

June 21, 2009

## **John the Baptist: Following the Real Jesus** **Mark 1:1-8**

First, I want to wish our dads a blessed Father's Day. Debby and I heard a middle age woman recently recall painful words her father spoke to her when she was a teenager. He told her that she was not pretty enough to be his secretary. We were struck by how vivid and alive these words spoken to her over 40 years ago had become. Dads: be careful and thoughtful. Your words have the power to build up or can tear down. I've done both. So we all need to hear words of grace and mercy. None of us do this flawlessly. As David said, our sins are more numerous than the hairs on our head. But love covers a multitude of sins. Please never stop living in forgiveness and forever being transformed by Christ. We are flawed; we are forgiven and we can be better. Don't ever stop believing that. So, I commend our dads to the word and grace of God. And I ask moms and children to pray for your dads, forgive them, and give them lots of hugs.

Last Sunday we began to talk about what it looks like to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet to follow Jesus on your own terms is really not following Jesus at all. To follow a Jesus of your own making is like looking down a well and seeing your own reflection. Mark knew this as well as anyone. And so he teaches us that the only Jesus that can change you is Jesus AS HE IS, not as we would like him to be. Many today say they are followers of Jesus—that is—as long as they can have Jesus and hold onto the pantheon of other gods in their lives with themselves at the center. But Mark says that a Jesus that doesn't challenge you, disturb you, or summon you to deny yourself and follow him is not the real Jesus. So Mark begins by telling us who the real Jesus is. The beginning of the gospel is the gospel of Jesus, Christ, The Son of God. These titles mean to receive Jesus is to receive and acknowledge that you can't save yourself, you can't be your own king or Christ and you can't be your own God. You simply aren't sufficient for those roles. Later, Mark will work out in detail what each of these special titles means for Jesus and for us.

**JOHN THE BAPTIST: THE MESSENGER:** Now, before Mark says anything more about Jesus he reminds us of the messenger God sent to prepare the way for the LORD. Israel fully expected that the LORD—the God of the covenant—would some day come to Jerusalem. That is why he quotes Isaiah 40. The most difficult thing for Jesus' disciples and others to accept was that Jesus was indeed the LORD. The reason for this was not that their theology couldn't accommodate God coming to Jerusalem. What it could not accommodate was that the LORD would come *without absolutely and mightily prevailing over their political enemies and then raise up Israel to the pinnacle of honor, respect, and power*. In their minds, the problem of Israel was the oppression of the Roman occupation. In their minds, Israel's real problems were always "*out there*" with the sinners, politicians, and religious leaders. The ascension to the pinnacle of material, political, economic, and social power was the only gospel Israel could hear. Even in the last days of Jesus' ministry his disciples were still arguing over who was the greatest among them and how they could position themselves to the seat of power. John and James pulled Jesus aside and in a preemptive strike they ask Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hand in power. After three years of living with Jesus they were still unable to grasp that to gain one's life you must lose it. After three years, they were still competing with each other for status and power imagining the gospel in terms of personal and political power. Yet Jesus taught that the one who is first must be last. To be great and over all you must be the servant of all. I think we still don't get it. It seems to me that the most popular ministries in America today are those that hold out personal, social,

economic, political, and religious power. We think we have been blessed when we have been raised up to positions of prestige, honor, status, and political influence. The world thinks that acquiring status and power over others is the way to get things done. Jesus taught just the opposite. He gave up status and power over others. He let loose of his own divine prerogatives and took on the form of a servant. That message was as unthinkable then as it is today.

However, there was one man who got this message right and that was John the Baptist. And what I find so interesting about John is that Jesus honored John more than any other man. Jesus said, “Among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Mtt.11:11). Now, if John the Baptist is the greatest person born, other than Christ himself, you would think that his life would become something of a paradigm, for the rest of us. By this I don’t mean that our lives will match his frame for frame. For example, John was single. It’s just not God’s call on everyone to be single. So, I’m not saying that everyone should quit their jobs, take vows of celibacy and poverty, and begin preaching in the desert. I’m saying that we should look at this man within the limits of our own special calling and adopt his beliefs, principles, theology, message, values, and character. And that of course will affect how we live.

