

What do you say about yourself?

John 1:19-34

Series #5

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 1, the Gospel of John, chapter 1.

There is an incident recorded for us in Mark 10 about James & John, the sons of Zebedee. It's an incident which is one of the clearest expressions of human pride in Jesus' disciples. The disciples were following Jesus as he headed for Jerusalem to give his life as a ransom for many. Along with their mother, James & John boldly approached Jesus and asked a favor of him – that when he had entered into his kingdom that they might sit on either side of him in all his regal glory. It was a bold and pride filled request. And it was a prime teaching moment for the two apostles about the nature of pride and true humility. Proud people make terrible servants. And humble people prove to be most useful for the Master.

John the apostle – the author of this gospel account – learned the joy of humility and became one of Christ's most effective servants. And, I think, one of his heroes of the faith is another John who preceded him, and who even preceded our Lord – and that is John the Baptist. Johnny A – or John the Apostle – learned much from Johnny B – or John the Baptist. It is likely that he was even one of his followers before he followed Jesus. And Johnny A learned the truth about Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, from the faithful witness of Johnny B. Therefore, I think that John the Baptist is one of John the Apostle's heroes of the faith – an example that the Lord used to shape John the Apostle's heart and ministry.

And John the Baptist is really one of the most underrated and underappreciated men in the Scriptures. His role was monumental in preparing the way for the Messiah to come, but his heart was humble. In fact, I am not sure we could find a humbler servant in the Scriptures – which maybe is a fool's errand because there are truly so many who served so humbly. But, a case could be made that John the Baptist surpasses them all in lowliness of heart. His story of faithful humility begins in verse 19, and we will just read down through verse 34 this morning. *Read 1:19-34.*

You will remember that John's Gospel has one of the clearest purposes stated for us in all of Scripture. John tells us in 20:31 that he has written these things so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. Every verse of this Gospel is pointing us to that truth – that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and there is true and lasting eternal life in him. John's Gospel began with this dense theological prologue – the word before the word – in which we learned the theological truth about Christ which will now be proven over the next 21 chapters of narrative accounts. And he starts by taking us through the first week of Jesus' public ministry. It is one of the only times in the Gospels, outside of Christ's passion week, where we are given this sequence of days to mark

time. Jesus is witnessed to by John over several days and several different interactions, and then followers come to Jesus based on that witness by John, and this all culminates in the first miracle in Cana. And all of it points to the same truth – that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

The week begins with the witness of John the Baptist – the forerunner of the Messiah. This is the first witness that is called into the witness stand to testify to the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. He is first in chronology, on the scene – and he is first in importance in John the Apostle’s mind. There is not a clearer testimony from another person in the gospel than John the Baptist. He is confident and clear and bold and faithful and profoundly effective. And he points us unfailingly to Jesus Christ. I don’t think there is a better person in Scripture, outside of Jesus, to learn humility from than John the Baptist, and the text before us gives us so many wonderful truths about his humility. John is simply a humble servant. So, I want to put before you this morning seven truths about the humble servant of Christ as seen in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. May Christ increase, and we decrease through this study.

I. The Humble Servant is Honest about himself

- a. From the life of John the Baptist we learn that the humble servant is honest about himself. This is found in his testimony given to the priests and Levites who were sent to figure him out. He communicates clearly and humbly about who he really is. But this honesty is not self-deprecating – as though it is somehow untrue. Everything John says about himself is the most honest truth about himself ever to be spoken. He is not being dismissively rude to his own self-image. He is not feigning false humility by deflecting the praise of men to get more praise in the end. No, he is being completely honest with himself and about himself with others. Which seems to be a remarkably hard thing to do in the human heart.
- b. Before we look at what he actually says about himself, think about who John was. In Luke’s Gospel we learn about how he was miraculously born by the power of God overcoming the old age of Zachariah and Elizabeth. He is tasked by God from before he was conceived with this role as the forerunner of the Messiah – the anointed one of God. He was to be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s longstanding prophecy of one crying out in the wilderness to prepare a way for the coming of the Lord. He was the first prophetic voice in Israel for over 400 years. And he was wildly popular. Luke and Matthew tell us that all of Judea and Jerusalem and all the region about the Jordan were going out into the wilderness to hear John. He was the most prolific, well-liked, and popular preachers of his day. And he was also the cousin of the Messiah, and he was from the family of a priest, who were held in high regard in Jewish society.
- c. And he was wildly successful as well. His message of preparation for the Messiah was widely received and many people were being immersed in the Jordan River as an outward expression of their inward repentance. They believed John was telling the truth – that after him the Messiah was coming, and they needed to make the way ready by cleansing themselves from sin and eagerly anticipating the Messiah’s arrival.

