Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived, Part 3
Scripture: Luke 7:28
Code: 42-99

I want you to turn back with me to Luke chapter 7 in our ongoing study of Luke. I told you last Sunday that I wanted to address one particular statement that our Lord made in Luke chapter 7 verse 28 and it will serve to prepare us for our time at the Lord's table.

In Luke 7 Jesus is speaking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist the prophet who heralded the arrival of Messiah. And in verse 28 Jesus said of him, "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John." The phrase "those born of women" was just an old way of saying humans. Among humans, on a human level there is no one greater than John. We might question the assessment of some people but we wouldn't question the assessment of the Lord Jesus Christ. If He said John is the greatest, that settles it, he is the greatest. The greatest man who ever lived up until his time was the only son of an old Jewish priest and his wife Elizabeth. They had been barren all their lives, unable to have any children and yet by miraculous divine intervention God allowed them in their seventies, or perhaps in their eighties, to have a son. This son was chosen by God, prophesied by the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Malachi, miraculously conceived in barren parents. And when being carried in his mother's womb was even then filled with the Holy Spirit, and actually even in a sense prophesied by kicking in his mother's womb.

When he was finally born and his father held him, God revealed special words to his father, Zacharias. And he spoke them to his son. "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God with which the Sunrise, the Messiah, from on high shall visit us to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." That was the great *benedictus*of Zacharias as its known. He spoke it into the face of that little infant, John, holding him in his arms. You, child, will be the prophet of the Most High God, and you will prepare the way for the Lord, the Messiah, the Sunrise, who will bring light to this dark world.

We also learned in the first chapter of Luke that the child, John, grew, became strong in spirit and lived in the deserts, in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel which came, according to chapter 3 verse 23, when he was thirty years old. So he had lived from perhaps early teen years when he would have been considered to be a man on his own, he had lived for all of that

time, from the time he left his home, in the wilderness until the age of thirty, disconnecting from the society around him, from the world around him, from the influences in order that he might have a prolonged desert experience with God to prepare him for the immensity of his responsibility to announce the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah who had been prophesied many millennia before. When finally at the age of thirty, John burst on the scene, he preached salvation...entrance into the Kingdom of God by repentance from sin and faith in God. And John pointed to the Messiah, Jesus, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He even called Him "The Son of God." He identified Him as the Coming One, the Promised One. And Jesus said he was the greatest man that ever lived.

As we pointed out last time, from a human viewpoint, a worldly viewpoint, he didn't start any schools, he didn't found any institutions, he didn't write any books and he wasn't a part of society in anyway. In fact, he was isolated from it all but from the standpoint of Jesus Himself He said he was the greatest who ever lived. Not because of his influence, although it was great. Verses 29 and 30 tell us how great his influence was and other portions of the gospels tell us that all Judea and Jerusalem was going out to hear him preach and they were being baptized with his baptism of repentance to get ready for the Messiah. He had an immense influence over the whole nation of Israel.

But it wasn't his influence, as great as it was, that made him the greatest man who ever lived. There were other men, other prophets who had as great an influence. And his personal character was great as well, but it wasn't his personal character as great as that was that made him the greatest man who ever lived. He was humble. He was bold. He was brave. He was courageous. He was confrontive. He was committed to truth at any price. He was austere. He lived in self-denial and self-sacrifice. He was focused singularly on his ministry. He was faithful to do that ministry. As great as his personal character was, however, it's not that that distinguished him as the greatest person that ever lived. There are others who have been humble, others who have been faithful, others who have been courageous and bold and so forth.

And what really made him the greatest was his privileged calling. And that's what we've been focusing on the last couple of weeks. It was the unique responsibility and privilege that he had to touch the Messiah, to point to the Messiah, to baptize the Messiah with his own hands. He was the promised forerunner. Isaiah 40 verse 3 said there would come a voice crying in the wilderness. Malachi chapter 3 verse 1 said there would come a herald, a prophet before the Messiah. John was the fulfillment of those prophecies. He was the greatest because of his privileged calling. No prophet had ever had such privilege. The prophets had told of a Messiah to come, none...but John...ever was able to touch the Messiah, to baptize the Messiah, to hear the voice of God, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," to see the Spirit of God descend and identify the Messiah...only John.

