

Greater Than The Greatest

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Date: 06 January 2019

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[0:00] Good morning. My name is Dave. For those of you who I have not met, and it is my privilege! to open up God's Word with you today to Matthew chapter 11. We're going to begin in verse 7.

If you need a Bible, they're on the back table, and they are already bookmarked to today's passage. And as you turn there, this week has reminded me how great a treasure God's Word is.

This is a difficult passage that we're about to read. It's challenging just to get our head around what Jesus is saying. And then after that work is done, just understanding the words that he says, how does that affect us? How does that apply to our lives? What response does he want from us?

That's a second challenge. But God's Word is surprising. And he repays careful attention to it with huge dividends. This passage speaks into my life this week in a way that I did not expect.

And his Word is rich and deep and living and active and powerful in the life of his people because he is alive and powerful and good and he acts. And I want you to know that today.

[1:37] And I hope that you see that today in his Word. This passage holds the key to our joy in every circumstance. No matter how bleak or depressing or conflicted or unsure, this passage is the secret to Christian contentment. Hear it with me, Jesus and his Word.

Beginning in Matthew chapter 11, verse 7. As they, that is, John's disciples, went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses.

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. For from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

[3:02] For all the prophets in the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Father, as we look to your Word, will you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, show us your Son? May we glory in Him. May we find in Him our soul's satisfaction. And Lord, may we rejoice in You. We pray that through the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I have had a frustrating week. Now, I don't plan to unload my issues on you.

This is not my therapy session. That would be a distraction, I think. But, like you, and like every other person on this planet, rich or poor, black or white, healthy or sick, not everything is the way I would like it.

[4:15] And I have been particularly frustrated and dissatisfied this last week or so. Perhaps you can relate. This passage is for you.

Or perhaps you're not just frustrated, but desperate. This passage is especially for you. Or perhaps things are great for you right now.

This passage is for you as well. To make sure you're taking satisfaction in the right things. And to prepare you for the days when things are tough.

Let's begin in verses 7 through 10. As they went away. That's John's disciples.

Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? [5:12] Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I did. And more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written.

Behold, I send my messenger before your face. Who will prepare your way before you. Let's remind ourselves who this John is.

Whose disciples are being sent away. And of whom Jesus is speaking. The people of God had had no prophet for hundreds of years.

And they knew that God was going to send a redeemer. A Messiah. A Messiah who would fulfill God's many promises. And bring justice and repentance. Healing and restoration to the world. And the Lord had promised that he would send ahead of this Messiah. A prophet. To prepare the way for the Messiah. And Jesus quotes one of those prophecies here in verse 10.

[6:11] He's quoting the final book of the Old Testament. Malachi. And this quote comes from Malachi chapter 3 verse 1. Behold, I send my messenger. And he will prepare the way before me.

And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming. Says the Lord of hosts.

And John the Baptist came. Dressed in the same garments. As the prophet Elijah. Preaching as we have already seen in Matthew chapter 3.

Matthew chapter 3. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He was preaching the way for the Lord.

Preparing that way for the Lord. And the people came to him. Now, two Sundays ago, in verses 1 through 6, we saw that even though John had already made this bold proclamation, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

[7:20] Even though John had already proclaimed Jesus. Jesus had not met his expectations. Things weren't going great for John. Why did he have to send his disciples to ask these questions of Jesus?

Why is Jesus here in verse 7 allowing his disciples to depart? Because John is in prison. He was in prison because he had been faithful in his preaching against sin.

And that had angered powerful people. John wasn't sure what that meant. See, the Redeemer was here. So how could the Redeemer's herald be put in prison? Jesus didn't rebuke him for his uncertainty.

Instead, he gently reassured John that he was indeed becoming king. And today we see that Jesus turns to the crowds who now may have been uncertain about John.

Right? John has uncertainties. Is he really a prophet? And Jesus spoke on John's behalf. He told the masses that not only was John a prophet.

[8:25] He was the greatest of the prophets. When Jesus asked the crowds, What did you go out into the wilderness to see? He's reminding them that they already knew and had already received his prophetic word.

They had already responded to him. We read that also back in chapter 3. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to John.

And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sin. Jesus says they didn't go out to see a reed shaken in the wind. And by that he could either mean they didn't go out for the scenery.

