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Two Incidents—Three Lessons

(7:18-50)

John Kachelman

“... And the disciples of John reported to him about all these things. And summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are You the expected One, or do we look for someone else?’ And when the men had come to Him, they said, ‘John the Baptist has sent us to You saying, “Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?”’ At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind. And He answered and said to them, ‘Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: . . .’” (7:18-22).

Two little boys were playing together shortly after one had been orphaned by his mother’s death. “What do you do without a mommy to tell your troubles to?” asked the friend. “Mommy told me who I could go to before she died,” answered the orphan. “I go to the Lord Jesus. He was Mommy’s friend, and He’s mine too. He’s in the sky far, far off. He has many important things to do in heaven.” “If He’s so busy he won’t stop just to mind you.” The little orphan thought and then replied, “I don’t know anything about that. All I know is that He says He will, and that’s enough for me.”

This simple faith is wonderful. It trusts in God’s love even when it is incapable of explaining it. Such a faith will bring inestimable blessings!

Luke’s Gospel narrative was written to reveal facts about Jesus Christ (1:1-4). The message is simple, and the meaning is clear. Throughout the book Luke is careful to record details that focus the reader’s attention upon the divine truths about Christ.

Luke 7:18-50 is a passage encouraging faith. In this section two incidents about our Lord are described at length. They help us arrive at three lessons that will lead to a strong faith.

THE TWO INCIDENTS

John the Baptist

In 7:18-35, we find an incident involving John’s disciples. John was in prison about seventy miles from where Christ was teaching. He had condemned Herod’s marriage and thus fallen into disfavor. Even though he was in prison, he enjoyed the liberties of receiving visitors.

This first incident can be divided into three main paragraphs: 7:18-23 records John’s questions and Christ’s reply, 7:24-28 reveals John’s role in redemptive history, and 7:29-35 records the rejection shown to John’s ministry.

As John was in prison, he heard of the enthusiastic reception which Christ was enjoying in His teaching and healing ministry. It seems John was puzzled about these reports, for he had understood that the Coming One would render harsh judgment upon Israel (Matthew 3:11, 12). But Christ was showing acts of mercy. John sent two of his disciples to inquire about Christ’s mission and work. Christ answered with a demonstration of mercy and healing (7:21, 22). In doing this, Christ gave John an emphatic fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-3. The answer affirmed that Jesus was the Anointed One. The closing words (7:23) were sent to encourage John.

After John's disciples left, Jesus turned the crowd's attention to John's character (7:24-28). His words verified John's great role in redemptive history. John's greatness overshadowed all prophets, priests, kings, and lawgivers! No one in Israel's history could eclipse John's greatness. From a purely historical perspective, Christ said John was "one who is more than a prophet" (7:26). The words were tender and warm. Christ emphasized that John's greatness would be surpassed by no one (7:28a). Yet, as great as John was, his greatness would pale beside those who were to be members of God's kingdom!

The paradoxical statement of verse 28 is easily understood. Jesus said that no one was as great as John the Immerser. He was devoted to God. He had been set aside by God for a great work. He had been diligent in fulfilling his task. But as great as John was, he was not a member of the kingdom he heralded. On the Day of Pentecost (described in Acts 2), this kingdom would become a reality. On that day men and women would enjoy full remission of sins and become partakers of the heavenly blessing found only in Christ. Those who possessed even the "least" of these spiritual blessings would possess *more than John*. Therefore, they would be reckoned "greater"! The Lord was not depreciating John's greatness or faith. He was simply stating that the kingdom was not yet in existence.

In verse 28, we find four obvious truths which show that the kingdom/church was not yet in existence. It is important for us to note these because some believe the kingdom/church was begun by John. Honest consistency in Bible study will show that such is not true. (1) John was not in the kingdom, for Jesus spoke of it as yet future. (2) Since no one was greater than John who had been born, no one had yet entered the kingdom. (3) Even the Lord's disciples recognized the kingdom/church had not yet been established (Acts 1:6). (4) The kingdom/church could not have been present while John was preaching because he spoke of it as being "at hand" (Matthew 3:2). All in the kingdom/church would have a station superior to John, but this was not yet a reality.

In spite of John's greatness and his impressive role in the history of redemption, John was rejected (7:29-35). The Jewish leaders were smug, feeling they were justified in their rejection. They were unwilling to repent (7:30). Even though the common people had followed John, they were

still controlled by the religious rulers. The Lord's words revealed that the rejection shown to John was justified only by resting upon a false argument. The leaders were totally unreasonable. No one could please them! Neither John nor the Lord succeeded in pleasing this group because they were bent on rejection. The Lord's answer to such a rejection was stated in a proverb (7:35). He observed that divine wisdom would be justified when honest hearts responded in obedience. This humble obedience would emphasize the arrogant rejection by Israel's leaders.

Simon the Pharisee

The second incident is recorded in 7:36-50 and takes place at the house of Simon the Pharisee. The stubborn arrogance of the Pharisee sect in general now takes on a name in particular. Christ is invited into the home of a Pharisee for a feast. The invitation was given with a devious intent—to judge this "prophet" whose influence was sweeping the nation.

