

## “Who Are You?”

John 1:19-28

<sup>19</sup> And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” <sup>20</sup> He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” <sup>21</sup> And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup> 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?” <sup>23</sup> 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.” <sup>24</sup> (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) <sup>25</sup> They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” <sup>26</sup> John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, <sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” <sup>28</sup> These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (ESV)

Several months ago I saw one of the most interesting movies that I’d seen in a long time. The title of the movie was “Vantage Point.” On one hand it’s your typical “terrorist attempt to assassinate the President” movie.” The President is in Spain at a big event and terrorists plan and seek to assassinate the President. What makes the movie different than any movie I’ve ever seen (maybe) is that the story is told from the vantage point of eight different people. The movie starts, and then about ten minutes into the movie it stops and rewinds and shows you the same events through the eyes of someone else. So you see the events through the eyes of an innocent bystander, you see the events unfold through the eyes of a Secret Service agent, you see the events unfold through the eyes of the President, through the eyes of the terrorist; eight different people. By seeing the eight different vantage points of the event you actually get a complete idea of the story that you could not have gotten if you had only heard it from one person.

In the New Testament, the four Gospels are basically a theological version of that movie, except the object in the story that’s being told is the story of Jesus. The reason you have four Gospels is because each one gives you a different perspective, and they show you Jesus from a different angle.

Of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Matthew is basically a Jewish follower of Jesus who primarily is trying to make the case to Jews in Rome that Jesus in fact is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.

Then, you have the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark, most people agree, was actually Mark taking stories and dictation from the apostle Peter. I like to affectionately think of the apostle Peter as the patron saint of those of us with ADHD. If you think of his life, and read the book of Mark, you realize that it makes sense because remember what word comes up in every other paragraph in the book of Mark? “Immediately.” “Immediately John the Baptist came and said this,” and then “immediately Jesus came, and immediately . . .” Everywhere you turn he’s healing people, he’s healing the blind, he’s raising the dead. Immediately, immediately, immediately. You’re getting a different vantage point.

Luke, on the other hand, was a doctor, very educated. You see in the beginning of his Gospel, “Beloved Theophilus, having gathered all the information and having an accurate account of the events – it seemed like the thing to do.” Luke writes a very detailed Gospel, but also just as Matthew focuses on Jewish expectations of Jesus, Luke tends to focus on Gentile expectations of Jesus.

Then you have this sort of odd-child, the black sheep, John. He’s different than the other ones. He opens up philosophically. You almost hear the birds [Tommy whistling]. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” [Tommy making the sound of wind] The reason John’s Gospel is a little different is because John’s vantage point is the vantage point of one who is not just an insider (he was a disciple), but he was on the inside of the inside. He was one of Jesus’ closest three associates. So as you’re reading John’s gospel you not only hear different stories, but you hear almost editorial comments. “He said this because of this.” You get a different vantage point of Jesus.

Interestingly enough, you get a different vantage point or a different picture of John the Baptist when you look at all these different Gospels as well. The first three Gospels, the theologians call them the “synoptics” – they’re alike. They explain who John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer, is. You see him as one who comes like Elijah. He’s even wearing Elijah’s outfit of camel hair and he eats locusts. You get this vision that he’s a fire and brimstone-type guy. He’s engaging, he’s confronting religious leaders. He’s just all over the place and you get this idea that he’s almost angry. When you look at John’s Gospel, instead of seeing who John the Baptizer is, he explains who John the Baptizer is not. That’s what we’re going to look at this morning, John’s perspective on John the Baptizer. Really we’re going to see three things this morning. When I say “John,” now I mean John the Baptizer. We’re going to see John’s denials, we’re going to look at John’s boldness, and finally we’re going to look at John’s humility.

