

True Greatness.

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Text: "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. "In the sight of the Lord"—then men are not on a dead level in his eyes. Though he is so high and we are so low, the country beneath him that he looks down upon is not flattened to him, as it is to us from an elevation, but there are greater and smaller men in His sight too.

No epithet is more misused and misapplied than that of "a great man." It is flung about as indiscriminately as ribbons and orders are by some petty state. Every little man that makes a noise for awhile gets it hung round his neck. Think what a set they are that are gathered in the world's Valhalla, and honored as the world's great men. The mass of people are so much on a level, and that level is so low, that an inch above the average looks gigantic. But the tallest blade of grass gets mown down by the scythe, and withers as quickly as the rest of its green companions, and goes its way into the oven as surely. 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." That is gold that will stand the test.

We may remember, too, that Jesus Christ, looking back on the career to which the angel was looking forward, indorsed the prophecy, and declared that it had become a fact, and that "of them that were born of women there had not arisen a greater than John the Baptist." With illumination of His eulogium we may turn to this life, then, and gather some lessons for our own guidance.

I. First, we note in him unwavering and immovable firmness and courage.

"What went ye out into the wilderness for to see; a reed shaken with the wind?" Nay! an iron pillar that stood firm whatsoever winds blew against it. This, as I take it, is in some true sense the basis of all moral greatness—that a man should have a grip which cannot be loosed—like that of the centipede with all its tentacles round its prey—upon that dominate his being and make him a hero. "If you want time to weep," said the old artist poet, "there must be tears in your own eyes." If you want me to believe, you yourself must be aflame with conviction which has penetrated to the very marrow of your bones. And so, I take it, the first requisite either for power, upon others, or for greatness, in a man's own development of character, is that there shall be this unwavering firmness of grasp of clearly apprehended truth, and unflinching boldness of devotion to it.

I need not remind you how magnificently, all through the life of our typical example, this quality was stamped upon every utterance and every act. It reached its climax, no doubt, in his bearding Herod and Herodias. But moral characteristics do not reach a climax unless there has been much underground building to bear the lofty pinnacle. And no man, when great occasions come to him, develops a courage and an unwavering confidence which are strange to his habitual life. There must be the underground building; and there must have been many a fighting down of fears, many a curbing of tremors, many a rebuke of hesitations and doubts in the gaunt, desert-loving prophet, before he was man enough to stand before Herod and say, "It is not lawful for thee to have her."

No doubt there is much to be laid to the account of temperament, but whatever their temperament may be, the way to this unwavering courage, and firm, clear ring of indubitable certainty is open to every Christian man and woman; and it is their own fault, their own sin, and their own weakness, if they do not possess these qualities. Temperament? What on earth is the good of our religion if it is not to modify and govern our temperament? Has a man a right to jib on one side, and give up the attempt to clear the fence because he feels that in his own natural disposition there is little power to take the leap? Surely not. Jesus Christ came here for the very purpose of making our weakness strong, and if we have a firm hold upon Him, then, in the measure in which His love has permeated our who nature, will be our unwavering courage, and out of weakness we shall be made strong.

Of course the highest type of this undaunted boldness and unwavering firmness of conviction is not in John and his like. He presented strength in a lower form than did the Master from whom his strength came. The willow has a place as well as the oak.

Firmness is not obstinacy; courage is not rudeness. It is possible to have the iron hand in the velvet glove, not of etiquette—observing politeness, but of a true consideration and gentleness. They who are likest him that was "meek and lowly in heart" are surest to possess the unflinching resolve which set his face like a flint, and enabled him to go unhesitatingly and unrecalcitrant to the Cross itself.

Do not let us forget, either, that John's unwavering firmness wavered; that over the clear heaven of his conviction there did steal a cloud; that he from whom

no violence could wrench his faith, felt it slipping out of his grasp when his muscles were relaxed in the dungeon; and that he sent "from the prison"—which was the excuse for the message—to ask the question, after all, "Art thou he that should come?"

