

John 1:19-27

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[0 : 00] I invite you, also good morning, I invite you to turn with me to John chapter 1 and as you do that I invite my helpers up front to this side.

! And some John the Baptist and some representatives from the temple leadership in Jerusalem. And I find it a little bit tough to read back and forth myself in a passage like this. So I have some helpers today who are going to be the representatives from the temple in Jerusalem and John the Baptist over here.

And I will narrate today's conversation. We'll begin in John chapter 1, verse 19.

And we're going to turn off those monitors real fast. Are you guys ready? Alright. You guys are looking at him, right?

[1 : 22] Yeah. Okay. Alright. And 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? And 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 answers to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

He said, I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ?

Nor prophet. Nor the prophet. John answered them. I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.

[2 : 30] Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. Now these things took place in Bethany, across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, guys. Thanks. Let's pray. Father, I pray that you would help us to benefit from this conversation, the way that you have intended for it, to mark our lives.

So, Lord, do the work that only you can do by your Spirit in our hearts. And glorify yourself as we direct our gaze at your word.

Pray that in Christ's name. Amen. I send a lot of emails. I'm sure that's the next thing you were thinking about, right? I don't get tons of real-time, face-to-face interaction with my coworkers.

That's you. During the workday, most of you aren't available for an in-office meeting. We don't even have an office. And we don't bump into each other at the water cooler or in the break room.

[3 : 45] A church is a distributed, asynchronous, volunteer organization. So I send a lot of emails.

When I'm working, whether that's preparing for elders' meetings or planning Sunday worship or coordinating between our realtor and the elders and the deacons and all sorts of other connecting-the-dots sort of work, I send a lot of emails, a lot of texts, and the elders and the deacons, we coordinate it on a chat tool as well.

So lots of written communication. And there are a lot of upsides to doing that. It's on demand. I can send it to you, and you can read it when it works for you.

I can think about the way that I'm about to, you know, I can edit my words. And also, I don't have to go back to you and say, wait, what did you say? I can just look it back up again. So there's a paper trail to it, so to speak.

There are a lot of pros to this, but there are cons as well, drawbacks. And the biggest challenge in written communication is that it's very difficult to communicate tone sometimes.

[4 : 54] When you're writing. Have you ever had the experience of sending a text message with a smile on your face, so to speak? But then it was interpreted, it was received as if you were somehow angry at the person.

Something like that. Without eye contact, without a tone of voice, without body language, it's sometimes easy to miscommunicate our intent. And now, I'm not saying this because I want to complain about being, about sending a lot of emails.

I mean, honestly, I'm a millennial. I'd rather send you an email. But I bring it up because Scripture, too, is written communication. And so it is sometimes difficult to recognize the tone of a passage. And that has a huge impact on how we understand it. For instance, in this passage, what kind of question is being asked in verse 25?

And they asked him, then why are you baptizing? If you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet. Are they curious?

[6 : 05] Or are they furious? Or something in between? In other words, what kind of conversation did we just hear? And that will set the whole trajectory of how we understand and then how we live in light of this passage.

So, how did they ask the question? Then why are you baptizing? If you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet. Or, then why are you baptizing?

If you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet. Is there a way for us to know what kind of conversation this is? John gives us some clues.

And I think we can be pretty confident of what kind of conversation it was. He already set up the chapter, if you look back to verse 5, set up the whole book, in fact, as a clash between light and dark.

He's put it in terms of Jesus being the light and being opposed by and misunderstood by the darkness. And not being received by his own.

[7 : 09] And he said that it's to that opposed light of Christ that John was testifying. One writer put it this way, the Baptist asserts that Jesus stands among them, but they do not know him, just as the light was unknown and unreceived.

So, we should be expecting a challenge to the herald of the light. Not only that, this is the Jewish leadership from Jerusalem.

Throughout the book of John, we are going to see that the Jewish leadership perceives Jesus to be a threat. He didn't come up through their system.

He didn't play their game. In fact, he critiqued it quite a bit. He wasn't very much like them, but he was amassing a huge following among the people of God.

And before they were suspicious of Christ's ministry, they were suspicious of John's ministry, his herald. So, sadly, the testimony of the Gospels is that the city of David was set against the son of David.

[8 : 20] And then we see here some strange language in the passage. It begins with his testimony. Then there is that strange phrasing in verse 20.

He confessed and did not deny, but confessed. This is courtroom language. John, the apostle who's writing the Gospel, is presenting John the Baptist here as if he's on trial.

So, John, the apostle, the writer here, isn't showing us a friendly conversation. No, it's not clear necessarily that there's outrage and open hostility necessarily, but what is certainly true here is that they are very suspicious.

This is an inquest, a trial, an interrogation, because they perceive him to be a threat. Why? They don't reveal their motives just yet, but we can list out some of the most likely reasons that they would perceive him to be a threat.

