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Matthew 11:11



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the meaning behind Matthew 11:11 and the contextual statements regarding Jesus, John the Baptist, and the kingdom of God. He emphasizes the humility and sacrifice of Jesus, who willingly gave his life as a ransom for many. Gregg also explores the significance of John's message and the idea of justification, explaining that it is a declaration of righteousness and not a matter of predestination. Overall, the talk provides insight into the themes of repentance and salvation in the biblical text.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 11, we are going to be continuing an examination of what Jesus said about his friend and relative and partner in the kingdom of God, John the Baptist, who at this time was in prison and who had, in the context of these statements, had only recently sent Jesus a message through some messengers asking him if he was the one who was to come or not. And Jesus had sent back a message, I believe, of encouragement to John, and then had turned to the crowds to talk about John and say how important a person he was. And I took some of these verses in our last session, but we simply ran out of time, so we'll continue in it, but let me read again the whole statement that Jesus made about John.

He says in verse 7 of Matthew chapter 11, Assuredly I say to you, among those who are born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Now, these remarks about John the Baptist are not only remarkable remarks, but they are somewhat confusing at certain points. Now, first of all, verse 11 is a confusing statement at a certain level.

Jesus said, Assuredly I say to you, among those born of women, there has not risen one

greater than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Now, how can that be? How can it be that there's none greater than John the Baptist among those born of women, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is in fact greater than John the Baptist? Well, that's not the easiest thing to understand. It is possible that Jesus, and I don't believe this is the case, but some have suggested that when Jesus spoke of the least in the kingdom of heaven, that Jesus was speaking of himself.

And therefore, although John was the greatest of all natural men, Jesus, who was calling himself the least in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus was greater still than John. That would agree well with what John said. John said that Jesus was greater than he and had come before him, and John even said he wasn't worthy to unloose the latch of Jesus' sandals.

Of course, if someone would say, Well, why in the world would Jesus call himself the least in the kingdom of heaven? It would possibly be for the same reason that Jesus girded himself with a towel in the upper room and served the disciples by washing their feet, making himself the lowest in the room, taking the position of the lowest servant. And on more than one occasion, Jesus said, He that would be chief among you must make himself the least, like this little child shall become the servant and slave of all. And Jesus had come to do just that.

He said, Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. There's a sense in which Jesus, though he existed in the form of God, came down and laid aside his privileges, made himself low, not only as low as man, but lower than most men. He came to the realm of Israel and oppressed people.

He came down, as it says in Ephesians 4, to the lower parts of the earth. He came to the lower echelons of human society. He humbled himself and he took on the form of a servant, even humbling himself beyond that to the point of death.

In one sense, Jesus could be called the least, having made himself such in the kingdom of heaven and thus highly exalted and given a name above every name. And Jesus said that he that would be the chief would have to make himself the lowest. Now, Jesus, of course, could then, seen that way, be referred to as the least in the kingdom of heaven because that's what he made himself.

And because of it, God has made him the greatest and the highest. But it seems to me unlikely that that's what Jesus means here for the simple reason that Jesus never used this expression to speak of himself elsewhere. He never called himself the least in the kingdom of heaven.

And the term does sound more like a generic term rather than a personal title. Although, if it is a personal title, as I say, this is a unique usage of it. Jesus never used it elsewhere so as to give the impression that it was a label or a title for the Messiah or for himself.

And furthermore, there would be no special reason to use that label for himself in this context. If he was simply trying to say, I'm greater than John the Baptist, to use the expression the least in the kingdom of heaven to refer to himself is not a label that would in any sense enhance his statement or give depth to it as near as I could tell. Now, I may be missing something here, but I just don't think it likely that this wording is intended to be applied to Jesus himself as the least.

Though, as I said, in a manner of speaking, he could be so called. But I think Jesus is saying something else about it than this. Now, it's interesting that over in the parallel in Luke, in Luke 7 and verse 28, it says, Among those born of women there is not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist.

Now, it reads that way in what we call the Textus Receptus. That's the manuscripts that are followed by the King James and the New King James versions. But the so-called Alexandrian text, which is followed by other versions other than the King James, does not have the word prophet.

So, we're not sure what the original said in this particular case, whether the word prophet was included or not. But in the Textus Receptus, in Luke 7, 28, Jesus said, There is not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist, but he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. If this is the original reading in Luke, then it would perhaps open the meaning of this up a little bit.

Because he would be saying that there have been many prophets that have come, born of women. Among all people born of women, there hasn't been a greater prophet than John, however. And the reason would be this, that John's message was more urgent and timely than that of the previous prophets with reference to the Messiah.

All the previous prophets had essentially said, the Messiah will come. The Messiah will come. But they had no way of indicating whether that would be soon or late.

And as it turned out, all the Old Testament prophets prophesied hundreds of years before the Messiah came. The best they could say is that someday the Messiah will come. That's a great message.

But John had a greater message than all of them. Because his message was, the Messiah is here and the kingdom of God is at hand. This is him.

Look at him. He's the Lamb of God. He's going to take away the sins of the world.

