

January 30, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Behold the Lamb of God!

John 1:19 – 34

Last week we finished up the prologue to John's gospel that ends with verse 18, but we spent most of our time with the summery of the summery in verse 14: *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.* John 1:14 And we saw that **the first reason God became a man was so that He could die.** The only way God could die and pay the penalty for our sins was *if* He became a man. Everything hinges on this. Secondly we saw that **God became a man so that He could identify with our humanness.** If God had not become a man, there would have been no sacrifice sufficient to save us, first of all. And secondly there would have been no way we could begin to identify with Jesus as God. A God who stands outside of time and the material world is unreachable. There is no common ground. We could not be sure of His compassion when we are hurting. We could not be sure of His faithfulness when we are unfaithful. We could not be sure His grace is sufficient when we struggle with temptation. We could not be sure of His forgiveness when we fail. We need a God-man who can sympathize with our weaknesses and carry us through.

Thirdly, God became a man so that we might have an example to follow. *'For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps...'* 1 Peter 2:21 His life points the way for us to live our lives. Not that we do this thing on our own – notice that He is both the one who leads the way by example – author, or pioneer – and He is also the one that brings us to perfection, to completion, by the power that He Himself provides. And then Scripture says that He, God, tabernacled among us. **The meaning of the Word became flesh and tabernacled among is that God, in Christ, came close to us.** Because **everything centers in Christ.** The Old Testament points to Him in all the types and shadows – the New Testament reveals Him in the gospels and epistles. And finally, **in Christ, grace comes together with truth in the person of Christ to not only tell us what the law requires but to fulfill the requirements of the law in us.**

So John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for the Word who became flesh, and in this next section what we are given is John's witness concerning Him. *This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"* John 1:19 This stuff about witnesses is very important to John the writer here. Jewish law demanded that everything be attested by at least two, preferably three, witnesses for the truth of the matter to be verified. And we find this throughout John's gospel. First there is John the Baptist: *He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.* John 1:7. And then we'll see in chapter five that Jesus talks about three more witnesses His works, the Father, and the Scriptures: *"But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John ; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish -the very works that I do -testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me..."And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me...You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life ; it is these that testify about Me.'* John 5:36, 37, 39.

So John the writer, piles on the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah – and he has four witnesses, not just two or three. And John the Baptist is out there in the wilderness, and in several places the Bible records the fact that great crowds were going out to hear him and getting baptized. And it made enough impact that it got the religious leaders in Jerusalem to start thinking that there was something to this guy, so they send a delegation of priests and Levites to see what is going on. Now the priests were the guys in the temple who were in charge of handling the sacrifices and all the temple sacred duties, and the Levites were like the temple guard. They were the enforcers. So this delegation gets sent out to see why everybody in Judea and Jerusalem are going out to hear him.

They were sent to get a look at his credentials. We have to understand that religious worship was regulated by the big boys in Jerusalem. And so here comes somebody saying things like, 'Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand' and so naturally they feel the need to investigate and find out under what authority John is saying these things and baptizing people. And John answers their question without dithering or wrapping it in some mystic mumbo-jumbo – he simply says: *And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* John 1:20

Of course that was the \$64,000 question for these guys. All religious Jews, and even those who were not so religious, were looking for the promised Messiah. And in their minds, when Messiah came, He would deal with their enemies, the hated Romans, judge the all the gentiles, and usher in the kingdom of peace. That is what they were expecting and that is the question that was uppermost on their minds – Are you the Messiah? And John says 'No'. So they press him: *They asked him, "What then ? Are you Elijah ?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet ?" And he answered, "No."* John 1:21

John's appearance and personality probably lent itself to identifying him with the Old Testament prophet Elijah, in addition to the fact that he was proclaiming the imminent appearance of the kingdom of God and His Messiah as Malachi 4 predicted: *Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.* Malachi 4:5-6 The Jews knew that before the Messiah came, the Scriptures prophesied that Elijah would come. But John said 'I'm not that guy.' Which may cause those of you who know something of the other gospels a little anxiety. Jesus Himself testifies in Matthew that John the Baptist was the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah: *"This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' ...And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come."* Matthew 11:11,14

So what is John saying here? To understand the apparent contradiction between what John the Baptist said and what Jesus said about him, you need to go to the gospel of Luke. When John the Baptists' dad, Zacharias was doing his priestly duties in the temple, an angel appeared to him and told him his wife, Elizabeth was going to have a son. And among others things, this is what the angel told him: *"It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* Luke 1:17.