If you remember the opening of the book of John, you have that great philosophical thing that says, “He was in the beginning.” (He’s talking about Jesus with God.) “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and life . . . was the light that shines in the darkness. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” Then in verse 6 it says, “There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.” And then in verse 8, “He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” So if you’re not clear, he was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. Today’s text is that witness, or that testimony that John gave. The first thing you see John doing is denials. If you look at verse 19, it says

<sup>19</sup> *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” (ESV)*

You need a little bit of context here. This had to be an incredible event to attract the attention of Jerusalem first of all. The event wasn’t just that John was preaching, or that John dressed funny, but that he was actually baptizing. Not only was he baptizing, but he had gained such crowds that it caught the attention of the leadership in Jerusalem. What you need to know is that they sent a delegation to investigate John. In order to understand the rest of the text you need to realize that it was a mixed delegation. When John talks about the Jews (he’s the only Gospel that mentions that phrase, he talks about ‘the Jews.’ “Now, ‘the Jews’ did this or ‘the Jews’ did that”), it’s a technical term he writes to refer to the leadership of the Jews.

Within the Jewish religion, it was just like it is today. You had different dominations, or you had different sects, you had different Jewish groups that expected different things. When they thought about the Messiah they expected different things. So the delegation that was sent to investigate John was a mixed delegation. We know that just from the text. There were Levite priests and toward the end there were Pharisees among them. Let me put it in terms we might understand. Something crazy’s going on and so the church comes together and they send a delegation that is made up of Catholics (the priests), Levites, let’s call them Episcopalians. Levites were in charge of the order of worship. So you have the Catholics and the Episcopalians and the Pharisees. Let’s say they’re the Presbyterians. So the Catholics, Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians say, “We need to go find out what’s happening with this guy. Even though we don’t agree on much ourselves, we’re still worried about what’s going on over there.” So the Catholics, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians send a delegation to find out what’s going on. All the different Jewish groups are not on the same page themselves, but John’s ministry’s so disturbing to them that they get together and the leadership sends them as a group to go find out. They go to John and they ask him a logical question, “Who are you?” Did you notice how John answered? John answered three different questions here, and he answered them all in the negative. In the first he answers an implicit question. Different groups had heard rumors. Gossip was just as popular back then as it is now. Some people asked, “Could this be the kingly Messiah?” “Could this be the prophet Messiah?” “Could this be the priestly Messiah?” “Is this the Messiah?” John probably heard those rumors. Notice how he answers them when they ask, “Who are you?” It says,

<sup>20</sup> *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” (ESV)*

All that language there is just to make his statement emphatic. “I am not the Christ.” When he says, “The Christ,” what he’s referring to is a very specific type of Christ. In the Old Testament there are three offices: prophets, priests, and kings. Many in Jerusalem expected a kingly Messiah to come, the Anointed one (capital A), the Christ, the One Who’d come in and rule. John says, “I am not the kingly Messiah that people expect. That’s not who I am.” And they immediately ask him the next logical question, “If you’re not the kingly Messiah, are you the prophetic Messiah?” In other words, “Are you Elijah?” Why would they ask him that? If you remember (I’m sure many of you can just pull it right from memory) Malachi chapter 4 verse 5, it says, “Before the great day of the Lord, God will send Elijah to warn Israel of the great and coming day of the Lord.” Some people thought that the Messiah who would come would actually be Elijah. Elijah would come before God was going to bring judgment, and this prophetic Messiah would come and call people to repentance and to turn back to God. So they asked, “Are you Elijah?” John says what? “I am not.” You notice his answers are getting shorter and shorter. One thing I appreciate about John is that he tends to obey the P.O.W. principle. He does not offer information that is not asked. “Are you Elijah?” “I am not.”

Now, some people are saying, “I thought Jesus said he was the Elijah.” There are two ways to look at that. One is that maybe John didn’t know that he was the Elijah because John didn’t know everything, or John was being very literal with people who were expecting very literal words. “Are you he?” “No, I’m John.” “Now, am I THE Elijah, am I the one who comes? Yeah.” They didn’t ask him that.

