

Sermon Series: *The Gospel of John*

Who Are You?

John 1:19-28 (ESV)

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” 22 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?” 23 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.”

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Introduction

Verse 19 begins the first narrative section of John’s gospel. John will now, through chapter 2, go on to offer a fairly detailed description of the daily events that comprise the first week of Jesus’ public ministry. He begins not with Jesus himself but with John, the one who was baptizing.

You will recall that the John who is named here in v.19 is not the same John who is the author of this gospel. Theologians typically refer to the author of the gospel as John the Evangelist and the John mentioned in verse 19 as John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus and was six months his senior.



Bethany Across the Jordan

In verse 28 John locates the events of this first day for us. He says they **“took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing”** (Jn 1:28). This Bethany is not the same Bethany that was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This Bethany was “across the Jordan,” while the Bethany in which Lazarus and his sisters lived was located about two miles from Jerusalem.

The exact location of this Bethany is uncertain. There is reason to locate it in the north (just above Samaria) somewhere near Salim and Aenon¹ which are two other locations where John was known to baptize. So these events possibly take place on the edge of the wilderness about 40 to 50 miles north of Jerusalem.

¹ John 3:23.

And This Is the Testimony of John

John begins verse 19 by saying, “**this is the testimony of John.**” This has the ring of courtroom language (which I will get the privilege of hearing much of this coming week as I venture to Framingham for jury duty). A testimony is usually intended to offer proof of something and to establish the truth. We require testimony when someone has witnessed something or knows something that will help in either confirming or denying some claim.

What claim is John here seeking to establish? What is the author attempting to confirm or deny? What claim has the Evangelist made? We find the answer in the prologue, which is the first 18 verses.

In the prologue, John introduced the eternal Word who was both *with* God and also *was* God. John explained that the eternal Word who was (i.e. existed) before the world (i.e. existed) became flesh and dwelt among mankind. John names the eternal Word as Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:14:17).

The reason Jesus became flesh and came to this earth was to give all who would believe in Him the right to become the children of God because we do not naturally possess this right. For if Jesus had not come in the flesh and lived a sinless life, then no one would have been given the right to become the children of God. We are not by nature children of God. We are by nature children of wrath² because of our sin and therefore we are enemies³ of God.

For this reason, no one has the right to become a child of God except those who believe in Jesus, because only Jesus lived a sinless life and thereby was successful in removing the wrath of God. John is greatly concerned that this truth be known and believed because it is only through faith in Jesus that one can receive the life of God into his or her soul and thus experience new birth. The life of God comes to us only through faith in the name of Jesus (John 20:31).

This is the purpose for which John is writing and this is the purpose for introducing **the testimony of John**. John the Baptist is one who also believed and bore witness to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen One whom God sent into the world that He might give life to all who would believe in God through Him. **John was the first person in history to begin turning the eyes of the world toward Jesus.**

Who Is John the Baptizer?

John the baptizer was a very interesting character. His clothes were made of camel's hair and he wore a leather belt. His diet consisted of wild honey and locusts, which is a large grasshopper (Matt 3:4). Locusts are edible (and are even kosher) and are still eaten by today people in some countries in the Middle East and Africa.



He was an incredibly bold preacher. He chose not to preach in the cities where all the people were, but instead John chose to preach in wilderness of Judea (Matt3:2). Yet God's hand was upon him and crowds flocked out into the wilderness hear him preach (Matt 3:5). The popularity of his ministry caught the attention of the watchful Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

² Eph 2:3.

³ Rom 5:10.

“The Jews” In John

Verse 19 introduces the term “the Jews.” We will see this term repeated frequently throughout John. The term appears seventy-one times in sixty-seven verses of this gospel and is used in varying ways—sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, and sometimes it neutrally. Three of these sixty-seven verses are references to the Jews who believe in Jesus. In thirty-three verses the reference “the Jews” is neutral, while thirty-one are negative with the majority of those referring to hostile Jewish leaders in opposition to Jesus.⁴ So when you see this term, pay close attention to how it is used in context.

The Jewish leaders have been watching John. These leaders probably refers to the members of the Sanhedrin.⁵ After watching for awhile they decide to send a delegation of **priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him “Who are you?”** (Jn 1:19).

Both priests and Levites were descendants of Levi. However, the priests were Levites who were also descendants of Aaron. The Levites assisted the priests in their duties and also served as the temple guard. Remember that Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, was a priest. Therefore, these priests who came to John had a common lineage. [John also would have been in line to serve as a priest, but we are never told that he actually did.]

Who Are You? (v.19)

This delegation came to John and asked, “**Who are you?**” John answered by telling them who he was **not**. He answered them with, “**I am not the Christ**” (John 1:20). Evidently John had an idea of why they were coming and he knew something of what they were thinking. He knew they were probing into the importance and role of who he was. They were not seeking his educational or family background. They knew who he was in that sense.