God is always confounding the wise, especially those who think they have it all figured out. The Jews are looking for Elijah – and God sends them a man who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. They are looking for the coming Messiah – a king, a ruler, someone to wipe out the Romans and vindicate His people – God sends them a baby – and they don't recognize Him. They expected Him to come in power and authority, riding on a white horse with a sword in His hand – and He came with a power and authority they couldn't comprehend, and riding a donkey, and not looking much like a king at all. And here, God sends John the Baptist, in the spirit and power of Elijah – and they were looking for a reincarnation of the old prophet.

So now these guys are pretty sure John's not the Christ, or Elijah, but just to be sure he's not someone important, they ask him if he is the Prophet. This comes from the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18: *"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him."* Deuteronomy 18:15 And again John simply says 'No'. *Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself ?"* John 1:22 In other words, they are asking him to give them some idea of his credentials – because they want to shut him down.

Now John could have said a lot of things. He could have said, 'My dad is Zacharias the priest, a prominent family in the Jewish world, I have been preaching up and down the countryside and thousands are coming to hear me, I've baptized many of them, I'm a very popular and well-known figure and the people love me. In fact I'm getting pretty famous here.' He could have appealed to his family ties, his fame, his successful ministry – but he did none of that. What he did was appeal to the Scriptures: *He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said."* John 1:23 He identified with a voice. Not a person, just a voice. He could have taken the high road – instead he chose the low road of humility.

And more than that he identified himself with a common laborer. His job was to make straight the way of the Lord. This referenced the fact that in those days when a very important royal official or a king announced a visit to some city, road crews would go out and smooth out the potholes and straighten the roads so there would be no hindrance in the journey. That's how John saw himself. That was his ministry and he didn't presume any more. When John said that his job was to make straight the way of the Lord, he wasn't saying that he had to somehow get things ready by getting the people to straighten up their lives and get their house in order. Or that people needed to clean up their act because the King was coming. **What he was saying was that the King comes in on a highway of repentance.** That was John's message – a message of repentance.

Both Matthew and Mark expand on John's message and tell us that what he was preaching was *'...a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem ; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.* (Mark 1:4-5; Matthew 3:2) Repentance is the avenue through which the gospel comes to us. The word translated **'straighten'** here means to make the crooked thing straight. **And the call of the gospel is first to repent** – turn away from the crooked road and get on the straight one. I have heard too many people say, 'I know I need to get right with God, but I need to straighten up my life first'. Listen, if it were possible for you to straighten up and fly right before you come to Christ, you would have already done it. What you don't need to do is straighten things up, you need to make the road straight – that is, repent, confessing your sin. Isaiah tells us: *But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.* Isaiah 66:2 What is necessary is not a lot of work on our part, but a repentance of all our work.

John goes on to say, *Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.* John 1:24 And if there were a group of people in need of repentance, it was these guys. *They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet ?"* John 1:25 The Pharisees taught very dogmatically that no prophet after Moses had any right to introduce some new ceremony or rite, except the Messiah Himself, and here John was inviting people, Jews, to be baptized for the remission of sins. Now they had a teaching that allowed a Gentile to baptize himself, as one of the Jewish elders recited the Law over him so that he might become a Jew. But John was doing something new – he was baptizing Jews, not Gentiles – and it wasn't so that they would become Jews, but for repentance. What this points out is that those who thought they knew the Scriptures actually didn't know them at all. They didn't realize that the way to make straight the way of the Lord was to repent. They actually didn't think they had anything of which they needed to repent.

So John answers them – and doesn't do it directly: *John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. "It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* John 1:26-27 **John's mission again was not to point to himself but to the Christ**, who was already among them, whom John had already baptized by this time. John contrasts his ministry of the baptism of repentance with Jesus' ministry of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as we will see shortly. As the messenger who goes before the Messiah, John's ministry was always to point to Jesus. Growing up as a pastor's kid, I saw a lot of things and learned a little bit. One of the things I learned from watching my dad as he counseled others was that he was always pointing them to Christ. They would come for counseling and advice, and he would invariably say, 'Why don't we pray and ask the Lord about that?'. ***Our job as ambassadors of Christ, and ministers of the gospel is to point the way to Christ.***

These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. John 1:28 The next day the one to whom John had been pointing, showed up again at the river: *The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world !"* John 1:29 John had been preaching repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand, His Messiah was coming, and now again, he makes the announcement that He is here. And John connects Isaiah 53 with Exodus 12, and for the Jews listening, it was somewhat confusing. They expected a Messiah, **and** they expected one day a supreme sacrifice would be made that would once for all take care of sin. After all that was the picture of the Passover lamb – blood had to be shed to atone for sin. They just didn't connect the two. Isaiah 53 is all about the Suffering Servant, the one who dies for the atonement of sin, and Exodus 12 tells us that He is a lamb to be slain. But strangely, the Jews didn't connect this suffering sacrifice with the glorious Messiah who was coming to usher in the Kingdom of God.

