

John 1:19-34

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[0:00] The Gospel of John chapter 1, verses 19 through 34. That's the scripture passage our teaching will be based on this morning. You can find it on page 886 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn along there.

We've been preaching through John's prologue this Advent series, so I thought as we sort of continue, we'd pick up where the prologue leaves off and continue in to the first chapter of John's Gospel.

So, John chapter 1, verses 19 through 34, page 886. So, let's pray as we turn to God's Word. Father, we pray that you would open our ears and our hearts to receive your Word this morning. God, we pray that you would speak as you promised through your Holy Spirit. God, may we see and know the Lord Jesus today in fresh and living ways, and may we be changed to resemble Him more and more.

Lord, we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So, John chapter 1, verses 19 through 34. Let me read this for us. And this is the testimony of John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask Him, Who are you?

[1:07] He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I'm 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. 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, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I'm not worthy to untie.

These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[2:08] 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.

And John bore witness. I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and remain 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.

And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. Well, here we stand on the verge of another new year, right?

In less than 48 hours, 2012 will be behind us. And 2013 underway. Now, I don't know about you, but I sort of like this time of year. It always feels like a time to make a new start, and I like that. Of course, it's easy to ridicule the practice of making New Year's resolutions, isn't it? We all say we're going to diet more and eat more healthy and exercise more and do all these things, and then come like January 4th, we've already fallen quickly behind.

[3:18] But you know, resolutions are inherently a bad thing. When he was a young man, the great theologian Jonathan Edwards made a whole series of resolutions, and they were anything but ridiculous. Here's just a sample.

Number one, resolved that I will do whatever I think to be most to God's glory and my own good, profit, and pleasure in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now

or never so many myriads of ages hence.

There's a resolution for you. Number 28, resolved to study the Scripture so steadily, constantly, and frequently as that I may find and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same. Number six, resolved to live with all my might while I do live. That's a great one, isn't it? And on they go.

There's actually 70 of these. Each one pretty potent. They're great. In fact, you can find the rest of them pretty easily on the internet. Just do a Google search and you'll find Edwards' resolutions pretty easily. And if you're thinking about drafting some good God-centered resolutions for the new year, I would commend them to you.

[4 : 30] They are excellent. Now, the passage before us this morning doesn't explicitly have anything to do with resolutions. But as, you know, as we take stock of another year gone by and look forward to another year to come, I actually believe that this passage about the testimony of John the Baptist can help us to think clearly about what really matters.

It puts the most important things front and center for us. And that is something we desperately need because maybe you feel like me. As the days and months of 2012 have raced by and especially as the holidays have come rushing in at the end, it's easy to lose sight of the great things, isn't it? It's easy to lose sight of the truly important things, the eternal things, in the midst of the good but everyday things. Our perspective gets clouded and our sense of what's worth pursuing gets skewed.

So it's good at the end of the year and the beginning of another to get realigned, to do a refresh on the screen of our spiritual life. After all, isn't that what we hope the new year will bring? Greater clarity, greater depth, greater wisdom, that this year will be able to live life more intentionally and more abundantly, that the old habits and patterns of the year gone by will give way to new, more satisfying ways of living and being.

[5 : 56] That this new year will be just that. New. Well, if you and I had lived in Judea in the first century, maybe we would have realized that God was up to something new.

Because out in the barren landscape east of the Jordan River, a man named John was preaching with the kind of prophetic fervor and authenticity that Israel hadn't seen in 400 years.

Now, those 400 years had been a time and a period of great changes. There had been great political change. There had been great social and cultural change. In many ways, life had been turned upside down for the Jewish people in that span of 400 years.

Life was new in countless ways. But spiritually, there had been an almost deafening silence. There was no new word from the Lord.

And the people were waiting. And they were waiting. And then, like the crack of a lightning bolt, there was John. Luke tells us that the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

[7 : 10] Just like the Old Testament prophets, the word of God came. And it was like dropping a match in a field of dry grass.

Suddenly, the whole region was on fire. Matthew writes that Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him.

In short, John was at the center of a spiritual renewal movement, a spiritual revival that was rocking the region, that was shaking the whole nation.

Now, outside of the Gospels, we don't have any firsthand accounts describing the excitement that John must have generated among the people.

But we do have accounts of revivals in other periods in history. And perhaps they can give us a glimpse of what it might have been like by analogy in John's day.

[8 : 09] Here's an example from the first great awakening in the 18th century. A Connecticut farmer, it's a good homegrown illustration here. A Connecticut farmer named Nathan Cole writes an account about going to hear George Whitefield preach.

This is what he writes. In the morning, about 8 or 9 o'clock, there came a messenger and said, Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at 10 o'clock.

I was in my field at work. I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown.

Then I ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late. Having my horse, I, with my wife, soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear.