And John, therefore, as a prophet and as a messenger of God, had a much greater message than that of all the other prophets. Because all of them predicted the Messiah would come. But all those that came before John could only be vague and say, well, someday.

But John could say, he's here. This is it. Now, if that is what is meant by saying there has not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist, it would then perhaps give some clarity to the meaning, but he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

If the greatness that is spoken of here is the greatness of his message and the importance of his message, then we could say that those who have lived since the time of John, who are in the kingdom today, those who are Christians, those who are converted, those who carry the gospel of Jesus Christ, they have an even greater message than John the Baptist. Because John's message was the kingdom of God is at hand. That means near.

But the preaching of the New Testament church is the kingdom of God has come. That we who believe have been translated out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's own dear Son. We have a message of fulfillment.

John had a message that was pretty much similar, but he lived at the time of transition. We, who are in the kingdom today, live after that time of transition and the new order has arrived. And therefore our message is even greater than his.

His was, well, it's at hand. Ours is, it has come. And you can enter the kingdom of God today, if you will.

Now, that is one possible meaning. And that hangs a lot on the introduction of the word prophet in the statement in Luke. There has not arisen a greater prophet.

The way it reads in Matthew, however, and even in Luke in some manuscripts, it just says, among those born of women there has not arisen a greater, presumably meaning a greater man, than John the Baptist. But he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. How can this be? Wasn't John in the kingdom? And if so, how could he be the greatest and lesser at the same time? Well, I'm going to make a suggestion.

Obviously, I'm not sure that this is the suggestion that is correct. But it's interesting that when Jesus spoke comparing John with other people, he specifically spoke of people in general as those who are born of women. He could have said, of all men who have ever lived, there has not arisen a greater man than John.

But instead, he said, of all those born of women, there has not one risen greater than John. And yet he said this in order to contrast those who are in the kingdom. Now, you might remember that Jesus told Nicodemus, unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of God.

You cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again. Now, what this means, of course, is that in addition to being born of women, you need to be born again of the spirit of God. You need a spiritual birth in addition to your natural birth.

John the Baptist lived, carried out his mission, and died without ever experiencing that second birth, I believe. Now, some could dispute that. But I'm of the impression that the second birth became a reality only after the resurrection of Jesus.

And since John the Baptist died before then, John did not have the opportunity to participate in it. I believe that the second birth is a New Testament phenomenon. And John lived his life and died under the terms of the Old Covenant because the New Testament had not yet been inaugurated.

Therefore, of all those who had only one birth, those who were born of women merely, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist. That is, of all people who lived and died before the time that Christ died and rose again, there's none that's been finer, none that are greater, there's none that outshines John the Baptist. Among those who are simply natural-born men, he's the greatest.

But his contrast would be there is another class of men. These ones, of course, they have been born of women, but that's not the most that can be said for them. They've been born again of the spirit of God.

They've been born into the kingdom of God. They are now citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And even the least of those who are in that state are better situated than John the Baptist.

Now, to say greater than he, we need to, of course, question what the measure of greatness is that Jesus has in mind. The word greater, of course, can literally just mean bigger. But it's not likely that every Christian is larger in stature than John the Baptist.

Greatness usually has to do with excellence or superiority in some sense. But depending on the context, greatness can be greater or lesser depending on what the standard of greatness is that's been measured. And Jesus does not say by what standard John was the greatest.

It may mean that he was the most important. As I said earlier, that his message was more urgent and was superior to the message of the previous prophets. But that even the humblest Christian who has come into the kingdom of God holds a position in the economy of God that John never really was permitted to hold.

And has a message that's far more wonderful than that of John. John had a message of repentance, but John never really preached salvation. Now, of course, one might imply from his message that if we repent, we'll be saved.

And therefore, there could have been an implicit message of salvation that John was preaching. But John's message was essentially a message of repentance without holding out a promise of salvation. Those of us who live after the death and resurrection of Jesus who are in the kingdom of heaven now, we have a message of salvation.

It's a much more cheering message. It's a greater message to the world. Yes, it does involve repentance.

The message of salvation today does not exclude repentance. It is part of it. But the point is, repentance is simply what God calls us to do.

Salvation is what God promises us as a result. And that was not part of John's message, but is part of ours. So that even the least Christian who has this message to tell and this experience of being reborn is in some senses superior to John the Baptist.

Has a superior message to the world. And stands in a superior standing to that which John had. And this is very likely, it seems to me, what Jesus meant when he made these comments about John.

Now in Matthew, Jesus goes on and makes some other comments about John. But there's a comment left out of Matthew that in the context is included in Luke. Because at this point, Luke chapter 7 and verse 29 and 30 adds some statements Jesus made in this connection that Matthew simply leaves out.

And we have to remember that the gospels are not inaccurate for leaving things out. John, when he wrote his gospel, he left out many things. Because it would take more books than the world could contain to record everything Jesus said and did.

So the gospels are deliberately sketchy. And they only include some of the things Jesus said. And Matthew doesn't include all the things Luke does.

