

**The Messiah Has Come
(A Study in Matthew - Week 4)
Matthew 3:1-6
“Greatness In The Eyes of God”**

Introduction

...“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothes? See, those who wear soft clothes are in royal palaces. What then 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:

See, I am sending My messenger ahead of You; he will prepare Your way before You.

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matthew 11:7-11

Have you ever wondered exactly what God considers as “greatness” ? We know what is considered to be great in the world; money, fame, fortune, power, and the list goes on. But those are all the trappings of a generation that is passing away. But what does God consider to be great? And as Believers, should we not strive to be great in His eyes above all else? Jesus claimed that John the Baptizer was the greatest man who had ever lived. That’s pretty high praise coming from Christ Himself! But then He also went on to say that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven would be even greater than John. How is this even possible? And if it is, then how are we to achieve such greatness? These are very good questions, and I hope that today we can at least begin to discern the answers.

John was a “different” kind of guy, to say the least. The Scriptures tell us that he was filled with The Holy Spirit even before he was born!

For he will be great in the sight of The LORD and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with The Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. **Luke 1:15**

There’s that “great” word again. John became a Believer in Christ before his own birth. In fact, he became a Believer in Christ, before Christ was born! This is the occurrence described for us in **Luke 1:41** when John leaped within his mother’s womb as Mary greeted Elizabeth. Both women were pregnant at the time. John would be born to Elizabeth, and Christ, of course, to Mary. But John had a supernatural faith experience just by being in proximity to Christ in the womb! Now that is a miracle you never hear many preachers taking about. But all things are possible with God!

Now, I realize that none of us could ever hope to experience salvation before we were even born! But that is not the only thing that made John special in God’s eyes. It was in fact his intense dedication to Christ that made him great. And that, my friends, is something that we are all called to emulate. In fact, remember what Jesus said about those who would inherit the kingdom of God:

“...but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (John).” **Matthew 11:11b**

So let us look together at some of the things that made John *great* in the eyes of The LORD, and as we do, let us examine our own hearts to see if we share in these qualities. When we are in the presence of Christ, we will be glorified, never to sin again, fully remade in His image. This is when we will become “*greater*” than John ever was when he was on earth. However, while we are dwelling in this earthly *tent*, we ought to be striving to be all that God intends for us down here. For many, there is a level of satisfaction in being just *lukewarm* followers of Christ. But they will never hope to achieve anything resembling the greatness that God desires for them.

There are three things about John's ministry that I think we should examine, if we are to become effective and pleasing to God in our obedience to *the Great Commission*. Our purpose, our reason for living, if you will, is to go into the world and make disciples. That's exactly what John did. And he was *great* at it. So let us learn by his example. Namely his *message*, his *mantle*, and his *method*.

His Message (vs. 1-2)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Matthew 3:1-2

Now, conventional wisdom would tell us to share John's description and pedigree before telling about his message, but in God's sight, the message is far more important than the messenger. After all, the messenger is merely a vessel. It is the Word of God he carries that matters, and John's sermon was simple and to the point: Repent! It is a word that is desperately lacking in the sermons of our time. Too many pastors are far more concerned with building big churches than they are holy ones. But whether it is popular or not, genuine salvation can only be found alongside genuine repentance. **You cannot stay where you are and go with God!**

The word that John used actually speaks of a change of direction. To turn from a road once taken and heading in a completely different direction. It is not simply to feel sorry for our sins, but rather sorry enough to forsake them completely. Many these days would tell you that Jesus loves you just as you are, and you need not change a thing. But the truth is that He loves you, and that is why He is insistent that you are changed. Sin separates us from a Holy God. We are, as *The Bible* says, "at enmity with Him" (***Romans 8:6-9***). Show me a person who claims to have faith in Christ, but that faith has not changed their direction, and I will show you someone who is merely religious and does not possess a genuine saving faith. These are those whom Christ spoke of when He said:

"On that day many will say to Me, "LORD, LORD, didn't we prophesy in Your Name, drive out demons in Your Name, and do many miracles in Your Name?" Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!'" Matthew 7:22-23