And when my horse got much out of breath, I would get down and put my wife on the saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not stop or slack for me except I bade her. And so I would run until I was much out of breath and then mount my horse again.

[9 : 12] And so I did several times to favor my horse. We improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing that we should be too late to hear the sermon.

For we had 12 miles to ride double in little more than an hour. And when we came within about a half mile or a mile of the road that comes down from Hartford, Wethersfield, and Stepney to Middletown, on the high road, on the high land, I saw before me a cloud or fog rising.

I first thought it came from the great river, but as I came near the road, I heard a noise, something like a low, rumbling thunder, and presently found it was the noise of horses' feet coming down the road.

And this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horse's feet. It rose some 30 feet into the air over the tops of the hills and trees. And when I came within about 100 yards of the roads, I could see men and horses slipping along in the cloud like shadows.

And as I drew near, it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than a length behind another, all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils at every jump.

[10 : 17] It's a pretty great description, isn't it? Every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of souls. It made me tremble to see the sight how the world was in a struggle.

So writes Nathan Cole in the 18th century. Well, maybe that gives us a taste of what things might have been like in the first century as people from every part of Judea went out to hear John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness.

Most likely everyone would have heard of him. In fact, the first century historian, Josephus, mentions John the Baptist more than he mentions Jesus. So it's no surprise that eventually the religious authorities in Jerusalem would start to take notice of this guy.

And that's where the Gospel of John picks up the story in verse 15. An official delegation from Jerusalem has been dispatched to investigate this spiritual leader. And they asked him, who does he think he is?

And what does he think he's doing? Typical of, you know, the religious establishment. Who are you? What are you doing? And what does John have to say for himself? Well, here's where this passage is so helpful for us.

[11 : 37] Because the thing that John testifies to is exactly what we need to be reminded of. And what is it? Quite simply, and quite profoundly, what he testifies to is the incomparable worth of Jesus Christ.

The incomparable worth of the one who's coming, of Jesus. Listen to what John says. I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know.

He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I'm not worthy to untie. Now in the ancient world, the one thing a master couldn't demand of his slave was that the slave take off his shoes. No master was so worthy that he could force a slave to do that menial of a task. But the one who's coming, John says, he is so incredibly worthy that I couldn't even do that.

Compared to Jesus, he says, I'd be lucky to have the privilege to untie his sandals. Now remember who is saying this.

[12 : 51] Remember who John the Baptist is. He is leading the biggest spiritual renewal movement of his day. He's got every sector of society turning their heads and showing up at his church services.

He's shaking up the religious establishment. He's making the political power brokers nervous. And yet John says, I'm nobody compared to Jesus.

He is so incomparably worthy that it would be the highest honor for me just to untie his shoes. Think of the leading figure in your field.

The greatest musician, the most brilliant scientist, the most emulated teacher or doctor, the wealthiest CEO. Think of the way that leader commands respect.

Think of the way in which lesser musicians or scientists or business people imitate them and read their books and envy their position and their prestige. Think about the way that they have shaped our approach to these fields.

[14 : 04] Or think about the way in which there have been some people who have been true shapers of human culture. Think about the way in which you can't even think about physics apart from Albert Einstein.

Or the way in which you can't even think about music apart from Mozart. These great women and men have left their indelible mark not just on their field but on human history itself. And you know, let's face it, when it comes to music, I'm not worthy to be the guy who turns the pages at Mozart's piano.

Right? When it comes to science, I'm not worthy to sharpen Albert Einstein's pencils and arrange them on his desk so that he can do his thinking. But friends, the reality is Jesus Christ surpasses them all.

He is incomparably worthy. John the Baptist says, after me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me.

You know, if we applaud the world-class musician after her flawless performance, how much more should we be in awe of the one who created the very concept of music itself?

[15 : 22] if we're humbled by the brilliance of a cutting-edge scientist, if we can't even understand the titles of the papers that they publish, how much more should we be in awe of the one who devised matter in the first place and flung the stars into space?

before you or I or anything existed, before we made our tiny attempts at greatness, Jesus was. At the opening of the gospel, we're told, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.

He is incomparably worthy. And friends, how do you know? How do you know that you're starting to grasp the incomparable worth of Jesus?

Well, we see two things about John the Baptist in this passage that come when you really start to get how incomparably great Christ is. The first thing is genuine humility, and the second thing is unshakable purpose.

[16 : 48] So, humility. Look at how readily John denies that he is one of the highly anticipated figures of the Old Testament. In that day, messianic expectations were very high. People were hoping that Christ, God's King, would show up.

And given John's popularity, it would have been very easy for him to make such a claim, wouldn't it? But it's not me. John says, I'm not the Christ. Well, then who are you?

