

John Series: Sermon 3

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[0:00] Amen. So, as some of you may know, some of you may not, I hope you're not scandalized by this, but your pastor, when he was a teenager, played guitar in hardcore punk bands.

I can show you sometime if you're interested. I was always determined to make as loud of a racket as possible. The bassist in our band was always determined to do the same, so we would crank our amps up all the time.

It seemed to turn into a kind of competition which would be followed by, dude, turn your amp down, I can't even hear myself. No, you turn your amp down, I can't hear myself. Clearly, we both wanted to be front and center when it came to churning out noise, which we were pretty good at, I think. That desire to be front and center is a common human tendency, but strikingly, it's one that we don't find any evidence of in John the Baptist and his ministry.

Today, we're continuing our sermon series on John's gospel, and our passage this morning focuses on the ministry and the testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus.

[1:43] I have always found it difficult to preach on John the Baptist. I don't get the sense that he would have had a lot of patience for sermons about his weird choice of wardrobe and his unique diet.

Given what we have recorded in the gospels, he doesn't seem to be a man of many words in general, and he has even less to say about himself. I find myself wondering what to say about his ministry every year when Advent rolls around.

What do I do with this guy? I've heard people say before that John the Baptist is the central figure of Advent, even. But as I've thought about it, I don't think that's true at all.

Because John the Baptist's ministry is all about pointing people to Jesus. I imagine that I don't always know what to say about John the Baptist, because he's not the focus of his ministry.

So when we look this morning at John the Baptist's ministry, the focus ultimately is not on himself at all. It is on Christ Jesus. In this morning's sermon, like the last couple of weeks in which we dealt with the prologue of John's gospel, we'll go through our text and break it down, and then think about why what we have read matters so much.

[3:02] As this first portion of the text is a dialogue, we'll look at these few verses up front. If you would, please open your Bibles and look with me at John 1, starting in verse 19.

We read there, So this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.

Alright, let's break that down. First, this is probably the Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin from Jerusalem, that sent people to check out this strange but influential preacher.

[4:18] So they asked him if he was the Christ or the Messiah, that is, if he was God's anointed one. And that was a bit of a tricky question.

First of all, at the time, God's people generally expected that a Messiah would come, but they didn't typically agree on what the Messiah would do and be.

So some people were expecting a king, some people were expecting a priest, some people were expecting a combination of the two. Some people were expecting basically a political leader who would drive the occupying Romans away, right?

So perhaps they were wondering if this quirky preacher might be the one they were looking for. Or perhaps they were looking to trip him up in asking the question.

What is certainly clear is John's answer. He says, nope, I am not the Christ. That is not me. So they're scratching their heads, continuing to wonder why this strange wilderness dweller is baptizing people.

[5:24] And they ask him if he's Elijah. Remember, Malachi chapter 4 speaks of God sending Elijah before the day of the Lord comes. That is, before the end is ushered in.

And John the Baptist says, nope, that is not me. Now what's interesting here is that Jesus elsewhere does identify John the Baptist with Elijah, which probably suggests that John the Baptist didn't understand how significant his own ministry was.

They then ask John the Baptist if he is the prophet, probably a reference to the prophet like Moses that was promised in the book of Deuteronomy. And John says again, nope, that is not me.

So at this point, maybe they're getting puzzled, maybe they're getting exasperated. And they ask him, what do you say about yourself then? Who are you?

He responds with a reference to Isaiah 40. He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.

[6:35] They probably didn't know what to make of that. John the Baptist downplays his own ministry. I am just a voice, he says. But what does all of this about making, what's all of this about making straight the way of the Lord?

What does that mean? Well, let's take an Old Testament detour. Look with me in Isaiah 40, please, starting in verse 1. We'll look at this reference in context, because I think it sheds a lot of light on what's going on here.

Starting at verse 1, we read, A voice cries, Now, this passage in Isaiah's immediate sense, is talking about what was then the future return of God's people from exile in Babylon.

