

WHAT IS YOUR STATUS BEFORE GOD?

Today's Text: Matt. 11: 1-15

Extracts:

As they [two of John the Baptist's disciples] departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?... A man clothed in soft garments? ... A prophet?... Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" [Matt. 11: 7-9, 11]

The weekend before his inauguration as the 44th (and first African-American) President of the United States of America, Barack Obama took his family to the Lincoln Memorial on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.¹ Abraham Lincoln inspires Obama, apart from sharing the same home State (Illinois). He was the President during America's Civil War (1851-56). In addition to saving the Union, his actions eventually led to the abolition of slavery across the United States. To date, he ranks as the most influential President in American history.² As the Obama family looked at Lincoln's second inaugural address which has been etched on a wall in the Memorial, the younger daughter asked her father, "That's a long speech. Do you have to give one of those?" He replied that his would be longer. The older daughter, 10-year-old Malia, turned to him and said, "First African-American president. Better be good." Here, we see President Obama using America's 16th President, Abraham Lincoln, as his standard but his children are setting a higher standard for their father. Obama is not just the 44th President. He is the first African-American President. He has to defend not only his office but his race! So, at the end of his term, what would be his ranking (status) among past presidents? What would be his standing among African-Americans?

The status we enjoy depends on how we measure it. Status before humans will be different from the one before God. For sure, the one before God is more desirable. So, what status would you want to enjoy before God? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Story based on Mark Silva, "Obama's daughter: 'Better be good'" taken from the transcript of CNN Anchor, John King's interview with President-Elect Obama, http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2009/01/obamas_daughter_better_be_good.html Posted on January 16, 2009;

² Martin Kelly, "Top 10 Most Influential Presidents," <http://americanhistory.about.com/od/uspresidents/tp/toppresidents.htm>

1. Measuring status

The issue of status is a recurrent problem in a gathering of two or more persons. In Scripture, it was a big problem among the disciples of Jesus. For example, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, even wanted to be installed on the right and left sides of Jesus in the coming kingdom [**Matt. 20: 20-28**]! Whether in the church, school, office or business, *the clamour to be the first among equals or others* can take a serious toll on that organization's effectiveness. Therefore, status is an important subject to understand.

According to Leonard Sayles, Professor Emeritus of organizational behaviour at Columbia University Graduate School of Business, status is the ratio of the number of people who defers to you to the number you defer to.³ To defer is to give way to or accept another person's superiority over you. If you defer to everybody else and nobody defers to you, then your status is zero. If you defer to as many people as defer to you, your status is one (1). However, if everybody defers to you and you defer to nobody, your status is infinite. Nobody wants zero status. In fact, most people prefer a score of more than one, meaning that more people defer to them than they defer to others. Such posturing breeds instability in organizations and they manifest in various forms, such as the following:

a) *Resistance to change*

People see change as a threat to their status. If change will enhance it, they will gladly support it. Otherwise, they will resist it even if their fight does not make logical sense! For example, how do you expect a trade union leader to support automation if that will reduce the size of the workforce (union membership base)? How do you expect rich people to support higher taxes for the wealthy if that will reduce their advantage over poorer folks? In the church, a deputy pastor may resist the appointment of more deputy pastors for fear that that could dilute his own status.

The Jews and Romans feared the growing status of Jesus because they knew that it was a threat to their own. You saw how they used such fear to stop Pontius Pilate from setting Jesus free in preference to Barabbas. They told him, "If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar" [**Jn 19: 12**]. Since it was the emperor that appointed Pontius Pilate governor of Judea [**Matt. 27: 2**], his own status was also threatened. So, even when the crucifixion did not make legal or logical sense, it served his status preservation (if not enhancement) quite well!

b) *Undesirable impact on cooperation, collaboration and productivity*

³ Leonard R. Sayles, *Managerial Behavior* [McGraw-Hill, 1964]

Many people find it difficult to work in groups for fear that it could dilute their status. There can only be one leader or coordinator at a time in each group and they may not be the one so appointed or chosen. Their merit or knowledge may be put to test or exposure beyond what their status can bear. Therefore, the earlier they can get out of it the better.

Various tricks are used. For example, filibuster is common- you keep talking until time runs out and nothing is achieved! Or you may make the current coordinator fail so that you can be considered in his/her place. Or you may be present without actively participating. Or you may put in much less than you are capable of producing. Or you will disagree with every suggestion other than your own. That may in part explain why a team made up of stars hardly wins tournaments.

There is nothing wrong with status *per se* unless it is self-awarded. The word of God says, "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger and not your own lips" [Prov. 27: 2]. You do not even know what will make others defer to you. It may have little to do with your assertiveness or position in life. When it comes to God, it is a bigger matter. He cannot share His limelight with man. He does not see the outside but our hearts [1 Sam. 16: 7]. His ways and thoughts are higher than ours [Is. 55: 8-9]. Therefore, the way He sees status is quite different from how we see it. If God rates your status high, then you are on top of the world ! This lesson will show us how God measures status.

2. How Jesus saw the status of John the Baptist

Our background story is set in the time that Herod had put John the Baptist in prison for questioning his immoral marriage to his brother's wife. As prophesied by the prophet Malachi [Mal. 5: 1; Matt. 11: 10], John was the precursor, that is, the herald of the coming of Jesus. Before his imprisonment, he had preached repentance and made it quite clear to all that he was not the Messiah, that he was not even worthy to carry [Matt. 3: 11] or loose [Lk 3: 16] His sandals. John's earthly ministry officially ended when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan [vv. 13-17].