Or that they didn't go out to see someone who was easily shaken. He was a man of fierce conviction and confidence. Neither, Jesus says, did they go out to see a man dressed in soft clothes.

They went to see him because, well, not because he was flashy. He dressed humbly like the prophet Elijah before him. And that's exactly what they went to see. A prophet. The prophet.

[9:31] And that's what he explains in verses 9 and 10. When he says, what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you in more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written. Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.

Jesus is here declaring, yes, John was a prophet. He declares John was the prophet. Preparing the way. The way for who? Listen closely at Malachi 3 again.

Behold, I send my messenger. He will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you see, will suddenly come to his temple. Who's coming?

The Lord. And who shows up? Jesus. Jesus is Lord of all. That's the whole point of this passage.

If you look ahead to verse 14, Jesus completes his thought on John's ministry. He says, John is the Elijah who is to come. He's already quoted Malachi 3 and now he's quoting Malachi 4.

[10:41] The second to last verse of the Old Testament is Malachi 4.5.

Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

And Jesus is here saying that John is the Elijah who is to come. More than any other prophet of Israel, Elijah was considered the great, wonder-working prophet.

He raised the dead. He called down fire from heaven. The idea is that the coming Elijah would usher in a period of great power and great change. And when Jesus says that he is the Elijah who was to come, he does not mean that this is Elijah reincarnated.

That goes against everything the Bible has to say about life and death. He's speaking of Elijah's office. In fact, in Luke 1, verse 17, the angel who prophesies announces the coming birth of John the Baptist puts it this way.

That he will minister and prophesy in the spirit and power of Elijah. So John was indeed the forerunner of the coming Messiah.

[11:58] And Jesus is that Messiah. What are we to do with this? Two things. The first comes in verse 11. And the second in verses 12 to 14.

Verse 11. Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than me.

How is John the greatest of the prophets? He wrote no books like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

He never served in the temple. He performed no recorded miracles. How was he the greatest?

Many prophets came before him with longer and better resume. But John did what they only dreamed of.

[13:03] All the prophets who came before him said, The Messiah will come. John said, The Messiah is here.

This is he. The Lamb of God. Who takes away the sins of the world. Where they prophesied, The Messiah is coming. John said, He is here. Where they wondered what the Messiah would be like. John saw him and spoke with them. No prophet had ever seen the Messiah except in a vision. John touched them.

No other prophet had this place, this privilege. That's why Jesus says that John is the greatest among those born of women.

But here's the incredible part. He goes one step further. And he speaks of you and he speaks of me. And he says, Yet, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

[14:12] How can it be that we are greater than the greatest? First, by this, Jesus does not mean that John is separated from the Lord.

We will worship side by side with him on that day. John is not excluded from the kingdom, but John's life ends before the kingdom comes in its voice.

Before Jesus goes to the cross to die in the place of sinners, before Jesus conquers the grave and rises to life on Easter Sunday, before Jesus gives the Great Commission, and before Pentecost.

In his lifetime, John saw the coming of the Messiah, but he never saw the fulfillment of his ministry. And so he was still dealing with the shadows of what was to come.

He still worshipped in the temple. He still offered sacrifices because the sacrifice had not yet been made. He still awaited the salvation that the Lord would bring.

[15:23] He was saved by his faith in what the Lord promised to do. We are saved by trusting in what he has done. John was greater than the previous prophets because while they said he is coming, John said he is here.

We are greater than John because while he said he is here, we say he is risen. At this point, John, the other prophets, and all the people of God had a wonderful expectation of the promised Messiah.

Now we have the experience of him. And someday, when he returns, we will have the consolation. How are we greater than John?

Greater than the greatest? We are in a more privileged position than he is. We have seen the completion of Christ's saving work and we have seen his glory and we have trusted in him and we testify to the watching world Christ is risen.

Christ is Lord. Oh, what grace. We deserve nothing from God except death and hell.

[16:50] But he chooses to grant us so high. And I think that that is the story that Jesus is telling in verses 12 through 14.

Verse 12 may be the most challenging to understand thing that Jesus ever said. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept that he is the Elisha who is to come. When we look at these verses, especially verse 12, the first thing that comes to our mind is, is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Because I'm not sure. See, some see that this is a bad thing. Thinking that Jesus is talking about the persecution of the church. After all, John is in prison as Jesus is saying.

