

The Greatness of John the Baptist

Luke 1:15-17

42-6

Open your Bible, if you will, to Luke's gospel, chapter 1, as we continue in this amazing account of Luke as he writes concerning Jesus Christ.

We have been going through the narrative story of Luke chapter 1. We've gone all the way down to verse 25. It's the story of a couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth. He is a humble priest and they are faithful to the Lord, righteous and blameless in the commandments and requirements of the Lord. He went down to do his priestly duty, as you remember, in the temple in Jerusalem which he did two weeks a year. And he was chosen to go inside the holy place and offer the incense on the altar of incense which was a high privilege for a priest. Not all the eighteen thousand priests would have the privilege of doing that in their lifetime.

While he was in there, an angel appeared to him in verse 11 and made an announcement. He told him that he was going to have a child, verse 13, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth."

What was remarkable about this was that an angel hadn't showed up for over 400 years in the story of Israel's history. God hadn't sent a message in 400 years. There hadn't been a prophet in 400 years. There hadn't been a miracle in over 500 years and there hadn't been a group of miracles in 800 years. Now all of a sudden an angel appears, an angel brings a message from God about a miracle which is really the trigger miracle to many, many miracles that are about to begin. This is the launch point of the New Testament. All of this is signaling that the Messiah, long-awaited, long hoped-for, is to come.

We saw, remember, down in verse 18, that Zacharias didn't believe this and his doubt cost him greatly. He was stricken by the angel and he could neither speak nor hear and he remained that way until the child was finally born. That was a punishment on his life for those months. You also will remember he finished his priestly duty and went home and the miracle occurred. His wife Elizabeth, who was barren, and both of them were in their late 60s, 70s or even 80s, past child-bearing capacity and yet she became pregnant with a child. And so the miracle conception occurred. Later on in the first chapter we'll see that the miracle birth as well took place at which time Zacharias received back his hearing and his speech. We've been going through that amazing narrative.

I skipped verses 15 to 17 leaving them for today because they belong in a single message because verses 15 to 17 really describe the life of the child John who would be born. Let me read it to you. "For, he will be great in the sight of the Lord. And he will drink no wine or liquor. And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of

Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

That astonishing message from the angel describes who this child will be. It starts out in verse 15 with the words, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Greatness, certainly a topic for discussion. We all remember the brash claim of Cassius Clay, aka Mohammed Ali, who said, "I am the greatest," and produced no small amount of incredulity with the statement. At the same time, however, that statement actually was a social launch point. It unleashed a flood of tolerance for blatant egotism in athletics as well as in society and generally true across our culture. This kind of brash egotism is generally engaged in by people whose claim to greatness...greatness is nothing more than that they are a legend in their own mind.

History in the past has certainly been able to chronicle truly great people. Although I wonder in the future if it's not going to be harder to sort out the truly great from those who are merely famous for being famous, creations of the media.

If you look at the issue of greatness and the popular perspective on it, it could be associated with fame, in our culture with money, space in the media, press releases, societal admiration, celebrity. A truer view of greatness, however, less popular, looks at someone's significant achievement, something beyond entertaining people. Somehow it says that the truly great are those who mark the culture, they mark the world somehow. They mark people. They mark society with a sense of well-being, with some improvement on life. Whether we look at greatness from the standpoint of celebrity, or whether we look at greatness from the standpoint of human achievement, in either case it falls short of God's perspective.

God's greatness is reserved for other than those categories of people. Transcending all other perspectives on the human level of greatness is God's view, and the only way we can really understand God's view of greatness is to look at who God labels as great. And here we meet such a person.

The angel from God describing John says he will be great in the sight of the Lord. And, frankly, none of the normal trappings associated with greatness in human society are a part of John's life. He had no royal birth, to put it mildly. He was born to a very, very plain and common family. He had no prominence by virtue of his personal heritage. He was no intellectual as far as we know. We don't know anything about his intellectual capabilities. He's not at all assigned any responsibility in terms of inventing anything, in terms of ideologies, or ideas or religion. He came from a common, simple, undistinguished family living in a small village somewhere, according to verse 39, in the Judean hillsides, some non-descript place.

He had no formal education. He rather lived in isolation. Down in verse 80 of this chapter it says that while he grew and developed strong spirit, he lived the whole while in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel. So he grew up in isolation. He grew up away from the social centers, away from interaction with society in general. He certainly made no fashion statement. According to Matthew chapter 3 and verse 4, he wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. That was his daily, every day wardrobe. Nor did he make any comment on life-style diet. In the same verse it indicates that he ate locusts, no doubt dried out and perhaps cooked, and crunched them down, covered with wild honey.