d. His message was so popular and his preaching so powerful that this delegation of men who come to investigate him from Jerusalem wonder if he thinks he is the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet. This the top tier of the Lord's servants that John is being put in by others. Jesus will even say, later in his ministry that John was more than a prophet and that of those born among women, there is none greater than John. So, there is no minimizing of John's role here. He is a major player in the Divine drama of bringing the Messiah. He is the forerunner – the one who leads the way and makes it ready. But that is not what John thinks of when John thinks of John. When John thinks of John, he thinks this:

i. I am not the Christ

1. By this he means that he is not the one that has been promised of God in the Old Testament. There was tremendous messianic fervor in and around the 1st Century. There were several break off groups of zealots who were longing for greater purity among the Jews and for freedom from the Romans. And that last part is what brought such constant scrutiny from the Roman Empire. This is why they had a Roman governor stationed in the city of Jerusalem – to keep the peace by keeping down the uprisings. And the religious leaders in Jerusalem were supposed to help the Romans keep their Jewish followers in check. And so, this is why there is a delegation from the Jews – which is code in John's Gospel for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, most likely the Sanhedrin – there to investigate who John was. John's wildly popular appeal was drawing some attention in the religious and the political circles and so they wanted to know – who are you?
2. And to that question John immediately replies – I am not the Christ. He wanted no part in any political uprisings, but he especially wanted no part in being confused for the one he was there to proclaim. "I am not the Christ."

ii. I am not Elijah

1. When John thinks of John he also thinks – I am not Elijah. That is the next question from the religion boys – if you're not the Christ then who are you, Elijah? They asked him this because Malachi 4 – the last Old Testament prophet ended his prophecy by saying this:
 - a. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶ 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." – Malachi 4:5-6
2. So, the last Old Testament prophet ends with this prophecy about the return of Elijah before the Day of the Lord comes. And you'll remember that Elijah did not pass through the gate of death into Heaven but was taken up in the chariot in the whirlwind. And John the Baptist is remarkably similar to Elijah the prophet in his appearance, his behavior, and his message. Mark's gospel tells us John

was dressed in camel's hair, wore a leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey. This sounds just like Elijah. And he brought a message of repentance to the land, which was exactly like Elijah. So, you can see why they ask the question.

3. But John the Baptist is quick to say no to this question as well – he is not Elijah. And this can be a bit difficult to understand if you think about it much, because Jesus will say in Matthew 11 that John the Baptist was Elijah who was to come. So, if Jesus says he is Elijah then how can John say that he is not Elijah? The simplest answer is that John the Baptist knew he was not Elijah in the sense that these priests and Levites were thinking. He was not actually Elijah brought back to Earth. So, he answered honestly that he was not Elijah. But he was serving in the spirit and the power of Elijah – which is how Luke 1 describes him. So, in one sense he is the Elijah to come, but in another sense, he is not Elijah. And as it pertains to how John thought about himself, he humbly admitted that he was not the great Elijah of old.
- iii. I am not the Prophet promised by Moses
 1. Next, they ask him if he is the Prophet. They are referring to the prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18. We just covered that in our series on Deuteronomy and you remember that the Early Church proclaimed Jesus to be the Prophet prophesied by Moses. So, of course, John says no to this question as well. He is not the Christ. He is not Elijah in the truest sense. He is not the Prophet promised by Moses. You can feel the tension mounting in the text as they religion boys ask him – then, who are you? They've thrown every guess at him that they can, so now they ask – what do you say about yourself?
 - iv. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”
 1. And this is the key lesson in humility 101. What do you say about yourself? Usually that answer is filled with things we have accomplished, or with things we are currently doing. Maybe we will describe ourselves by our job, or by our family, or by our credentials – depending on the situation. But John's answer filled with the humility of his heart. He says, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” His view of himself is filled with his purpose for living as given by his gracious Lord. He is not the Word, nor is he the Light – he is simply and truly the voice who is proclaiming the coming of the Word and bearing witness about the true Light. He is the herald of the king going before him and proclaiming his soon arrival. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness.
 2. This is a direct quote from Isaiah 40:3 and it is found in all 4 gospels in connection with John the Baptist. But this is the only gospel in

which John the Baptist himself uses Isaiah 40 to describe himself. It shows his own self-awareness. He knew who he was before the Lord. He knew his role. He knew what God had called him to do and to be and he was content with that role. He was content to be the voice crying out in the wilderness. This is the nature of humility.