They knew he was John, son of Zechariah, but he was much more than that. You don’t just pack up and hike out into the wilderness and start a preaching campaign that actually draws people miles and miles out of the cities without something more than meets the eye is going on. Furthermore, thousands of people do not walk 30 plus miles in the hot Middle Eastern sun in order to sit on the dry dusty ground without God somehow being involved. Something significant was happening and John was at the center of it. The Jews in Jerusalem wanted to know what was going on.

Isn’t it interesting as it relates to the work of God in the world, that even though we often are not exactly aware of the full extent of all that is happening, we do sometimes have enough of a hunch to know that something divinely unusual is taking place? Sometimes when God is at work we can sense it, we can smell it even though we might not be able to fully articulate it. The real test in those moments is will we press on to find out if it truly is God at work or not? Will we seek to do the hard work to discover if this is God or not or will we choose to ignore what is happening? And if we discover that it is God at work, what will be our response?

⁴ Colin G. Kruse, *John: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 4, Gen. ed. Leon Morris. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 50.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 142.

The Question Aims At His Authority

The concern of the Jewish leaders was John's authority. They were not seeking his resume, they were wanting to know on what authority he was doing what he was doing. Those who are in authority are often concerned with *keeping* that authority. John preached boldly with great authority, unlike the others of His day. Where did he get this authority? His authority was their concern. A notable work was happening in the wilderness. But the source of John's authority must be discovered—***was this from God or was this from man?*** Was John simply an unconventional but dynamic speaker or was the hand of God upon him? Later when Jesus' authority is questioned by the priests and the elders Jesus will ask them this very question and they will not give him an answer even though they know the answer (see Matt 21:23-27).

Seeking to answer this question is not wrong. In fact, it is very right. However, it is the response to the answer that makes all the difference in the world. If God is at work, then how shall we respond? ***The answer to that question can make the difference between eternal life or eternal death.***

So they came asking, "Who are you?"

A Moment of Temptation?

It is moments like these that can be significant times of temptation. The press has arrived, the cameras are rolling, and the nation is watching. How will John answer? This could be his golden opportunity! Finally the really important people have taken serious notice of him. Now is his chance to show the world what he was made of. He could explain his skill at preaching and to talk about all the hardships he'd gone through to get where he was. He could say something to the effect of "Well, I'm no one reeeally. However, these crowds of people don't just come out here to see 'no one.'" None of this describes where John was. He was intent on moving the focus away from himself.

Notice that John's answers become progressively briefer. John three times denies that was the Christ. It is interesting that Peter three times denied he knew the Christ.

Delegation:	"Who are you?"
John:	"I am not the Christ."
Delegation:	"What then? Are you Elijah?"
John:	"I am not."
Delegation:	"Are you the Prophet?"
John:	"No."

He Confessed And Did Not Deny (v.20)

When the moment for the question came, John ***"confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."*** John has an interesting way of stating this. He confessed what? He confessed that he was *not* the Christ. Did not deny what? He did not deny that he was *not* the Christ. The emphasis is clearly and abundantly on what John is **NOT**. John said ever so plainly, ***"I am not the Christ."***

John's answer immediately throws all attention away from himself and upon "the Christ" (Greek *christos*). "'Christ' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew 'Messiah,' meaning 'Anointed.' It was the

title of the prophesied deliverer, who would bring renewal and political freedom to Israel.”⁶ John’s answer is emphatic. He was **not** the Christ.

The intentionality of the answer is astounding. It very effectively forces one’s attention directly toward the one whom he is not. All attention goes straight to “the Christ,” for the entire frame of the answer is not who John **is** but precisely who he is **not**. If you want to open up a door of opportunity to talk about Jesus, try giving John’s answer the next time you are introduced to someone. When you meet someone and they ask, “Who are you?” You answer, “I am not Christ.”

Elijah? I Am Not (v.21)

Their questions continue. The next question from these priests and Levites is, “**What then? Are you Elijah?**” John replied, “**I am not.**”

The question makes sense for several reasons. First of all John dressed like Elijah. We are told in 2 Kings 1:8 that Elijah “wore a garment of hair with a leather belt tied around his waist.”⁷ So he looked like Elijah and he probably preached like Elijah. Both were incredibly bold in their proclamation of the necessity of **repentance and whole-hearted return to the Lord**.