He had no involvement in any formal institution. He wasn't associated with the priesthood, though he came in a priestly line. He wasn't associated with royalty at all. He wasn't associated with any of the official institutions of his hour, his day. He founded no institutions. He started no real movement. He was responsible for no organization, no new religion. In fact, the people in religious authority at the time resented him. They resented him fiercely. He resented them also and described them as a bunch of snakes.

The ruler at the time, a man by the name of Herod in the Herodian line, imprisoned John. He was held in prison until Herod was moved to lustful excitement one night as he watched a young girl dancing. And in the midst of his excitement wanted to give her anything and she asked for the head of John on a platter. John was despised by many. In his lustful excitement, the foolish king did what she asked and had John that night decapitated and served his head on a plate to the party. He was treated with such terrible disrespect and disdain. He was little more than a man to be decapitated for the pleasure of a girl and a man she had excited.

Even his ministry was brief, his fifteen minutes of fame, to borrow the common vernacular, was short. His appearance on the world's stage didn't last long. And he himself tried to bring it to a rapid end. His star intentionally faded fast.

There isn't really anything in his life of normal human features associated with greatness. And that's why it says in verse 15, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Certainly not in the sight of men, although he did garner a small following who understood that he was a true prophet of God and who believed in him and who were loyal to his message. And they were so loyal to him that he himself had to push them away toward Christ, increasing the speed with which his own star faded from the sky.

But as far as the general assessment of the world would be concerned, he doesn't find his way into their categories of greatness. But in God's eyes, he was great. The word great is *meegas* from which we get mega. He was a mega star as far as God was concerned. By the way, that is also used of Jesus in verse 32 where the angel who announces the birth of Jesus in verse 26 to Mary says of Jesus, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." Notice it doesn't say "in the sight of God." He was great, not just by someone's perspective, even God's perspective, He was great in the absolute sense of greatness because He, of course, was God in human flesh.

Going back to John in verse 15, "He will be great." The question is asked then, "How great because great is a relative term?" It's a relative term even in the way we use it. We say someone is great but that's relative to some environment which we have in mind. There are all kinds of greatness. What is John's level of greatness?

The answer comes in chapter 7 later on. And we'll look at this, of course, in detail when we get there in a few years. But Luke chapter 7 and verse 28 it says, "I say to you," Jesus is speaking here, Luke 7:28, "I say to you, among those born of women," and that includes everyone, obviously, "there is no one greater than John." Now Matthew 11:11, Matthew records the same truth. He has a few different words. Matthew 11:11 records Jesus saying, "Truly," or verily, or amen with solemnity and emphasis I say to you, "Among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John." He is not only the greatest, he is the greatest who has ever lived. That's an amazing commendation.

Here is the greatest man ever born. "Born of women" was a common, ancient expression referring to humanness, for obvious reasons. Jesus said, "No greater human being has ever lived." Greater than Enoch who walked with God and he was not for God took him. Greater than Noah who was spared the Flood. Greater than Melchizedek, that great king of Salem, priest of the Most High God to whom Abraham paid tithes. Greater than Abraham, the father of Israel, the friend of God. Greater than Isaac, greater than Jacob, greater than Joseph. Could he be greater than Moses, the great lawgiver? Greater than Samuel, greater than Samson, greater than Gideon, greater than David. Could he be greater than Elijah taken to heaven in a chariot? Greater than Elisha, the great prophet. Could he be greater than Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and all the other prophets? Yes, he was greater than all of those listed in Hebrews chapter 11 as the monumental heroes of the faith. This is the greatest Old Testament person who has ever lived, the greatest of all people in the time of promise, the greatest in terms of task and privilege, the greatest. He is the greatest.

And his greatness is not measured by any of the normal ways in which the world measures greatness, none of them. In fact, from the worldly perspective he really achieved nothing of lasting value. He was, in fact, hated, despised and decapitated.

But he was great, according to verse 15, not in the sight of men particularly, but in the sight of the Lord. Now let me just tell you about that phrase. "In the sight of the Lord" or "In the sight of God" is a phrase used many times in Scripture. It is used many times by Luke. He uses it several times in this gospel, including back in verse 6 referring to the fact that Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous in the sight of God. But he also uses it innumerable times...or numerous times, I should say, in the book of Acts. So Luke uses the phrase, "In the sight of God," of "In the sight of the Lord" both in his gospel and in the book of Acts.

Paul used it. Paul used it many times. I could probably count up nearly ten times that Paul used this phrase. He used it in 2 Corinthians maybe five times or so. He used it in writing to Timothy in a couple of places. Peter uses it, 1 Peter 3:4. James uses it, James 4:10.