The highway, the way of the Lord, is being prepared for the purpose of God leading his scattered children back home. And John is applying this text to God's promised Christ.

And preparing the way for the one who would bring God's people home in the ultimate sense. The one through whom the warfare of God's people has been ended. The one through whom God's glory is revealed.

[8:36] The one through whom our sins are forgiven. That is what John the Baptist is pointing to. God's fulfillment of his promises in Jesus. The promise that the lost and the scattered exiles would be brought home again.

The promise that sin would be forgiven through God's suffering servant. And the promise that ultimately, all flesh would see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

That's who he is. And what he's doing. John the Baptist points to God's promises in Christ. We may assume that the delegation to John probably didn't catch that.

They're still puzzled. Let's pick up back in John chapter 1 verse 24. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

They asked him, Then why are you baptizing? If you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.

[9:49] Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

So the delegation is still wondering why he's baptizing people, right? This hasn't been cleared up. If he's not the Christ, if he's just a voice crying in the wilderness, as he put it, what in the world is he doing?

We should note that it was a familiar practice for converts to Judaism in that time to baptize themselves as an act of conversion. But John is baptizing people.

He's doing the baptizing. And he's baptizing his fellow Jews. Why would he do that? He's making a statement that a person's mere ancestry is not going to cut it when the Christ is revealed.

No, he is indicating through his ministry that repentance and personal faith will be necessary in light of the one he's preparing the way for. He's administering baptism that signifies repentance, but he's doing that because the Messiah is coming.

[11:05] And always one to downplay his own significance, John the Baptist notes that he is unworthy to untie the strap of the sandals of the Christ. In John's world, taking off someone's shoes was considered a dirty and demeaning task.

Because there are lots of animals around and you're walking around in sandals. You can imagine how that goes, right? But John the Baptist is saying that he's not even worthy to do that undesirable task for the Messiah.

Because he's pointing beyond himself. And moving on, we find what is clearly the highlight of John the Baptist's testimony here, starting in verse 29.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him. And he said, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He identifies Jesus.

And he identifies him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In this verse, it's a little difficult to trace the exact scripture John the Baptist might be referring or alluding to.

[12 : 22] Some scholars have even claimed that John the Baptist wouldn't have understood the cross yet. So he's, in a sense, speaking more truth than he realized. But certainly the author of John's gospel would have seen the connection to the cross.

Jesus is the true Passover Lamb, right? Isaiah 53 also comes to mind from the reference to the Lamb of God.

So we read of Jesus in Isaiah 53, 7. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.

So he opened not his mouth. And at the end of the chapter, Isaiah 53, we read, Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Jesus is this Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As Isaiah 53 says, he will make many to be accounted righteous because he will take their sins upon his own shoulders.

[13 : 44] Jesus is the Lamb of God. His complete and sufficient sacrifice on the cross is the only way that our sins can be taken away.

But it can and will take away all of the sins of all of those who believe in him and have life in his name. What else does John the Baptist say about Jesus?

First, he identifies Jesus as the one he's talking about. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me.

I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel. John is saying, This one who came before me, who pre-existed me, if you will, and is more important than me.

It's Jesus. This Christ that you were asking about, here he is. Well, how did John recognize him? We find out, don't we? John bore witness.

[14 : 54] I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain on Jesus. What's the significance of that? Well, it points to numerous references throughout the Old Testament about God pouring out his Spirit uniquely on a chosen servant.

The Old Testament predicted that this was going to happen. And this is the confirmation that John the Baptist was expecting, that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Next question that we might ask is, what does it mean to baptize with the Holy Spirit? John talks about his ministry of baptizing with water.

We get that. What does baptizing with the Holy Spirit mean? Well, this too points back to multiple examples in the Old Testament that God would pour out his Spirit on his people in a mighty way.

[16 : 18] One example is what we find in Joel chapter 2. It shall come to pass afterwards that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

So Jesus is identified with this massive outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He is the one also through whom God's people will enter the kingdom of God and receive the Holy Spirit.

