

A Voice in The Wilderness - Part 2

John 1:19-28

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Well, again, good morning to you. It's good to be back with you. Thank you to Ben for filling the pulpit for me last week. But it's always a joy for me to be back here with you at home.

And it's our joy to open God's word again to John chapter 1. I invite you to turn there with me if you would to John's gospel as we continue to look at the ministry of John the Baptist. You know, as I was meditating on these truths and applying them to my own heart this week, I was reminded that the Scriptures continually speak of the fear of the Lord and hold up the fear of the Lord as a supreme virtue that is essential to a right relationship with God and a life that honors God, that's defined by wisdom and righteousness.

Consider just a few passages of Scripture this morning that speak of this.

Proverbs 1:7: for example, *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Psalm 112:1: *Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, Who greatly delights in His commandments.*

And then Proverbs 15:33: *The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor comes humility.*

All of these passages make the connection between a right understanding of God with a wise life and a right relationship with God that brings Him glory. The Bible teaches that our lives really are the product of our view of God. A wrong view of God leads to foolishness and ultimately destruction. Whereas a right view of God leads to wisdom and salvation.

Consider when we look at the men and women of Scripture whose lives should be our imitation. We discover that their lives were oriented by their view of God. They understood that God is holy. He is sovereign. He is all-powerful and our creator. Therefore, they revered Him and honored Him and worshiped Him as the starting place in life. And the details of their life flowed out of that understanding of who God truly is.

So the fear of the Lord cannot help but shape the way you think and the way you speak and the way you live. So let me ask you this morning, do you fear God? How has the fear of the Lord shaped the way that you personally live?

John the Baptist was a man who feared God. The reason we know this is because of the fruit that that fear of God produced in his own personal life and ministry. John understood that his purpose in life was not crafted by his own selfish desires or his own personal ambitions, but his purpose in life was to glorify God by fulfilling the mission given to him, which was to point to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this produced in him the opposite of selfish ambition and self-promotion. Instead, it produced in him humility that compelled him to point everyone, not to himself, but to the Messiah.

There's much for us to learn as we consider John's ministry an example this morning. And it's my hope that our takeaways will be to again stand in awe of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, but also to apply practically some of the things we see in the life and ministry of John that can help us in our own life and ministry to others.

Remember, the theme of the gospel of John as a whole is **Jesus as the Son of God**. We've already studied the prologue in the first 18 verses. And last time together, we began studying in more detail the ministry of John the Baptist with an opening scene in verses 19 to 23. And we'll close that section out this morning in verses 24 to 28. But in order to stay in the flow of the context, let's begin reading in verse 19 and then read all the way down through verse 28.

John 1:19,

*This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he *said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 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?" 23 He said, "I AM A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

Now the main idea that we saw last time really carries through until today. **We are to heed God's messenger, prepare for his master, and follow his example.** There are three observations given to us here in the Gospel of John about John the Baptist and his ministry. We saw the first of those last week. We'll see the second this week. Remember last week, the last time, **Observation One**, was **John's Identity** in verses 19 to 23. And I mentioned then that the scene that we are witnessing here comes at the end of John the Baptist's ministry.

This is sort of the climactic moment in his ministry before he passes off the torch to Jesus Christ. And there are three consecutive days that are recorded here that we will see together. This is the transition point from John to Jesus coming on the center stage.

The baptism of Jesus has already taken place. Jesus has just returned from being tempted in the wilderness. And soon, as we'll see next week, He's about to come on the scene and begin His earthly ministry.

Now, we stopped in the middle of a conversation last time between John and a group sent from the leadership, likely from the Sanhedrin, the leaders of Israel, to question John. And

they want to know who he's claiming to be. He answers that question by quoting the famous prophecy from Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5. Let me just remind you again of that passage.

John says this is what he is fulfilling. He is *A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

So John says this is who I am. And yet it brings us now to verse 24 and a **second observation** about John, **John's Purpose**, verses 24 to 28. The conversation continues. And the Apostle John writes here in verse 24, *Now they had been sent from the Pharisees*. They, meaning the group questioning John the Baptist.

Now before we dive into this, let me just lay the table, the context for just a moment. There were two primary groups of leaders at this time of John the Baptist's ministry within Israel. And remember the religious structure and the political structure of Israel really come together. And so these leaders function as religious leaders but also politically in certain ways.