John got the real Jesus and the real gospel. So, before Mark has us study Jesus he puts before us John the Baptist who was God’s faithful messenger both in the things he said and in the things he did. Now, if you are like me, you want to eat better than John did, dress better than he did, and be accepted by others more than he was. Most of us want to live longer and die an easier death than John. We often equate God’s blessing with the increase in our wealth, ease, and long life. So, John the Baptist’s life doesn’t reinforce the values of a narcissistic culture. I wonder if this is why we hear so little about John. How would John’s life fit into the wealth, health and prosperity messages that are so popular today? But, according to Jesus, John was the greatest man born among women. Mark’s point is that John followed Jesus—as he is—and he followed the gospel—as it is—and as a result he was liberated from fears, greed, insecurities, self protection, and self promotion that haunt most of us and put limits on our love and courage. Mark says to get Jesus and the gospel right you have to begin with John.

I want us to look at three things Mark teaches us about John the Baptist and how the real Jesus and the real gospel changes you.

- **John’s character**
- **John’s message.**
- **The outcome of John’s life.**

The real Jesus changes your character, your message, and the outcome of your life.

## **1. JOHN’S CHARACTER (MARK 1: 5-6)**

“John appeared in the wilderness...[he]...was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.” How can we describe John’s character? I notice three specifics: John was modest, courageous, and humble.

### **Modesty**

First, John’s modesty is illustrated by his dress and his diet. He wore camel hair garments and snatched up grasshoppers and robbed beehives for his meals. How would this message work today in our culture? “Come to Christ and he may call you to wear old animal skins and eat grasshoppers and honey?” or

“Come to Christ and you may end up financially worse off than you are today?” Is this the kind of message that is gaining strength in the church today? Would this message sell books? What if we took out a full page add in the Oregonian inviting no celebrities from the rich and famous—just folks—and said, “Come to the Portland Coliseum for a series of fantastic seminars on how to become a Christian and begin a *downwardly* mobile life.” Would anyone attend? Yet change one word and you would have a marketable product. Change *downward* mobility to *upward* mobility and you have something that will sell. That a blessed person of faith would not be reasonably well off financially and growing in their financial portfolio is just unthinkable to us. We think something has gone terribly wrong if we are not becoming richer and richer. John is wearing the clothes and eating a diet of *poor* people. John was so taken by the gospel and the blessings of the gospel that his joy and purpose in life were simply not bound to riches. Yet Jesus says John is the greatest man who ever lived. Who are you listening to? Who do you know who is saying that John’s lifestyle is the evidence of the greatest person who ever lived? May I ask, “What gospel are we listening to?” My prayer kinda goes like this. “Lord, I don’t ask for much, but whatever you give can it be quality?” Unlike John, I’m often bound to what people think of my financial or professional success. Would I still be respected if my next job line began with the phrase, “May I Supersize that for you?”

Years ago the senior pastor of the First Evangelical Free Church of Phoenix AZ. was so convicted that he was not living in the freedom of the gospel, he left his prestigious pastorate and took a janitor’s job in a local Jr. high school. Although he continued to minister, he never returned to vocational pastoring. He retired as a janitor and said that his ministry was never so fulfilling as when he made that change. I remember seeing some time back a popular book written by a professed Christian motivational speaker entitled, “See you at the Top!” Does that sound like John? John’s message may have been “See you at the Bottom.” The gospel liberated John from the tyranny of greed and status. Look, if you’ve taken a husband, wife, or have children, you have obligations that you have made to God, yourself, and to them. So, you are bound by your promises to do your best to provide for their needs. God may not have called you to a vow of poverty. If you are hearing me say that you should quit your job and abandon your responsibilities you are not hearing me rightly. I’m saying that John believed to be a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ was to live a life that challenged the gods of materialism of his day and the hope Israel was putting in wealth and prosperity. He was so confident in God’s love for him in Christ that he didn’t need an abundance of acquisitions to feel successful, alive, or accepted. He would never set the bar so low in his life to pursuit life in riches, pleasure, and the acquisition of things in this world. He found his life, security, confidence, and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and was then free to live anyway that would point to the fact that Jesus is Lord and not anyone or anything else. The gospel liberated John to life a modest life in freedom. How about us?