So it was a common expression. And what it simply means is divine approval, divine favor. He will be great as far as God is concerned. He will have divine approval. That's the general sense. He will be great as far as bearing God's approval is concerned. He may never gain the approval of men. He will have the approval of God. Now that's a general understanding of the term. But inherent in that is a very specific reality that you need to understand, and that is this, no one is ever approved by God whose sin has not been covered. Do you understand that? So inherent in the generic statement "approved by God" is that this man will be a justified man. He will be made righteous. He will be a saved man. He will be a man to whom the Lord imputes righteousness. He will be a man covered by the righteousness of God. So you have to look at divine approval in the general sense as having a specific internal component of justification. That's... That's the idea in Romans chapter 2 and verse 13, "Not the hearers of the law are righteous before God but the doers of the law are justified." It's talking about God giving to a person a covering of righteousness as well as a capacity for obedience to His holy law. That's conversion. That's salvation. That's justification and its partner, sanctification.

So this is a promise. Listen to this, very important. This is a prophecy. This is a pledge from God through the mouth of a holy angel that John will be a justified man. This is a promise of the salvation of someone not yet conceived and is a very monumental point in understanding the divine doctrine of election. God has chosen John for justification for salvation before he was ever conceived. That is an

illustration of how God has chosen all who believe and written their names in the Lamb's Book of Life before the foundation of the world. God was pleased with His Son because He was sinless and God is pleased with anyone who is covered with the righteousness of His Son. And God is pledging that in behalf of John; tremendous, tremendous statement.

John then, the angel is telling Zacharias, has God's approval on his life. He will be right in the sight of God. He will be more than that. He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be justified. That's reserved for those whose sins are forgiven and are covered by the righteousness of God. He will thereby be favorable to God as his parents were by their own faith, as verse 6 indicates. So his greatness is a greatness that's unequalled by any human up to his time, the greatest who ever lived. That must include justification.

So much for the statement of his greatness; let's look at the three demonstrations of it, the three features of his greatness that flow in the text. There is so much here, folks, I'm going to go rapidly. It's going to test the best of you. Hang on.

Number one, his greatness evidences itself in his personal character, his personal character. Verse 15: "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Two things are said immediately about his character: "He will drink no wine or liquor," and "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." Two things are noted there. One has to do with the physical, the external life, personal that he lives. He will neither drink wine or liquor. The other has to do with the internal and spiritual. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

So the angel identifies something about his character on the outside and on the inside. First of all, he will drink no wine or liquor. Liquor is often translated in the New Testament and the Old, strong drink, strong drink, and I'll comment on that in a moment. This demonstrates just generally a temperate lifestyle, a moderate lifestyle, a lifestyle of self-denial. One who wore camel's hair, a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey, had already demonstrated great temperance and somewhat an indifferent attitude toward the pleasures of the world, the dietary pleasures and the wardrobe fashion pleasures of the world he had eschewed or disdained.

This takes us even further. He will not drink wine or liquor as a life commitment. Now I have to talk about this for a brief moment so that you understand what this is saying. Certainly it's saying he's going to be temperate. Certainly it's saying he's going to disdain some of the simple pleasures of life, some of the...some of the comforts of life. He is going to distance himself from those things. He is going to be so preoccupied with the work of God that has been commissioned to him.

But let's talk specifically about what might be behind this. He will drink no wine or liquor. Let me talk about wine for a moment. There were two Old Testament words which he would have known very well for wine. One of them is *tirosh*. It's a Hebrew word for new wine, fresh wine, which is grape juice, unfermented grape juice. It's associated with blessing in the Old Testament. You see the word *tirosh*, you see it in Deuteronomy 7, Deuteronomy 11 and 2 Kings chapter 18, and some other places, and it's simply grape juice. And it was enjoyed and it's associated with the way God blesses, He provides vineyards, and He provides grapes and He provides the fresh, sweet, new grape juice. That's *tirosh*.

Then there's *yayin*, a more familiar word in the Old Testament. *Yayin* refers to fermented wine. There was no refrigeration. The climate of Israel is identical to the climate of Southern California, so that it

is a very warm climate and the summers are very, very hot without refrigeration. Obviously everything would ferment and so the Old Testament had a word for fermented wine, it's the word *yayin*. It's used many places in the Old Testament. The rabbis were concerned about the intoxicating capabilities of *yayin* and so they required that this fermented wine be mixed with water, be mixed up to eight to one, eight parts water, one part of wine in order that it might be diluted. Dilution of that liquid would prevent intoxication. Also the introduction into the water of the fermented wine would act as a disinfectant on the water which was otherwise not free from amoeba and bacteria and whatever. So the rabbis called for a mixture. So they would drink... They would drink either grape juice normally or they would drink this mixture of water and wine. The Old Testament acknowledges the common consumption of those beverages, both new and mixed. It calls for moderation in both. And it rejects drunkenness and a love for drinking.