Some see this as a good thing. The idea being that the forceful people lay hold of the kingdom, referring to like a rigorous discipleship. Some see this as both a good thing and a bad thing.

[18:08] There are like seven or eight different views of how to understand the views first. Now, certainly, both ideas are true. The people of God, Christ himself, suffer persecution.

And discipleship is a vigorous thing. So we can't go wrong on either side. But which is Jesus speaking of here? After spending perhaps too much time on this verse this week, I believe it's a positive thing.

Here's why I think that. Verse 12 is difficult to understand on its own. But it is not on its own. Jesus immediately explains it in verses 13 and 14.

He begins in verse 13 with the word for, which means he's explaining verse 12. What does he say? He says, the prophets and the law prophesied.

They proclaimed. They declared the rule and the reign of God. They beckoned people back to the Lord. And they said with one voice, Messiah is coming. And then in verse 14, he concludes that John is the Elijah who was to come.

[19:24] He's not talking, or he's talking about John coming. He's not talking about John's imprisonment. He's talking about John's proclamation, not his doubt. He's talking about the advancement of God's plan and kingdom, not its persecution.

And so I think that context and that explanation helps us to recognize that this is probably not a bad thing that Jesus is talking about, but probably a good thing. One of my favorite preachers of history is Charles Spurgeon.

He also thought that verse 12 was a good thing. He preached a sermon just on verse 12 called Holy Violence, where he understood this to mean that Christians would be ferocious in seeking Christ.

Here is a quote from that sermon. Those who have received the Spirit are violent men. They have a violent anxiety to be saved and they violently strive that they may enter in at the straight gate.

You will observe them when they come to church. There is no yawning with them, no listlessness or inattention, no imagination that if they sit in church the hour and a half they will have done enough.

[20:41] No. They hear with both their ears. They look with both their eyes and all through the service they have an intense desire that they may find Christ. Meet them as they go to prayer and ask them why they are going there.

They know right well what they are going after. I am going to pray to find mercy and to find peace and rest to my soul for I am in anguish about sin and I want to find the Savior.

He concludes, if God has convinced you of your lost ruin and undone condition and if he has put his spirit within you the spirit of God will not lead you to be faint hearted.

He will drive you to desperate searching for Christ. That is the forcefulness I think that is in you.

I want to be clear about the good news of Jesus Christ. Christ. We are not saved by the vigorousness of our searching. We are saved by Christ and his work alone.

[21:50] Christ's death as our substitute, his empty tomb, his victory over death, secure our salvation which is absolutely free. We don't and

we can't contribute anything to it.

So when Jesus uses this language and preachers like Spurgeon talk about straining after Christ, they are not talking about accomplishing our salvation.

They are explaining that our new life in Christ is not passive, it's active, and that it is directed at Jesus. Why do we pray?

To speak with Christ. Why do we read the scriptures and listen to them preached? To hear from and to see Christ. Why do we obey his commandments?

To walk with Christ and to know what it is to rely on his strength and the power of his spirit. The great Puritan Thomas Watson wrote a book called *The Christian Soldier* based on this verse.

[22:56] Or, he says, heaven taken by his sword. One of the duties of the Christian soldier is to offer violence, he says, to himself.

We kill sin. Not only the action of it, but our desire for it. We vigorously pursue obedience to awaken ourselves, and as he says, to shake off spiritual sloth.

And I will add here to his list, we forcefully seek to bring the glory of verse 11, that high privileged place that we have back to our minds again and again.

We fight back against our circumstances which tempt us to look away from Christ and back to the message of his glorious grace towards us.

Jesus grants us a completely free salvation through his cross and his empty tomb, and the new life he gives us leads to a lifetime of vigorous discipleship.

[24:16] And that's, I think, what he wants us to hear as he concludes this section in verse 15 saying, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Let him hear that John was indeed the forecomer.

Let him hear that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment, the coming one, the one who is our Savior.

Friends, if you're waiting for something else, something better, don't.

There is nothing better. So if you've never come to this Christ, if you've never come to know him, if you have never come to find that his death and his victorious resurrection can be your victory and your salvation, will you do it now?

John's message in his message was simply this, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And for those of us who already belong to Christ, Christ, of whom verse 11 is already true, it brings us two things.

First a comfort, then a commission. At the outset of this sermon, I promised you something that I have not yet delivered.