Simon invited Christ to this feast, yet failed to show even the basic acts of hospitality to the Lord (7:44, 45). This showed the base intent and pseudo-hospitality that would characterize the meal.

As Christ reclined for the meal, a woman entered. Luke gives us interesting insight into the Jewish customs. While a feast was in progress, it was normal for others to enter the banquet hall and talk with the guests, but for a woman to enter and participate was an act of great courage, and this woman had the reputation of a great sinner (7:37-39). Not only was she breaking the norms of society, but she was entering the house of a Pharisee!

This woman would teach Simon two lessons before the feast was finished. In her past Christ had helped her to find a wonderful forgiveness. In response to the Savior's forgiveness, a strong devotion developed in her heart. She discovered that the Lord was in Simon's house and seized the opportunity to respond to His kindness. As she stood at the Lord's feet, her emotions overwhelmed her, and tears fell upon His feet. Seeing what had happened, she quickly undid her hair to dry the tears. In a symbol of great adoration, she kissed His feet and anointed them with a vial of perfume!

Pause for a moment and contemplate the irony of this woman's devotion. Remember that

John the Immerser, the “greatest” of all, had confessed that he was “unworthy” to loose the sandals of the Messiah; but now, this woman, called “unworthy” by the self-righteous Pharisees, performed the duty of which John deemed himself unworthy. It is lovely. This shows that God will accept all who are willing to humble themselves and acknowledge His greatness.

In response to the woman’s public scene, Simon’s thoughts were condemning. His black heart could see neither the Lord’s compassion nor the woman’s devotion. Our Lord knew Simon’s dark thoughts and spoke a parable which posed a question about devotion and forgiveness. The smug arrogance of Simon was exposed as was his utter poverty of spirit and self-seeking devotion.

The woman left in the security of a wonderful peace. As she left, Simon was presented as blind to the truth and bitter in self-righteousness. The contrast between the two could not be greater. Such a dramatic contrast ought to cause all of us to examine our hearts and motives.

THE THREE LESSONS

As we study this section of Luke’s narrative, three truths of abiding value emerge.

True greatness is defined in spiritual terms, not worldly accomplishments (7:28). How would we measure John’s greatness if he stood in our presence? When he lived he wore poor clothing, his daily meals were staples of beggars, his later years were lived as a convict, and he had few friends and many enemies. This was called “greatness” by God! Those who mind earthly things cannot understand this definition; but John’s greatness was found in his spiritual qualities: He was great in dedication to duty (John 1:23), in humility as a servant (John 3:27-30), in courage as he taught God’s truth (Matthew 4:7; Mark 6:17), and in faith toward God (John 1:29).

To Christ, greatness is not defined by materialism or status. He casts aside worldly standards and measures “greatness” on spiritual scales (cf. Matthew 5:3, 5; 25:3-40).

If the world could understand true greatness, then so much vanity would disappear! The world seeks a greatness that is ever elusive because it is without the Lord. An incident from history helps illustrate the vanity of worldly greatness. Charlemagne gave instructions that when he was bur-

ied he should be seated as a ruling monarch. He had the mausoleum erected after a model of the chapel which had been built over the assumed sepulchre of our Savior in Jerusalem. In a tomb within this chapel he was placed upon a throne. The Gospels, which I suppose he had often read, were to be opened for him to study thoroughly while dead. He also directed that his celebrated sword was to be at his side, an imperial crown upon his head, and a royal mantle on his shoulders. Thus, his body remained for about 1,080 years. The tomb was opened by the Emperor Otho. The skeleton form of the body was found dissolved. The various ornaments were all there, but nothing else remained but the ghastly skull still wearing the crown. The relics were taken to Vienna where they were used in later years at the coronation of Germany’s emperors to signify their greatness as successors of Charlemagne. This is the tragic “greatness” which the world promises to its followers.

True greatness is always demonstrated. The woman at Simon’s feast demonstrated true gratitude for the Lord’s love. She understood sin’s tragedy and the wonder of forgiveness. For her no service was too menial, no attitude too humble, and no gift too costly to give in service to the Lord.

It is wonderful to see Christians serving Christ. Examples in the New Testament would have to include the brethren of Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:5), the Ephesians (Acts 19:18-20), Paul (Galatians 2:20—6:14), and the family of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:15). These, and a host like them, encourage all Christians today to demonstrate true gratitude.

How can one ever find the wonderful forgiveness of Jesus Christ and fail to demonstrate true gratitude?

True forgiveness is found only through an obedient faith. Only in obedience are we able to be told to “go in peace.” The woman at Simon’s feast had found forgiveness through Jesus, and that brought a wonderful peace. If we are willing to obey God’s will, we will find forgiveness and be able to enjoy peace for the troubled soul (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; Acts 3:19; Philippians 4:7).

CONCLUSION

How strong is our faith? Let us strive toward *true greatness* because we have expressed *true gratitude* and found *true forgiveness* through an obedient faith!