### **Courage**

Second, John was courageous. There’s another point to John’s clothes. John wore the same outfit that Elijah did (2Kings 1:8). In Elijah’s day the kings of Israel followed and worshipped Baal not Jehovah God. You might remember that when Ahaziah fell off his balcony through the lattice rail, he sent his messengers to the priests of Baal to see if he was going to live. On their way Elijah said to the priests, “Is there no God in Israel that you pray to Baal?” Ahaziah asked his messengers, “What kind of man said this to you?” They said, ‘It was a man who *wore camel’s skins and had a leather belt tied around his waist.*’ Elijah wasn’t like everyone else who was in it for the money and the fortune. John and Elijah protested against the hope Israel was putting in their material, physical, and financial prosperity by the way they dressed. Baal worship was designed to make you prosperous. Israel was putting their

hope for all of these things in Baal. Elijah and John were fearless about confronting this (Elijah before Ahab the prophets of Baal and John before the Herod and the religious leaders of his day). When was the last time you heard anyone say, “Flee the wrath to come?” But John and Jesus spoke about hell and the wrath to come as if it was real and as if someone was actually going to be there. That takes courage because to say these things means that many will simply not darken the door of a church to hear it. So the pressure to *heal the wounds of the people lightly* has always been enormous. John challenged Herod’s adulterous and incestuous relationship with Herodias and got his head cut off for it. Does this indicate that John somehow missed out on the blessings of God? Of course not. The sad person in Mk. 6 isn’t John, it’s Herod. John was free. However, notice that the one who is saved, the one who is courageous, and righteous, is the one who is politically, economically, socially helpless, and gets killed for his faithfulness. Courage that comes from faith is a major theme in Mark. Herod was afraid for his reputation. Pilate was afraid of the crowds. The Pharisees were afraid of Jesus’ popularity. The disciples were afraid of not having enough status, reputation, and power. Because of the gospel, John the Baptist wasn’t much afraid of anything. A teaspoon of his courage would enrich any of us.

Where do you need courage? How about the courage to resist the pull of: materialism, sensuality, or judging others harshly? What about the courage to live free of fear and worry about the future or free of the negative and false things others may have said about you? Where do you need courage today? All the courage you need for these things and more is in the gospel. God has not left you without resources and the example of John the Baptist. Beloved, you can do all the things you need to do through Christ who strengthens you. But, by *all things* he may not mean the acquisition of more wealth, power, and status. By *all things*, he may mean all the things you need to become a servant of all. The gospel made John modest; it made him courageous; and it made him humble.

### **Humility**

In verse 7 John said, “after me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” John could not call others to repent without knowing and *publicly* acknowledging that he was an *unworthy* hearer of his words as well as a preacher.