[25:39] I promised you that this passage holds the key to your joyful contempt. Here is how that all comes together. Verse 11 tells us that in Christ we are greater than the greatest.

We have the highest privilege of any of the people of God in all of history. And our contentment rests on this truth. And verse 12 tells us that we need to fight for it.

We fight to keep that truth central in our hearts and in our minds when sin and circumstances seek to dislodge it every day.

God. Friends, we must fight to count our wealth not in earthly terms but in Christ.

Make Christ your highest satisfaction today. We must do violence to the tendency to seek the foundation of our satisfaction anywhere but Christ.

[26:53] if you're not content in Jesus Christ at your foundation and your place with him you'll never be satisfied in anything because he is the only lasting thing in all the universe.

And he is the only fully satisfied in all the universe. Every good thing in this life possessions and relationships entertainments art accomplishments can grow beyond a blessing and become our highest aim the chief source of our joy if we let him.

We can love the gift more than the giver. Friends, relationships are good. The relationship with Christ is best. Wealth is good. It's not an intrinsically evil thing.

But the riches of being co-heirs with Christ is best. Health is good. Being raised with Christ is best.

We must fight this fight. When our society and our jobs and our advertisements and our own hearts say that what will really make us happy is that next thing, that next achievement, that next promotion, that next relationship, that next child, that whatever.

[28:16] when our hearts tell us that that is what will make us happy, we must fight to remind ourselves that the best thing we already have, that His name is Jesus.

We must fight the fight, the fight to keep Christ who can never disappoint at the center of our joy every day. we must fight the weight of our circumstances as well.

I told you at the outset I was kind of frustrated by my circumstances these last few days. We must fight the urge to evaluate God's love for us based on our circumstances.

Like, oh, you know, things aren't going my way, God must not love me. No, no, no. We must fight that, do violence to that idea. Instead, we must evaluate and endure our circumstances based on God's love for us, which we know already for sure.

Your King suffered and died in your place. You are loved completely and forever. Remember the inextinguishable hope you have in Christ, so when stress and failure and conflict and sickness press on you, and your eyes are fixed on what's going wrong, and your heart is ready to despair, it is in that moment that we need to fight, verse 12, to bring our hearts and minds back to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who has established a hope for us greater than any circumstances in this life.

[30:05] That is the violent fight we must wage in our own hearts and minds each day. If our hope is laid up for us in heaven, whether people treat us with friendliness or enmity, whether we are sick or well, rich or poor, calm or stressed, we can still walk forward in love and contentment, because our hope depends on only one person and only one circumstance, Jesus Christ and being found in him.

So our faith and our love can remain unshaken. It's only when we put our hope in other things and our satisfaction is grounded in other things.

How today is going, how someone is treating us, that we can become discontent. So friends, fight. Fight for your joy by finding your all and all in Christ.

If your anger is fixed in heaven, you can risk anything and you can endure anything in this life.

In every circumstance, no matter how we have an unshakable hope. What are you striving for?

[31:45] no matter what you achieve or gain or accomplish or have in this life, the greatest title you will ever hold is child of the risen king.

So what are you striving for? and why? Ambition is no sin, but making it your greatest aim, your greatest good is.

Ask yourself, is that ambition really going to satisfy? or is it adding stress but not value to your life?

If that thing you want, if you get it, will that top be in a better position than John the Baptist?

Christ? Friends, this is a great comfort. You do not need to prove yourself. We are not saved.

We do not have eternal hope and glory because we are impressive, but because Christ is perfect and powerful and risen and loving and giving.

[33:10] Now, being a child of God does not mean have no ambition. In fact, try hard things because you are a child of God, but do not wrap your self-worth in your achievement or your satisfaction in your circumstances.

You will never outdo what Jesus has already done for you. Let's pray.

Lord, this is a challenging passage. These are hard words, but Lord, I pray that you would help us to find in them, in the great promise that you have given incredible joy in your son.

Lord, will you fix our hope on him? And out of that, will you help us to lead lives that honor him?

Not just in service, but Lord, but in delighting in him and walking with him. Thank you, Lord, that he has risen for us.

[34:30] that we have this highest price, not by our own gain, not by our own acts, but by his unbelievable love for us.

We praise you, Lord, and we thank you. Amen.