new life of the reign of God have come to and encompassed him through faith; faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Total and complete forgiveness and everlasting salvation through faith alone in God's grace alone because of the all-redeeming work and person of Jesus Christ alone. It is finished in Christ, through Christ, because of Christ. There is nothing greater than this objective, salvific reality.

Because of Christ Jesus, you are truly great in God's eyes and in His kingdom. Come what may, sickness or health, rich or poor, better or worse, through the gift of faith you belong to Christ, and you are great in the kingdom of heaven—now and into all of blissful, heavenly eternity. AMEN

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and mine in Christ Jesus. Amen *Stand for Creed*