Are you Elijah? Now, many people were expecting a prophet figure like Elijah to appear before the Lord came in power. In the Old Testament book of Malachi, God says, behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

So that's what they're thinking. They're thinking along those lines, but John says, no, I'm not Elijah. Now, as an aside, Jesus would actually later affirm that John the Baptist was in fact the Elijah figure that Malachi spoke of.

Jesus knew John better than John knew himself, it seems. Finally, the religious authorities ask, are you the prophet? They're thinking here of Deuteronomy 18.5 where Moses predicts that the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you.

[17 : 55] Are you that prophet? They ask. No, John says. Now, just imagine the magnitude of what's going on here. The whole region is showing up to hear John preach.

What's stopping him from thinking, hey, you know, look at this impact I'm having. You know, now that I think about it, maybe I am Elijah. Maybe I am a prophet. Maybe I am the Christ. Maybe I'm a little Christ.

Maybe I'm sort of like a mini Christ. But no, the thought doesn't even cross his mind. Why? He's totally unconcerned to measure up his own worth because he has such a lived and real sense of the incomparable worth of the one to come.

You see, genuine humility doesn't come from beating yourself up or thinking about how many times you've screwed up. That's actually a very counterfeit kind of humility. After all, when you're consumed with thinking about how terrible you are, it still keeps the focus on you.

It's still very self-centered thinking, actually. No, you see, genuine humility, the kind of freedom of genuine humility comes from beholding one who is truly worthy.

[19 : 15] Genuine humility is being taken outside of yourself. It's having your thoughts filled, not with how great you are or even how awful you are, but with how great he is. Humility comes naturally to those who are ravished by the glory of Christ.

So as you look ahead to the new year, let me encourage you not to resolve to be a more humble person. I mean, it's a good resolution. We should all be more humble. But as you think about humility, let me encourage you to resolve to meditate on the immense worthiness of Jesus. To put your eyes on him. And as you put your eyes on him, your eyes will stop being drawn to yourself. A deep grasp of Jesus' incomparable worth produces a genuine humility, but it also produces an unshakable purpose.

In verse 22, the religious delegation gives up their guessing game with John. We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? And John replies, I'm the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now, he's actually quoting Isaiah 40 here. And Isaiah 40 is the beginning of that great middle section of the book of Isaiah.

[20 : 46] And it describes how God will come and rescue his covenant people from Babylonian captivity. Now, you have to see what John is saying here.

John is saying that his ministry is finally fulfilling what Isaiah was talking about all those years ago. Of course, the Jews have been allowed to physically return to Judea in 538 B.C., almost 500, 600 years before John showed up on the scene.

But the real return from exile, the real homecoming, the real display of God's saving work in history, John says, is coming here and now.

You see, that though their physical exile had ended long ago, their spiritual exile had continued. They were still spiritually dislocated. They were still east of Eden, wandering and waiting.

But now God was finally going to come and bring them back to himself. You see, even in Isaiah, even in the book of Isaiah, the return from Babylonian exile becomes a picture.

[21 : 58] It becomes this great type of an even greater return from exile. and Isaiah starts describing it like a second exodus. And this greater exodus would lead not to the promised land in Palestine, but on into the new heavens and the new earth.

All creation would be restored and God's people would finally be at home in his presence once again. And like the Passover lamb at the first exodus, Isaiah sees that this greater exodus, that at this greater exodus, God's people would be delivered by an even greater lamb.

That the suffering servant of the Lord would come and die for his people so that they could finally be liberated from their bondage to sin.

And the prophets start to see that once they're liberated from this deeper bondage, God would give them not just his law on tablets of stone, but God would give them his very spirit in their hearts.

That the new heavens and the new earth to come would come crashing into the present and dwell within the very midst of them. John says, I'm the voice crying in the wilderness.

[23 : 21] Make straight the way of the Lord. In other words, the cosmic redemption that the prophets foretold is about to come breaking in now. And he says, I'm the herald that it's coming and that God is coming and that nothing is going to be the same.

Amen. You see, for John, it's this incomparable worth of Jesus, of this one who's coming that defines his life and gives it its shape and its purpose and its plot and its direction.

He's the voice crying in the wilderness, the one preparing the way of the Lord. Everything he did was fed through this single great reality.

Even if it caused some people not to like him. Because after all, it was a bit of a scandal that John was out there baptizing.

At least the religious authorities found it very troublesome. Look at what they asked them. Well look, if you're not the Christ and you're not Elijah and you're not the prophet, what gives you the right to baptize?

[24 : 39] That's my sort of interpretation of what is it, verse 23. You see, baptism in the first century was something Gentiles would do. Baptism in the first century was something Gentiles would do as they were converting to Judaism.

It symbolized being cleansed of their old pagan way of life and sort of coming into, starting the process of coming into the Jewish covenant community. But you see, John was in the wilderness not baptizing Gentiles, he was baptizing Jews as well.