This is all over the Old Testament. I don't have time to go into all of this. But in Proverbs chapter 20 you have a general statement, verse 1, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise." Wine has the potential to mock you, to turn you into a fool, as it were. Strong drink can make you into a brawler and anybody intoxicated is just not using their mind. Proverbs 21:17 says, "He who loves pleasure will be become a poor man, he who loves wine and oil will not become rich." Why? Because spend all your time drinking, you love to drink and you don't work, you become a drinker. Chapter 23, of course, even a further warning, verse 20, "Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine." And there are judgments pronounced on drunkards. I won't take the time to go through all those. Read the prophet Amos, a brief little book, I think nine chapters or so. And the prophet Amos says there are certain judgments coming on God's people because of sins associated with drunkenness with wine. Later in that prophecy, however, to show you God's view, he says, when the Messiah comes and establishes His glorious kingdom, it will be with sweet wine, in Amos 9, I think it's verse 13.

So God provided that as a beverage, grape juice. The rabbis were wise to say mix that which ferments with water so that you protect yourself against drunkenness. And the Bible warns about loving drinking and it identifies drunkenness as a serious iniquity.

When you come into the New Testament there's a common New Testament word for wine. It's *oinos* and it basically shows the same thing. In the New Testament wine is there. It is to be dealt with in moderation. One is not to linger long beside his wine, that is loving drinking and drunkenness is identified as a serious sin. Wine was used in that society, it was used, remember in John 2 at a wedding. Jesus went to the wedding. When they ran out, Jesus created wine. He created wine, bypassing the earth, bypassing the vineyard, bypassing the vine, bypassing the grape, bypassing the grape vat. He just created wine and you can be sure it was wine that bypassed the curse and therefore it was unfermented new wine. But even fermented wine had a role to play. You remember Paul said to Timothy, 1 Timothy 5:23, "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake." It may have been that he needed to swallow some disinfectant for his own health. Drunkenness, according to Ephesians 5:18, is considered a sin, "Be not drunk with wine in which is dissipation." That's a pagan kind of action.

So wine is dealt with in those terms. It's there. New wine was enjoyed with blessing. What was fermented was wisely mixed so that it purged the water and diluted the intoxicating capability. You weren't to be a love...to love drinking and you never were to be drunk. Now with strong drink you have a different issue, or the word "liquor" as it is translated in the NAS. In Greek it's *sikera*. In Hebrew it's *shekar*. Strong drink means an intoxicating beverage. It comes from a verb meaning "to

be drunk." This is a beverage designed for one purpose and that is to help you lose your self-control, undiluted fermented beverages from fruit or grain, such as whiskeys and beers, consumed for the purpose of intoxication because they wanted to get drunk. They wanted the feeling and the pleasure of drunkenness. Strong drink did have an anesthetic use. Deuteronomy 14:26 introduces it as a feature of life that God has provided. And Proverbs 31:6 tells us who is to use it. It is for those people who are at some point of serious suffering, "Give strong drink to him who is perishing, wine to the one whose life is bitter." People suffering perhaps can be alleviated to some degree with the use of strong drink. But Scripture warns against strong drink all over the Old Testament and certainly implied is any warning in the New Testament such as Ephesians 5:18, or 1 Peter 4:3 against the drunkenness that liquor produces.

So it may be...we could say, "Well John didn't drink wine or strong drink cause he was just going to take the high ground. He was just going to take the high ground. He was going to be a model of virtue. He was going to the top level. He wasn't going to tamper with anything that might corrupt him. He stayed away from the world's wardrobe. He stayed away from the world's diet. He stayed away from the world's beverage indulgence. Just another indication of his being sold out to God." That's possible that there was just some general affirmation on his part along that line and that was by God's designed.

There also is another component to throw in here. According to Leviticus chapter 10 and verse 9, when any priest went down to the temple to do his duty, to do his work at the temple, he could not be drunk. In fact, if he happened to be drunk and he was doing his priestly duty, God had said he might die. Listen to what it says in Leviticus 10:8. "The Lord spoke to Aaron, said, 'Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you,' none of the priests "when you come to the tent of meeting so that you may not die."