The first group was known as the Sadducees. These were, you might think of them as the upper crust. These were the wealthy aristocrats. They had control of the office of the high priest. They had the majority rule in the Sanhedrin. Also, the Sadducees were very liberal in their views. They denied the supernatural. They rejected things like angels and miracles and the future resurrection of believers. In addition, they only held to that the first five books, the Torah, were inspired. The others they rejected as being inspired.

So obviously several issues there exist in their theological understanding. But I mention them because it's highly likely that there were also Sadducees present during this conversation. They're just not mentioned here. The reason for that is because they had majority rule in the Sanhedrin and it's very unlikely they would have sent a delegation of only, but probably a mixed group of Sadducees and Pharisees.

But one little interesting note is that John actually never mentions the Sadducees at all in his gospel. While they're very prominent in the Synoptic Gospels. The reason for that is probably because John wrote his gospel later after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. And the Sadducees no longer existed as a political or religious force at the time that he writes his gospel.

Now the second party within Judaism would have been the minority party. But they were the conservative party, the Pharisees. You're probably very familiar with the Pharisees. They were conservative in their views in many ways. They held that all of the Old Testament writings were inspired. They were ardent proponents of keeping the law, particularly the external aspects of the law, down to the letter.

But also, unfortunately, they added to the law their own man-made rules. And they elevated those man-made rules to the level of Scripture itself. And so we will see that our Lord comes

into conflict with them on many occasions because of their legalism and self-righteousness and their hypocrisy. But it makes sense, all of that to say, it makes sense that it's the Pharisees here who are asking the questions. They would have been the ones most concerned. After all, they believe the prophets actually prophesied. They would be the most attuned and concerned as to who John is saying that he is. Which one of these prophetic people are you claiming to be, John? So it makes sense that they're leading the conversation here.

But it doesn't seem that John's answer of quoting Isaiah 40 fully satisfies their suspicions. Instead, now they move on to questioning John's authority to teach and to do the things he's doing in his ministry.

Look back at verse 25:

They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

If you were here last time, you know that we looked extensively at each of those three people. The Christ, the Messiah, Elijah, and the prophet. John clearly said, I'm not any of those three. But this question posed to him here really deals with his authority. If you don't claim to be any one of these key figures, the Pharisees say, then what gives you the right? On what basis are you baptizing?

Now, to really get the sense of the intensity of the conversation here, this was not a casual conversation. This is likely a very intense conversation with tension between the Pharisees and John the Baptist. They're not happy with him. He's having to stand his ground and answer these questions.

And to understand really where that tension comes from, first of all, understand baptism was not a foreign concept to the Jews. Baptism, in fact, by some Jewish groups was regularly practiced, particularly with proselytes. That is, when a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism, baptism was often involved.

The males in the household would be circumcised, and the men and the women would be baptized as they converted to Judaism. The significance, however, of the baptism of a proselyte and the baptism of John the Baptist were very different.

Morris says it this way: "This was seen as the ceremonial removal of all the pollutions contracted in the Gentile world." That is, the baptism that the Jews practiced for the Gentiles was a way of saying, you need to be ceremonially cleansed from your Gentile-ness as you're coming into Judaism, and so we're washing you clean of all that you picked up from being a Gentile and living in the Gentile world. But this was a baptism of the Jews reserved only for the Gentiles.

But John's ministry is not targeted at the Gentiles, is it? John is baptizing Jews. John's calling Jews to repent and to be baptized. So the issue here is not the issue of baptism itself. The issue is, why, John, are you baptizing Jews? And what gives you the authority to baptize Jews? D.A. Carson says it this way: "They want to discover by what authority John is baptizing Jewish people as part of their preparation for the kingdom he's announcing."

The Pharisees, again, want to know what in the world gives them the right to baptize Jewish people, to call them to repentance. After all, these are Jews. These are the chosen people of God. They're the blood descendants of Abraham. What need have they for repentance?

And this is where we begin to see that John the Baptist lived his life for the fear of God rather than the fear of man. Because if there were any men in Israel to fear from a human standpoint, religiously, it would be these men. If there was anybody that would cause you to kind of change the message or tone it down just a little bit to make it more acceptable, it would have been these Jewish leaders, the Pharisees.

