

The Greatness of Jesus

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[0 : 00] And as always, if you find it helpful, there was an outline inside the notice sheet. There was a spelling mistake. There's a missing word right at the start to keep me humble on the outline today.

Now, I think Matthew chapter 11 is amazing. It's an amazing bit of the Bible. But I wanted to admit at the beginning that there's one man in particular who helped me understand this bit of the Bible and really sort of amazed me by it, a guy called Don Carson.

And so much of what I say today is his thinking about this passage. And I wanted to say that now rather than constantly quote him through the sermon. So that was my thinking.

Now, much more importantly than which human beings kind of explain a Bible text to us, it's God's word. And our desire is that we all encounter God as he speaks to us wherever we stand with him just now.

So let's pray for that. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for sending Jesus into our world that we can know you through him. This morning, Father God, we seek your face.

[1 : 04] Please give us eyes to see you and hearts that are willing to change and follow you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if this is a common experience among us this morning.

Do you ever roll out of bed in the morning, yawn, stretch, look in the mirror and say to yourself, I am greater than King David?

You ever do that? Ever think to yourself, I am greater than Abraham? Because if you don't ever think that, then you're not being biblical.

Just have a look again at verse 11, really the key to unlocking the passage this morning. Verse 11, Jesus says, I tell you the truth, among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Just follow that through. John the Baptist is greater than anyone who would ever come before him.

[2 : 07] And yet, if you're a Christian here this morning, even if you're the least Christian, the kind of the bottom of the pile in the kingdom of heaven, you're greater than John the Baptist.

So what does Jesus mean by that? Of course, on some measures of greatness, you're not as great as people who came before John the Baptist. You don't have David's military might.

You don't have the wisdom of Solomon. So what's the measure of greatness that Jesus is using here when he addresses the people? Clearly that really matters. For all around our lives and around Glasgow, we'll find different people defining greatness in different ways.

And we might try and be great by following one of them. Surely when it comes to thinking, how do I be great? We want to use the same calculator that Jesus uses for greatness because we follow him.

So what does he mean? Well, let's work it out. There are three parts to the scene. And the first part is a portrait of a discouraged Baptist. There's no point beating about the bush.

[3 : 13] John the Baptist is discouraged. Just have a look again at verse 2 with me. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?

Why? Why does he say that? We've been in a series in Matthew's Gospel. And this is our last sermon in the series. In this section, it's as though Matthew summarizes some of the key ideas we've had in Matthew chapters 8 to 10.

In those chapters, Jesus has announced his arrival into the world as God's promised rescuing king. And he's done that by performing miracles, by doing things that only God can do.

He has power over sickness, over death, over evil, over nature. But there's this great mystery as he starts to establish who he is.

And it's, what is he doing here just now? People were expecting, because of the prophets, that God's rescuing king would come into the world and he'd bring judgment and the world would end. [4 : 19] If Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed one, the Christ, what is he doing in Nazareth in 30 AD? Why hasn't the world ended? And the answer came in chapter 9, in verse 2.

Verse 6.

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. That's why Jesus has come. He's on a mission to forgive sins.

And that is absolutely key for you to understand if you're going to make the most of your life today. Because we live in the times, still waiting for Jesus to come in glory, when Jesus is on a mission and he's sent his church on a mission to forgive sins.

The times when anybody in the world, whatever you've done, whoever you've become, you can come to Jesus and be completely forgiven for everything you've done.

[5 : 25] We see that in his miracles, the kind of mission that he's on. So the despised can come to him and he welcomes them. Even Matthew himself, a tax collector, hated at the time.

The unclean can come to him and he cleanses them and restores them. Even a leprous man. The sick are healed, even the dead are raised around Jesus.

And so Matthew chooses his words very carefully when he wrote verse 2. He says, John heard what Christ was doing. And that jumps out at you if you're reading Matthew's gospel.

Because it's the first time that Matthew is referred to Jesus as the Christ. The Christ was this title. In Hebrew it's Messiah. And the title is for God's promised rescuing king.

The one who's been awaited for hundreds of years. Matthew is basically saying in verse 2, By now I have established for you, with my eyewitness account, of what Jesus did, that he is the Christ.

[6 : 31] And yet John the Baptist is discouraged. Are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else? Why?

Well, John the Baptist is in prison. And he was this prophet who came to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. Matthew told us about him in chapter 3.

I'm going to read some bits from chapter 3. They're going to come on the screen. But you can turn back if you want. The prophet, in verse 3 of chapter 3, it says this.

This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah. A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him.

That's what John's there to do. So what did John preach to the people to prepare them for meeting the Lord as he comes? Well, it was a message of repentance, of turning away from our wrongdoing.