He says, “I’m not the kingly Messiah. I’m not the prophetic Messiah.” The only thing left is, “How about priestly? Are you the prophet?” Even though the word prophet is used here, that’s really getting at this sort of priestly Messiah because that word “prophet” there refers back to Deuteronomy 18:15. Moses predicted and said, “From among you will arise one of my brothers who will be like me. Listen to him.” In other words, some people expected a priestly Messiah who was actually the one Moses

talked about. Someone's going to rise like me. Another Moses will come and reestablish God's law on the face of the earth. "Is that who you are? You're not the kingly Messiah, you're not the prophetic Messiah, are you the priestly Messiah? Is that who you are, the prophet?" How does John answer that? "No, I'm not the one." So, what now? John has denied everything. He's basically crushed their expectations because everyone had different expectations. Some wanted the king, some wanted the prophet, and some wanted the priest. Their expectations were crushed. You have to appreciate the honesty of this delegation. Did you notice what they said to him after that, after he gives them these answers? In verse 22,

<sup>22</sup> *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?" (ESV)*

They're being honest. Now they're getting ready to bite off a big chunk of John's boldness. They're asking a question and basically saying, "Come on, man. You got to throw us a bone here. We can't just go back to Jerusalem and tell them who you're not. We need to know what you are. Who are you? You dispelled the rumors about what other people are saying about you. Tell us what do you say about yourself?" In other words, "Some people are saying this about you, some are saying that. Just shoot straight with us, and what do you say about yourself?" John, I'm guessing, surprised them by saying, "I'm a voice. Maybe I'm not a voice, I'm THE voice." Notice what he says in verse 23,

<sup>23</sup> *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." (ESV)*

This passage is from Isaiah, chapter 40:

<sup>3</sup> *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (ESV)*

Can you imagine the incredible boldness it takes to say something like that? Imagine you're talking to some friends, and maybe you're at a Bible study and you read a verse in the Bible and you say, "That's me right there." And people say, "Oh, yeah, we're all supposed to bear witness, we're all sent forth." And you say, "No, that verse is literally talking about ME! I am that person." That takes incredible boldness if you think about it, to tell a bunch of religious people, "This verse in the Bible is talking about me." Notice what it says. It says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

What's going on here? In the Ancient Near East apparently, when a king would travel on a great journey, or maybe on a political journey to impress a neighboring king, they would send people out in front of them to prepare the way, almost like contractors; people who go ahead of them to say, "The great king is coming. We need to flatten the road. We need to prepare the road so that when the king comes through there won't be anything that gets in his way." So on one hand they would go out almost like a contractor and they would maybe hire people. On the other hand they would also announce that the king is coming. John the Baptist is like a theological road grader. He's going through and preparing the way for the king. On one hand he's incredibly bold by saying, "This is me. This verse in the Bible is talking about me. I am the one who comes to prepare the way for the One." But it's also incredibly humble because what's a "voice?" A voice is nothing.

C. S. Lewis often talked about the fact that virtues and vices come in sets of twins that are apparently contradictory but in actuality they're complementary. For example, let's take a couple of vices. The vices of pride and insecurity are actually two sides of the same coin. At first they sound opposite and yet the reason you're prideful is because you're insecure. They go together even though they don't sound like they should. Now, as far as virtues go, a great example is boldness and humility. When most people think about who is bold they don't think about humility, and yet true humility is the only thing that enables true boldness. Why? Because if you're truly humble you don't care what other people think about you. If you're truly humble you know that you're at the very bottom of the food chain and so if you tell the truth, what are they going to do? Push you down further? There's nowhere to go. So if you're truly humble you become truly bold. Why is John so bold? John is so bold because he is so humble. That's probably the most shocking thing he says to the Pharisees; what comes next is his humility. Imagine, here's a guy who's attracted people from all of Judea, all of Jerusalem, everyone from everywhere is coming out to him to be baptized, and he says, "I'm just a voice." Notice what comes next when you talk about his humility. The Pharisees go to talk to him. Let's look at that finally.