Here this greatest of all prophets, greatest of all those who had ever lived because of the greatness of his privilege is at the time Jesus says these words in prison, waiting to be executed which he was not many months after this by being beheaded and having his head served on a platter at a party. He was in prison because he had confronted the wickedness and the sin of Herod Antipas who was the ruler of the region. He had pulled no punches, he confronted him about his wickedness, in particular his seduction of his brother's wife whom he then took for his own wife. Herod didn't like it. Put John in a dungeon. Kept him there until he cut his head off to entertain his lusts. So at this time John isn't having, in some ways, the reward that you would expect the greatest man that ever lived should have. In fact, there couldn't be imagined a more tragic ending for this the greatest of all men.

Now we have, in the last couple of messages, confirmed this greatness. In fact, as you go back through our studies of Luke we started talking about the greatness of John back in chapter 1 when the angel came to his father and said you're going to have a son and he shall be great in the sight of the Lord. We also talked about his greatness for the couple of months that we studied chapter 3 and went into his preaching and his ministry. And here we are again talking about the greatness of this man. No one in history up to that point greater because noone had such a monumental honor as to identify the Messiah.

Now everybody knew John was a prophet. Everybody knew he was a preacher from God. All men perceived that John was a prophet, the New Testament says. Some even thought he was the Messiah and he was asked if he was in fact the Messiah. He was fearless and peerless as a preacher, absolutely faithful to his calling. And even after Jesus appeared on the scene and John said, "He must increase and I must decrease," he continued to faithfully preach repentance and faith and that Jesus was the Messiah. No prophet before him was as great and no king before him was as great and no priest before him was as great...noone was as great as John.

And that brings us to this most shocking statement on the backside of verse 28. "Yet he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." You spend three weeks coming to grips with the greatness of John and then one statement like that has some meaning. We now understand how great John is, how great he is even though he's a prisoner. We understand that he's the greatest man who's ever lived at the time Jesus says this. And yet in a shocking statement Jesus says, "Whoever is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." What does that mean?

Well there are a couple of ways that I want you to understand it. First, and I think it's an accurate thing to say this, first, there's a comparison here between a temporal earthly calling and an eternal spiritual reality. That is to say, no matter how great your earthly calling your place in the Kingdom of God is more important, right? So though he had a privileged ministry as a man, though no human being had a more important earthly function, anybody in the Kingdom of God has a greater spiritual

privilege. Kingdom of God represents the sphere of salvation. And by the way, John was also in the Kingdom of God. This is not some kind of contrast which keeps John out of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the realm of salvation where God rules over His people, and John was in the Kingdom. In chapter 13 of Luke and verse 28 Jesus said, "There would be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God and yourselves cast out." The people who rejected John and rejected Jesus, Jesus says you're going to be outside the Kingdom and when you see the Kingdom you're going to see Abraham and all the rest including all the prophets. John is in the Kingdom.

So, in a sense, John can be included in that statement as well. As great as John's temporal privilege was, his spiritual privilege in the Kingdom is greater. The idea is that spiritual and eternal salvation is better than any physical, temporal duty no matter how important it is.

But I'm not content to leave it at that because although we had...and I don't want to get caught up in too much discussion about this...we have the concept of the Kingdom of God as the sphere of salvation over which God rules His people. The form of that Kingdom can be distinct. In other words, let's just make it real simple. In the Old Testament the Kingdom had a certain promise attached to it. In fact, it was really the Kingdom of God filled with people who were believing in a promise because Messiah hadn't come, redemption had not yet been made. The New Covenant had not been ratified. The sacrifice had not been offered that would take away sin so they lived in the Kingdom in the era of promise. We live in the Kingdom in the era of fulfillment. All that they looked for we have. All that they hoped for we understand. All that they believed would come we know has come, did come.

And so, when John came preaching, he preached repent for the Kingdom of God is...what?...at hand. There's an element of the Kingdom, there's a form of the Kingdom that is near, it's imminent, it's going to come with the Messiah. And it was that form of the Kingdom that can be characterized as the fulfillment rather than the promise. Jesus came preaching essentially the same message, preaching repentance and the coming of the Kingdom. That was John's message in chapter 3 and that was also Jesus' message as He proclaimed the same thing that John did. So they were preaching there's a form of the Kingdom coming...there's a form of the Kingdom coming that's not here yet. What is it? Well, it's not a different sphere of salvation, it's the Kingdom of God in its fulfillment as opposed to in its promise. That's one way to understand the distinction.

