

**CHRISTMAS CHARACTERS:
LIFE LESSONS FROM THE ‘LESSER’ KNOWN CHARACTERS
IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY:
“ JOHN THE BAPTIST:
THE BEST MAN ”**

“John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say, 'Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John. Yet even the most insignificant person in the Kingdom of God is greater than he is!” Luke 7: 27-28

Last week we left Zechariah and Elizabeth anxious about the birth of their long awaited, and much-anticipated son; John. Who from before his miraculous birth was prophesied to be the forerunner of Jesus, in some way ‘preparing’ the way for the Son of God, ‘preparing’ the world for the arrival of the Savior, ‘preparing’ people to be ready to meet...GOD!

John the Baptist (refers to his life’s activity, not his denominational choice) occupies more ink in the Christmas story than every other character except the real ‘star’ of the show, Jesus. Even more than Mary and Joseph, especially if you take into account the stories of John following the birth of Jesus.

But his significance is not related to the number of verses recorded about him, he is prominent and must be remembered for 2 very important subjects. Though he lived an extraordinary life, and died in a most dramatic fashion, it is neither of those two things that strike me as being significant. Let me share them with you.

1. HIS UNUSUAL MESSAGE AND METHODS

In the life of the Baptist, these two elements cannot be disconnected. The scripture very clearly states that John lived out in the wilderness until the time God’s message and mandate were delivered to him. Immediately he begins to move to more populous regions, and begins declaring his most unusual message. Let me give you just an appetizer:

2 Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living out in the wilderness. 3 Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. 4 Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare a pathway for the Lord's coming! Make a straight road for him! 5 Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills! Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places! 6 And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.'" 7 Here is a sample of John's preaching to the crowds that came for baptism: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming judgment? 8 Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say, 'We're safe – we're the descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. 9 Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire." Luke 3: 2-9

Not your basic how to win friends and influence people motivational speech, huh? Many people picture this locust eating, camel skin wearing, crazy eyed preacher like one of those weird sandwich sign wearing nut jobs wandering the streets of our big cities, booming their message of our doom and gloom unless we repent. I saw one on my only trip to New York City some 24 years ago that simply read: TURN OR BURN! It obviously got my attention.

Upon further investigation though, John's message is not so crass or coarse. He speaks in harsh tones about the love of God. He speaks with simple conviction that salvation lies not in his hands, but in the life of God's Son, who was about to be revealed. He speaks with humble assurance that none of us can claim any human birth rite that might qualify us for God's favor, and rid us of God's judgment. But mostly his message consisted of one simple word (that by the way often appears on those sandwich boards): REPENT.

If you were to ask the question, how does John prepare the world for Jesus, it is this one word; REPENT. If you want to know what we can do to make God's way straight into our own world, our own lives, its one word: REPENT. If you consider the course of action that this world needs most and most of us neglect it's this same word: REPENT.

Luke defines repent in verse 3: *turned from their sins and turned toward God.* Literally REPENT means to make a u-turn. You are walking away from God; you stop going that direction, and begin moving toward God.

Most of us commit one of two errors when it comes to implementing the command to repent: 1) We think we have already repented, or 2) We think we don't need to repent. You see the message hasn't changed much for 6000 years. From the lush garden in Eden, to the dusty back roads outside Baghdad, to the spacious skies of North Dakota; men and women, boys and girls, Adam and Eve, Saddam Hussein and US, all need to do one thing to prepare to meet Jesus: REPENT! Being raised in a Christian home is good, but won't get you to heaven. Spending time in Sunday School or church or Bible School is fine, but won't qualify you to meet God. Being a law abiding citizen and a caring neighbor are great, but not good enough. There is only one way to be prepared to discover Jesus again for the first time, and it's this: REPENT.

Repentance is clearly defined as turning around, but is coupled with another concept:

"Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God." In another place John calls it making your life produce the "fruits of repentance." Many of us confuse confession with repentance. Jimmy Swaggart is a classic example.

Following the admission of his sexual and fiscal sins most of us heard his tearful confession on national TV, but we also saw his defiant attitude when directed to submit to the authorities of his denomination and take 1 year off from active ministry. He couldn't/wouldn't do it. It's easy to point to Jimmy, but some of us are in the same boat.

We have lived in and around the church for so long, we naturally assume God must like us, and will let us into his heaven. Shoot we aren't near as bad as some of our friends and neighbors, and heck, the good stuff we've done in our lives certainly outweighs the bad, that's all it really takes right? WRONG.

John was blatant and unashamed with his condemnation of the 'religious leaders' of his day, insisting that if they wanted to see Jesus. There was only one way: REPENT!

So what lessons shall we learn from this first distinguishing characteristic of John The Baptist? I think 2 things ought to be remembered.