<sup>24</sup> *(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) <sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" <sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, <sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." (ESV)*

That verse 24 is pretty hard to translate. The thrust of it is, “Now some of the Pharisees came to him.” In other words they came to him separately apart from the big delegation because the Pharisees were concerned about orthodoxy and they were concerned about doing things decently and doing things in order. You can see why I equated them with us. If you asked a Pharisee, “Why are we doing it this way?” A Pharisee would say, “Because that’s the way we’ve always done it.” John was breaking tradition here. He was doing something different. That’s the nature of their question. The Pharisees come to ask him, “If you’re not the Messiah, the Anointed one, the prophet Elijah, or the prophet like Moses, why then are you baptizing?” There’s nuance in the question. The question isn’t really like, “Why are you performing the act of baptism?” The question really gets down to whom he is baptizing.

In the Ancient Near East baptism was extremely common at this time. It was common because those who were proselytes, those who converted from being a Gentile or a pagan to Judaism would be baptized. Let’s say a husband and wife converted from being Gentiles to being Jews, the husband would be circumcised and both of them would be baptized. It was an act of purification. It was a symbolic act of cleansing away their sins and cleansing away their old life, and everyone did that. It was very common. The problem with John was that he was not baptizing proselytes from the pagan world to Judaism, John was calling Jews to be baptized. That’s why the Pharisees were upset (if you read the other Gospels this is clearer). The question is not, “Why are you baptizing? We know why people do that.” The question is really, “Why are you baptizing them – Jews? Aren’t they okay how they are?” Basically John’s baptism, if nothing else, shows us that your race and your religion are not good enough. What was disturbing to them about John’s baptism was that he was calling the religious people, not the unbelievers. He was calling the people who were religious to turn back to God because your religion is not good enough. That is what was disturbing.

In John you hear something different. He says, “I baptize you with water.” In every other Gospel it says, “But he will come and baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In John’s Gospel, what does he say? “I baptize you with water, but one stands among you.” Think about that for a second. This big delegation who has come to investigate what’s happening with John asks, “Are you the Messiah? He says, “I am not. I baptize with water but there is One among you Whom you don’t know.” Imagine the delegation looking around and wondering if John doesn’t have their attention yet. Then he basically says, “The One among you: I’m not even worthy to unloosen the thong of His sandal.” In other words, “You’ve come out here to see me because you think I’m ‘The Man.’ All of Jerusalem and Judea, are coming to me because they think I’m ‘The Man.’ I’m compared to the One Who will come. You are expecting a priestly Messiah or a prophetic Messiah or a kingly Messiah. The One who comes is all three. He is the prophet. He is the priest. He is the king. He is so big and so amazing that I am not even worthy to unloosen the thong of His sandal.” In the Ancient Near East, that was humble because the only ones who would undo the thong of a sandal were slaves. John says, “On the pecking order of things, I’m lower than a slave.” The fact that John knew he was so low on the pecking order enabled him to say to all the religious people around, “The King is here and He stands among you.”

I’ll close with this. I’m going to ask you to think about this as you go through the week. Who are you? And I mean this, are you the kingly Messiah? Are you the one who runs your life? Are you the one who knows how things ought to be done? Are you the one who protects and defends yourself? Are you the prophetic Messiah? Are you the priestly Messiah? Are you the one who is in charge of making sure that all of your sins are atoned for? Because if you are, you’ll lose. You need One Who can do all those things for you, and His name is Jesus. The other question is, “What do you say about yourself?” Or, “What do you say for yourself?” Are you a voice? Do you point so something else, or do you simply exist to draw attention to yourself? Are you bold, and if you’re bold, are you bold because you are so humble, or are you humble because you’re so bold? Think about that. Who are you, and what do you have to say for yourself because there is One and He stands among you. He always does. His name is Jesus.