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Sermon Notes

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Christ's Perspective on Greatness

Matthew 11:1-15

I. Introduction: The World's Perspective on Greatness

Walking through the courtyards of MIT

Isaac Newton... Blaise Pascal... Galileo... Copernicus... Faraday... the greatest names of science

How Time Erases Greatness

1 Peter 1:24 For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever"

Illus. Tomb of Cyrus the great... on a deserted, wind-swept plain in Pasargadae in modern Turkey

"O Man, whosoever you are, and whenever you may come... I am Cyrus who won for the Persians their empire. Do not begrudge me this little earth that covers my corpse"

D. Context: Greatness of the King and the Kingdom

1. Matthew 1-10: Testimonies of Christ as King

testimony of Jewish history: genealogy (1:1-17)

testimony of the Virgin birth (1:18-25)

testimony of fulfilled prophecy (1:23-2:23)

testimony of Magi (2:1-12)

testimony of John the Baptist (3:1-15)

testimony of God the Father (3:16-17)

testimony of Jesus' personal holiness (4:1-11)

testimony of Jesus' widespread preaching (4:12-17)

testimony of commitment of disciples (4:18-22)

testimony of Jesus' powerful miracles (4:23-25, and 8-9)

testimony of Jesus' perfect teachings (5-7)

testimony of Jesus' apostles (10)

2. Matthew 11-12: reactions to that evidence

series of negative reactions, followed by personal appeal to faith

Matthew 11: negative responses of

doubt (1-15), criticism (16-19), unbelief (20-24)

followed by positive appeal for faith "Come to me, all you who are weary..."

Matthew 12: negative responses of

murderous entrapment (1-14), astonishment (22-23), blasphemy (24-27),
curious fascination (38-45)

followed by positive appeal for faith: "Whoever does the will of God is my
brother and sister and mother"

E. Christ Sets the Example

1. Matthew 9: "When Jesus saw the crowds He has compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." PRAYER FOR THE LOST

2. Matthew 10: Apostolic mission

10:5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions... Preach the word!!

3. Matthew 11:1 Christ sets the example that we should follow in His steps

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.

Assumption: Christ's apostles out on mission, Christ went on alone

Great leaders set the pace themselves... willing to bear the price of leadership through their example

Illus. Douglas MacArthur's personal courage on a beach in WWII

II. Human Greatness: Still Imperfect (vs. 2-6)

vs.2-6 *When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was 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 cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. 6 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*

A. A Limit to All Greatness!

Psalm 119:96 *To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless.*

1. Many Biblical heroes, worthy of emulation
2. Jesus is about to say John is the equal of all of them, none have surpassed him
3. YET... all of them are sinners in need of a savior
4. The Bible is candid about their weaknesses

B. John the Baptist Doubted Jesus!!

1. Doubt revealed
2. Doubt is shocking: contrasted with earlier confessions
 - a. Matthew 3
 - b. John 1
 - c. John 3

C. The Roots of John's Doubt

1. Limited revelation & exposure

Mark 1:14 *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.*

2. Physical trials: imprisoned and suffering under King Herod
3. Faulty expectations: Messianic Kingdom, prisoner set free
4. Confusion about Christ's actions: fasting, consorting with sinners, not confronting Herod

D. The Significance of John's Doubt

1. For the Man: Sapping His Strength
2. For the Mission: The Forerunner of Christ Doubting

E. Christ's Gracious Response to John's Doubt

1. Essence of Christ's Ministry to His Children: What is Needed When It's Needed

Illus. Richard Sibbes, "Bruised Reed and Smoldering Flax"

Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart: "Stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art..."

2. Evidence: Signs and Scripture
 - a. evidences: grounds for faith
 - b. immediate miracles

Luke 7:21 At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.

- c. prophetic Scripture

vs. 4-5 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

A direct quote of Isaiah 61... note that Jesus stopped reading at a key point in the text

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God

the rescue of captives would be SPIRITUAL and not physical... physical judgment on the world would come... most certainly it would come. But not until the second coming of Christ

Michael Card: "Now our king rides in low on a donkey, but then, on a charger for war"

3. Exhortation:

vs. 6 "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

- a. consistent word from God to those suffering persecution

Revelation 2:11-12 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

This is the "blessing" Jesus speaks of... eternal life and eternal honor from God Himself... "crown of life" = eternal honor to the martyr, "not hurt by the second death" = eternal life itself, free from torments of hell

"BLESSED" is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

- b. John must be exhorted to stand firm to the end

Matthew 10:22 "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

- c. John will not be rescued... he will seal his testimony with his blood

Herod will have John's head cut off and carried in on a platter to satisfy a promise he made in lust and pride to a dancing girl

III. Christ Praises John's Greatness

vs. 7-8 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John

Christ defends John's greatness and ministry to the crowd!

Imagine Christ giving a speech about you... what would He say?

- A. John's Personal Character (vs. 7-8)

vs. 7-8 "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 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.

1. John's immense popularity
2. Root: character shaped by FAITH

Haddon Robinson: "Preaching is truth poured through character."

3. Unshakeable convictions: free from earthly consent

“A reed swayed by the wind”

Greek: “swayed” = trembling, unsettled, shaken, confused, unstable

External circumstances had NO EFFECT on John’s message!!

Modern-day **politicians** and media experts constantly conducting polls... sticking their finger in the wind to see what people believe about certain issues. WHY? Because they will alter their policies accordingly.

Tiger Woods, before hitting a drive, will throw a few pieces of grass into the air to see which way the wind is blowing. WHY? Because he will alter his shot accordingly.

