

THE PROFESSOR

MAY IT NEVER BE!

Matthew 11:11 (NIV) I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

WHO ARE YOUR BIBLE HEROES?

The answers I have heard to that question have so often been David, Moses, Samson, Elijah, etc, that I began to ask, "Why Old Testament characters?" The more appropriate question is, "Why don't Christians recognize New Testament characters as heroes?" Even when they do mention New Testament characters it is often only to identify themselves with the Gospel descriptions of the weak, vacillating, inconsistent disciples as they walked the dusty roads of Galilee unable to comprehend even the most basic teachings of the Rabbi, Jesus.

Jesus made a distinction in the text verse that should make every Christian sit up and take note. Of all those "born of women" (that seems pretty inclusive), none was "greater than John the Baptist." *Yet*, "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Consider the time in which Jesus made this preposterous claim. For about 1,500 years the children of Israel had been dealing with the Law of Moses. Volumes of commentary had been written about the Law. From Moses to Malachi the prophets were revered as great men of God. Who could be greater than Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, etc? According to Jesus the answer is John the Baptist! *Yet*, "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Jesus gave several clues about the Kingdom in his teaching. First, he began his ministry by proclaiming, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (**Matthew 4:17**). Then he sent out his disciples to proclaim the same message (**Matthew 10:6**). He told the Pharisees, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you." (**Matthew 12:28**). In **Matthew 19:14** Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these."

It is in the Gospel of John that we begin to learn what it takes to be a part of the Kingdom.

John 3:3Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth unless a man is born again (or, born from above) he cannot see the Kingdom of God." (NCV)

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Clearly, something definitive must happen to a man before he can see or enter into the Kingdom.

John 1:10-13 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (NIV)

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVING THE “RIGHT TO BECOME” CHILDREN OF GOD AND “BEING” CHILDREN OF GOD?

Romans 8:14 Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (NIV)
“All who follow the leading of God's Spirit are God's own sons. (Phillips)

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You may hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

Being born of the Spirit and being led by the Spirit means we are the sons of God.

DOES THAT ALSO MEAN WE ARE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

Colossians 1:13 For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves

There can be but one Kingdom besides the kingdom of darkness. It is variously called the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Christ. Only a very special kind of people can be a part of that kingdom. Peter describes them in his first letter.

I Peter 2:9-10 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

It is abundantly clear that we who are born again and Spirit-led are in (or “of”) the Kingdom of Heaven. That means we are *greater than* John the Baptist.

WHEN WERE THE DISCIPLES BORN AGAIN?

Let's look at one of the most prominent of them – Simon Peter. Some say he was born again when he left his fishing nets and boat to follow Jesus. Some say Peter was born again when he answered Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” with a revelation he received from the Father. But Peter himself said, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (I Peter 1:3)

Think about the implications of that statement. If we are “born again...through the resurrection” then until the resurrection no one was born again! I have even been told, “Abraham, Moses, David and Elijah were as born again as you and I are!”

In spite of all the talk, preaching and teaching about the cross there is precious little understanding of the part the cross plays in our salvation.

How does the cross enter into our salvation? One answer I’ve heard: “They (the Old Testament saints) were saved by looking forward to the Cross; we are saved by looking back to the Cross!”

I contend that we will never approach the ideal presented by the New Testament until we see the Cross as the dividing line between an old relationship with God based on *behavior modification* by the law and the *crucifixion of the flesh* “with Christ” leading to a *new creation* “in Christ.”

So much depends on how we “see” ourselves.

“Repeat after me!” – “The world would be a better place/ if everyone in it/ was just like me.” This little interactive exercise has been greeted by hoots of laughter everywhere I’ve used it. The very idea of asking someone to be *like me* is apparently totally ridiculous. These are for the most part “born again,” active church members – people who certainly should be living holy and doing their share of witnessing or at least inviting others to their church. If we can’t tell others they ought to be like us, then what in the world do we have to offer them?

In the 26th chapter of Acts Paul defended himself before King Agrippa for the actions that had landed him in prison. Agrippa put him off by saying, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." ²⁹ And Paul *said*, "I would to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also **all who hear me this day, might become such as I am (i.e. like me), except for these chains.**"

Can you say to the world, "I would to God that you were like me?" Can you even wish your children were like you?

The world doesn't need any more David's or Solomon's or even Elijah's and Elisha's. What the world needs today is born again, Spirit-filled children of the Most High God who will show forth His praises and say to the world, "I wish you were just like me!!" The problem is that too many

Christians today are like the Pharisees in Christ's day, about whom Jesus said, "Do as they say, not as they do."

As long as we are comparing ourselves with Old Testament saints or even the disciples in the four Gospels we are setting ourselves up for failure. It is time for us to understand what Jesus did for us on the cross; to fully enter into the completed work of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus!

It all comes down to our attitude toward and relationship with the flesh. Some years ago a Bible teacher wrote on the blackboard, "Quit fulfilling the lust of the flesh, and you will walk in the Spirit." It sounded good to me. The religious atmosphere in which I walked put more emphasis

on the things I shouldn't do than on my relationship with God. I felt that if I could only get the flesh under control, then I could become all God wanted me to be.

And, on the other hand, I had been taught that Romans chapter seven is the norm of the Christian life.

Romans 7:14-24 For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. ¹⁵ For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ But if I do the very thing I do not wish *to do*, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that it is good. ¹⁷ So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. ¹⁹ For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. ²⁰ But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. ²¹ I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. ²² For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, ²³ but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.
²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Although Paul's next words look like the answer to that question he messes things up with the last part of the verse. ²⁵ "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, **on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.**"

IS THAT REALLY THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE – AS GOD INTENDED IT TO BE?

"May it never be!"

You may have noticed that those last words are a direct quote from Paul in the sixth chapter of Romans.

Romans 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?
² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

He repeats himself word for word in verse 15 answering another, similar, but different question.
¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? **May it never be!**

Is it possible that we are living a lifestyle that Paul rejects out of hand because we accept a seeming contradiction in his writing? Do we really believe the Paul who said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" could have also said, "The good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish" and be speaking of his Christian walk in both places?

Surely the Word of God is not that inconsistent!