And yet John fears God rather than man. Therefore, he commits himself to boldly proclaiming the message he was sent to proclaim, even if it brings him into conflict with the Jewish leadership.

We also need to understand something else about the tension that existed here in this conversation. This was not the first encounter that John the Baptist has had with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. In fact, the Synoptic Gospels include other examples that happened earlier in his ministry. I want to show you one of those in Matthew 3. Look at this scene, and we'll compare and contrast it with the scene here in John 1. But here's Matthew 3, verses 7 to 12:

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10 The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now again, this is a scene in Matthew that took place earlier in John's ministry. We can see that there are some key differences between this scene and what happens here in John 1. But it does highlight for us what John understood to be the significance of his ministry.

First of all, in verse 9, he calls out their faulty understanding that they will be spared from the wrath of God simply because of their Jewish heritage. He tries to dispel that from the beginning. That if you think that you're going to be accepted by God simply because you're a descendant of Abraham, you are wrong.

John understood that God has always, throughout history, preserved a remnant of true believers unto himself, those who genuinely had repentant hearts of true faith in the true God. And his message was to call out from the Jewish people, the true people of God who would humble themselves in repentance and faith in the coming Messiah, preparing their hearts for Jesus to come on the scene. He was preaching specifically to a remnant of the Jews.

And apparently, the reason that John is so harsh towards these Sadducees and Pharisees who are coming to be baptized, after all, think about it, you might think he would be excited about this. These are the leaders of Judaism coming to respond to his ministry. You would think, hooray, right? And yet he calls them a brood of vipers and really gets after them.

Why? It's because John must have understood that their understanding of the significance of his baptism was entirely wrong. He understood that his baptism was a call to repentance and that the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to be baptized in order to sort of add it to their religious string of works of self-righteousness to say, I've even been baptized by John. I've done it all. And John won't let it happen. He says, no, this comes to those who understand that the wrath of God is coming and we must repent and humble ourselves and be washed clean of our sins that we might, in faith, embrace the Messiah. And so he speaks so harshly to the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

So now that you understand that some of the history that predates this conversation, there's some unsettled tension between John and these Pharisees as they ask these questions. But there's also some good news here. Notice this difference between the scene in Matthew 3 and the scene in John 1 because he goes on here to, after explaining his baptism of repentance, he speaks of what is coming with the one after him.

Matthew 3:11-12 says:

11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Here again we see John's clear purpose for his ministry. He says, I'm here to prepare the way for another, and what you should be really anticipating is the coming of the one whose way I am preparing because He's going to bring a different kind of baptism altogether. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Now he explains what he means by that through the illustration given in verse 12. He's making a distinction between the true wheat and the chaff. He says the true wheat is going to be gathered into the barn. That is, those who are the true children of God who have repented of their sins and put their faith in the Messiah, they will be saved from the wrath of God and will receive the Holy Spirit, thus being baptized in that sense by the Holy Spirit.

But those who are lost will be evidenced by their hardness of heart and refusal to repent and believe in the Messiah, and they will receive His judgment. He uses an illustration here in verse 12 of a winnowing fork. Now I don't know if you've ever seen a winnowing fork. It's not a key part of our society today, but it was then, and the illustration to the original audience would have made immediate perfect sense. Let me just explain to you quickly about this winnowing fork.

During the wheat harvest, the farmers would gather, of course, the stalks of wheat, and they would bring them to what was called the threshing floor. The threshing floor usually was located on a hill so that there was a lot of wind that was necessary for this process.

They would bring these stalks of wheat in bundles, and then they would thresh them. That is, they would either pound them with a club or run over them with some heavy implement to separate the grains of wheat from the stalk, but also to crack the outer surface of the grain of wheat that was called chaff, a thin layer on the outside of the grain that had to be removed. This threshing would crack that chaff. Then they would take the winnowing fork, and they would toss that wheat up into the air with the fork, and the wind would catch it and blow away the chaff off of those grains of wheat. The heavier wheat would fall down close to the farmer, and the chaff would gather into a pile some feet away as the wind carried it off.

This is the process. This is the illustration that John is using of the coming judgment, of both salvation, that some will be saved, but also those who harden their hearts in unbelief and unrepentance, they will be like the chaff that is gathered to be burned, that is gathered for the judgment of God.