Did you catch that last part? "Depart from Me you **lawbreakers!**" And just who are the lawbreakers? Answer: the unrepentant! These are those who think a mere cheap belief in Christ is all it takes to be saved. They want to stay where they are and go with God! But The Scripture clearly teaches that "faith (*belief*) apart from works (*obedience*) is dead" (***James 2:26***). It's not a popular message these days, and truth be told, it wasn't all that popular in John's day either. But it is still the truth. Apart from a genuine turning away from sin and turning to obedience, no one *has ever*, or *will ever*, be saved.

Many Jews must have been shocked to hear John's message of repentance. After all, it was commonly believed that because they were God's chosen people, descended from Abraham himself, their standing with God was secure. But *The Bible* clearly tells us that "***all have sinned and fall short of God's glory.***" (***Romans 3:23***). And since all have sinned, it stands to reason that all are in need of repentance. You're not a Believer because you were born in a Christian home. You're not a Believer because you regularly attend church. You **are** a Believer, when you have had an encounter with Christ that compelled you to repentance. Simple as that. So the message of repentance is still as important as it was in John's day, unless you want to hear the words on the day of judgment:

"I never knew you, depart from Me you lawbreakers."

If we truly want to be seen as "great" in God's sight, then it begins with the message of repentance; to humble ourselves before the One Who is infinitely holy, to turn from our sin and turn to Christ, for to believe in Him is to obey His commands.

"The one who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father. I also will love him and will reveal Myself to him."
John 14:21

To be great in the sight of God begins with faith, repentance, and obedience. And this was the compelling message of John The Baptist, who, according to Jesus, was the greatest man that ever lived!

His Mantle (vs. 3-4)

For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said:

**A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way for The LORD; make his paths straight!**

Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.
Matthew 3:3-4

It had been some four-hundred years since God had sent a prophet to Israel. The last one was a man named Malachi. And in his parting words, he warned the people:

Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of The LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.
Malachi 4:5-6

So the people of Israel knew to look for Elijah before The Messiah came to set up His earthly kingdom. What they did not understand was The Messiah would be coming *two times*, once as a baby in a manger born of a virgin, born to die on a cross, and then the second time when He will come to set up His kingdom.

But God, in His wisdom, chose to send a prophet in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way of The LORD as Isaiah had promised. And during the Tribulation before Christ returns, God will once again send two prophets to warn Israel of His coming. One of these two prophets will most certainly be Elijah. As to the other, there is some disagreement. Some believe it will be Moses, but I personally believe it will be the ancient prophet of old, namely Enoch. My reason for this opinion (and mind you that is all it is) is that these are the only two men who never died. They will preach the coming of The Messiah, and the antichrist will have them executed, and all the world will watch as they rise from the dead and ascend into heaven (**Revelation 11:1-14**).

So, if you ever wondered why Matthew describes the clothing (*mantle*) of the Baptizer, it is important to understand that he is a type of the Elijah that is to come. And Elijah the prophet had a peculiar way of dressing himself, in fact no other prophet in The Scriptures is described by their wardrobe other than Elijah and John. When the wicked King Ahaziah heard his men describe Elijah's attire, he knew exactly who it was that had spoken to them. He had sent his men to inquire of a foreign god, but Elijah intercepted them and prophesied against the king.

The king asked them, "What sort of man came up to meet you and spoke those words to you?" They replied, "A hairy man with a leather belt around his waist." He said, "Its Elijah, the Tishbite."
2 Kings 1:7-8

Elijah wore a mantle of animal fur and cinched it up with a leather belt around his waist. As far as we know, he was the only prophet ever to dress in this manner. So when Matthew described John's clothing to his Jewish readers, they would instantly know that this forerunner of Christ would be identified with Elijah the great prophet. It is just one more piece of evidence, a clue if you will, to convince the people that Christ was indeed the promised Messiah King.

