

True Greatness

Notes of an address to young men by F. B. Hole.

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"Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." - Matt. 11: 11.

This is undoubtedly a verse which at first sight is rather puzzling. There is something in it of the nature of a paradox; but a good many things in Christianity are just of that kind; and I want to point out, if I can, the meaning of this remarkable statement.

Perhaps it is necessary to start by saying that there are two kinds of greatness: *moral* and *positional*; or, to put it in another way, there is greatness of character and greatness of position, resulting from a change of dispensation. A dispensation is a period of time characterised by a certain mode of dealing on the part of God. We talk of the antediluvian, the patriarchal, the legal dispensations, and we now live in a dispensation that is marked by grace and the gospel. These dispensations are marked by different dealings. and God has in these days inaugurated that which transcends everything that went before.

The greatness of John the Baptist, to which the Lord alludes, was undoubtedly *moral*, coupled with official greatness in the prophetic office. Luke in the corresponding passage tells us there was no greater *prophet* than John the Baptist. Here it says that there was no *man* greater than he. Evidently, therefore, the Lord here speaks of the greatness of his character; and yet He adds that the least in the new dispensation that He was about to inaugurate would be greater than John.

I would like everybody to note what it is that makes a man great in the moral sense of the word. If we turn to the Gospel of John, we shall see what made John the Baptist great in the sight of God. In John 1: 19 to 27, we get a record of conversations between John the Baptist, and those who were sent to examine him on behalf of the Pharisees; and we find that John persistently refuses to talk about himself. He prefers to speak of the great One who was to come. "He that cometh after me is preferred before me, for He was before me." At last, when they insist on John giving some account of himself, he says, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Nothing more — a very lowly place to take. In the Christian circle the mark of a really great man is that he does not talk about himself and his own exploits. His business is to keep pointing to the Master, and to bear witness to Him.

If you look at John 3: 30, you get another glimpse of John. "He must increase, but I must decrease." The people came to him trying to stir up his jealousy. They said, "Look here, John, you are being thrown completely into the shade. The One to whom you bore witness, He is capturing the people. His popularity is on the rise, and yours is on the wane." John says, "Very well; I am glad that it is so. My mission is to be but the forerunner, and immediately the royal chariot appears, and the King himself graces the procession, I am content to be out of sight." That is another mark of a really great man. When taken down and thrown into the shade by the Master Himself he gladly accepts it.

And then one thing more. In John 10, at the end of the chapter, we get another glimpse of this great man. "Jesus went away again beyond Jordan, to the place where John at first baptized, and there He taught, and many resorted to Him." Evidently the old place stirred up old remembrances, and their minds naturally reverted to John, who some years before had been the man of the hour, and so they said, as they thought over these things: "John did no miracle, but all things that John spoke of this Man

were true." John never did anything wonderful. But I tell you what he did: he bore steady, unswerving and absolutely trustworthy witness to the blessed Son of God. And what can anybody on earth do more than that? This might have been his epitaph: "Here lies a man who, though he never did anything wonderful, never opened his mouth as to Christ but he said something that was absolutely true. He never swerved a hair's breadth from bearing true testimony to the Master." He concerning whom such things could be truly said is going to shine very brightly in the coming kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. John was such an one. He was a great man, not only in prophetic office as Messiah's forerunner, but morally — as to character — in the sight of God. I hope that every one of us will covet that kind of greatness, and covet it very much.

But when you have said all, and admitted to the full John's greatness, yet we have this astonishing statement, that the one who is least in this new dispensation is greater than he. The dispensation was ushered in when the King, having been rejected and having accomplished redemption, went to the right hand of God in the heavens, from thence to exert His blessed sway, not publicly, not with outward glory, but secretly over the hearts of His own.

Let me draw an imaginary picture. You see an aged Minister of the Crown, one of the most striking and distinguished men you ever set your eyes upon. You see him in the royal palace, and what is he doing? Sitting on one of the chairs with crossed legs, and giving a little lad a ride upon his foot! Would you believe it — with all his mental greatness and the wisdom of years, that little child riding on the aged statesman's foot is the greater of the two? How so? Oh, because he is the son of the King, and a day is coming when, if he lives, the very crown of the realm is going to be placed on his brow. If it is a question of moral greatness, then you must say the statesman is the greater; but if it is a question of destiny or relationship, or of position, then the child is the greater. The very least of the King's sons is greater than the very greatest of his servants. I think that is easy to understand, and it serves as a kind of picture of that of which the Lord was speaking here.