- v. I am not worthy to even untie the strap of the sandal of the one who comes after me.
 1. But it doesn't stop there. The religion boys keep pressing him. If he is just the voice, then why is he baptizing in the wilderness. Baptism wasn't unknown in Jewish life, but it was certainly not common. The closest equivalent in religious life for the Jew was the ceremonial cleansing that they would go through after an illness or after touching a dead body. But this full immersion in water as a symbolic act in front of others was not something a Jew would do. Rather, it was reserved for the Gentile proselyte who wanted to express their conversion to Judaism. They would immerse themselves in a ceremony which was to symbolize their internal cleansing from their old religion and from the sins of their past. It symbolized a new beginning.
 2. But here in the wilderness, John the Immerser is calling people to repent and prepare for the soon arrival of the Messiah. When someone expresses this repentance and a heart ready for the Messiah to come, then John immerses them in the Jordan River. It was a shocking act really. One that was controversial and not a little offensive to the Jewish mind and heart. So, they ask him – if you don't have the clout of the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet – then what are you doing calling God's people to such an action as immersion?
 3. And John's answer in verses 26-27 is not really an answer to their question at all. He admits that he is baptizing with water, but then he immediately returns the conversation back to the Messiah. There is one standing among you that you do not know, even one who comes after me. It is likely that Jesus was literally standing in the crowd that day. He had probably recently returned from his 40 days of temptation in the wilderness and he was about to begin his public ministry. And John knows it – and instead of getting in a heated debate about religious matters with experts of the Law he turns the conversation to talk about the Messiah. And he tells them – this one who is coming after me – the one you don't yet know – I am not even worthy to untie his sandal strap. This is an admission of unequaled humility. There was a rabbinical saying that taught these religious folks that a disciple was to do for his teacher everything that a slave would do, except loosen his sandals – that was to be reserved for the lowest of the low – the slave of all. So, John is here using their language – the language of the rabbinical tradition which they would

all know, and he is telling them – I am the lowest of the low. I am lower than the slave who is lower than the disciple of the teacher. I am not even worthy to loosen his sandal strap. As Leon Morris says – “Humility could scarcely take a lower place.”¹

- e. So, John, what do you say about yourself? I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah. I am not the Prophet. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. I am not worthy to even untie the sandal strap of the one who comes after me. Do you hear any touting of credentials in John’s testimony? He does not once give even an inkling of selfish ambition – or a “hey, look at me” attitude. In an environment of human praise and adoration, in a moment of historical significance, and in the glow of messianic expectation – John remained humble before the Lord. I am not sure that I can think of a moment of greater temptation for human pride than what John the Baptist faced here. How easy it would have been for him to just throw a small pinch of self-exaltation into the recipe of his testimony about himself. But he didn’t. He never forgot who he was. He was honest about himself. And this is one of the cornerstones of humility. If your building is going to be square in life, then it must be plumbed to this truth – the truth about who you are.

II. The Humble Servant is Focused on the Master

- a. And that truth is only clearly seen by focusing on the Master. And this is the next mark of a humble servant. They are focused on the Master. In order for John to see himself rightly he must first see his Master rightly. And we know that he did because of how he testifies to the truth about Jesus. It is obvious by what he says that John was focused on his Lord. He was able to see himself clearly because he first saw his Savior rightly.
- b. There is this escalating testimony being given by John in these verses. It begins with the foundation of what John is and is not – he is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, he is not the prophet. But then it builds as John starts to answer the question – what do you say about yourself, in verse 22. So, he answers in verse 23, I am the voice. His identity as a servant is defined by his laser focus on the identity of the one he is serving. He is serving the Lord – and that Lord has told him to be a voice in the wilderness making hearts ready to receive him. There is one Lord in this situation, and John is not it, and he never loses sight of that.
- c. Then in verses 26-27 he confesses the superior greatness of the Lord by saying that he is not worthy to untie his sandal strap. So, the flip side of what we just talked about – the humility of the servant – is the greatness of the Master. John see himself in such a lowly manner, not as a matter of self-abasement but as a by-product of exaltation of Jesus. He knows the eternal worth of Jesus the Christ. He knows the truths that John the Apostle taught us in the first 18 verses. He knows that Jesus is co-eternal, co-existent, and co-equal with God the Father. He knows that Jesus has come to make God known to us and to redeem mankind to God. And this high and exalted view of Jesus is the spring of truth which produces the river of humility. All

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT, pg. 27.

true and lasting humility in the servant of Christ starts with this high and holy view of the Master.