I mean, if you go down there and you've gotten yourself in an inebriated situation, you could lose your life, offering some kind of strange fire to the Lord because you're in a drunken condition, doing something that was not appropriate to the ceremonies that were prescribed by God, treating God with such diffidence...or indifference, as to be inebriated when you come into His holy presence. Those could be deadly things. And it may well be that some priests took it beyond just rendering their service in the temple and decided the safest thing to do was never to bring such shame and dishonor to God and so they perhaps would even avow to do that permanently. Certainly John...John's father Zacharias would abide by the prescription of Leviticus 10 whenever he was doing his priestly duty. So priests had some restrictions on drinking as well.

It also is true, according to Proverbs 31:4, that rulers and leaders were never to consume these beverages. It says in 31:4, "It's not for kings...it's not for kings to drink wine or for rulers to desire strong drink." Anybody who is a leader, anybody who has responsibility, anybody who has to make decisions, set examples, should not be engaging in drinking wine or strong drink. In the New Testament elders are not to be drinkers. Of course, elders and pastors are not to be drunk. As Paul's injunction to Timothy, "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake," Timothy may well have been a teetotaler and had to be told to drink some because he too took the high ground and wanted to avoid anything that could bring shame or dishonor or cloud his judgment.

So you could say, well, John is not officially a priest, though he's in a priestly line. He's certainly not a ruler or a king. But maybe he wanted to take the high ground. Maybe he just wanted to take that kind of level of life that lifts you all the way to the top and abstain from all these beverages as a part of his

own personal self-denial.

There's one other possibility. Numbers chapter 6, this introduces a...a wonderful Old Testament vow into the discussion. It was called a Nazarite vow, not meaning from Nazareth, having nothing to do with that, an old Hebrew word meaning "separated." A vow of separation... A Jew could do this, decide I want to separate to God for a period of time. I want to be totally devoted to God. I want to just...I want to walk the high road with God and so I'll take a certain period of days and I will vow this Nazarite vow of separation unto God. The first component in it is this, verse 2, "The Nazarite, to dedicate himself to the Lord, shall abstain from wine and strong drink, drink no vinegar neither made from wine or strong drink, neither drink any grape juice nor fresh or dried grapes all the days of his separation." It was only for a matter of days usually, "Not eating anything produced by the grapevine or even the seeds or the skin." Nothing to do with the grape; he would abstain from that, which was the normal pleasure of the pleasurable beverage of life. So it was a way to devote himself to God by self-denial. Then he would not take the razor to his hair, his beard, he let his hair grow, not giving any concern to how favorably he might look in the face of people, and neither would he touch a dead body so that he would bring upon himself any unceremonial uncleanness. . .any ceremonial uncleanness. So this was the Nazarite vow, but it incorporated this idea of neither drinking of wine nor liquor.

Some have suggested that John may have been a Nazarite for life. There were only two, according to Scripture. Most people just did that for a few days. There was Samson, according to Judges 16, and Samuel according to 1 Samuel 1. Very rare someone would do that their whole life. Maybe John was a Nazarite for life, for life, separating himself. We know he separated himself by living in the desert. We know he separated himself in his lifestyle. It may well be that this was indicative of a life of a Nazarite, although it doesn't mention anything about his hair.

But the point is this. He took consecration to the highest level, to the very highest level. Here was a man who on the outside was a consecrated, devoted, separated man. As well as the outside, though, look at the inside, verse 15, and it's the inside that made the outside possible. He was filled. . .will be, it says, "filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. That will be the pattern of his life. He not only will be a man on the outside devoted to God at the highest level of devotion, but on the inside empowered by God at the highest level as well.

The idea of being filled with the Spirit simply means that he would be under the influencing control and power of the Holy Spirit. His life will be under Spirit control. His life will be dominated by the will of the Spirit. The will of the Spirit, of course, largely expressed in the Word of God, but his life will be dominated by Holy Spirit influence. By the way, the phrase "being filled with the Spirit" Luke uses numerous times in the book of Acts. It simply means God's Holy Spirit will be in control of his life while he's still in his mother's womb.

Let me just add a footnote here. This speaks to the viability of a fetus. The Bible teaches life begins at conception and here is a life capable of being controlled and dominated by the Holy Spirit before it's ever coming into this world, before birth.

It is the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, who has the task of working divine power in the lives of God's people, both Old Testament and New, saving them, sanctifying them, instructing them, sending them, using them. And that control was exhibited...to be exhibited in the case of John while he was still in his mother's womb, so special was this man's life.