And Luke doesn't include all the things Matthew does. But at this point in the discussion about John the Baptist, Luke includes a statement Jesus made which Matthew does not include. And it is this.

This is found in Luke 7, 29 and 30. Jesus continued his statements in connection with his discussion of John the Baptist. He said, And when all the people heard John, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John.

But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him. Now, this contrast between the tax collectors, on the one hand, who were the ultimate sinners as far as Israel was concerned, and the Pharisees, on the other hand, and lawyers, is a contrast that's made elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus. But the particular statements here are rather interesting because it was the tax collectors and sinners that were more ready to be baptized and repent and receive the baptism of John.

They were more willing to admit that they were sinners and that they needed to repent and be baptized. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were not prone to acknowledge themselves to be sinners and therefore did not show up in large numbers to be baptized

with John's baptism, which signified repentance. Now, Jesus' interpretation of these actions is rather significant because those tax collectors who came to be baptized by John, Jesus says in Luke 7, 29, those people justified God by being baptized by John.

What does it mean, justified God? We know that most of the time the Bible talks about God justifying sinners through faith. We have the doctrine of justification by faith. But what does it mean to justify God? Well, this is what it means.

The word justify means to declare just, to issue the decree that somebody is just or righteous, okay, or innocent, or right. It basically is to vindicate somebody and to judge them as in the right. That's what justify means.

Now, how did the tax collectors justify God by being baptized by John? Well, here's what it is. Man, in his natural state, is at odds with God. Man has chosen a lifestyle characterized by self-centeredness and sin.

God has declared such a lifestyle is wrong, that it's sinful. In fact, God condemns it and condemns those who adhere to that lifestyle, according to the Scriptures. Now, this being so, it means there's a contest and a controversy between God and man, sinful man.

If a man justifies himself, that is, if a man upholds his sinful life as okay, if he does not, in other words, repent, but instead he's confronted with God's claims and God's condemnation of his conduct, but he still maintains his way without repenting, that man is justifying himself. He's basically saying, I'm okay no matter what God says on this matter. It doesn't matter that the Bible says it's wrong to commit adultery.

I'm all right, even though I commit adultery. It doesn't matter that God says it's wrong to cheat and to steal. The cheating and stealing I'm doing is all right.

That is self-justification. We call it rationalization and justification, and that's what man does all the time about himself. When a man adheres to his sin, in spite of knowing that God condemns it, the man does so by declaring himself just, even though he's sinning.

He justifies himself. But when a person hears God's condemnation of his sinful lifestyle and says, you know, God is right, I'm wrong, and that person repents of his sin, and he turns from his sin, and he agrees with God, what he is doing is saying, God is just. I'm not just.

I'm wrong. God is right. That's what it means to justify God, to declare that God is right.

God is just. God is righteous. God who condemns my sinful life is not mistaken.

He is right on this matter. I am condemned and wrong. God is true and just.

Now, those who repent, as did the tax collectors who came to be baptized by John, by

their very act of repenting, they're justifying God. And this is interesting because it indicates that man, in a certain sense, is in a position, certainly not in the ultimate sense, but in a certain sense, man is in a position to make a judgment of God. Because man has his preferences and his chosen way, and God has his statements about it.

God condemns the sinfulness of the sinner. The sinner chooses sinfulness. But when God condemns it, we can either judge God to be telling the truth, and that God is right.

That would be justifying God. Or we can say that God is wrong. God's not telling the truth.

I'm okay even though God condemns my behavior. Well, that is certainly making a negative judgment of God. In turning away from our sins because we know that God condemns them, and in repenting before God, we are saying, I am wrong.

God is right. And the tax collectors who came to be baptized by John were doing just that. They were justifying God by being baptized by John.

Now, the Pharisees who did not come to be baptized, it's interesting what Jesus said there. In Luke chapter 7 and verse 30, it says that the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God for themselves. Now, the word counsel there, the Greek word, is the same word that is used in Ephesians where it says God works all things according to the counsel of his own will.

The word will there is the same word that is here counsel. Some translations translate this, the Pharisees rejected the will of God for themselves by not being baptized. Now, God told what his will was.

He commanded them to repent and be baptized, but they didn't. And therefore, they rejected the will of God for themselves. So says Luke 7 and verse 30.

Is it possible for you to reject God's will for you, or is God so sovereign that his will is always done? Well, according to the words of Jesus here, the will of God is not always done. The will of God for you is not necessarily done because you can reject the will of God for you by not obeying him, by not turning to him. It's not a matter of some kind of decree of predestination.

It's a matter of whether you accept or reject God's will for you. That's what it says in Luke 7.30. Jesus is the one who seems to be making the statement, and he is the one, therefore, who declares that God's will is not necessarily always done. The Bible says God's not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

But not all do. Not all do what God wills. Therefore, his will is not always done because you have the power to condemn yourself.

You can either justify God or justify yourself. If you justify yourself, you'll be at odds with God and you'll reject his will for you, which is that you repent and come to him seeking for mercy. More on this next time.