So, with that in view, understanding that, we come then to a second sense in which we are greater than John. The greatest in the era of promise is surpassed by the least in the era of fulfillment. That's the idea.

Now let me show you this. Turn to Luke 10:23 for a minute, Luke 10:23. Now in Luke 10:23 Jesus says to his disciples, speaking to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see." You know, you're really privileged because you see things...verse 24...that many prophets and

kings wish to see. They wanted to see what you see. They didn't see it. They wanted to hear what you hear. They didn't hear them. You are blessed. What's He saying to the disciples? Because you're living with Me, walking with Me, you're listening to Me, you're seeing the miracles that I'm doing, you're hearing the message that I'm preaching. They heard all the great discourses of Jesus. John the Baptist like other Old Testament prophets, like the people in the era of promise, didn't hear that. John even after he identified Jesus went about his own ministry, was then put in prison, never really had exposure to the ministry of Jesus, died before Jesus was crucified, risen, ascended, died before the Holy Spirit was sent to inaugurate the church. John didn't know any of that. John was living very much like all the people in the era of promise lived, living by hope...living by hope.

Here we are so much more privileged than John because we don't live in the era of promise, we live in the era of fulfillment. We have the full revelation of the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. John was in prison, languishing in prison, wondering why he was there, how this could be reward for being the faithful prophet. Why doesn't Jesus confront the apostate religious leaders? Why doesn't He overthrow the pagan Romans? Why doesn't He save the people from their sins? Why doesn't He establish the Kingdom promised in the Old Testament? John had all those questions, you remember, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was in fact the Messiah. When the report came back about the miracles of Jesus which were a foretaste of Kingdom power, John was satisfied but still he died in hope. John never saw the impact of Jesus. He never knew of Jesus' arrest or His trial or His death. He never knew about His glorious bodily resurrection. He never knew about the ascension into heaven at the right hand of the Father from which He dispatched the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to inaugurate the church. He didn't know about that.

And he never knew anything about the meaning of all of that which is explained in the epistles of the New Testament. John didn't know anything about the Second Coming. He never heard the Olivet Discourse, Jesus own sermon on His Second Coming. He didn't have the opportunity to read about the glorious return of Jesus Christ, the establishment of His Kingdom in the book of Revelation. John was a part of the crowd at the end of Hebrews 11, those people who were never really made perfect without us, those people who came up short of the fulfillment. John couldn't preach a sermon on the cross, couldn't preach a sermon on the resurrection. John in that sense couldn't give the gospel the way we give it. He couldn't preach about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He couldn't preach about the return of Jesus Christ. Never knew that.

And you want to know how privileged we are? We know all of that...all of it. So the least of us in the age of fulfillment is greater than John in terms of the message that we have. What a privilege. He pointed to the Messiah, he was the one who literally announced the arrival of Messiah, but now we are commissioned by that Messiah to proclaim His truth to the world. And we know what John never knew. Yes he was the greatest in the age of promise, but the least of us in the age of fulfillment is greater...greater privilege because we have a full and glorious message. We know the full record of

the life of Jesus in the four gospels. We know the full record of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world recorded in the book of Acts. And then we have all the epistles in the New Testament to explain to us all the meaning of the work of Jesus Christ and the purpose of God in salvation. And then we have the book of Revelation to understand how it all ends in the glorious return of Jesus to establish His earthly Kingdom, and then the new heaven and the new earth and the glories of eternity as well as the horrors of eternal punishment. We know it all.

We also have a unique presence and power from the Holy Spirit. John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. That was unique to him as a prophet. And yet all of us, all of us are filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of our opportunity to come to Christ. We are indwelt by the Spirit of God. Once the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall be witnesses, Jesus aid in Acts 1:8. We have the New Testament, the glorious inspired record of the full gospel of Christ. We have everything we need. We have the full message. John didn't have that. We understand truth that John never knew, that nobody ever knew.