You will recall that Elijah never died (2 Kings 2:11). He was taken up into heaven alive in a whirlwind on a flaming chariot. The prophet Malachi prophesied (4:5) that Elijah would be sent ahead of the Messiah, so the return of Elijah was expected. However, John flatly denies that he was Elijah. He plainly, answered, “**I am not.**”

However, Jesus later clarified the role of John. Jesus spoke to the crowds and said, “If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Mt 11:14).⁸ Evidently John was not completely aware of the full import of his ministry and calling. Jesus attached more significance to John’s ministry than John did himself. Yet remember what the angel said to Zechariah, John’s father.

Luke 1:13-17 (ESV)

13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,

17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

John was not Elijah reincarnated and so he rightly answered that he was not Elijah. However, the essence of his preparatory ministry was carried out with the same **spirit and power as that of Elijah**.

⁶ Frank E. Gaebelin, Merrill C. Tenney and Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9: John and Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 35-36.

⁷ See also Mk 1:6.

⁸ See also Mt 17:12; Mk 9:13.

Are You the Prophet? (v.21)

John was not the Christ, neither was he Elijah. The minds of these priests and Levites now move on to another end-time figure, “the Prophet.” They ask, “Are you the Prophet?” To which John responded with a simple, “**No.**” They most likely had in mind the prophet that God told Moses that He would raise up.

Deuteronomy 18:18 (ESV)

18 *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. (See also 18:15)*

This “prophet” was expected to appear along with Messiah and the Samaritan's thought this was a reference to Messiah, as did some Jews (cf. Jn 6:14; 7:40). However, again, John says, “No.” These answers frustrate the delegation. They tire of the negative answers. They want a positive answer. They now know who he is not, but this would not satisfy those who sent them. They need to know who he is.

John 1:22 (ESV)

22 *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?”*

OK. We understand. You are not the Christ, not Elijah, and not the Prophet. We need who you are! Say something positive about yourself!

John 1:23 (ESV)

23 *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.”*

He responds by quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah and applying them to himself. All of the synoptic authors apply this purpose to John also (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4). It may be helpful to have the larger context before us.

Isaiah 40:3 (ESV)

3 *A voice cries:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

4 *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.*

5 *And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

“In the original context, the Old Testament prophet is calling for a (metaphorical) improvement in the road system of the desert to the east, a leveling of hills and valleys and a straightening of the

curves, to accommodate the return of the covenant people from exile.”⁹ This points to the fact that preparation is necessary before the glory of the Lord is fully revealed.

Why Preach In the Wilderness?

Have you ever wondered why John chose to preach in the wilderness. The Judean wilderness is an unfriendly, inhospitable, dusty, dry, lonely, and hot land? Why on earth would he go there to preach? This passage explains why? ***The wilderness is a place of preparation.***



Moses spent 4 decades in the wilderness before he was ready to be used by God to lead Israel out of Egypt. Elijah spent probably several months alone in the wilderness during a famine being fed by ravens and drinking from a brook until it dried up (1 Kgs 17:1-7). David spent years shepherding his father's flocks in the wilderness¹⁰ and then several years on the run hiding in the wilderness from Saul¹¹ before he was ready to be anointed king over all of Israel. Paul spent time (maybe three years) in Arabia after his conversion (Gal 1:17) and before being commissioned by Jesus to plant churches in Aisa. And Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before the beginning of his public ministry (Lk 4:1-2). The entire nation of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. ***The wilderness is a place where God prepares his people to be used by Him.***

The wilderness is a place where all idols are removed and and worship is purified. The wilderness is a place where God provides in miraculous ways. In the wilderness there are deep and transforming experiences of God. The wilderness is a place where all distractions are taken away and one must decide if the LORD will be obeyed or not. The wilderness is a place of desolation and place of decision. The wilderness is a place of pain, purification, and preparation. The wilderness is a very lonely place where God knocks away all the props and He becomes intimately personal and powerfully present. The wilderness is also a place to hear God's voice. It was in the wilderness that the children of Israel heard the voice of God speaking to them from the mountain.

If you today find yourself in a wilderness, do not too quickly seek to run away. Seek the Lord for why He has you there and do not let go of Him until you know. Cling to Him for the answer your soul yearns for and do not be angry at Him for leading you there. Learn to be still and listen for His voice as you read His word. And keep a pencil handy to write down what you learn about yourself lest you forget and find yourself often in the same barren place.

If you are in the wilderness remember this. God can make water flow out of rocks and He can make bread fall from the sky. Job said that God's word is more precious than his daily food (Job 23:12). If you want your soul to thrive then feast on His word. Read your Bible. *“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”* (Dt 8:3). Do not neglect the reading of God's word.

John the Baptist chose to preach in the wilderness in order to prepare people to welcome the Lord. He preached a message of repentance. In the wilderness God reveals the bankruptcy of life apart

⁹ Carson, 144.

¹⁰ 1 Sam 17:28.