He's a threat to their power, right? You're stealing our influence. He's a threat to their safety, perhaps. You might be out here amassing a following in the wilderness.

[9 : 35] You might be a revolutionary. And if your revolution fails, you will bring down the wrath of Rome on us. He could be a threat to orthodoxy.

These were the religious gatekeepers of the day. You might be a false teacher. You might lead Israel astray. They have lots of potential reasons to be suspicious. And John knows what they're expecting.

And that's why he answers, even really before they ask, like specifics, he says, without them leading him there, you know, that he isn't the Christ. Now, Christ is a Greek word.

It means anointed. It corresponds to the Hebrew word, Messiah. Lots of leaders were anointed in the Old Testament. But the Jewish people understood that the anointed one was coming.

God had made promises of restoration, of peace, of a king, to come and sit on David's throne. They understood that there would be one climactic anointed one.

[10:37] Now, there were differing views about how the Christ might come and how the people should prepare for it. And it's not unlike, actually, today, how Christians have different views about perhaps how the Lord might come again.

The Essenes were kind of a monastic community. They went out into the desert and just were waiting for the anointed one to come and destroy all the Gentiles in Jerusalem and the unfaithful Jews there.

And then they'd party with him. The Pharisees were trying, essentially, to earn the Messiah's return. If they could convince Israel to obey the law sufficiently, they thought that God would reward that by raising up a king to free them from Rome's grip.

That's their project, essentially. The Zealots were themselves the revolutionaries. They were trying to overthrow Rome on their own so that there would be a free place for the Messiah to come and to rule and to reign.

And so there had been numerous pretenders who came claiming to be the Christ. We heard what that was like in our series in the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 5, we read that a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men, that's the apostles, outside for a little while.

[11:55] And he said to them, men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days, the Eudeus rose up claiming to be somebody.

And a number of men, about 400, joined him. He was killed. All who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. One pretender. After him, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census.

Another pretender here. And drew away some of the people after him. He too perished. And all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you to keep away from these men and let them alone.

For if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God.

And they have not been overthrown to this day, have they? A pretend Christ was a potential liability. Rome didn't like insurrections.

[12:53] And John could very well put the people in danger if he was leading them into Rome, squashing them. But he wasn't claiming to be the Christ.

But we're not out of the woods yet. He could still be some kind of liability to them. And so they continue their inquiry. First they ask him, is he?

If you're not the Christ, then are you Elijah? Elijah was an early prophet in Israel, and there was something very unusual about him. He did not experience death.

The Lord took him into heaven without tasting death. And he had promised that he was sending Elijah again.

The very last words, the very last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi chapter 4, it's the very last thing you'll see before the book of Matthew.

[13:50] You and I can just turn the page. Just one page. It takes us less than a second to do that. But Israel had been waiting for 400 years for the next thing to come.

Here it is. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble.

The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall, and you shall tread down the wicked. For they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction, and then silence from heaven for 400 years.

[15:19] The next thing they're waiting for is Elijah. And so when someone, the first prophet, in generations arrives, they wonder, is this Elijah?

Is this him? In fact, if you read the descriptions of the two men, they're very much alike, even in appearance, and in their message, and in their acts.

And so there's this confusion, like, are you this guy? And John says no, which is confusing to us, because Jesus said, if you look to Matthew chapter 11, Jesus said, for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John the Baptist here.

And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was to come. But he said he's not. I think the best way to understand this is that he is not personally, he is not Elijah come back to us, but he fulfills the office of Elijah.

One writer put it this way, John's negative reply is likely intended at the literal level. Elijah was taken to heaven, and the Baptist is saying that he is not that same Elijah returned to earth.

[16:34] Nevertheless, in what way, in what he is about to say of himself, John indicates that symbolically he plays the role of the prophesied Elijah. This is likely what Jesus means when he identifies John as the Elijah who was to come.

Now, if he's not Elijah, really, is he the prophet? I ask. Not if he's a prophet, if he's the prophet. It's a reference to Deuteronomy chapter 18. This is Moses speaking. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers.

It is to him you shall listen. Just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, they are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

[17:52] For the Lord to raise up a prophet like Moses was different than all of the other prophets. Maybe you've heard the idea that really all of philosophy is footnotes on Plato or Socrates or that all of the history of theology is footnotes on Augustine.

Those are common ideas, right? In a similar way, all of Israel's prophets were basically pointing the people of God back to what God had done, the Exodus, and said the law through Moses.

Even if we look back to Malachi chapter 4, right? Remember the law of my servant Moses. They're all pointing to him and what the Lord had done and said through him.

So pointing, so another prophet like Moses who would have this kind of effect to whom all the rest of redemptive history would point back at, that would be game changing.

Well, John is a prophet. He's not the prophet, he says. And so they say, well then, who are you?