Paul identifies these as *musterion*, mysteries. When you think of a mystery you think of Agatha Christy, or something. Or you think of something that's a riddle you can't figure out. That's not the biblical use of it. Ephesians 3:9 defines what a mystery is. Ephesians 3:9 says, "A mystery which for ages has been hidden in God." A mystery is something hidden until the New Testament. There are things revealed in the New Testament that aren't in the Old Testament discernable, understandable. They may be there in a veiled way, they may be there in a shrouded way, but not in clear way. They may be there shadowy, but not in focus. And Paul saw himself as an Apostle of the mysteries. The whole New Testament is God unfolding the things that have been hidden in Him.

For example, Colossians 2:2 and 3 talks about the mystery of the incarnation. Though you have in the Old Testament some hints that the Messiah will be God and man, a virgin will conceive, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9, His name will be Mighty God, Eternal Father. Those are hints that the Messiah is God/Man, but it was not crystal clear. It was not easily discernable. The mystery of the incarnation wasn't fully revealed until Jesus came and that's one mystery John did understand because John did identify Jesus as the Son of God.

But then there's the mystery of Israel's unbelief and that's recorded in Romans 11:25 to 29. In the Old Testament it wasn't revealed that when the Messiah came Israel would reject Him. Israel's unbelief is mystery in the Old Testament but it's unfolded in the New. John didn't know that mystery. And then there is the mystery of Gentile salvation. Also in that same passage in Romans 11 as well as Romans 16:25 to 27, the Bible talks about the mystery of the Gentile salvation. The scope of Gentile salvation is not indicated in the Old Testament. If you just read the Old Testament you might

come to the conclusion that when the Messiah comes Israel is all going to be saved and some Gentiles, when the fact of the matter is the predominant number of people to be redeemed and brought into the Kingdom will be Gentiles. That great purpose of God to save sinners from all the world is shrouded in the Old Testament.

And then there's the mystery of the one body in Ephesians 2:11 to 22, that the Jew and the Gentile would be brought together in one body. That's hard for a Jew to understand, particularly an Old Testament Jew since everything in their prescriptions from God kept them separate. The day would come when they would all be one and the middle wall of partition would come down. That mystery John never saw.

He never saw the mystery of the indwelling Christ. Colossians 1:25 to 27 says that there is a mystery hidden in the past and now revealed that the Messiah will live in His people, that He will take up residence in them spiritually. John didn't understand that, the indwelling Christ what Paul celebrates as being in Christ and Christ in us.

And then in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 Paul talks about a mystery of lawlessness. But that's something they didn't understand, they thought when the Messiah comes He will stamp out evil and then everything will be righteous. The fact of the matter is the Messiah came and evil gets worse and worse and worse. There's this mystery of lawlessness. The Old Testament didn't see it, John didn't see it.

First Corinthians 15:51 there's the mystery of the Rapture of the church. Nothing in the Old Testament to describe the Rapture, the catching away of believers into the presence of the Lord. That's why it's called a mystery in that verse. John didn't understand that.

And then you have in Ephesians 1 what I would call the mystery of the future, the mystery in verses 8 to 10 of summing up everything in Christ, how the whole universe will be summed up in Christ. Paul calls it a mystery. John didn't understand that.

So here was John without all the mysteries being revealed. Didn't see the cross, didn't see the resurrection, didn't see the ascension, didn't see the sending of the Holy Spirit, the establishment of the church, didn't see the power of the movement of the gospel, didn't even have the full gospel. Didn't understand Israel's unbelief, Gentile salvation, Jew and Gentile one in Christ, didn't understand that the Messiah spiritually was going to dwell in the life of every believer. Didn't understand the unfolding escalating mystery of lawlessness. Didn't understand the Rapture. Didn't understand how everything was going to move toward a consummation summing up everything in the glory of Christ. And he didn't understand the theology of justification by the death of Jesus Christ. Couldn't

understand it because he didn't know there was a cross in the plan.