Look, when we call others to righteousness, are we making it clear that we are first pointing the finger to ourselves? Do we do this publicly when we hold up the standards of righteousness to others? Do you think our adversaries are hearing us on this point? When we hold up Biblical standards for our national leaders and the nation to follow do they hear us say that repentance first belongs with us? Do they hear us say that we are not accusing them of sins from any position of our own righteousness? Do we make every effort to help them to feel our own humiliation for our own sins? Have we made our own unworthiness clear? I doubt that we have. Moreover, most of our churches have dropped the Order of Confession in the Sunday worship service. We have been slow to admit these things to ourselves much less our adversaries. So, are we preaching to them from a position of weakness and unworthiness like John did or do we merely point the finger from position of superior morality? Do they see us as moral watchdogs or fellow sinners who have found some bread of mercy to share with others? On this Father’s Day, Dads when you correct your children or catch your children in sin, do you lecture them from position of self-righteousness or do you humble yourself before them and let them know that they came by their sin honestly. Do we give our children the freedom to share their frustrations with us when they sense our own hypocrisy? The gospel made it possible for John to be transparent about his own unworthiness. John said, publicly, “I am unworthy to even untie his shoelaces.” How do we do this

today? Is this the way the gospel works in your life? Because of the gospel of Jesus John was modest, courageous, and humble. This is what the real gospel does for us. Can we believe it?

**2. JOHN'S MESSAGE (Mk. 1:1-4):** Note again that John preached in the desert and called people out to the desert. It was in the desert that Israel, Moses, Jacob, Elijah, and a host of others met God. The desert can't sustain life. It's that place where all your wells run dry and all the bread goes moldy. Only in the desert do we really realize that God gives water from the rock and manna from heaven. You meet God and the gospel almost always in the desert not at the oasis. And that is so, because it is in the desert that your idols fail you. In the desert what ever you were hoping would give you life fails. Whether that is your looks, your wealth, your power, status, acquisitions, or achievements—when they fail you—you are in a desert. And it is there that you can meet God who never fails and gives living water and the bread of heaven. If God has called you into the desert it just may be the best place you can be. Because he may be calling you to turn from your idols and trust Him. And that was John's message. John came preaching a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sin. John's message was a message of judgment and mercy. Neither is sufficient alone. To receive Jesus and his gospel is to turn away from whatever it is that you think is going to make you secure, fulfilled, and whole and turn to God instead. Then receive God's forgiveness in Christ. His message was that Jesus baptizes us in the Holy Spirit and gives us everything we need to live as we have been called to make us holy and whole. He'll feed you and He'll take care of you and empower you to do everything you need to do.

John's character was defined by modesty, courage, and humility. His message was repent, be baptized and receive forgiveness, for Jesus will baptize you in the HS.

### **3. THE OUTCOME OF JOHN'S LIFE (Mr.6)**

Finally, just a word about the outcome of his life. Did his life end well? Was his life a blessing in death? Beloved the one to feel sad for in Mk. 6 is not John; it's Herod. Herod is the one who is to be pitied. Because it was Herod who was bound by the fear which robbed him of love and courage. Herod was so afraid of his wife and reputation that it kept him from doing the right thing. John was free to do right and even the threat of death could not bind him. John's life ended in a glorious testimony to how the gospel liberates you from even the fear of death so that we can be free in life and in death. In essence John says, "Come on, bring on the worst you can do. It will only bring me closer to God." John was free enough from the ultimate fear of death that he could be faithful to God and God's calling on his life. His death was a sad thing. But beloved, it was a beautiful thing. Jesus said, "Blessed is he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel." God may not call you to die for him in such a dramatic way. However, God does want you to live free of the fear of death, condemnation, free of the fear of not knowing that God is going to take care of you, accept you, love you, honor you, and receive you. The gospel sets you free.

John got the real Jesus and the real Gospel. It changed his character: Because of Jesus and the gospel, he lived modestly, courageously, and with humility. His message was a message of repentance, forgiveness, and the hope of having the very presence of God with us and closer to us than our very breath. Jesus and the gospel liberated John to live free from the fear of the threats of others and the fear of the uncertainties of life's ever changing circumstances so that he could be faithful to God regardless of the ups and downs of life, even in death. Is this the Jesus and the gospel you are hearing and believing in today? Believe on the real Jesus today and be saved. The real Jesus and the real Gospel

will save you. May, this Jesus and this gospel make us a little more like John...for his glory and our great joy. Amen.