Nor let us forget that it was that very moment of trepidation which Jesus Christ seized in order to pour an unstinted flood of prayer for the firmness of his convictions on the wavering head of the Forerunner. So if we feel that though the needle of our compass points true to the pole, yet when the compass frame is shaken the needle sometimes vibrates away from its true goal, do not let us be cast down, but believe that a merciful allowance is made for human weakness. This man was great; first, because he had such dauntless courage and firmness that over his headless corpse in the dungeon at Machærus might have been spoken what the Regent Murray said over John Knox's coffin: "Here lies one that never feared the face of man."

II. Another element of true greatness that comes nobly out in the life with which I am dealing is the clear elevation above worldly goods.

That was the second point that our Lord's eulogium signalled. "What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?" Ah! you would have gone to a palace if you had wanted to see that, not to the reed-beds of Jordan. As we all know, in his life, in his dress, in his food, in the aims that he had set before him, he rose high above all regard for the debasing and perishable sweetness that hold of flesh, and are ended in time. He lived consciously for the Unseen. His asceticism, which belonged to his age, was not the highest type of the virtue which it expressed. As I have said about his courage, so I have self-denial—Christ's is of a higher sort. As the might of gentleness is greater than the might of such strength as John's, so the asceticism of John is lower than the self-government of the Man that comes eating and drinking.

But while that is true, I seek, dear brethren, to urge this old, threadbare lesson, always needed, never needed more than amidst the senselessly luxurious habits of this generation, needed in fewer places more than in a great commercial centre like that in which we live,—the one indispensable element of true greatness and elevation of character is that not the prophet and the preacher alone, but everyone of us, should live high above these temptations of gross and perishable joys, should

"Scorn delights and live laborious days." No man has a right to be called "great" if his aims are small. And the question is, not as modern idolatry of intellect, or, still worse, modern idolatry of success, often makes it out to be, has he great capacities? or has he won great prizes? but, has he greatly used himself and his life? If your aims are small you will never be great; and if your highest aims are but to get a good slice of this world's pudding—no matter what powers God may have given you to use, you are essentially a small man.

I remember a vigorous and contemptuous illustration of St. Bernard's—he likens a man that lives for these perishable delights which John spurned, to a spider spinning a web out of his own substance, and catching in it nothing but a wretched prey of poor little flies. Such an one has no right to be called a great man, surely. Our aims rather than our capacity determine our character, and they who greatly aspire after the greatest things within the reach of men, which are faith, hope, charity, and who for the sake of effecting these aspirations put their heels upon the head of the serpent, and suppress the animal in their nature, these are the men "great in the sight of the Lord."

III. Another element of true greatness, taught us by our type, is fiery enthusiasm for righteousness.

You may think that that has little to do with it. I believe it has everything to do with it, and that the difference between men is very largely to be found here, whether they flame up into the white heat of enthusiasm for the things that are right, or whether the only things that can kindle them into anything like earnestness and emotion are the poor, shabby things of personal advantage. I need not remind you, how all through John's career, there burned unflickering and undying that steadfast light; how he brought to the service of the plainest teaching of morality a fervor of passion and of zeal almost unexampled and magnificent. I need not remind you how Jesus Christ himself laid his hand upon this characteristic when he said of him "he was a light kindled and shining." But I would lay upon all our hearts the plain, practical lesson that if we keep in that tepid region of lukewarmness which is the utmost approach to tropical heat that moral and religious questions are capable of raising in many of us, good by to all chance of being "great in the sight of the Lord." We hear a great deal about the "blessings of moderation," the "dangers of fanaticism," and the like. I venture to think that the last thing which the moral consciousness of England wants today is a refrigerator, and that what it needs a great deal more than that is that all Christian people should be brought face to face with this plain truth—that their religion has, as an indispensable part of it, "a spirit of burning," and that if they had not been baptized in fire there is little reason to believe that they have been baptized with the Holy Ghost.