[19:07] Right? And as we just think about that, as they're interrogating him over whether he's one of these expected figures, let's just notice how much the people of God were anticipating.

they were anticipating the Christ. They were anticipating a restoration, a king. They were anticipating Elijah, a prophet, a new covenant, and more.

The Old Testament is laden with expectation. It cries out for fulfillment. And John tells them that he's actually the fulfillment of another Old Testament expectation.

expectation. Verses 22 and 23 read, 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. Now we won't go back and, okay, we will go back and look a little bit at Isaiah 40 in a couple minutes.

[20:19] But right now, we're not going to. The big idea of Isaiah 40 is that redemption is coming. And it's coming especially in forgiveness of sin.

And that the Lord himself is coming as a part of this restoration and this redemption. And so, the implication of it, that the one, John is saying that the one that I'm pointing to, Jesus, is a Christ very much unlike what you've been expecting because God is coming.

One writer put it this way. John the Baptist's account of himself in this verse consists of a reference to Scripture. He reminds the priests and Levites who wanted to know who he was of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the times of the Messiah.

They would there find Isaiah saying with the abruptness of an inspired prophet and speaking as if he saw what he was describing.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness. That means, I hear in spirit as I look forward to Messiah's time a man crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

[21 : 33] That prophecy, says John the Baptist, is this day fulfilled in me. I am the person whom Isaiah saw and heard in his vision.

I am come to prepare the way for Messiah like a man going before a king in a desert country to prepare a road for his master. I am come to make ready the barren hearts of the Jewish nation for Christ's first advent in the kingdom of God.

I am only a voice. I do not come to work miracles. I do not want disciples to follow me but my master. the object of my mission is to be a herald, a crier, a warning voice to my fellow countrymen so that when my master begins his ministry they may not be unprepared.

That is what this conversation is about. what does that have to do with you and with me though?

First, let's not be unprepared.

He said his whole ministry was pointing people to Jesus Christ. If you have never looked to Jesus Christ and seen the anointed one come to faith in him and looked to the redemption that he has bought for you.

[23 : 04] Oh, please will you do it. And let us not be like the Pharisees. We're all tempted to be like them.

And, let's remember that we have a commission like John's. And just those two things. Let's not be like the Pharisees. And let's recognize that we have a commission like John's. And so we'll minister like John.

And that'll be just the remainder of our thought today. First, let us not be like the Pharisees. Right? Because they saw Jesus as a threat to a lot.

Right? Status quo, their way of doing things, their position. Jesus is a threat to my status quo, my way of doing things. Isn't he? Now, if you're here today, you probably don't see Jesus as a threat. Probably. But you might think of his commands as a threat to you. Like, oh, that really does not jive with what I've got going on here.

[24 : 14] Right? And I would encourage you to think through as we listen to the way that John is calling, to not receive his word as a threat to you, but as a blessing.

Because we've been called to be voices just like John. Right? Our call is to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that the Lord has commanded us.

And really, really, the gospel should be an easy sell. Shouldn't it? I mean, shouldn't it? There is quite literally nothing better.

Ever! Right? I mean, we love free stuff, don't we? And the gospel is free. There is nothing better to gain than eternal life and a crown of righteousness from God himself and an inheritance that cannot fade or be stolen.

A home built for you by Christ in a city whose streets are paved with gold. And that's probably a reference not to something literal, but to something better than that. and have forever God himself as your Father.

[25 : 35] There is nothing at all that can be better. It is worth any and every price and it's free. So why isn't Christianity all that popular?

There are lots of reasons. Like, perhaps, spiteful Christians in public life that tarnish the name of Christ. Or hurtful Christians in private life.

Or grifters lurking within the church. But even enduring all of that is a small price to pay for what's offered in the gospel of Christ. So why isn't Christianity popular when all of this has been purchased for us?

It's free. You have to decide that you need it and desire it. That is, you have to repent and believe. And that, that is a tough sell. For many people, repentance is simply too high a price to pay for the endless riches of Christ. And let that not be true of us and let us help others understand that the exchange is so worth it.

[26 : 55] Repentance is, and I think, especially difficult for Americans. In particular, it is uniquely un-American. And this is sort of a development over the last 20 years.

It's a pretty recent development in American culture. that. Well, let me back up. Here's how sin works. It has to do with what we love.

When we sin, we love to excuse ourselves, right? And say, oh, I don't know what happened there. Something came over me. That's not the real me. But the scriptures tell us that nothing could be further from the truth.

We sin for the sake of love. Wrong love. And when we sin, far from, you know, a something that's not the real me coming over us, when we sin, we reveal who we are and what we love.

Something similar can be also said when we act in righteousness. But we're talking about repentance right now because that's John's message, repent. Jesus said, it is from the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks.

[28 : 09] And so our sinful words come from a sinful heart, a heart set on wrong desires. For example, if you shout obscenities at someone, you are revealing what you love.