[7 : 26] And a message of the judgment people would face if they didn't turn back to God now. Verse 7. John the Baptist said this. You brood of vipers.

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. The axe 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.

Imagine if you heard John the Baptist speaking like that. And then Jesus arrives and he goes around healing people. And welcoming people.

Where's the fire? From what we can see here, John the Baptist doesn't yet understand the cross. He doesn't understand yet Jesus is the king who one day will come in glory to judge.

[8 : 30] And there will be a horrible judgment for those who have rejected him. But right now he's come to take that judgment on himself. So that he can save people from their sins.

He's come into the world as the suffering Christ to die on the cross in our place. And so Jesus has to explain that to John. And he explains it using Old Testament passages.

That's what's going on. So have a look with me at verse 4. The response by Jesus to the followers. 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.

Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. Well Jesus here in Matthew 11 is quoting two Old Testament passages. About the Messiah and what he'll do.

[9 : 29] Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61. But Jesus is doing something more than that. And it's a bit like this. If I was to say to you this morning, For God so loved the world.

What's the next line? That he gave his only son. Lots of Christians know that line. Where is it in the Bible? What chapter of the Bible? Yeah, John chapter 3.

Lots of people know that. Don't worry if you don't. But lots of Christians know that. That that verse is from there. Just for a few words, the whole verse comes into our mind. Well John the Baptist knew his Bible very well.

And so Jesus knew that when he quoted these verses to John's followers. And they got back to John. John would know the references. You think, oh yeah, that's Isaiah 35. That's Isaiah 61.

And crucially, Jesus misses some bits out from what he says. In Isaiah 35, listen to the promise about the coming Messiah that Jesus quotes. Verse 5. That's what Jesus said.

[10:38] But look at verse 4, the preceding verse. Say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear. Your God will come. He will come with vengeance.

With divine retribution, He will come to save you. You see what's happened? Jesus quoted the words about salvation. And He left out the words about judgment.

And He does the same thing with Isaiah 61. He quoted that the good news is preached to the poor. Let me read you from verse 1 of Isaiah 61. The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, the Messiah, because He 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. Jesus stops. Verse 2.

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God. Jesus is missing out the words about judgment. John the Baptist, the disciples, the Jewish people, they thought the Messiah comes once, to save the people from their enemies, and to judge their enemies, and destroy them.

[11:49] Deliverance and judgment together. And Jesus is pulling apart those two events for them. People ultimately need to be saved from the enemy within, from our own sin. And so Jesus has come to save them, and the times that have been predicted by the prophets are being fulfilled clearly before their eyes.

But the day of judgment, of the vengeance of our God, is still to come. And so Jesus gives John's followers this encouragement. Verse 6. Blessed is the man who doesn't fall away on account of me. See what he's saying? Don't miss the Messiah. Look at what's going on. Don't reject him, just because he doesn't come as you expected. Look at the way the promises are being fulfilled, and trust him.

And for us today, isn't it an encouragement? You know, one of the reasons I'm a Christian is the way that Jesus fulfilled these Old Testament promises, given hundreds of years before.

We must turn to him for the salvation we need. So that's our first point, the portrait of a discouraged Baptist. Secondly then, we have the portrait of a defended Baptist.

[13:01] You see, if you were there, and you saw John the Baptist followers come in, and ask those questions, you might think a bit less of John the Baptist for having sent those people with the questions.

And it looks as though the people at the time were already being quite critical of John the Baptist, because he was a bit weird. He was unusual. He was out in the desert.

He wore clothes made of camel's hair. He ate locusts and wild honey. And Jesus warns them, don't underestimate John, verse 7.

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 king's palaces.

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.

[14:05] I tell you the truth, among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. So John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God, and more than that, he was a man the prophets had promised.

He's one who was prophesied about. In Malachi, the Lord had promised someone would come and prepare their way for the Lord, for the Messiah, and John is that man. Now it's in that context of John fulfilling the prophecy and preparing the way for Jesus that Jesus makes that extraordinary claim about John the Baptist.

Among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. That's a pretty broad category of people. The people who've been born of women. Jesus is saying nobody is greater. Nobody who came before John the Baptist. Why, Jesus? Why is John the Baptist that great? Because John the Baptist, says Jesus, prepared the way for me. Because John the Baptist introduced me. Just think about what that tells us about Jesus. You know, I sometimes meet people and you're talking about Jesus and they say, did Jesus really ever make any of these claims to greatness?

[15:23] Wasn't he just a good teacher? Just imagine, if I got up this morning and said, before I start, I'd just like to thank Gordon and pay tribute to Gordon for leading our service, opening our time together this morning.