Because that's really what is in view when we're talking about being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Our passage this morning closes with this affirmation from John the Baptist.

I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. That's important.

Because it's this Son of God who can make sinners right with God. Jesus is the one, as we read in the prologue, who can give us the right to become children of God.

[17:34] So in summary, what do we find from John the Baptist's testimony? First, we find that Jesus, not John the Baptist, is the Christ.

We find that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We find that Jesus, unlike John or any other messenger or preacher, can baptize someone with the Holy Spirit and bring them into the new life of the kingdom of God.

So what should we take away this morning from John the Baptist's ministry? Well, first, it's that John the Baptist points to Jesus and not to himself.

That cannot be emphasized enough. That's a reminder that we all need because we are so given to seeking our own glory when our desire should be simply that Jesus Christ be glorified.

By the way, that temptation does not stop when one is ordained and steps into the pulpit. But let me be clear, if I preach an eloquent and stirring sermon and it does not exalt Jesus Christ, then I have utterly failed.

[18:53] As the preacher Charles Spurgeon once put it, the motto of all true servants of God must be, we preach Christ and him crucified. A sermon without Christ in it is like a loaf of bread without any flour in it.

Is there no Christ in your sermon, sir? Then go home and never preach again until you have something worth preaching. I think that's awesome, by the way.

But that principle isn't just for the preachers in the room. No, we are on this earth as Christians for the purpose of bearing witness to Christ and him crucified.

We live so that we can make much of Jesus that people would see in. You don't have to have a pulpit to tell people about Christ. In fact, you and I need to go to the places where there are no pulpits to tell people about Christ.

The whole aim of our lives ought to be seeing Jesus Christ glorified. Our concern is not for our own glory but for his.

[20:08] And John the Baptist sets the example for us. I think another thing we should consider about John the Baptist is his ministry of preparing the way of the Lord.

Because that ministry still matters and that ministry still speaks. John the Baptist saw his ministry as is clear from the Isaiah reference. He saw it as preparing the way for the one who would bring the captives and the exiles back home.

And Jesus to this day is still in the business of bringing the captives and the exiles back home. Is he not? Is he not? The reality that John the Baptist prepared the way for and pointed to is still happening right now.

It happened to me and I pray that it happened to your life as well. And your life as well. We've thought about the methods and the function of John the Baptist.

Let's think for a second about what we should take away from the content of John the Baptist's message about Jesus. Well, we've already looked at his teaching that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

[21:29] We've looked at his affirmation that it's Jesus who is the Christ that is God's anointed one. Now, I could go on to preach whole sermons on both of those things, but I don't want to keep you here for several more hours, especially in the heat.

And those themes will come up again as we journey together through John's gospel. But I want to close by focusing in on the implications of a particular statement that John makes that I believe stands at the very center of his testimony.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It's hard to miss the big picture here. It's pretty obvious.

John is talking about the sin of the whole world being taken away, right? But it gets extremely personal when we start to think about what that means for us.

because everyone listening this morning to this sermon and everyone preaching it too has sinned.

[22:41] And unless that sin is taken away by Jesus, the Lamb of God, the only one who can take it away, we will perish in our sins.

But here's the thing. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world can take away my sins and your sins no matter how badly we have fallen.

We don't have a massive crowd here this morning. It's particularly true because summer travel and summer heat have diminished our numbers today, I think.

But in a gathering of any size, there's likely to be someone with a troubled conscience. If that's you this morning, I want you to hear me very clearly.

The burden that you are carrying can be taken away. Even if what you've done has haunted you for years or your entire life, even if you're ashamed to speak of what you have done, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world will take away the guilt of anyone and everyone who asks Him to.

[24:14] this morning, please do not leave this place without turning from the burden of sin that you are carrying, confessing it to God, asking Him to forgive your sin for the sake of His Son, asking Him to wash you clean.

He can and He will if you ask. Forgiveness of sin is offered to us this morning through the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Glory to Him now and forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.