

## THE GREATER WORKS IN JOHN 14:12

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What does Jesus mean in John 14:12 when he says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who believes in me the works I do shall he do also, and greater than these shall he do, because I go to the Father"? Before I suggest an interpretation a few comments will be made about the context. In verse 12 itself the promise cannot be limited to the apostles, for Jesus says that anyone who believes will do greater works. In the wider context of John 14 Jesus' main purpose has been to assure his disciples that his absence from them will be even better than his personal presence. He is going to prepare a place for them so that they can be with him forever (John 14:3-4), and an eternal future with Jesus can only be secured by his atoning death. The cross is the means by which Jesus prepares a place for his disciples. Verse 12 on "greater works" is another assurance that Jesus' absence will actually be beneficial for those who believe in him. In verses 13-14 Jesus promises in his absence to answer prayers uttered in his name, and verses 15-17 promise the Spirit to those who obey Jesus' commandments. Thus, in Jesus' absence the disciples will do greater works, their prayers in Jesus' name will be answered, and they will have the power of the Holy Spirit. And one day Jesus will return to take believers home. I think the greater works Jesus has in mind are not greater miracles in terms of signs and wonders. Instead, the greater works done by those who believe in Jesus refer to the work of the Spirit in people's hearts, a work of the Spirit that has greater dimensions now that Jesus has ascended to the Father. Four arguments support this interpretation.

1. The "greater works" cannot refer to signs and wonders that are greater in quality than those done by Jesus because no believer ever has or ever will do greater miracles than Jesus. He raised the dead, opened the eyes of the blind, restored hearing to the deaf, cast out demons, healed the lame, calmed a stormy sea, etc. No miracle-worker has even come close since the days of the apostles, and even the apostles did not do any signs and wonders that were greater.

2. But perhaps John means that believers will do greater works in the sense that we will do more signs and wonders than Jesus? But the Greek word for "greater" used here does not refer to a greater number of works. If John wanted to refer to a greater number of works, he probably would have used the Greek word *polla* meaning "more." A careful study of the word "greater" (*meizōn*) in John's gospel shows that the word consistently refers to something that is greater in quality rather than something that is greater in number. For example, in John 19:11 Jesus says to Pilate "he who delivered me up to you has the greater sin." In other words, Judas' sin is a more serious sin (not greater in number!) Than Pilate because he actually betrayed Jesus.

Some other examples:

John 4:12 "Are you greater than Jacob?" This obviously means greater in quality, and the idea of greater in number doesn't make any sense.

5:36 "I have a testimony greater than John." The testimony is not greater in number, but greater in quality, for the superior testimony comes from the Father.

John 8:53 "Are you greater than Abraham?"

John 10:29 "The Father is greater than all."

John 13:16 "The servant is not greater than his master."

John 14:28 "The Father is greater than I."

The most significant example is from John 5:20 where Jesus says, "And greater works than these he (the Father) shall show to him (Jesus) that you may marvel." This verse is very close to John 14:12 because in both verses Jesus speaks of "greater works." Jesus is contrasting here his healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (John 5:1-16) with the greater works that he would do in the future. The greater works in the context appear to be the communication of spiritual life (John 5:21,24-25), the judgment of all (5:22), and the future resurrection from the dead (John 5:29). The point here is not that these works are greater in number, but they are qualitatively superior to the healing of a man who was lame. These works are superior because they will last forever, while the lame man got sick again and died.

To conclude this second point: the greater works do not mean believers will do more works than Jesus, but that they will do works qualitatively better than those Jesus did in his ministry. These better works are due to the outpouring of the Spirit after Jesus' ascension. [Note: Incidentally, there is no evidence from church history that any believer did more miracles than Jesus anyway, and this verse is not limited to those who have the gift of healing; it refers to all believers.]

3. The word "works" in John's gospel in some contexts clearly includes Jesus' miracles (John 7:3, 21; 9:4; 10:25,32,33,37,38). But even though the word often includes the idea of miracles, the word "works" cannot be limited to signs and wonders in John's gospel. For example, John 6:28-29 identifies the "work of God" as "believing in the one whom the Father sent." And in John 8:39 Jesus exhorts the Jews to "do the works of Abraham," and there is no record of Abraham doing miracles, and so Jesus must mean, "do the good deeds of Abraham." John 14:10 is especially interesting, for there Jesus says, "The words which I speak to you I do not speak from myself, but the Father abiding in me does his works." Here the "words" of Jesus in the first part of the verse are defined as his "works" in the latter part of the verse. Thus, we have clear

evidence in the near context (compare also verse 11) that the word "works" should not be restricted to signs and wonders. Indeed, when John wants to speak of miracles, he consistently uses the word "sign." "Sign" is the unambiguous word John uses to describe miracles, and the word "works" is a more general term, which may include miracles, but does not necessarily focus on signs and wonders.