So John sees his role very clearly, and so do we. Messiah is coming. Make way, the way of the Lord, by preparing your heart in repentance and faith. And do not think that simply by your heritage that you will be saved. It is by repentance and faith in Messiah.

In preaching this way, John knew he was in good standing with prophets who had come before, that had preached of a day in which the people of God would receive a new heart and the Spirit of God.

Ezekiel spoke of this in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

So John comes on the scene to say, now is the time to prepare your heart to be made new by the Messiah and to receive His Holy Spirit. But if you notice, back in John 1 now, what we have here is an abbreviated version of Matthew 3. He leaves out the vast majority of what's included in Matthew 3 and only gives little snippets of what is said there. And I think the reason we have an abbreviated version here is twofold.

One, this is a separate scene that happens later, and he's already said this in its fuller version before, so he doesn't need to go back through all of it. But secondly, remember, the Apostle John is writing to make a specific point, and that point is about Jesus, that He is the Son of God. And he gives us information here in this passage that again highlights who Jesus is.

By the way, this is something we can't lose sight of. Anytime we're studying a character in the Bible, which can be a profitable study, as we have here with John, we have to remember the main character is actually God Himself, always. In this case, Jesus is the main character, even though He's not in this portion of the narrative, because John's purpose is to point us to Jesus.

And so as we look at John, we have to keep in our focus who Jesus is and the point that's being made ultimately about our Lord.

So with that in mind, look at John's answer to their question. This is verse 26:
John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know.

Now notice, *I baptize in water* is the key portion of Matthew 3 that's quoted, but the vast majority of the rest of it is left out. He is responding here again to this question of his authority, what gives you the right to baptize? And if you notice, he doesn't directly answer their question, but he does answer their question in a roundabout way.

He admits that he is baptizing, but he baptizes only in water. And then he points to the true source of his authority by pointing them again, not to himself, but to the one coming after him. *But among you stands one whom you do not know.*

I believe John's point here is that his authority is not based in and of himself, but rather in the one coming after him to whom he has pointed. And unless you repent and believe and understand that the one coming after him is the Messiah, then you'll never really accept that what he's doing is from God.

His authority ultimately is from God. He's been sent, he's been prophesied, Isaiah 40, but he points to Jesus because it is only when we understand who Jesus is that the ministry of John makes any sense. I also want you to notice another key difference here between what's said in John 1 and Matthew 3. Because in Matthew 3, when John speaks of the one coming after him, he speaks of that as a future reality. He refers to Jesus as He who is coming after me, as in it hasn't happened yet.

But here in John 1, he uses a different verb tense. He uses actually the perfect tense, which is usually translated as something that's already happened in the past, but has ongoing implications for today and in the future. And so it's actually translated in the present tense in our English Bible. He says, *among you stands one*. That is to say, it's no longer a future reality. He has come.

Of course, historically, we understand the baptism of Jesus has already happened at this time. John is already known from the Father. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is on the scene. He's just returning from His temptation in the wilderness. It's unclear if He's actually there at this moment, but He will come very soon. We'll see in the next passage. But the clear intention is it's at hand. The one that I've been preparing you for, He's actually here.

Now, this should be a cause for rejoicing, right? Messiah is on the scene. But there's a problem here. You look back at verse 26:

I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know

Whom you do not know. Apparently, Messiah has already shown up on the scene, but they've failed to recognize Him. This will be a theme throughout the Gospel of John. It's already been highlighted in the prologue. Back in verse 10: *He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.*

Again, He says, He stands among you, but you don't know Him. If you picture the scene, you can almost see it. It's as if John says, He's here. You could see the crowds gathered there

begin to look around with anticipation. Who is He? Which one? And that's the idea. It's to create this sensation of anticipation even in us as we anticipate in the passage the coming of Jesus and the transition from John to Jesus.

But there's another detail that John gives about the Messiah that's coming after him that highlights on full display the humility of John in a unique way and his understanding of Jesus Christ. Verse 27 says:

It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

Now, this is where we begin to see that John's understanding of who Jesus is shaped his view of himself, his view of his ministry. It shaped everything. It shaped his character. John had first come to understand and have a right view of Christ, and now that has emboldened him to preach this message of repentance to the Jews.

And for us to understand the significance of what John just said, you need a little bit of background information about the relationship at that time between a teacher and a pupil or a teacher and a disciple who are in a formal teaching relationship.