The Jews wanted a King and God gave them a Lamb. The Jews wanted a conquerer and God gave them a sacrifice. They would have accepted Him on the throne, but first they had to accept Him on the altar. What they didn't understand was that the Messiah had to die on the cross as a lamb, because He had to be the Lamb before He could ever be the King – otherwise, He would have no kingdom over which to rule because we'd still be dead in our sins. And John says that Jesus came to take away the sin of the world. It is very emphatic in the Greek because it uses the definite article **'the sin'** and it is singular – not **sins**. Why does John say this? **It is because the Lamb of God is the fully sufficient sacrifice to not only deal with our sins, but to deal with the very root source and nature of sin – not just the symptoms.** So often we want to deal with the symptoms – better behavior, get rid of bad habits, be a nicer person, etc. But those are simply fruits of the bad tree, and the Lamb of God comes to cut it off at the root.

By saying that He takes away the sin of the world, the Bible does not mean that every person in the world is saved - He means that every person in the world, Jew and Gentile, will be saved if they believe in Jesus and follow Him. There is only one way to have your sins taken away and find favor with God – it is not working for God, not cleaning up your life first, not getting your act together before you come to Christ – that comes later as fruit of repentance. The one way is to believe in Jesus as the perfect Lamb of God.

Again John points to Jesus: *"This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' 'I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.'" John 1:30-31* John was not saying that He didn't recognize his cousin, that he didn't know Him – what he was saying was that He hadn't recognized Him for who He was, namely, the Messiah, the Son of God. John had probably known Jesus for 30 years – they were infants, and toddlers, and teens and probably young men together – and John hadn't seen any indication that Jesus was the Son of God. His mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah, and it might have been a shock when he saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized one day.

And the way he recognized that this one was the one whose arrival he had been announcing was miraculous: *John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. "I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."* John 1:32-24 **John recognized Jesus as the Son of God the same way everyone who comes to faith does – by revelation.** Now we don't all see doves descending from heaven, but we all hear the voice of God saying, 'This is the One – believe Him'. Peter got the revelation one day, and Jesus told him: *"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.* Matthew 16:17

Revelation of who Jesus is always comes from above. We cannot be convinced that Jesus is the Son of God by the preacher, although preaching is necessary – we cannot come to this conclusion by observing miracles, although they attest to the veracity of His claims – we cannot will ourselves to it or study our way to it – the revelation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God comes only from the Father. So that is what we pray for when we preach, that is what we pray for when we talk to men about Christ.

It was significant that John saw a dove descending and remaining on Jesus. It confirmed to him that this was the Son of God for two reasons: one was that God spoke to him. And the other was that the dove, a symbol of purity and innocence, was the smallest substitute sacrifice allowed by the Law for those too poor to afford a Lamb, and demonstrated that this One was God's Lamb for mankind, all of whom are poor sinners in God's sight. But the dove also symbolizes the Holy Spirit, which in Jesus' case remained upon Jesus in contrast to Old Testament manifestations of the Holy Spirit which were temporary. But this does not mean that Jesus received the Holy Spirit only at the time of His baptism. Remember He was fully God and possessed the fulness of the Spirit. But this was a sign, a confirmation of God's revelation of the Messiah.

And this also means that Christ is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. The point of John stressing that the Holy Spirit came and remained on Jesus is that this makes clear that He **can** baptize in the Holy Spirit. And this is what happens at your conversion. John is not talking about some secondary experience that some would say characterize more potent Christians – describing them as 'Spirit-filled' Christians as opposed to non-Spirit-filled. You cannot make that distinction because the Bible doesn't. If you have been born again, you have believed on the Savior – you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. One way to describe your need for salvation is that you need to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Because first of all **it is the Holy Spirit who gives life:** *"It is the Spirit who gives life ; the flesh profits nothing ; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.* John 6:63 What dead men need is life. That is why Jesus told Nicodemus: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God...That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* John 3:3, 6 **All who are born again, are born of the Spirit, baptized in the Holy Spirit.** Secondly, being baptized in the Holy Spirit not only makes us alive, but **makes us life-givers:** *He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'* But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive. John 7:38-39 Being baptized in the Holy Spirit causes rivers of living water to flow out of us to others. That is why genuine believers cannot help but tell others about this Christ they found.

Our gracious God and heavenly Savior,

Grant to us this morning the revelation of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Come Holy Spirit and work repentance in souls hardened by the Fall and awaken faith in those deadened by the deceitfulness of sin. Melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God. Show us our ruined selves and the salvation there is in Christ. Let us behold our Creator and His power to save, His arms outstretched and His heart big for us. May we confide in His power and love, commit our souls to Him without reserve, bear His image, walk in His law, pursue His service, and be throughout time and eternity a monument to His grace and trophies of His victory. Let us be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the victorious name of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.