In essence, he was saying that Jews as well as Gentiles are still in their sin and that God must equally save both and that nothing we can do as humans can put us any closer to God than anyone else.

Physical descent from Abraham doesn't make you a greater candidate for the kingdom. Neither does strict adherence to the Torah, neither does participation in the temple rituals. Even good, law-abiding Jews needed to repent of their sins and throw themselves upon the mercy of God's coming king.

And John's baptism was a way of symbolizing such heartfelt repentance. Of course, you can see how that message would have struck the Pharisees and other religious leaders as audacious and even sacrilegious.

[26 : 03] How dare he equate good, law-abiding descendants of Abraham with dirty, Gentile pagans? What gives him the right?

And John's answer, in short, is, I'm doing what I'm doing because the one coming after me is incredibly, incredibly, all-surpassingly worthy.

So worthy that our self-wrought righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. So worthy that I'm willing to do things that the religious authorities find strange or even offensive in order to prepare for the coming of this great one and display his worth.

So John's whole life was energized and directed by the all-surpassing worth of the coming Christ. And while John was a unique figure in redemptive history, you see, friends, the same can be true for us. As we grasp the worth of Jesus, our lives, too, are given a deep and lasting purpose and shape by it.

[27 : 19] As you look forward to the coming year, who or what are you building your life around? What great goals are you hoping to accomplish? What's going to give your life its defining shape?

Brothers and sisters, don't settle for anything less than the incomparable worth of Christ. Of course, that's a very unsettling thing.

At the end of the day, Jesus isn't out to help you achieve your goals. He wants to rearrange your goals all together. He wants to replot your life around the story that he is telling, the story where he is the hero and not you.

He wants to make you like John, a voice in the wilderness, a finger pointing to the coming king. We don't have time to unpack it all, but that's what the rest of our passage talks about.

John testifies that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and Jesus is the one who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. In other words, he is the center of God's redemptive plan.

[28 : 28] Just like Isaiah had foretold, the great and final exodus would be accomplished by the true and final Lamb of God who would come and take away our sin once and for all. You see, that Passover Lamb had always pointed ahead to the cross of Christ where the Son of God willingly laid down his life to be our sin-bearing substitute.

He's the center of it all, friends. And having saved us from the penalty of sin, he would also save us from the power of our sin. He would baptize us in the Spirit.

In other words, we would be initiated into the family of God, not with water on our bodies, but with his Spirit in our hearts. Everyone who repents of their sin and believes in Christ is given all the benefits of this unfathomable work, sins taken away, and the Spirit dwelling within us in all of his fullness.

And perhaps it's that unfathomable work that is perhaps the greatest testimony to his incomparable worth. That the eternal Son of God would die for us and not just die, but be raised so that we might be forgiven and made alive by his Holy Spirit.

And as you see his worth, it will give your life purpose. It will give it a whole new shape. John was the voice crying in the wilderness, and in a sense, that was a unique role. In Matthew 11, Jesus himself says, truly I say to you, among those born of women, there's arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

[30 : 09] But do you know what he adds immediately after that? What does Jesus say? Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Do you see yourself that way, friends? Even if you're the least in the kingdom of heaven, your capacity to demonstrate the incomparable worth of Jesus surpasses John's by a million degrees, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

So what role will your life play in the great drama unfolding around this incomparably great Jesus? Friends, resolve to make this year one where his great worth becomes a defining factor in your life. That needs to be fleshed out in a million ways. I don't know exactly what that means for all of you. I don't know what that means in your workplace, in your family.

I've got some ideas. I've got some threads, maybe. But we need to come together and figure these things out. What would it mean in school? What would it mean in work? What would it mean in my family to make Christ displayed in his incomparable worth?

[31 : 29] This is our project, friends. This is what the church is called to do. That's why you need to get in a small group so you can start talking about it, figuring it out. Well, there's a saying that goes, the praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards.

The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards. Friends, what I've been trying to say this morning is that Christ is the most praiseworthy of all. Live for his praise and you will find that it is sweeter than all other rewards.

Let's pray together. Jesus, we think about the last night that you spent with your disciples.

We think about the way in which you prayed for them and the way in which you prayed for us. Lord, and at the pinnacle of that prayer you said that to behold your glory is the greatest privilege and honor we could have.

That you desired for us to see your glory so that we could know and be full of joy. Lord, we want our lives to be such Lord, we want our lives to be those that are indelibly marked from beholding your glory.

[33 : 09] God, make us a humble people as we behold your glory. Lord, make us a people of great purpose and passion as we behold your glory. Lord, make us like John.

Make us like John the Baptist who said he must increase and I must decrease. Lord, exalt yourself among us. Amen.