A. Our Message must never change

John's message was nothing new, just new in the last 400 years! It was the same message Abraham delivered to the fearful Israelites, it was the same message Moses delivered in the wilderness, it is the same message delivered by all the prophets before him, and it is the same message Jesus delivers to us, and expects us to deliver to the rest of the world! God's message, Jesus' message, OUR message to a lost and dying world, this Christmas season must never change: REPENT, and believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and let the way that you live, prove you belong to God!

B. Our Methods must always change

Part of what made John's message so difficult to swallow, was the way it was presented. No self-respecting Jew would be caught dead even thinking about God if not standing or sitting in one of God's finest temples. This ragamuffin vagabond crying out in the wilderness may have been drawing a crowd, but also drew the disdain of the 'religious righteous' of his day!

Our methods of delivering the unchanging message, must always be adapted and adopted to meet the needs of the generation God has called us to reach, and must always be flexible and willing even to be sacrificed for something possibly undignified because that is what God calls us to do. Jesus echoed this principle of John's when he said; "old wine skins cannot contain my new wine." God is pouring out some new wine for a new day, to reach lost people, the same way He has done for centuries.

2. HIS UNCOMMON HONESTY AND HUMILITY

Bearing in mind what we heard Jesus say about John in our opening text:

'I tell you, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John.' I want to direct our attention for a minute to another story of John the Baptist that comes from the Apostle John's gospel. Listen:

26 John's disciples came to him and said, "Teacher, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you said was the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going over there instead of coming here to us." 27 John replied, "God in heaven appoints each person's work. 28 You yourselves know how plainly I told you that I am not the Messiah. I am here to prepare the way for Him – that is all. 29 The bride will go where the bridegroom is. A bridegroom's friend rejoices with him. I am the bridegroom's friend, and I am filled with joy at his success. 30 He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." John 3: 26-31

At a very human, natural level, who of us cannot identify with these faithful disciples, here, their colleagues are leaving in droves to follow this new upstart Savior, when it was their Master, John, who had introduced them to God, brought them new life, baptized them with water! Who of us hasn't felt the sting of jealousy as a peer or colleague outdistances us in whatever endeavor we share? I have, again this week!

John's attitude is utterly amazing, his humility, and honesty are awesome! His confidence in playing and fulfilling the role for which he was created sounds like a transparent example of the Purpose Driven Life we just recently discussed. Yet there is something more here than meets the eye.

The illustration he uses to convince his own disciples that there is nothing wrong with some, even all, of their number becoming His disciples is intriguing. He answers their query 3 ways. 1) He tells them this is exactly what he has always known and predicted of himself and his ministry. He was only a forerunner, a preparer, and now he must graciously give way to Him who is to follow. 2) He reminds them that God gives to each what God knows is best. There is no hint of envy or jealousy as he recounts that God gave them to him, and God was giving to Jesus what God knew was right. With God, you can never assume that what you want is what God knows you need! 3) John uses a well-known illustration to seal the deal.

He speaks of his role as the bridegroom's friend, we would likely call him; THE BEST MAN. In those days the best man did more than just propose a hokey toast at the reception. There was even a name for this person; the **shoshben**, the best man. He acted as the liaison between the bride and the bridegroom; he arranged the whole wedding on behalf of the family and the couple; he sent out the invitations; he presided at the wedding feast. He literally brought the bride and the bridegroom together. And he had one special duty.

It was his duty to guard the bridal chamber and to let no false lover in. He would only open the door when out of the darkness he heard the bridegroom's voice and recognized it. When he heard the bridegroom's voice he was glad and he let him in, and then he went away rejoicing, for his task was completed and the lovers were together. No, he did not begrudge the bridegroom the bride. He knew that his only task had been to bring the bride and bridegroom together. And when that task was done he willingly and gladly faded out of the centre of the picture.

John the Baptist's task had been to bring Israel and Jesus together; to arrange the marriage between Christ, the bridegroom, and His bride, the church...us. That task completed he was happy to fade into obscurity for his work was done. It was not with envy that he said that Jesus must increase and he must decrease; it was with joy. It may be that sometimes we would do well to remember that it is not to ourselves that we must try to attach people, it is to Jesus Christ. It is not for ourselves we seek the loyalty of men; it is for Him.

This Christmas season two lessons must be remembered from the life of this lesser:

A. Our Honesty must be our distinction.

John honestly knew who he was, knew what he had been called to do, and knew Who it was that had called him. He honestly lived and preached in ways that many found offensive, but through which many have found their way to the bridal chamber. He had an honest appreciation for the person God had created him to be, and he lived in faithfulness to that divine appointment. May we also honestly allow our acceptance of God's call, to be that alone which distinguishes our otherwise ordinary lives!

B. Our Humility must be our definition

John was defined by his humility. Yes his preaching might have seemed unusual, unorthodox, even unseemly, but he humbly accepted his lot in life, and humbly defined himself, the way God did. One who prepares.

May we, this Christmas, 2004, in all Godly humility, be all that God wants us to be. John set the stage for Jesus' coming to earth, our acceptance of this definition, may well set the stage for his coming again! So...let us pray!

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