Perhaps you love your peace and quiet with such fervor that anyone who disturbs it will feel your wrath. Or perhaps you love that item with such ferocity that anyone who breaks or takes it or deprives you of it has become an enemy to you.

Or perhaps getting your own way is so important that to defy you is to break an unbreakable rule and incur wrath. And did you notice none of those things are actually bad things?

Peace and quiet is a good thing. A treasured item had a problem. Getting your way? Okay. Neither here nor there. They can be neutral things over which when we attach an ultimate love to them they become our idols and we are willing to sin over them.

Your sins and mine, be they words or deeds or omissions, they reveal what we love. And this is why repentance is such an extraordinary thing.

[29 : 31] because repentance means rejecting that idolatrous love. The Hebrew word for repent is a word that means turn.

Turn your back on what you wrongly love. How can you turn your back on what you love? This is why repentance is such a non-starter for the world around us.

In a culture where we literally define ourselves and this is kind of that new development probably started in the 1990s thereabouts where we define ourselves in American society by what we loved. You are your desires. That's your identity in American society. Today, a human being is what they feel and what they desire.

that's how we have labeled ourselves. And so, American society now believes that to reject our deepest desires is inhumane.

[30 : 46] And so, repentance is cultural blasphemy in America. but you won't ever call on a Savior to get that free redemption unless you see this need for salvation.

that's why faith can't be separated from repentance. There's no entrusting ourselves to Christ faith without the spiritual sight that we indeed need salvation for our wickedness.

that's the heart of repentance. And so, the whole system of Christianity at its core is set against what our society is most committed to. And that's why we will be opposed as John was opposed.

That's why, like John, we might be interrogated. Who are you to say these things? That's the question they asked him and that's the question we will be asked by our society.

Who are you to say repent? I noticed earlier that the suspicion from the Pharisees could have come from any number of places.

[31 : 55] Power, safety, because of Rome, orthodoxy. The same challenge comes to us. Power, right? Are you going to tell me I have to submit?

This is the land of the free. Safety. Are you going to make me feel unsafe by not affirming me? Orthodoxy.

Are you going to say what must not be said in polite American society? Who are you to say that I'm a sinner? Who are you to say that I need to repent?

To tell me to repent of my desires is hateful, unspeakable. Who are you to say that the pride movement is wickedness? Who are you to say that other religions don't lead to God? To tell others their sincerely held beliefs are wrong is hateful.

How do we answer? How do we answer? We learn from John a twofold answer, and with it we will conclude.

[33 : 00] First, we point away from ourselves. Like John, we say, I'm simply calling calling out, get ready for the Lord's arrival.

Who am I to say these things? It's not about me at all. I'm simply being obedient to proclaim Jesus and what he has said. It's him you have to deal with.

I'm saying all those things are true, and they're why we need a savior, and the awesome thing is that he came. when the cultural winds press against us and demand an account of our supposedly hateful beliefs and behavior, and demands that we apologize for them, the authority is not our own. It comes from God on the high, creator of the heavens and the earth, from whose character the moral universe flows. And that's actually the second thing, that's the second part of his answer. it's how great he is. In verses 25-27, they asked him, then why are you baptizing? If you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet.

[34 : 13] John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, and here it is, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

the Lord is so high and lifted up that we have no right to question him. I told you we'd read from Isaiah 40 that was mentioned there.

Here's how it continues. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?

Who has measured the spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, or taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales.

Behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.

[35 : 39] If I question God, if I shake my fist at him, if I try to resist because I sense a threat to my power, I am a fool.

God, if we encounter someone who wants to teach this God what is right, no, God, actually, you've misunderstood.

We've got it figured out now. Now. But John is not only saying, who are you to answer back to God Almighty?

Shut it. He is saying that, but, I mean, he could have left it simply at that and no one would have any leg to stand on. But that's not all.

Because next week we're going to hear that, again, this God, the God who was just described in Isaiah 40. Well, he saw Jesus, this is verse 29, coming toward him and said, behold, the Lamb of God.

[36 : 45] who takes away the sin of the world. This God is not just mighty to the uttermost. Oh, he is, but he is not only. He is loving beyond measure.

A Lamb to take away sins is a sacrifice. He came to die in our place for us. And so we look and see, here is love, vast as an ocean, loving kindness as a flood.

When the prince of life, our ransom, shed for us his precious blood, who his love cannot remember, who can cease to sing his praise.

He can never be forgotten throughout heaven's eternal days. God says, who are you, the world asks, to tell me to repent?

The answer is not me. The one who has loved you beyond life itself calls you to himself.

[38 : 02] let's pray. Father, I ask that in our hearts repentance would look beautiful because we would behold the beauty of your person and of your love for us.

I ask it in Christ's name, the Lamb of God, who has taken away our sins. Amen.