Here we are, we understand fully the depravity of man, Romans 3 lays it out for us, doesn't it? Really actually Romans 1 to 3. We understand the full meaning of Jesus' life and death. We understand that great verse 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." We understand all of that. We can preach the cross. John couldn't preach the cross. We know that the preaching of the cross is to those that perish foolishness, but to those who believe it's the power of God unto salvation, right? We celebrate the cross, that's why we're here this morning. We also preach the resurrection. We know that noone can be saved if they don't confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their heart that God has raised Him from the dead. We have a clear understanding of death. We have a clear understanding of divine judgment. We have a clear understanding of heaven and hell. All that only vague in the Old Testament. We understand the full gospel: justification, saved from the penalty of sin; sanctification, saved from the power of sin; glorification, saved from the presence of sin. We understand the sweep of the gospel. In Romans 1, a familiar and beloved sixteenth verse, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The power is in the gospel, John didn't know the gospel. But we know that powerful gospel. We know the Word of God that the Apostle Paul says can make us wise unto salvation, the power of God which is profitable for teaching...the Word of God, I should say, which is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate or perfect, thoroughly equipped for every good work. We have the mind of Christ, the mind of God in its fullness.

The reason that we are in the Kingdom of God in its fulfillment age greater than John is not because of our personal character exceeding his, or our personal influence exceeding his, but because of our privileged revelation. John knew Jesus was the Messiah. We know a lot more than that...a lot more. And so we not only have this truth but we have received the Holy Spirit, "You shall be witnesses after the Holy Spirit has come upon you," so now we have the truth, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the anointing from God that leads us into an understanding of that truth. He's called the Spirit of truth. He shows us the truth. He reveals it to us. We have an anointing from God, John says, so that we don't need a man to teach us because the anointing from God teaches us all things. We have the truth, we have the Spirit and we have the mandate, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Right? We are a force that far transcends John the Baptist, as great as he was. We have a very clear calling. Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, you know it's one of my favorite portions, but it's...you go back there all the time because it's so central. It's like the pole in the middle that holds up the whole tent of the New Testament. Second Corinthians 5:18, now listen to this, "Now all these things...all these things regarding salvation, the gospel...all these things are from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

Now John had a certain ministry of reconciliation. His responsibility was to go out and preach repentance and faith in God and get sinners to be reconciled to God, to confess their sins, to trust in God to get ready for Messiah. And we...we have this new ministry of reconciliation, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them and He's committed to us the word of reconciliation therefore we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us...we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. There is the definition of our ministry. This is our greatness, folks. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation, verse 18. We have been given the message, or the Word of reconciliation, that's the gospel, verse 19. We are therefore ambassadors for Christ and God is actually entreating through us as we beg people to be reconciled to God for Christ's sake. John brought men up to Christ and from there on past Christ the ministry is given to us. And so we are sent to the world who are greater than John, not in personal character, not necessarily in personal influence, but in privileged calling because of the greatness of the full gospel. The least believer with the least understanding of the gospel has a greater message than John because it's the message of fulfillment. And it all focuses at the cross, doesn't it?

The gospels tell the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The epistles give us its theological meaning and implications both for understanding and behavior. And we understand all that. And the book of Revelation tells us how it all will end. The cross is the point at which promise became fulfillment. So all of us on this side of the cross are greater than those on that side in the sense that we know the whole glorious truth. And our call to be ambassadors proclaiming it, this is our calling, yours as well as mine.

Father, as we come to the end of our time this morning, we are reminded again that life is simple for a Christian. We're ambassadors, called for the proclamation of the gospel, that's why we're here. That's really the only reason we're here. Help us to be faithful in that. Help us to understand something of the greatness of this privilege. I suppose if we were given in some official encounter with You a personal calling, if You took us to Your very throne and looked into our faces and said, "This is what I want you to do for Me,"if we were like Paul caught up to the third heaven, maybe we would feel a little more strongly about the glory of this calling. But that's a sad reflection of our fallenness for this is what You have done, You have saved us to make us witnesses and You have given us the full message of fulfillment, the message, the truth, the Word of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation to go out and by the power of God through us beg men to be reconciled to God, thus we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ. What a great privilege to point to Him from this side with all the fullness of New Testament truth at our disposal. May we be faithful.

As we come to the cross now, it is to look at that cross and understand that therein is our redemption. May we examine our hearts and be sure there is no sin or thought or word or deed, may we with pure

hearts come before You to honor Your Son and our Savior and may we never ever underestimate the immensity of our privileged calling as ambassadors for His glorious gospel. May this be a reminder as we contemplate His sacrifice for us.

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