Modern-day **pastors** will study data on modern trends and popular ways of thought, seeing which way the wind is blowing. WHY? Because they will alter their message accordingly!

A **“reed swayed by the wind”** = a man swayed by popular opinion... a man who tailored his message to suit his audience

A man who would use a poll to determine what the people wanted to hear, then give it to them

A man who would constantly watch people’s reactions, and then adjust his approach accordingly

This is a “reed swayed by the wind”

John did NONE OF THIS... he was a prophet in the spirit and power of Elijah, who told the truth no matter how it sounded to people

Matthew 3:7-12 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

This is not “seeker sensitive” preaching...

When J.I. Packer heard the great Welch preacher, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preach for the first time, he said it came with the power of **electric shock**... this is the MAN OF GOD

What was John the Baptist but a **lightning bolt** straight from the mouth of God?

A "reed swayed by the wind" is not a true prophet of God, nor a true preacher of God

God means not to coddle sinners but to convict them... and if a man will tell the truth, God will bring the crowds to hear it

Crying need of the day... relativism and pluralism threatens our churches

John was not a "reed swayed by the wind" and neither can we be! He faithfully proclaimed the Word of God, no matter what it cost him. And it would cost him his life!!

4. Pure lifestyle: free from earthly comfort

vs. 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.

- a. John lived in the desert... the roughest possible place to live
- b. stripped of all earthly comforts... living only for the word of God

So unlike luxurious Herod, lounging on silk pillows, listening to minstrels playing music, watching alluring young girls dance sensuous dances... all in defiance of the word of God

- c. John wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey...lived in the desert

Essence of John: powerful faith drove out ... **human popularity, earthly luxuries**

He lived only for the prophetic message he was sent to preach

B. John's Prophetic Calling (vs. 9-10)

vs. 9-10 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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. The Spirit of prophecy: "Thus says the Lord" testimony about Christ
2. "The Elijah who was to come"

Malachi 4:5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

3. Culmination of the Old Testament's testimony to Christ

vs. 13-14 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Only by faith will you understand John’s role... the culmination of OT testimony to Jesus

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

So John was “more than a prophet”... he actually physically pointed to Christ and declared Him to be Messiah

C. John’s Powerful Commendation (vs. 11)

vs. 11 I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist

1. Jesus’ estimation of human greatness... John was greatest of them all
2. “Those born of women” = emphasizes humanness... born under sin
3. What an astounding statement

John was at least the equal of Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Job, Moses, Caleb, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Daniel

Not one of those godly men surpassed John in Jesus’ estimation

IV. Christ Limits John’s Greatness

vs. 11 “...yet he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.”

Leon Morris: “If it is surprising that John was the greatest man who ever lived, it is even more surprising that the **least in the Kingdom of heaven** is greater than he. Jesus is not denigrating John but bringing out the wonder of being in the kingdom. Great though he was, John the Baptist belonged to the old order.”

A. Difficult Verse: About John

what was Jesus saying?

1. Is Jesus saying John is not a believer? Hardly so!!
2. What then? Why is the least in the Kingdom greater than John?

B. John: Last of the Old Testament Prophets

Limited ability **to testify to Christ!!!**

1. Old Testament prophets had limited light, limited knowledge of Messiah, His person, His work
2. John the close of the Old Covenant era... the end of a major period of redemptive history
3. John came to prepare the way for the Kingdom... his message didn't actually bring anyone into the Kingdom

C. Limited Knowledge of Christ, Limited Witness to Christ

1. Limited knowledge of Christ

John 1:31-33 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

2. John understood some of Christ's mission... but not the fullness of it
3. He perhaps did not understand the deity of Christ fully

"Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?"

"Someone else?????"

V. Christ Describes the Kingdom's Advance

vs. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

A. Difficult Verse About the Kingdom

B. Two Main Possible Interpretations... both teach the truth

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

1. That the Kingdom of heaven advances IRRESISTABLY against great opposition, and NOTHING CAN STOP IT... also, if you want to enter the Kingdom, you have to do it with force!!

I.e. be willing to die, be willing to turn your back even on loved ones who reject you... be willing to die to everything you ever held dear

2. That the Kingdom of heaven is being constantly persecuted by evil men (like King Herod), and those evil men seize the messengers of the Kingdom and seek to kill them

VI. Application

A. Concerning Doubt

1. Doubt is always negative... but it DOES NOT prove God is not at work in your life
2. William Perkins said doubt of one's election is something only elect tend to do
3. It's only through intense concern that sometimes we doubt... that intense concern over our souls is a gift from God
4. However... Christ never coddled or accepted lack of faith; He always sought to correct it
5. Immerse yourself again in the person and work of Christ as revealed in the Word of God: His miracles, His perfect life, His teachings, His death, His resurrection
6. Remind yourself again that simple faith alone justifies
7. Seek out if there's any sin in your life that is damaging your faith... repent from it
8. Feed yourself on the word of God

B. Seeking Christ's Praise

1. Great human failing in this world: accepting praise from men not God
2. Reject what the world sees as great... strive to become nothing in the world's eyes
3. Seek only to please Christ in whatever you do

C. Imitating John

1. Unshakeable convictions: not a "reed swayed by the wind"

When your boss tells you a crude joke, don't seek to please him by laughing

When your neighbors tell you that all roads basically lead to heaven, don't agree

2. Pure lifestyle

America is constantly concerned with luxury

John lived pure from the pollutions of the world

D. Advancing the Kingdom

1. Realize that nothing can stop the Kingdom's advance
2. True greatness in this world is measure by faithfulness to the King of the Kingdom of Heaven
3. Be faithful to advance it