Now for most people, for those of us who are filled with the Holy Spirit, that comes after conversion. For John it came at the time of conception. This is not unusual in some special unfolding of God's purposes. Jeremiah, the great prophet, chapter 1 verse 4, "The Word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born, I separated you. I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"

The same thing is true not only of Jeremiah, but of Paul. Galatians 1:15, "When He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me." Paul says God was already involved in my life from my mother's womb.

This incontrovertibly indicates that life begins at conception and the fetus is indeed a person, capable of being under the controlling influence of the Spirit of God. This again is the strongest possible way to express sovereign election, God's sovereign elective choice of John to salvation and to sanctification and to service. This child wasn't even conceived yet and yet the pledge was he would be justified, covered with righteousness, pleasing to God. He would live a consecrated life under the energizing of the Spirit of God which work of the Spirit began while he was still in his mother's womb.

Over in verse 41 when Elizabeth, who was pregnant at the time, six months pregnant, heard Mary's greeting, the babe leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. That was some kind of physical manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Over in verse 67 his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Now that is a powerful family, everybody filled with the Holy Spirit, under Spirit power and influence.

So the first evidence of John's greatness is manifest in his personal character. Secondly, his privileged calling, secondly, his privileged calling. I'm going to go through this one rapidly. Verse 17, the first part of the verse, "And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him." Now we'll get into this in detail so we don't need to cover it all now. This is the high water mark of his greatness, this is the pinnacle of his greatness. This is what made him great. It was his privileged calling. He will go as a forerunner before Him. Him is Jesus Christ, Him is the Messiah, God in human flesh, identified at the end of verse 16, "The Lord their God, and it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him," antecedent of "Him" is the Lord their God. Marvelous to realize the Messiah is God, the Messiah is the Lord. The term "Lord," *kurios*, is used 26 times in Luke 1 and 2, three times of Jesus elsewhere and once here for a total of four. Jesus is the Lord, Jesus is God. And John will go before the Lord God when He comes. John was the prophet who would identify the Messiah. That was his task.

I read to you this morning John 1 verse 6, "There came a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for a witness that he might bear witness of the light that all might believe through him." He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light. Verse 15, "John bore witness of Him and cried out saying, 'This was He of whom I said, He who comes after me has a higher rank than I for He existed before me,'" the eternal existence of Jesus Christ. Verse 23, he said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said," Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3. He was the one in John 1:29 who pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This was his privileged calling.

Now it says, verse 17, that he came as a forerunner before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah. That's so important because the Jews believed that before the Messiah came to set up His

kingdom, Elijah had to come. Where did they get that? Because the last prophet, the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi 3, the Lord said, "I'm going to send my messenger and he will clear the way for Me." Before the Lord came into the world He would send His messenger. Who was the messenger? Chapter 4, the last two verses of the Old Testament, "Behold I'm going to send you Elijah the prophet," Elijah the prophet. Before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord, before the Lord comes in great glory, I'm going to send you Elijah. So the Jews were expecting Elijah. They were expecting Elijah. Elijah was the prototype of a prophet, faithful, powerful, miraculous, bold, uncompromising. He was the prophet of God who proclaimed divine truth unequivocally from God, fearlessly in the face of a ruthless monarch, just like John did. You can read about him in 1 Kings 18.

So the question is, is John Elijah? I mean, if he's announcing the coming of the Messiah, Malachi said Elijah would come before the Messiah comes. And kings in the ancient near east would always send somebody to prepare the road for them and to prepare the people for the royal entry. Malachi said the Messiah will have a forerunner, Elijah. And the question then arose, and it was a legitimate question, John 1:21, I read it again this morning. They said to him, "Are you Elijah?" And John said, "I am not Elijah. I'm not Elijah."

Well that's interesting. He very clearly said, "I am not Elijah." How are we to understand this then? In Matthew chapter 11 verse...verses 13 and 14, and we'll get to this suddenly in just a moment, listen to what Jesus said. John the Baptist has come. He tells them that he's the greatest that's ever lived. Then He says, verse 14, "If you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah who was to come." What? How are we to understand that? Jesus says, "If you accept it." What's it? "If you accept his message, if you accept Me as your Messiah, if you accept the kingdom that I bring, he will have fulfilled that Elijah prophecy." Which means that the prophecy was figurative. It wasn't going to be an actual resurrection of the real Elijah, but one who would come — and here we're back to our text, verse 17 explains it clearly — one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. That's what Malachi was talking about, an Elijah-like prophet, one who would powerfully, boldly, faithfully, uncompromisingly proclaim divine truth fearlessly to God's people and even in the face of a ruthless king. He would be like Elijah.