- d. John's testimony escalates in verse 29. He sees Jesus the next day and knows that it is time to point his disciples to Jesus. It is time for them to follow Jesus. And so, he declares to them – “behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” This is one of the most glorious statements about Christ out of the mouth of another. It ranks up there with Thomas' statement after seeing the resurrected Jesus when he declared “My Lord and my God!” Or with Peter's statement when Jesus asked them what they said about him and Peter responded – “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” So, here is John the Baptist's shining moment – “behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. But it really is a strange statement as well because it is not a common description of Jesus. John the Apostle is very fond of using the word “Lamb” to describe Jesus. In fact, it is only found in John's Gospel and in the book of Revelation. But the phrase “Lamb of God” is not found anywhere else. So, what does John the Baptist mean by this? Well, he probably has in mind the incident in Genesis 22 when God provided a ram for Abraham to offer in place of his son. And he probably has in mind the Passover Lamb that was offered yearly to cover the sins of the people and remember God's rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. And he probably has in mind all of the lambs offered daily in the Temple for the sin offerings of the people. And he probably has in mind the silent suffering servant who is likened to a lamb in Isaiah 53. And this suffering lamb of Isaiah 53 eventually becomes the ruling and reigning Lamb of the book of Revelation over the Day of the Lord. Likely, John has all of this in mind when he sees Jesus and say – behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John's understanding of the glory and eternal worthiness of Jesus could not be higher.
- e. And he furthers that in verse 30 when he goes on to reaffirm to them that this one who comes after me actually ranks before me because he was before me. This is an almost identical statement to what was attributed to John the Baptist in verse 15. It is a statement of the preeminence of Jesus based on the pre-existence of Jesus. John is saying that this Lamb of God is greater than him and is preeminent over him because he was before him – there's that Greek verb *eimi* again. Jesus always was, and John has not always been. Therefore, Jesus is preeminent over John. And John knows that and rejoices in that and gladly gives testimony to that fact. In fact, he bears witness to that fact because he is so joyfully enraptured with that truth. He can't think of his own life apart from this glorious truth that Jesus is preeminent because Jesus is preexistent. But notice that he also says that Jesus is a man in verse 30. “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.” In all this high and holy Christology, John the Baptist does not lose sight of the humanity of Jesus. This only adds to the mystique of the Messiah in John's mind. How it is that this man who is walking in flesh and blood before him also pre-existed him is beyond John's concern to explain. It is simply a fact of the preeminence of his Master which fuels his own humility.
- f. And then in verse 34 John confesses that while he has baptized with water, this Lamb of God who has now arrived on the scene, will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John's baptism was external and symbolic. But the Messiah was filled with the Holy Spirit and his baptism was one of the Spirit. In other words, the Messiah's work would be internal and permanent. It would be through this one coming after John that new life would be given through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This Jesus is far superior to John in every way – even in the way we all know John best, his baptism. Christ's baptism was far greater, and John knew that and gave testimony to it.

- g. And this all culminates in our text with that glorious summary from John in verse 34 – “And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” This is the purpose of this Gospel – that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. Here John the Baptist says – this is true – Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. John could not have expressed a higher view of Jesus in so few words. Everything he says in this text is dripping with truth about Jesus as the Christ. And this fuels John's humility. John's world is lit up with the bright light of the truth about Christ. This allows him to see the full truth about himself and this produces true and lasting humility. And this makes John a useful and faithful servant of our Lord.

Conclusion: If John the Baptist was alive today our psychology crazed world would be very concerned for John. John's mental health would be questioned because he is so focused on another which produces such a low view of himself. He obviously needs a little pep talk about his self-worth. He needs to envision his identity apart from another. He needs to shed this co-dependency on Jesus. He needs to see the John he wants to become. He needs to seize the opportunity to forge his own identity, right? He needs to stop being so hard on himself and see his accomplishments and make a name for himself, right? Isn't this unhealthy to be so humbled in the presence of another?

Well, there is actually nothing that is more right in this text than how John views his Master and how this shapes his view of himself. And, as we will see next week, this is the key to John's faithful and bold service in this world for our Lord. John was not depressed and deflated with this high view of Christ and low view of himself. He was not hindered in his work. He was not held back. He did not lack motivation or courage. Rather, this was the key to his faithful and bold ministry to others. So, how do you view yourself this morning? If your first thoughts about yourself are not filled with thoughts about Christ, then there is work to be done as we learn from the example of John the Baptist. Let's pray.

- III. The Humble Servant is Formed by Revelation
- IV. The Humble Servant is Faithful to his calling
- V. The Humble Servant is Clear in his message
- VI. The Humble Servant is Unashamed before men
- VII. The Humble Servant is Useful to the glory of Christ