In fact, I just wanted to share with you, Gordon is the greatest man who has ever, ever lived because he introduced me this morning.

It's extraordinary. That's what Jesus is saying about himself.

John's function was to point me out. That's what makes him the greatest man who's ever lived. As far as we know, John the Baptist didn't perform any miracles.

But he introduced people to Jesus and he told them the truth about him. And that's what made him great. So let me ask you this morning, isn't that what you would like people to say about you?

[16:24] You know, what do you want to be remembered for when you go to your grave? When people go to your grave after you've died, what are they going to remember about you? People will remember things about you.

What would you like it to be? You know, what about this? He wasn't the richest person. He wasn't the cleverest person. He wasn't the sportiest person.

You know, he wasn't even the most popular person. But everything that he said about Jesus was true. Make that your ambition. Make that what you'll strive for and make sacrifices for.

For in the eyes of Jesus, the only eyes that count, that's what makes you great. What do you want to be remembered for? Everything he said about Jesus was true.

I wonder, what could we do now in our lives to make sure that's what we're remembered for? What could we do as a church at St. Silas so that we're remembered together for that? So we've had the portrait of a discouraged Baptist, the portrait of a defended Baptist, and thirdly, we get the portrait of an eclipsed Baptist.

[17:34] Look again at verse 11. We've already started to look at it. Among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist, yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Well, Jesus must be calculating greatness on the same scale on either side of that equation, that statement. What made John the Baptist so great was that he could point out Jesus more immediately than anyone who'd ever come before him in history.

and we live the other side of the cross and the resurrection. So we can point out Jesus and point people to him more clearly than John the Baptist ever could.

You see, John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod and he didn't live to see Jesus die on a cross. If you're here and you only became a Christian last week, if you only became a Christian this morning, you can say, you know, I don't know much from the Bible yet, but I do know that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and he rose again to rule.

You can say that and that's what makes you great. That makes you greater than John the Baptist. I don't know how you feel about that, but I think we should feel really privileged by that. Privileged to live in this period of salvation history that even the very least of us is greater than everyone who came before them because of what, well, everyone who came before John because of what we can say about Jesus.

[19:05] Let's look at how Jesus goes on. Verse 12 is notoriously difficult to translate, but what Jesus is doing is he's going on to explain that through him the kingdom of heaven really is coming.

So he says, verse 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. It is coming, but people thought it was going to come with this big bang and be unstoppable and yet when Jesus comes as the suffering Messiah, people are resisting, they're opposing his mission.

That's what he's describing and ultimately that violent resistance from forceful men who are pushing back as the kingdom of heaven advances, that will lead to Jesus dying on the cross. And so Jesus

urges the crowds not to be discouraged when they see people resisting and opposing the kingdom of heaven.

This really is the time that the prophecies were about. Verse 13, for all the prophets prophesied until John and if you're willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.

In other words, stick with Jesus, keep listening. Jesus challenges us to follow him. He wants us to recognize that the kingdom has come in his arrival just as it was promised.

[20 : 26] Then Jesus tells this profound little story. What was going on is some people were rejecting John the Baptist because he was just too miserable for them. They had their ideas of what they'd expect from a man they'd follow.

John the Baptist, too miserable. Now Jesus has come and he's spending time with the outcasts, the sinners. He's eating with them. He's drinking with them and they think he's a glutton, this Jesus. He's a drunkard. He's not what we were expecting. And Jesus accuses them of being like little children in the playground. That they've made up their own silly little rules in their silly little game and because he won't kind of act in the way they expect, they're rejecting him.

Verse 16, that's what he means when he says, verse 16, to what can I compare this generation? They're like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others, we played the flute for you and you didn't dance.

We sang a dirge and you didn't mourn. For John came, neither eating nor drinking, and they say, he has a demon. The son of man came, eating and drinking, and they say, here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

[21 : 37] You see the problem he's describing? They've made up their minds about exactly what the Messiah has to be like and they're rejecting Jesus because he doesn't fit their framework. John was too ascetic, he must have had a demon in him.

Jesus is too much fun, he must be greedy, there must be some greed going on in there. And Jesus just says at the end, wisdom is proved right by her actions. In other words, instead of coming to Jesus with our framework, our preconceptions about what the Messiah has to be like if we're going to accept him, just come and look.

Just come and listen to Jesus. And as you see the consistency of his life, the balance, the character, the wonder of who he is, you'll see that he acted perfectly.

God is urging us in Matthew 11 to consider how truly great Jesus is. We mustn't let our ideas about what we expect from the Messiah to hold us back from accepting him.