All of this suggests that the first part of verse 12 where Jesus says, "the one who believes in me the works I do he shall do also" does not mean that believers will do miracles and signs and wonders to the same extent as Jesus. The word "works" is a general term, and thus Jesus is simply saying that you will do works of the same quality as I did and more. It should also be noted that Jesus' miraculous works were unique in the sense that such "signs" manifested his unique glory from the Father (John 2:11), and John tells us that the signs Jesus did were performed so that "you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and in order that by believing you might have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). Thus, Jesus' miracles were in one sense a unique manifestation of his glory and divinity. This is not to deny that miracles can be done today. The point is that Jesus' miracles were unique, and no one in church history or in the Bible has ever matched Jesus in miraculous activity.

4. The greater works, then, refer to the extended work of the Spirit, which will occur when Jesus ascends to the Father. This is not to deny that the Spirit was active previously in significant ways. But the work of the Spirit on earth was intensified with Jesus' ascension. Note that Jesus specifically says that "the greater works" will occur "because I go to the Father." Going to the Father, then, provides the reason or ground for the greater works. But why does Jesus' going to the Father make possible greater works? The rest of John's gospel answers that question. In John 16:7 Jesus says, "It is better for you that I go, for if I do not go, the paraclete will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you." This fits beautifully with John 14:12. Jesus says that it will be better if he goes because only when he goes will the Spirit be sent. And John 16:8-11 makes it clear that the Spirit when he comes will convict unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Such conviction of sinners is clearly another way of describing the "greater works" which will occur after Jesus goes. Greater than any healing is the inclusion of one's name in the book of life. Jesus reminds his disciples of this when they are so excited about casting out demons in Luke 10:20. "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

John 7:37-39 is another passage, which helps us understand why greater works will be done when Jesus goes to the Father. In v 38 Jesus promises "rivers of living water will flow from the belly of the one who believes in him." I think Jesus is saying here that life-giving water will flow from believers to satisfy the thirsty souls of others. The apostle John notes, however, that such living water is to be identified as the Holy Spirit. V 39, "But this he said of the Spirit which those who believed in him were about to receive, for the Spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified." Why wasn't the Spirit given to believers yet so they could satisfy the thirsty souls of others? John says that it was because "Jesus was not yet Glorified." In other words, Jesus had not yet gone to the Father and accomplished his work on the cross. He had not ascended to the right hand of God, and this outpouring of the Spirit would only occur after he was glorified, after he had gone to the Father. Again, the "greater works" are the works that are possible when the Spirit is poured out.

John 20:21-23 also confirms this interpretation. There Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples, which in a symbolic way anticipates Pentecost. When the Spirit comes, they will have the power in the name of Jesus to forgive sins and to retain them. The greatest work of all is surely for sins to be forgiven, and this verse hints that such a work was available to believers more extensively after Jesus had given his life for sinners and ascended to the right hand of God.

The book of acts supports the interpretation that "the greater works" are possible after the outpouring of the Spirit as well. The Holy Spirit is not poured out until after Jesus has ascended. Note how Luke emphasizes Jesus' ascension in Acts 1:9-11 as a prelude to the pouring out of the Spirit in Acts 2. Also, Acts 2:33 specifically says that "after Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, he received the promise of the Holy Spirit, and poured out this which you both see and hear." Again a direct connection is made between Jesus' ascension and the giving of the Spirit.

One final word: that greater works are done by believers after Jesus' earthly ministry in no way diminishes the ministry of Jesus, nor does it suggest our ministry is somehow better than His! I have argued that the greater works refers to the work of the Spirit through believers in

convicting unbelievers of their sin, and mediating forgiveness of sins in the name of the risen Lord. But such work is not our work! It is the work of the risen Lord in us and through us. The Lord Jesus Christ exalted and glorious works in concert with God the Father through the Holy Spirit. He is the one doing the work, and He is worthy of all the glory!