His Method (vs. 5-6)

Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.
Matthew 3:5-6

John also shunned the finer things of this world, for he longed to be wholly devoted to the calling of God upon his life, to the message of repentance that God had given him. He knew that the luxuries of this world would only seduce him away from what truly mattered. God had supernaturally gifted him as a powerful preacher, and the temptations of this world would lure him to use those gifts to make a great name for himself, rather than live to bring glory and honor to Christ. Avoiding these distractions is what made him *great!* In order to be great in God's sight, a true Believer must humble themselves and seek first the kingdom of God. John's diet may not have been filet mignon, but God sustained him and gave him a voice of authority. If we would be great in our faith, we must always remember what Christ commanded us:

Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
Matthew 6:19-21

And apparently, John had never read any of today's many books on church planting! For they would emphasize the importance of finding a good location, in or near a big metropolitan area. Because if you go where the people are, that is how you build a large congregation, and of course, this will ensure large donations for the offering plates. John didn't do any of that, but rather, he started preaching and baptizing out in the middle of nowhere! And guess what happened next? The crowds started coming to him! Why? Because it was a work of God and not a scheme invented in the imaginings of men. Only God can build a genuine congregation of Believers. It wasn't John's responsibility to go and get the people, it was simply his job to preach The Word, and God brought in the people that He wanted to hear it.

John was fully aware of the temptations that can accompany surrounding oneself with lots of so-called "*creature comforts*". Thus he avoided the places where these things would be altogether. As gifted a speaker as he was (for even his enemies and detractors would acknowledge his giftedness), if he had chosen to live in a place of luxury, how many synagogues in the wealthiest districts would have offered him a pastorate? Quite a few I'm sure. And as a result, he would have been well compensated. But with that kind of "salary package" comes more than a few strings attached. For if the "powers that be" one day conclude that the messages are a bit *too* harsh, then the coffers may start drying up. So in order to maintain one's lifestyle, compromises must be made in the sermons. That's how temptation works; gradually, a little compromise here and there. It doesn't seem like too much at first, until it literally becomes "*death by a thousand cuts*".

John was a fiery preacher, who told it like it was. And he would not allow worldly entanglements and enticements to rule over his soul! He chose to live the life of an eccentric, surviving off only what God provided for him in the wilderness as opposed to what the wealthy people of Jerusalem had to offer. I once heard a pastor in Guatemala say, "*The main difference between us and the Believers that come down from the US, is that you believe in God, but here, we have no choice but to depend upon Him!*" I have never forgotten that statement! And it still brings me a great degree of conviction, for it is so very true. The more you rely on God and shun the things of this world, the greater you will become in God's sight, for without faith it is impossible to please God (**Hebrews 11:6**). I cannot tell you how many people I have seen forsaking any meaningful service to The LORD in favor of seeking more worldly wealth. What they do not realize is; that serving Christ is worth far more than all this world's riches and pleasures.

“So don’t worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink” or “What will we wear.” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.” **Matthew 6:31-33**

Better to live off bugs and honey in the wilderness and have The LORD’S approval, than feast on filet mignon and fall far short of His glory! We can either live for God or for ourselves... for we cannot do both.

No one can serve two masters, since ether he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. **Matthew 6:24**

Being free from the luxuries of this world enabled John to preach what he needed to preach, namely the call for people to turn away from their sins and repent. And we need a lot more preachers these days to tell it like it is as opposed to giving the people **“what their itching ears want to hear”** (**2 Timothy 4:13**). To be considered great in the eyes of The LORD is to speak truth, no matter how unpopular it may become. And trust me, when you do that, there will be a long list of people who will not like you. But I, for one, would rather be what God wants me to be, than what the masses desire of me. Can I get a witness?

So, John the Baptist was great in the sight of God. And I am quite certain that many in his day considered him to be a crazy, wild man! But in the end, it is only what God thinks that truly matters. And we can learn a great deal from the life of this man in the wilderness. An uncompromising man was John, completely sold out with one purpose and message:

Prepare the way for The LORD; make His paths straight!

For that, my friends, is the only real **TRUTH** that matters!