¹¹ 1 Sam 23:14-15, 24-25; 24:1; 25:1, 4; 26:3; 2 Sam 15:28; 17:16, 29.

from Him. In the wilderness the foundations of life are tested. In the wilderness it is revealed who or what one worships. John was a voice calling out for all obstacles to true worship of God to be removed. He was a voice calling for all stones that would cause stumbling to be removed. He was a voice calling out for a return to a straight path and a turning away from a crooked path.

John was a voice and that voice still cries out to each of us today—**prepare the way of the Lord**. Remove all obstacles in your heart that prevent you from worshipping the Lord. Repent of the idols that you treasure more than God. Return to Him and He will return to you. This is the calling of the wilderness.

Why Are You Baptizing? (v.25)

This delegation does not comment on John's description of himself. They pay no attention to His "voice." They are not interested in his message. Instead they return to the issue of his authority and continue the questioning. John was not the Christ. He was not Elijah. Neither was he the Prophet. Therefore they then ask,

John 1:25 (ESV)

25 They asked him, *"Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"*

Evidently they thought that if John was not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, then he had no business baptizing people. The issue of his baptizing was evidently a matter of some controversy. Baptism was not unusual in Jewish culture. Gentile proselytes were baptized when they converted to Judaism and we know that members of the Qumran community practiced baptism as part of ritual cleansing.¹² In both cases baptism was self-administered.¹³

What was unusual about John's baptism was, first, that he was baptizing the candidates instead of the candidates themselves and, second, John was baptizing Jews not Gentiles. Gentiles were understood to be unclean and therefore baptism was necessary. However, baptizing Jews sent the message that all people were unclean in God's eyes therefore all needed to be baptized. This ignored the privileged standing of Israel before the eyes of God as His chosen people. This would have been very controversial in their eyes.

We still practice baptism today. We baptize because Jesus commanded it of all who would be his disciples (Mt 28:19). Baptism is an act of obedience for all who have put their faith in Jesus and have become his disciples. It is a powerful symbol of being washed of sins and having been granted new birth. The physical act of baptism does not wash away sins, only faith in Jesus does that. However, it is an outward representation of the inner working of the Holy Spirit of cleansing from sin and giving new life. It is a public demonstration of personal faith in Jesus. If you are a disciple of Jesus and you have never been baptized then please let us know and we can change that.

John offered an answer to their question.

John 1:26-27 (ESV)

26 John answered them, *"I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."*

¹² Kruse, 77.

¹³ Carson, 145.

It is almost as if John was saying,

“You guys just don’t get it. Stop paying attention to me. This is not about me. You think I’m important but there is someone among you, who you do not yet know, who is immensely more important than me! If you think I’m great, there is a man among you who is so much greater than me that I am not even worthy to reach down and untie his sandals!”

“Rabbi Joshua b. Levi (a.d. 250) taught, ‘All manner of service that a slave must render to his master, the pupil must render to his teacher—except that of taking off his shoe.’”¹⁴

In John’s mind, the worth and the honor of Jesus was so highly exalted that he thought himself unworthy of performing even the function of the lowliest of the lowly slaves. That kind of humility is almost unparalleled in Scripture. It also teaches that Jesus is worthy of the highest esteem. He is to be treasured above all treasures. He is to be loved above all loves.

Conclusion

In closing, let me ask a few questions. **Who are you?** By what metric do you define yourself. When you are asked who you are what do you say? Do you define yourself by your occupation, by saying, I’m a banker, I’m an analyst, I’m a teacher, I’m a technician, or I’m a builder? Do you define yourself in relation to your family, I’m a husband and a father, or I’m a wife and a mother? Do you define yourself by the past, I used to be a pilot, or I was an assembly line worker?

What happens when all of those things are removed. How do you define yourself if you have no job? How do you define yourself if you have no family? Do we not define ourselves in relation to that thing or person from which we find significance, whether that be job, or relationships, or vocation? John defined himself in relation to Jesus. Do you? Could you? Is Jesus that important to you that you could define yourself in relation to him?

A friend of mine recently stepped into a new role in life and had the opportunity to introduce himself to some new people while on vacation. After some thought he chose to introduce himself as a “Christian Missionary,” which is the new role he had just stepped into. This was the first time in his life he had ever introduced himself as a missionary for Christ.

How do you define yourself? Does Christ play a significant role in your self-identification?

Part of knowing who you are, is cleared up in knowing who you are not. Are you clear about both who you are and who you are not?

The wilderness might help clarify some of this. Some of you may find yourselves in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of preparation and a place to meet God. Remove the stones that have caused you to stumble. Repent of your sins and return to the Lord. Prepare the way for a fruitful future of a faithful life proclaiming the supremacy of Christ over all things. The most honorable and worthy human being who ever walked this earth stands among you this morning?

Do you know Him?

¹⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 65.