

The Difference Christ has made.

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THE difficulty of interpreting this saying was felt at a very early date. The variant reading in MS. A, 'there is not a greater prophet than John,' which Tischendorf accepts, is evidently due to an endeavour on the part of an early copyist to make the interpretation easier. 'Prophet' is omitted in MSS κ and B, which are followed by Westcott and Hort and the Revisers. Chrysostom sought to solve the problem of interpretation by referring δ μικρότερος to Jesus, but few have cared to follow him.

It is unfortunate that in the Authorized Version the comparative δ μικρότερος has been translated as a superlative. The Revised Version, given above, comes nearer to the true translation, but Wendt gives it with the greatest accuracy as 'one comparatively small,' or 'comparatively little.'¹ Our Lord makes use of the superlative in Mt 5¹⁹, 'Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least (*ἐλάχιστος*) in the kingdom of heaven.' The comparative describes one who is not so low in the kingdom, but who is plainly not an excellent or notable member of the spiritual kingdom. The description is almost a censure. It increases the difficulty of understanding why such a one is greater than John. The difficulty is intensified when we see that this superiority of one comparatively little in the kingdom of God does not arise from any lack of appreciation of the Baptist. The recognition of his greatness is most ample, most generous. The eulogy pronounced upon him is unique. He is 'the greatest of them that are born of women.'

We notice that John had a remarkable consciousness of his own inferiority to Jesus. He is not worthy to unloose the latchet of His shoes. He is the meanest slave in the presence of the King. John would doubtless agree if the comparison were made as Chrysostom suggested between Jesus and himself. But Jesus never

'Among them that are born of women there is not a greater than John: yet he that is but little in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'—Luke vii. 28 (R.V.).

compares Himself with John. He compares him with a citizen of the kingdom of God,—who has no particular spiritual excellence,—a very ordinary member, and declares that such a one is greater.

We believe our Lord uttered this paradox that men might be compelled to think of that which might easily escape them; to recognize what they might pass by without recognition—the surpassing value and meaning of the kingdom of God. John stands as the greatest of the old dispensation of promise and hope. The other with whom he is compared stands in the lower ranks of the new dispensation of fact and fulfilment. But the dispensations are so different that the comparatively little one of the new is greater than the greatest of the old. A few commonplace illustrations may make this clear. The greatest of men who walk by moonlight or starlight—if we can so imagine—is surpassed in outlook, opportunity, in the variety and richness of experience, by a very common man walking by the light of the noonday sun. What is the best illumination of the ancient rushlight compared with the brilliance of an ordinary electric light? What is the speed of Jehu to the rush of the express? What are the best of the old copyists toiling laboriously with the pen compared with a very indifferent printer guiding the latest press? The greatest of the astronomers before the time of Copernicus or Newton is surpassed by a very common student of the stars to-day. The one belongs to an old order, the other to a new. In these cases the new knowledge or the new inventions came gradually. Thousands of years lie between some of them. In the case of John and Jesus the two orders lay close together, and even overlapped. But the difference between them was so vast that the grandest type of the old is surpassed by a humble adherent of the new—

He (is) the last star of parting night,
And we the children of the dawn.

¹ *Teaching of Jesus*, ii. 29, note.

This apparently paradoxical comparison is a marvellous testimony to the uniqueness of the consciousness of Jesus. This is how He thought of His work. This is how it was to affect the world. We need to remember this and to emphasize it. The difference which Christ has made on the spiritual position and outlook of mankind is simply unspeakable. It is the difference between the Old Testament and the New. *That* is greater than we can realize, for the Church for over eighteen hundred years has read the New Testament into the Old. John really sums up the teaching of the Old Testament. Warning, judgment, and promise—these are the lines on which the goodly fellowship of the prophets did their great work. The impending wrath, the ready axe, the fan in the hand, the unquenchable fire, the coming of the King, the cry ‘Prepare,’ ‘Repent’—are echoes of the old prophetic strains. But Jesus comes, and the signs of judgment are strikingly absent. His work is not to judge but save. He does not cry, ‘Flee from the wrath,’ but ‘Come, and I will give you rest.’ We see Him as the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep; as the triumphing Messiah weeping over Jerusalem, dying on the Cross for the sins of men, forgiving His murderers, forgetting His pain to give life and hope to the robber beside Him. He speaks of His Spirit, not as fire, but as ‘peace’ and ‘comfort.’ The Father in Heaven, pardon, renewal of life; the love that *seeks* and *saves*; the gift of eternal life,—these are His themes. Judgment there is, but mercy triumphs over it. These are the things which make the new dispensation so different from the old, that the most ordinary believer is greater in spiritual outlook, opportunity, capacity, richness and variety of experience and strength of hope, than the grandest the old dispensation could produce. The darkness is past; the light has come. Gone are the gropings and searchings, the straining of the eyes to pierce the gloom. The Father’s face shines upon all His children. Love is seen to reign in earth and heaven. Death has lost its terror and the grave its victory. No wonder Jesus said, ‘Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear: for verily I say unto you, that

many prophets and righteous men have desired to see the things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear the things which ye hear, and have not heard them’ (Mt 13¹⁶⁻¹⁷). This is a thought which is often repeated in the New Testament. The Epistle to the Hebrews is simply an enlargement and illustration of it. Paul declares that the glory of the old is lost in the glory of the new that excellet (2 Co 3¹⁰), and gives his own personal conviction of the infinite superiority of the new revelation to the old when he says, ‘I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Ph 3⁸). Peter adds a remarkable thought when he tells how the prophets inquired and searched diligently, searching what or what manner of time the Spirit which was in them did signify . . . to whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things which are now reported . . . by them that have preached the gospel unto you,—*which things the angels desire to look into*. Things have been revealed in the gospel which had not been known to the angels. The wonder and value of the gospel revelation could not be more significantly expressed.

Is all this not a plain indication that the secret of the buoyant faith and strenuous energy of the apostles lay in their recognition of the unique splendour of the kingdom of God? Surely blindness in some measure has fallen upon the Church of to-day, when we compare its preaching and apologetic with those of the apostles. We see not the glory of Christ as they saw it. Men and women are even turning away from Christ, are putting aside the gospel. They see none of the splendour that filled the apostles with thankfulness to God for His unspeakable gift. The gospel is without attraction because they see not its reality, or the difference it has made. The hope of the world lies in regaining spiritual vision, and that must begin with the Church, and in the Church with the preachers. This hope need not be deferred. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to *glorify* Christ. And the promise of the Saviour holds for every age, ‘He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you’ (Jn 16¹⁴).