I long that you and myself may be aflame for goodness, may be enthusiastic over plain morality; and may show that we are so, by our daily life, by our rebuking the opposite, if need be, even if it took us into Herod's chamber and made Herodias our enemy for life.

IV. Lastly, observe the final element of greatness in this man—absolute humility of self-abnegation before Jesus Christ.

There is nothing that I know in biography anywhere more beautiful, more striking, than the contrast between the two halves of the character and demeanor of the Baptist; how, on the one side, he fronts all men undaunted and recognizes no superior, and how neither threats nor flatteries nor anything else will tempt him to step one inch beyond the limitations of which he is aware, nor to abate one inch of the claims which he urges; and, on the other hand, like some tall cedar, touched by the lightning's hand, he falls prone before Jesus Christ and says, "He must increase, and I must decrease." "A man can receive nothing except it be given him of God." He is all boldness on one side; all submission and dependence on the other.

You remember how, in the face of many temptations, this attitude was maintained. The very message which he had to carry was full of temptations to a self-seeking man to assert himself. You remember the almost rough "No!" with which, reiteratedly, he met the suggestions of the deputation from Jerusalem, that sought to induce him to say that he was more than he knew himself to be, and how he stuck by that infinitely humble and beautiful saying, "I am the voice"—That is all. You remember how the whole nation was in a kind of conspiracy to tempt him to assert himself, and was ready to break into a flame if he had dropped a spark, for "all men were musing in their heart whether he was the Christ or not," and all the lawless and restless elements would have been only too glad to gather round him if he had declared himself the Messiah. Remember how his own disciples came to him, and tried to play upon his jealousy, and to induce him to assert himself, "Master! he whom thou didst baptize," and so didst give him the first credentials that sent men on his course, had outstripped thee, and "all men are coming to him." And you remember the lovely answer that opened such depths of unexpected tenderness in the rough nature: "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: The friend of the bridegroom heareth the voice; and that is enough to fill my cup with joy to the very brim."

And what conceptions of Jesus Christ had John that he thus bowed his lofty crest before Him, and softened his heart into submission almost abject? He knew Him to be the coming Judge, with the fan in His hand, who could baptize with fire, and he knew Him to be "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Therefore he fell before Him.

Brethren! we shall not be "great in the sight of the Lord" unless we copy that example of utter self-abnegation before Jesus Christ. Thomas A. Kempis says somewhere, "He is truly great who is small in his own sight and thinks nothing of the giddy heights of worldly honor." You and I know far more of Jesus Christ than John the Baptist did. Do we bow ourselves before Him as he did? The Source from which he drew his greatness is open too us all.

Let us begin with the recognition of the Lamb of God that takes away the world's sin, and with it ours. Let the thought of what he is, and what he has done for us bow us in unfeigned submission. Let it shatter all dreams of our own importance, or our own desert. The vision of the Lamb of God, and if only, will crush in our hearts the serpent's eggs of self-esteem and self-regard.

Then let our closeness to Jesus Christ, and our experience of his power, kindle in us the fiery enthusiasm with which he baptizes all his true servants, and let it, because we know the sweetness that excel, deprive us of all liability to be tempted away by the vulgar and coarse delights of earth and of sense. Let us keep ourselves clear of the babble that is round about us, and be strong because we grasp Christ's hand.

I have been speaking this morning about no characteristic which may not be attained by any man or woman of child among us. "The least in the Kingdom of Heaven" may be greater than he. 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." And if we will keep ourselves close to Jesus Christ that will be attained. It will matter very little what men think of us, if at last we have praise from the lips of him who poured such praise on his servant. We may, if we will. And then it will not hurt us, tho' our names on earth be dark, and our memories perish from among men. "Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed."

Fact and Fiction Concerning the Southerners.

BY KATHERINE C. MCLEOD.

THEIR POLITENESS AND THEIR STARK. There is a certain fiction scattered abroad and dispersed throughout the North to the effect that the Southerners are a marvelously polite and courteous

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