And so the angel says there's coming one in the spirit and power of Elijah; he's the Elijah that Malachi promised. He's coming to announce the arrival of the Messiah. And Jesus says, "If you believe the message, if you believe the gospel, if you believe Me, he will fulfill that Elijah prophecy. He will be that Elijah-like prophet." Now that leaves room for another thought: What if they don't believe, because they didn't. Well they didn't and therefore even though John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, there still yet must be a future fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Before Jesus comes to destroy the ungodly, to set up His earthly kingdom, there will be in that day before He arrives another Elijah-like prophet who will announce His arrival. Perhaps could be one of the two described in Revelation 11.

So that's the significance of that and we'll see more of that as we go through the gospel, that he would come fulfilling the Malachi prophecy of the Elijah who arrives before the Messiah comes to set up His kingdom if they believed. If they didn't believe, he would just be one of two Elijah-like prophets, the first one the Second Coming before the return of Christ in the Day of the Lord. This is a privileged calling, to put it mildly, to have the honor of pointing to the Messiah, pointing to the gospel, identifying the Savior of the world. And that was his privileged calling.

Finally, his powerful contribution, his powerful contribution: The impact of his ministry is defined for us and it is as great a contribution as any human could ever make. Verse 16, it will be because of John's preaching, "That he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God," verse 16 says. What higher contribution could anyone make than that? The word "turn back" is *epistrephō* in the Greek. I give you that because it's a technical term for "conversion." There are going to be a lot of conversions under his ministry. He's going to come preaching conversion. By the way, *epistrephō* appears in the Old Testament Greek because it's a common Old Testament word for "conversion." It's the New Testament word for "conversion," used by Luke, used by the apostle Paul, used by Peter as well. He's going to preach, calling people to convert, calling Israelites, sons of Israel back to the Lord their God, back from their disobedience, back from their apostasy, back from their rebellion, back from their love of iniquity, back from their self-righteousness.

Now this really was the primary work of the all the prophets. Go through the story of Old Testament prophets and you'll find them all calling to their people saying, "Return, return, come back, be converted to the Lord your God." The noun form of *epistrephō* means "conversion." John was given a ministry of conversion. What higher calling than that, to be the instrument by which God produces conversion?

Down in verse 76, Zacharias said about the child, and God gave him these words to say, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High." This is at his birth, the birth of John the Baptist. "You will go on before the Lord to prepare His way." What are you going to do? You're going to give His people the knowledge of salvation. You're going to tell them about the forgiveness of sin because of the tender mercy of our God with which the sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. That's the gospel, folks, you're going to talk about the Messiah, the Savior is coming. You're going to talk about salvation, forgiveness of sin, the mercy of God, you're going to talk about the sunrise, that's the Messiah who is going to visit us and shine light into our darkness and guide us in the way of peace, that's the gospel. He was a preacher of Messiah. He was a preacher of salvation. He was a preacher of conversion. God was going to use him that way and that's the highest privilege anybody could ever have.

By the way, that ministry is described in Luke 3. When we get into Luke 3, from the beginning of Luke 3 to verse 18 it describes his ministry. We'll see that in detail.

He preached repentance also. Look what it says in verse 17. "He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children." And that, by the way, is a direct quote from the last verse of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:6. What does it mean? He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children. You know what that means? He's going to come with a message that's going to cause conversions in families. That's what he's saying. General repentance, touching all of society, young and old and when it says "turn" that's the Old Testament word used...that is quoted from Malachi 4:6, in Malachi 4:6 the Old Testament word means repent; conversion and repentance, conversion and repentance. What's going to happen, old and young are going to convert because they've repented of their sins and they're going to come back to God by faith in the Messiah and families are going to be reconciled, families are going to be brought together. I think it's in the spirit of Deuteronomy, way back in Deuteronomy 5:29, "Oh that they had such a heart in them that would fear Me, keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever." Sons and fathers, children and adults, coming back to God in repentance and conversion.

He describes the conversion yet another way. He's going to turn the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous. Those who are disobedient. That is a very interesting Greek word, *apeithēs*. It's a great word. It means someone who will not be persuaded, someone who will not believe, someone who's obstinate and stubborn and refuses to believe and obey. It's going to take those people who have stubborn, obstinate, hard hearts and it's going to change their attitude...attitude, their thinking, their understanding, their mindset and they're going to turn toward righteousness.

Wow, he's going to cause people to convert to God. He's going to cause people to repent of sin. He's going to cause people to turn from hardened unbelief and disobedience to a love of righteousness. That's a powerful life, powerful, powerful life. All of this so that verse 17, the last phrase, can occur, "To make ready a people prepared for the Lord." He's going to get people ready for Messiah's arrival.