Before the Christ was revealed to John by the Jordan, he was the boldest, if not the most prominent preacher of his time. The Pharisees and Sadducees [Matt. 3: 7], tax collectors and soldiers [Lk 3: 12-14] were among the people who had flocked to be baptized by him. In spite of his prominence, he continued to make it clear to all that a greater than himself was coming who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire [Matt. 3: 11]. He continued to baptize in Judea. At a stage, when a dispute arose between John's disciples and the Jews concerning purification, they came to him and said, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified-behold He is baptizing, and *all are coming to Him!*" [Jn 3: 23-26]. If "all" were coming to Jesus, that suggests "none" or fewer were going to John. By human standards, John's status had gone down with the ascendancy of Jesus. Was he envious? No! Instead, he told those that came to

him (among other things), “You yourselves hear me witness that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but ‘I have been sent before Him.’ ... Therefore, this joy of mine is fulfilled. *He must increase; but I must decrease*” [vv. 28-30]. Wow!

Soon after, he was arrested and put in Herod’s prison. Without any access to the outside world, dejection set in. Satan started to buffet him with some doubts. It was in that state that he sent two of his disciples (who might have visited him but could only speak to him from outside the prison wall) to Jesus to ask if He was “the Coming One” or whether they should look for another. He sent them back to reassure John that He was the expected Messiah, as vindicated by His words and works [Matt. 11: 1-6].

However, before God, John’s status actually went up! After his disciples had left, Jesus told the multitudes the following about the Baptist [v. 11]:

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Adam and Eve were not born of woman but they are out of reckoning because they fell to the devil’s seduction in the Garden of Eden. So, from our first parents’ children, through Noah, Abraham, David to you and I, there is no person born of woman with a higher status before God than John the Baptist. He was related to Jesus as a cousin. He performed his labour in the vineyard excellently well. But that is not all what Jesus wants us to see in John.

When the mother and brothers of Jesus came looking for Him, the multitudes expected Him to stop work and pay them special attention as close blood relations. However, Jesus saw it differently. Looking around Himself, He told His listeners, “Whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother” [Mk 3: 31-35]. In like manner, the person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is that person that does the will of God. That is the person who is superior to John the blood relation of Jesus.

The least in the kingdom of heaven can be equated with the greatest as the following examples from the Scripture suggest

- There was a dispute among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus perceived their thoughts and He set a little child by Him and said to His disciples, “Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives Him who sent Me. *For he who is least among you all will be great*” [Lk 9: 46-48]. Here, least is the same meaning as the greatest. Those who have accepted Jesus and His Father are the greatest and have high status before God.
- On one occasion, the disciples came to Jesus and asked Him, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus set a little child in their midst

and told them that unless they were “converted and become as little children,” they would by no means “enter the kingdom of heaven.” He added, “Therefore, *whoever humbles himself, as this little child, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” [Matt. 18: 1-4]. Here, humility and child-like purity are offered as marks of high status before God.

- When the ten other apostles heard how the mother of the sons of Zebedee had tried to corner the top seats in heaven for her two sons (James and John), they became quite displeased. So, Jesus called them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but *whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant, and whoever desires to be first among you let him be your slave*—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” [Matt. 20: 24-28]. Here, selfless service is given as a mark of high status.
- Soon after the Last Supper, there was a dispute among the disciples of Jesus as to which of them should be considered the greatest. He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors, but not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.” For those who continued with Him in His trials, He has bestowed a kingdom, just as His Father had bestowed one upon Him, “that (they) may eat and drink at (His) table in (His) kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” [Lk 22: 24-30]. Service is reiterated and the reward is sharing judgment thrones with Jesus in His kingdom. What status can be higher than that?

From the forgoing, we see that your status is closely linked to a God-fearing use of your position of authority, your humble carriage or helpfulness or appreciation of others’ contribution. John was great in that he showed those qualities but you can be greater because you know more about Jesus than He did!

3. Conclusion: Your status before God

John the Baptist did not live a flamboyant life. He was raised in the wilderness of Judea, “clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” But when he preached repentance, “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him” [Matt. 3: 1-5]. At the end of his short ministry as the forerunner of the Christ, he was imprisoned and later beheaded there. By human standards, to be a forerunner of Christ is a great privilege that has put John way ahead of any other human being. However, Jesus rated him the greatest person born of woman because, in his life and work, he demonstrated humility and selfless service in the fear of the Lord.

There is somebody else that Jesus has rated greater than John the Baptist- the least in the kingdom of God. You can be such a person if you:

- Have received Jesus and His Father in your heart. That means that you are completely committed to obeying the will of the Father as revealed by His Son in *all aspects* of your life;
- Demonstrate total devotion to God and His Christ by selfless service, no matter the position you occupy on earth. In fact, the higher the position occupied on earth, the more service you should render to those less privileged than you are.
- Recognize that you are a member of the Lord's value chain, made up of all labourers in His vineyard. Therefore, you cannot underrate or undermine others. Instead, you should learn to work with others, no matter their position in life, to advance God's work.

You can never measure your status by human standards because they are transient. One day, you will lose that leadership chair from which you now dispense rewards and punishment. One day, you could lose your material wealth to natural or man-made disasters and suddenly become vulnerable and poor at old age. One day, you will die and face God's judgment. On that day, the only status that suffices is the one that makes you qualified to be raised by the Lord to the highest seat in His kingdom.

That is the status you should be pursuing right now.