



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“There seems to be a contradiction in what is said about John the Baptist in Matt. 11:11. He is referred to as the greatest and then as the least. Surely this is a contradiction.”

There are no contradictions in the Bible. If we believe the Bible to be a collection of the words of men and **not** the Word of God then I suppose we could expect contradictions, but if we believe it to be the Word of God, then how could we expect the One who is the source of all truth to contradict Himself? We need, then, to put contradictions out of our minds, and by careful Bible study seek to **understand** what God is saying to us. Relative to the question, we shall need to see the sense in which the words greatest and ‘least’ are used, and it might help if we consider other instances where these words are used.

John The Baptist

There is no doubt at all that John was a very courageous and brave man. He confronted the Jewish leaders with the words, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7 but read on). One of the first clues, however, to the answering of our question is given by John when he said, “he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear” (V11). In comparing future status he said, “He must increase but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Later, when John, languishing in prison, sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was indeed the Messiah, he was not trying to enhance **his own** status; he was concerned because the progress of the Kingdom was not as he, John, had anticipated. (See Matt. 11: 2-6).

The New Situation

When situations change, a change in attitude is usually required of people who have to cope with the new, emerging situation. This does not always happen. In the twentieth century, when emergent nations have been given political freedom in order to unify with each other and with the world at large, other nations have ‘held their breath’ when they have seen such emergent nations trying to cope with the new situation by applying old, traditional tribal laws. In the case of the Jewish leaders, the emerging Kingdom was met by stern, unyielding attitudes, particularly in the application of the Mosaic Law.

However, the Jews had completely mis-understood what God had been telling them for centuries under the Old Covenant, and, incidentally, what Jesus was teaching (new wine, old skins, new cloth, old garments etc.). John was unique, not only as a person but also as a prophet (see Luke 7:28); he was the ‘greatest’, because Jesus said that he was. But John was at the end of the old order, heralding in the new, the Kingdom of God. What Jesus is saying to His disciples is that in estimation the **least** in this New Kingdom is greater than the **greatest** in the old order. Now this may say something about personalities, but it says much, much more about the superlative value of the New Kingdom when contrasted with the Old Covenant.

Fulfilment And Requirement

Jesus teaches His disciples, however, that they are not to disparage the Mosaic Law; even though imperfect, it had been given by God, and it had brought them to

the point of the ministry of Christ. Even though **incomplete**, it had to be seen as moving the development of God's Will in the right direction until the **complete** should come. Jesus acknowledges the continuity of the spiritual principle under-pinning the Mosaic Law, and calls upon His disciples, and us, to cultivate a deeper and more searching obedience to those principles, "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

The mistake the scribes and Pharisees made was to teach the people the **externals** of the law – ceremonial washings, animal sacrifices, etc. – while forgetting the weightier matters – love, mercy, compassion. It was an appreciation of the latter which prompted Jesus to say, "Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." (Matt. 5:17). Jesus then goes on to remind His disciples that they had been **brought up** under the Law, and that it had enshrined God's will up to **that stage**. He then warns them that in their zeal and enthusiasm for His **new** teaching they should not abandon **all** that they had learned before; as He said to them, "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the **least** in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called **great** in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19). They had to **do** and **teach**; isn't that the right way round?

Yes, the Jewish leaders and teachers had left out the prophetic elements of the Old Testament, and had substituted rigid, external observance for moral holiness. Well might Jesus scathingly denounce them. We should ensure that He doesn't find the same in us. Do we want to be of **low** or **high** esteem in His Kingdom?

Matt. 11:12 is an interesting verse, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." A free interpretation of this verse would be, "strong men **force** their way into the kingdom and take it by force." The Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that just seeing to the externals is no use whatsoever; we have to **strive** to enter in. When strong, resourceful men see something of inestimable value they will strive to apprehend it. How different from weak, peripheral Christians who are content with the crumbs from the rich fare on the tables.

Humility

In Eph. 3:8 Paul speaks about the power of God extended to him in the Gospel; he says, in some amazement, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Dear brother, sister, do you hear that? Less than the least! Paul had a great estimation of his fellow-saints; he held them in great esteem. He had endured much himself, but when he compared himself with many who had borne the burden and heat of the day, and in many cases had died for the Lord, he was moved to say that even the least of these was greater than he. This was not mock humility; Paul was not a weak man, on the contrary he tells us that he had wrestled with the beasts at Ephesus, but he was so intent on being like his Lord that he esteemed others more highly than himself.

Paul was careful, though, to defend his authoritative Apostleship. In 2 Cor. 11:5 he says, "For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostles." Later in the same letter he says, "for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest Apostles, though I be nothing." There was no arrogance in saying this; by the grace of God he was what he was. Nor was there mock humility in thinking himself nothing; he looked upon it as an occasion for the Gospel. This great Apostle had truly learned the spirit of Christ: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more." (1 Cor. 9:19),

All of this makes us understand the greatness of the Church, because the Kingdom is the Church. We, who were nothing, have now been exalted to the highest in Christ Jesus. In the eyes of the world we may be less than the least, but in the eyes of God we are something special. Didn't He send Jesus to die for us?

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden
20 Costessy Way, Winstanley, Wigan, WN3 6ES)

LOVE THE LORD

(Psalm 116: 1-12)

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications"

This verse tells us of great love. Brethren, love has to be the most essential feature in our relationship with God. God's love is the strongest love in all the world. So let us never forget the sacrifice given, that we might live in harmony with God.

"Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful" (v5). What a heart warming verse that is. We see here God's concern toward his own. It tells of God's concern for his people in-gathered through Christ Jesus; adopted by love are we.

Brethren, God makes his love known in many ways; never take for granted the signs; pray often in thanksgiving. We should remember that God's hand is ever near, protecting, guiding and keeping us from harm, through His loving care. Verses 8,9 reads: **"For thou hast delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling."**

"I walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

Beloved remember this, "The nearer to God the stronger the love." In this day and age in which we live, we require great strength of patience, hope and faith, as never before. We indeed live in perilous times.

Verse 10 reads, **"I kept my faith even when I said I am greatly afflicted."** Even in dire straits brethren, we can still experience God's love. A lesson here for all of us. Don't despair! Of course our hope and strength must never rest upon ourselves or mere man: if it does, we will assuredly fail. Verse 11 emphasises this great fact.

"I said in my consternation men are all a vain hope." It is sad, but nevertheless true, the world at large is hurtling towards disaster due to the trust put in man. All history confirms this truth. Praise the Lord our trust is in Christ Jesus!

In life we will doubtless fall foul of every-day happenings, that's a fact of life. But look for comfort in the book of Psalms. Let us, like the words of the old song, **"Walk in our fathers footsteps."** In this we share and experience the true strength of God's love.

Build for the future by keeping close to God. **"What shall I render to the Lord, for all His bounty - to me"?** (v12).

A. P. SHARPE,
Newtongrange.

Seen Through

The anniversary speaker, long advertised, was taken ill and had to send a deputy, who began his address by explaining that he was only a substitute and then felt it necessary to define the word.

"If you break a window," he said, "and put a piece of cardboard in place of the broken pane, that is a substitute."

At the close of the service one of the deacon's thanked him for stepping into the breach at such short notice and added: "You were no substitute, you were a real pane."