

DEFINING GREATNESS - A BELIEVER WILL PURSUE THE RIGHT THINGS

How one defines greatness may seem to be a bit subjective. Some are considered great if they win a gold medal in the Olympics. Others are deemed great if they have a large following, build a large business or succeed in politics. Surely there is something to commend in all the above, but the crucial question is, ***What does Jesus say about greatness?***

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus notes that John the Baptist was the ***greatest*** (Matthew 11:11). This is an amazing statement considering John never had wealth and was not accepted by the religious leaders of his day (though he was called by God to be a prophet). He did not build a business, write a book, lead an army, or create any art. And though his ministry was less than one year in length, Jesus said of him: *"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..."* (Matthew 11:11a)

It is essential to understand how Jesus defines greatness, and how believers today can pursue it. It is encouraging to know that one does not need to command an army, amass wealth or built a business to be considered significant in God's eyes.

VERSES AND PROPHECIES REGARDING JOHN THE BAPTIST

- **His mission was pointed to by the prophet Isaiah:** "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain...be made low, and let the rough ground become a plain...then the glory of the Lord will be revealed...'" (Isa. 40:3-5a)
- **His mission was pointed to by the prophet Malachi:** "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers..." (Mal. 4:5-6a)
- **His calling was announced by the angel of the Lord:** "Zechariah was in the sanctuary when an angel of the Lord appeared...the angel said, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy...for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord...And he will persuade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man

with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival.” (Luke 1:11-17)

• **His greatness was noted by Jesus:** *“But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’ Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!”* (Matt. 11:9-11)

COMPONENTS OF GREATNESS

1. Have a clear sense of calling/purpose

John did not have all of the answers. In fact, at the beginning of his ministry, which focused on preparing the way for the Messiah, he did not know who the Messiah was. Still, John understood and embraced his calling. John was aware of Isaiah’s prophecy.

“Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, ‘He is a voice shouting in the wilderness: Prepare a pathway for the Lord’s coming! Make a straight road for him!’” (Matt. 3:3)

Many are hesitant to move forward in fulfilling their calling until ALL questions are answered, and all pieces of the puzzle are in place. However, God may decide it best to withhold a few pieces of the puzzle for a time. It was true for John—It was true for Abraham (who was simply told to GO, *the where came later*). Our focus then, is to do what we know to do. Take steps of faith and trust that God will guide your steps. (Prov. 3:5)

2. Do not be swayed from doing what is right

Those who strive to honor God become high-value targets for demonic forces. There are no exceptions, but there is help. God has given His Word, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of the body of Christ to help believers stay strong and focused on the task at hand. There will always be *logical* reasons that we should slow down, stop, not give as much or work so hard. However, we must remember that our marching orders and

commission comes from God. Until he says stop, turn, or wait, we must persevere.

"For Herod, himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" (Mk. 6:17,18)

It is true that faithfulness comes at a price. John could have held his tongue, silenced his witness and saved his life. He knew that speaking God's truth to King Herod would arouse the king's anger. He knew there would likely be consequences. However, John was faithful to do what he knew God wanted him to do—and that is what makes him great.

3. Continually point people to God

Looking at the verses below, notice how John took every opportunity to point individuals to Jesus.

"People from Jerusalem and from every section of Judea and from all over the Jordan Valley went out to the wilderness to hear him preach. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River." (Matt. 3:5-6)

"God sent John the Baptist to tell everyone about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world." (John 1:6-9)

"Then who are you? Tell us, so we can give an answer to those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?' John replied in the words of Isaiah: 'I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, prepare a straight pathway for the Lord's coming!'" (John 1:11-23a)

"The next day John saw Jesus...and said, 'Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29) John was an up-and-coming preacher. After spending time in the

wilderness, without a following, without fine clothes, food or home, John began preaching on the east side of the Jordan River and quickly became notable. Folks came to him, listened to him, welcomed him, and submitted to his call to repent and be baptized. And then Jesus arrived on the scene. Without notice or fanfare one day Jesus stepped into the Jordan and asked John to baptize him. And that was the end. From that point on John's mindset was, "He must increase, and I must decrease" (John 3:28-30). John was called great because his focus was not on how he could become rich or popular, but on how he could best honor and point individuals to Christ.

4. Be open to new possibilities

The Scripture passage below notes that John did not know that Jesus (his cousin) was the Messiah until he was about 30 years old. Yet, in spite of any preconceived ideas he may have had about Jesus (who had lived an unremarkable life as a carpenter in the remote village of Nazareth) when God spoke, he was quick to embrace the new. Being quick to adapt and fall in step with God's leading (even when elements are unexpected) is a mark of spiritual maturity and greatness.

"John said, 'I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him [Jesus]. I didn't know he was the one, but...God told me, "When you see the Holy Spirit descending and resting upon someone, he is the one you are looking for. He is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Son of God.'" (John 1:32-34)

5. Build a reputation for purity/integrity

"...Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man." (Mark 6:20b)

One of the reasons John was called great was that he had a great reputation. This reputation was not linked to power—it was linked to purity.

Today, many strive to create a reputation and legacy by pursuing things of this world (power, money, position, possessions, etc.). However, the best and most important reputation an individual can build will not be linked to anything in this world—the best reputations are linked to faithfulness. The faithful will love, serve, give, witness and warn. John was faithful—even his enemies referred to him as a “righteous and holy man.”

The good news is, achieving this goal costs no money and requires no specialized training. Anyone can be faithful. And note: Do not believe that your past completely disqualifies you from having a good reputation in the future. The Bible is full of heroes who had blemishes in their past (Moses murdered, David fell into adultery, Abraham lied, Jonah ran, Peter denied...). The greats are not great because they never sin—they are great because they get up when they fall, they ask for forgiveness, and they resume the quest to be faithful (Psalm 103).