

TRUE GREATNESS

"For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord." Luke 1:15.

So spake the angel who foretold the birth of John the Baptist. No epithet is more misused and misapplied than that of 'a great man.' It is used indiscriminately. Every little man that makes a lot of noise for a little while gets it applied to him. The mass of people are so much on a level, and that level is so low, that an inch above the average looks gigantic.

There is the world's false estimate of greatness and there is God's estimate. If we want to know what the elements of true greatness are, we may well turn to the life of this man, of whom the prophecy went before him that he should "be great in the sight of the Lord," and of whom Jesus declared that no greater had been born of women. Greatness, prophesied by an angel, and attested by Jesus, is greatness indeed. Greatness "in the sight of the Lord" is measured by very different standards from the world's.

What is greatness? Scarcely two persons among us would give the same reply to that question. All would admit that it denotes pre-eminence, but each would have his own preference as to the department in which it was to be manifested.

Some would associate it with birth, some with money, some with talents, some with courage, some with power, some with eloquence, etc., yet each would think of it as conferring an advantage on its possessor, and so putting others at a corresponding disadvantage.

What makes people great in the sight of God? It is not any of the things which lead to greatness in man's sight. It is wonderful to "be great in the sight of the Lord;" for just what a man is in God's eyes that is he indeed, neither more nor less.

Nothing can make a man truly great, but being truly good, and a partaker of God's holiness. Wealth, honor, power, may constitute a person great in the estimation of man; but faith, love, and true holiness are necessary to secure for us God's approbation. The really great man is he whom holiness and love combine to inspire for the service of his generation according to the will of God. The highest commendation one can earn is this -- "He hath done what he could;" and the noblest life-record is that which comes nearest to His of Whom it was said that "He went about doing good."

A song is more impressive, a noise more startling, and a declaration of truth more challenging when preceded by a period of silence. For 400 years there had been no direct message from heaven. A dozen generations had lived, listened, and died with something of a sense of disappointment.

Not as they had planned, but as God willed, an announcement was made by an angel to an obscure priest that an unusual character was soon to be born into his home, one who would be great in the sight of the Lord. Is not this God's way of saying that men would appraise him differently? They would not see in him the elements that make for greatness, according to their own petty standards. He would cross swords with their religious gladiators, for his mission was higher and his message different. His heroism was to be of a new kind -- the heroism of the commonplace.

In selecting her great, the world often passes over the gold that will stand the fire. She selects her heroes from the battlefield, the gridiron, the rescue squad, the stage, and the realm of philanthropy. She forgets that glamour and

greatness are not synonymous.

The truly great are those who do what God wants them to do, where and when He wants it done.

By accepted standards, John the Baptist was not great. He would not rank as a philosopher. God gave him a simple message. He delivered it. He left no book for future generations to read; no poem to stir and inspire; no painting to hang in the art gallery. He was a stranger to social circles; took little stock in political movements; and financially was a failure. This single-handed preacher had no house in which to deliver his message, no organization to support him, no publicity department, and no advance agent. His ministry was short — less than a year, — yet God called him great.

I. John Was Great As A Preacher.

For thirty years, in preparation, he had lived in the wilderness. This gave him time to think, to mature, and to be disciplined. From this seclusion, he weighed the conflicting notions against the spiritual gropings of the people. His spirit burned within him, as he longed, not for a better civil government, but for the kingdom of God on earth. His love for humanity was consuming. His message bore the unfailing marks of eloquence. Men heard him and did what he said. His messages were fruitful. His beautiful consistency of life-message and lip-message made him a pulpit power.

II. John Was Great In Conviction and Courage.

Conviction, that he cherished more than life, and courage, that set a standard for all generations, soon landed him in the fortress of Machaerus. There was nothing unusual about that. Prophets are born to die for the cause. This is the essence of moral greatness—that a man have a grip on truth, that criticism cannot weaken, that persecution cannot phase, that Martyr's fires cannot break.

III. John Was Great In His Ideals.

All efforts, both of threat and flattery, could not move him one inch from his conviction that Christ is all, and he, himself, but a voice to introduce Christ. His humble submission and feeling of utter dependence gave him that boldness and courage that placed him in the top rank. Only men of the highest plane submerge themselves out of sight and hide themselves in the background, that they may not detract from the glory of the Christ. He cared little what people thought of him, but he cared what God thought of him.

IV. John Was Great In His Contention For the Truth.

He has been called radical and dogmatic. His declarations were brief and sharp. Repent, prepare, purge, and burn are the strange words from the lips of the forerunner of Jesus. On this truth John staked his life; that the efficacy of grace depends upon the depth of repentance; that private righteousness must precede public reformation; that self-denial must be found before self-sacrifice can be made; that all the virtues and graces worth while must root deep in the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

V. John Was Great In His Stand Against The Popular Sins Of His Day.

A man may condemn the sins of the past and the anticipated sins of the future with little to fear from his contemporaries, but when a man looks sin and the sinner squarely in the face and speaks the blistering truth, he may expect trouble. John shared the common knowledge of Herod's sin. One day he stood in his presence. He measured up to the occasion. Without apology, he shot straight at the mark. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." The sledge-hammer blow of that rebuke did not cease with the one who delivered it. It still stands to rebuke the Christian world for its compromising attitude toward popular sins.

VI. John Was Great In His Obedience.

In fact, John's obedience was the basis of all his greatness. He did just what God wanted him to do. His chief aim was to please God. As one views his greatness, he is impressed with the fact that if one's aims are small, he will never be great.

It is a poor ambition to seek to be called great. It is a noble desire to be great in the sight of the Lord. If we shall keep close to Christ, and do the things which He has commanded us to do, we shall be great in the sight of the Lord.

VII. John Was Great In His Death.

That day when the sermon was finished, it bore the marks of failure. No one sought a better life. Strange terror seized the King, but it did not lead to repentance. Herodias swore vengeance; The preacher was thrown in prison. He had preached his last sermon.

The shaggy head of him who feared not life nor death was delivered to Herodias; and his weeping followers buried his body. But he was great in the sight of the Lord. What else matters?

Why is it better to be great in the sight of the Lord than in the sight of men?

1. Such greatness is more useful.
They are more useful by their examples.
2. Such greatness is more lasting.
A greatness that connects itself with our being made good and holy will never pass away.
3. Such greatness is within the reach of all.
That is not true of greatness in the sight of men, but it is true of greatness in the sight of God.

The source from which John drew his greatness is open to us all. We may win this greatness anywhere if we are willing to pay the price for it. However, one cannot attain this greatness at the expense of others.