The fact is, John was the last of the long line of most distinguished men, but his career was shortened, and he passed off the scene, never entering into the kingdom of the heavens. That is the plain inference of our text. He died just before the mighty work of redemption was accomplished and the Saviour took His seat at the right hand of God, and when, as a consequence, the Holy Ghost came down to earth and formed that in which you and I have a part, through the infinite grace of God.

If it is a question of character and spiritual backbone, we are simply nowhere compared with a man like John the Baptist. We hear much about the physical degeneration of the race, but more pronounced than the physical is the spiritual. We have not got the Martin Luthers, the Whitefields, the Wesleys, and the men who were prepared to go to the stake for their convictions. Nowadays the fashionable thing is to have no convictions, to have no backbone. John the Baptist was a giant, we are but pygmies; but we must recognize that such is the grace of God to us that we have been called into the kingdom of the heavens. Out of the world which has rejected Christ we have been taken; and during the period that elapses between His rejection and His second coming in glory to take His rights we have been linked up with Him the rejected One, seated at the right hand of God in heaven; and though we have never seen Him, we have believed in Him in such a way that He becomes to us an object of faith. We live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved us, and gave Himself for us.

If anybody said to me, "Well, now, but how would you distinguish these blessings? In what respect has there been this great advance from John the Baptist's day until now?" I should say in the first place that there is all the difference in the world in the matter of REVELATION — the revelation of God Himself. The God who in previous ages let rays of His glory shine through the dark cloud has,

so to speak, rolled back the clouds and shone forth like the sun in his strength. He did so in the person of Jesus become a Man here upon earth, that we might know the God of Sinai, not in Sinai's thunders, but in the gracious accents of the Man Christ Jesus. In the wonderful revelation — a revelation that throws everything that preceded into the shade, we find the first great distinguishing mark of the present dispensation.

Then think of REDEMPTION. Think of the great work being actually completed which has dealt with the whole question of sin. Do you say, "But what about the sacrifices? I thought they were offered for sins." They were valuable as a promissory note is valuable. I hold up a piece of paper. Now, what is that worth? You may say, "Well, I think you could buy about a hundred of those for sixpence." I reply, "That is worth one thousand pounds." Intrinsically it is a piece of paper, with a Government stamp on it, and some ink, worth practically nothing, but because of the name attached to it it is worth a very great deal. The sacrifices had value after that fashion. They were accepted as a provisional settlement, year by year, until the great moment when the Lord Jesus Christ should come, and by His own sacrifice of infinite worth should absolutely liquidate the whole debt. What a wonderful thing it is, that we live in a day when that work has been DONE. Redemption has been accomplished. We travel, so to speak, into an altogether new region, into which John the Baptist, blessed as he was, never entered.

Then there are the new RELATIONSHIPS, which I was trying to figure a few moments ago by imagining the aged statesman and the little boy. The new relationships are those which are established in the light of the revelation, and on the basis of the redemption work of Christ. The relationship in which we stand with God is, as you know, summed up in two words, on His side that wonderful word "Father," and on our side the wonderful word "Child" or "Son." If you were to read the Epistle to the Galatians, particularly the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth chapters, you would find a wonderful commentary on that point. You would find the apostle reminding them that Christ had come, born of a woman, born under the law, come to redeem those that were under the law that they might receive the adoption of sons. That is what we have received, and into that wonderful position we have now been brought. Do not these things, then, help us a little bit to understand how, as the Lord Himself said, he that is least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than a great man like John the Baptist. We may be only like little children, but, thanks be to God, our lot has been cast in this dispensation, and we are children of God. We have the knowledge of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. We can look up to the God who has perfectly revealed Himself to us and call Him "Father."

Well, I hope that these things will be more real to us. There are so many things that drag us down and obscure our vision. God help us not to forget, but to keep these simple yet profound realities brightly before us; because, depend upon it, it is as we do so that we are able to answer to the grace bestowed, and live lives of courage and backbone which will glorify God.