John's disciples were in danger of that, they thought he hasn't brought the judgment and vengeance we were expecting, is it really true? Other people were taking offence and saying, he seems to spend time with people who we thought were sinners.

[22 : 58] Is he really the one we were expecting? And for both camps there's a danger they're going to miss the Messiah. Well I wonder what the big dangers are today. Perhaps one of the dangers is people would think, look I'm willing to accept Jesus as long as I don't have to believe that he performed miracles.

And we need to say, look at the evidence, the evidence for the resurrection. Keep an open mind that if there is a God and he was announcing his arrival into the world, wouldn't we expect him to do things that only God could do?

I wonder if more commonly today in Glasgow, people would reject Jesus as Messiah because they'd think his teaching is socially and morally regressive.

I'm not going to accept that this man could be from God because his teaching about family, about sex, his whole moral framework, his family values, they're just a thing of the past.

They're not good for us now. You see the danger of that? I've made up my mind in 2016 in Scotland that I have my whole moral framework right and if God sends a man who disagrees with me, he can't be from God.

[24 : 13] It's extraordinarily arrogant for us to think like that. But it's often how we drift into thinking. Don't judge Jesus by your own ideas of what the Messiah must be like.

And when we have recognized Jesus as the Christ on the basis of his fulfillment of prophecy, friends, let's really meditate on that verse 11.

Really let that verse change the course of your life that Jesus said, among those born of women, there's not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist, yet he who is the least in the kingdom of

heaven is greater than me.

So we don't judge our success by the same standards as the world around us. We don't judge ourselves by our popularity, by our achievements, by the money that we make, by how well our children are doing at school, by the place that we grew up, by our parents.

We don't judge ourselves by those things. Christians assess ourselves on how we witness to Christ in these last days. You know, when we take stock of our lives and work out how we're measuring up, we have to think, how have I pointed people to Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, through my proclamation, through what I have said about him and my witness to him.

[25 : 33] That's what establishes our greatness in the eyes of Jesus. How are you bearing witness to him? That's what makes us greater than King David, greater than Abraham, greater than John the Baptist.

It's the way Matthew ends his whole gospel. Go and make disciples of all nations. So let me ask, when did you last bear witness to Jesus?

That's where your greatness lies. And so how unthinkable it should be that the very thing that makes us so significant in God's eyes is something that we rarely do.

You know, I remember helping with a church outreach week, mission week, in Cheshire. And I went and stayed there for the week and I met all this church family there who were doing events and things.

And I was hosted by a family one evening and this guy, Simon, was a nice guy. He was a very soft man. In lots of ways, he wouldn't have been thought of as a kind of a great man.

[26 : 42] He was quite a timid man. And me and my friend, Will, Will's kind of ex-army, and we went to have dinner with this guy and his family.

And he said, okay, should we say grace? And we all had to hold hands. And I was holding hands with Will and with Simon who was hosting us and thinking, this is quite weird.

Which some of you may do and that's great, but I was just thinking I wasn't used to that. And then we went to the pub and in some ways, in a very worldly, sinful way, I wasn't very impressed with Simon. And we went to the pub with this timid guy and we were having a drink.

And some people arrived from the village who knew Simon and they said to him, hi, who are these guys? And Simon could have said something very vague. And he said, well, these guys have come to see us because at our church we're trying to tell people what great news Jesus is.

And they've come to help us with that this week. And I thought, Simon is amazing. That is a great man. He is great. Just by speaking up about Jesus.

[27 : 46] You know, I said a few weeks ago when we looked at Matthew 10, my danger, and I'm sure it's your danger as well, is that I alternate between being a bunker bill and a blender brender. I go through my life and sometimes I'm a bunker bill and I stop having friends who are not yet believers.

I spend all my time with Christians and I'm in a bunker where I'm not witnessing to him. Other times, I'm a blender brender. I go out and I spend time with all these people who are not believers but I don't look any different to them because I want to be liked by them and I want to be popular and I don't stand out and speak of Christ.

Well, both those things cripple our opportunity to show true greatness in Glasgow today. Jesus says, you are great but what makes you great is that you can tell people about him, that he died for sins and he is risen to rule.

Let's get on with that together. Let's pray together now. Heavenly Father, we praise you that Jesus is the Christ. We praise you for his unparalleled, unprecedented greatness.

That he would be able to assess the greatness of all who came before him against how they had pointed to him. We marvel at him and we praise you for the mission he gives us now as his people in bearing witness to who he is.

[29 : 06] And so we pray that you will send us out into the world determined to make the most of every door you open for us to speak of Christ.

We pray that out of our love for him and our worship for him we will overflow in a desire to speak about him to those we meet for the praise of his glory.

Amen. Amen.