He had a real ministry of Old Testament conversion, a real ministry of Old Testament conversion. He got people to turn from their self-righteousness and their sin back to God. He was going to bring people to the recognition of their sin and produce repentance. He was going to bring them to the recognition of their hard-hearted, disobedient attitudes and God was going to use him to change their mindsets so they would pursue righteousness. Literally he was going to be used by God to bring about conversions so you would have a group of people ready for the Messiah's arrival. I'm quite confident, of course, that those who did believe in Jesus Christ, many of those who did believe in Jesus Christ when He came, many of those who believed in Jesus Christ after He died and rose again, many of those people had been prepared hearts under the ministry of this great man.

John's great contribution to the kingdom of God was to bring a body of people to spiritual conversion, so to be ready to receive the Messiah when He arrived, to make ready a people. Luke uses the word "people" sometimes for Israel, sometimes for the nations. And here it certainly includes obviously dominating Israel because they were the area where John did his ministry, but this gospel would extend to the world. Such was the angel that...such was the child the angel described as to personal character, privilege, calling and powerful contribution.

I want to close with something that is really mind boggling. Turn back over to chapter 7, verse 28, just one comment here on this verse, ends this message where it needs to end. Luke 7:28, we're right back where we started. I told you at the very beginning how great John was, this great. "I say to you," Jesus said, verse 28, "among those born of women there's no one greater than John." That's the statement Jesus made. But look at the next one. "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." What is that saying? What it's saying is this, contrasting the kingdom of God with something else. John's greatness is not spiritual. John's greatness was, in a sense —

although his message certainly was a message about the kingdom of God — John's greatness was in a task he fulfilled humanly. John's greatness, the fact that he was the greatest person that ever lived was because he was given the greatest task that any man had ever been given and that was he literally could point to and identify the Messiah for the first time. John's great contribution was to point to Christ, to point people to Christ. And so he... No man had ever had that privilege, no man had ever had that honor, no man had ever been at that level of greatness in terms of human calling.

But you have to keep that in perspective. As great as that is in the human realm, even the least person in God's kingdom is greater. Bottom line, spiritual greatness exceeds human greatness. Even the least amount of spiritual greatness exceeds the most amount of human greatness. In the spiritual kingdom of redeemed souls everybody ranks at the top. John was great. From the human

perspective, he had the greatest job any person could ever have, but when it comes to the spiritual realm, he was just like the rest of us cause there's no rank, even the least will enjoy the same eternal life.

I want to close with a thought. As you think about the greatness of John I want to let you know that you're in the kingdom and spiritually we're all great in the sight of God because we've been covered by the righteousness of Christ. But even humanly speaking, we on this side of the cross can approximate the greatness of John. You say, "What do you mean?" Personal character wise we can live at the high, same high level of spiritual commitment, can't we? We can choose to take the high ground. We can choose to live a consecrated, separated, devoted, Christ-like, God-honoring, holy life like he chose to live. Not only that, do we not have the privilege of being filled with the Spirit of God? Are we not promised that the Spirit of God would take up residence in us? And are we not continually enjoined in the New Testament to be being kept filled with the Spirit? We like John can enjoy the highest level of spiritual devotion and the greatest expression of spiritual power in the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We not only share his personal character, we share his privileged calling because we are in this world. He was given the ministry of conversion, according to 2 Corinthians 5. We've been given the ministry of reconciliation. Our job is as ambassadors of...to God...unto God in behalf of Christ to go into the world and to preach Christ everywhere we go, call men to be reconciled to God through the substitutionary death of Christ. We have the same honor of pointing souls to the Savior who takes away sin. We can say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

And in the end, we can also have a powerful contribution as John did. God can use us for conversion. God can use us to bring people to repentance. God can use us to cause people to turn from obstinate, hard-hearted, disobedient unbelief to the love of righteousness and to obedience to God. And God can use us to prepare a people who will be ready when Jesus comes the second time. What a great calling and so has God called us to this greatness as He did John.

Father, we thank You this morning for insight into one of the most amazing and remarkable men. And we're just hearing now what he will be like. We have yet to see it unfold in the text of Luke and already our hearts are exhilarated by this greatness and challenged by the calling in our own lives to the great spiritual joy of being in Your kingdom, which is a greater greatness than anything human. But we too have been called to the same human perspectives as was John: Personal character, privileged calling and powerful contribution. Use us as You did him that we might bring to You glory and honor and in the same time bring none to ourselves but like John say, "He must increase and I must decrease." Continue to teach us, Father, the standard which You have established for our usefulness and our joy and we'll thank You in our Savior's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).