At the time, it was understood and it was an accepted practice that if you were a disciple or a pupil of a teacher, that you were to serve that teacher, that you were to serve him in practical ways, in the ways that a servant would normally serve someone, as a sort of out of gratitude and a kind of payment for his services, the student would serve the teacher. However, it was clearly understood and even stated in writing that this service of a pupil to a teacher stopped when it came to the teacher's feet.

The student was not to degrade himself to the level of touching the master's feet or taking off his shoes. This was reserved only for the lowliest of slaves in the household. D.A. Carson again says it this way: "The Baptist's words continue a theme in the prologue and betray extraordinary humility in the context of a society where a student was expected to do for his teacher whatever a slave would do-except take off his shoes."

But notice the specific wording of what John says here. He said it in Matthew 3 as well because John doesn't say that my rightful place in relationship to the Messiah is to take his shoes off. That's not what he says. That would have been a humble statement in and of itself. But John says, I'm not even worthy to do for this one what the lowliest slave in the house is called to do. I'm not even worthy to do that. I'm basically saying I'm not worthy to be the lowliest slave in this one's house.

And it's here that John the Baptist's view of Jesus becomes instructive for us. It's not just that we should model John's humility. The application this morning is not just go be humble like John. Because John's humility was a byproduct of something else. It was a byproduct of his view of Jesus.

John had come to understand who Jesus really was. He was convinced both by the prophecies of the Old Testament and now he's heard at the baptism of Jesus, the voice of the Father declaring who Jesus is, that this is indeed the very Son of God. And we learn from this example that true humility cannot be attained apart from a right understanding of God.

This is why we began the discussion with the fear of God this morning. The fear of God is not simply to be afraid of God. It is to truly and rightly understand who he is.

John came to understand that Jesus was God in human flesh, meaning He's our creator, perfect in holiness, perfect in power, in wisdom, in grace, in justice, in love. And when he came to understand who Jesus was, it changed everything. And when we come to understand truly who Jesus is, it changes our view also of ourselves.

You see, a right view of Jesus orients us under Jesus in the right way as it did for John. Suddenly, we find ourselves saying with John, I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes. I'm not even worthy to be the lowliest servant in his house.

When we come to really understand the significance of who Jesus really is, not just a good man, not just a great teacher, not just a good example, but the Son of God in human flesh who came to take the wrath of God for our sins. When you come to understand who He really is, then you freely confess with John, I'm unworthy. I'm unworthy even to be the lowliest slave in His house. It produces humility all on its own. You don't have to stir up the humility. It comes automatically when you see who Jesus is.

Let me ask you, is this how you see Jesus? Do you understand that He is so far above you that you're not even worthy to be the lowliest slave in His house? By the way, as a side note, this is why we have to be careful when we share the gospel with others not to get too jumpy and jump to the end of the story. You know, we're all excited, rightly so, to get to the part where Jesus died for their sins. Now, Jesus died for your sins, don't you want to receive that? But that's the part we want to get to, and there's nothing wrong with wanting to be excited about that, but we've not yet helped that person understand their need for that by giving them a right view of God and a right view of themselves as sinners before a holy God so that now they're prepared to say, oh, that's why I need Jesus as my Savior.

John's ministry was all about preparing the hearts of the people on the front end so that when Jesus came, they were already ready to believe in Him, having hearts prepared by repentance because they already understood the glory of God and their need as sinners for His forgiveness.

Only when we first come to see Jesus as holy God and understand what that means can we understand our sin and therefore our desperate need for His forgiveness. Let me ask you, have you really come to know and believe that Jesus is the very Son of God? Do you believe that? Have you come to understand that you're a sinner before God and that if God gave you justice today, it would mean eternal punishment for your sins? Until you understand those two things, the rest of the gospel will not be good news to you. It might be a fun story. It might be interesting, but it won't be good news.

But when you understand, as John did, that we are such unworthy sinners that we don't deserve to be the lowliest of the slaves in Jesus' house, it's then that we see the grace and the love of God in Christ in the way that we should. When we understand those realities, our hearts then burst for joy when we hear Jesus say what we sang of this morning, Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

The good news of the gospel becomes the greatest news we've ever heard when we understand who Jesus is and who we are in relation to him. And here's the thing about how this connects with the fear of God.

When we fear God rightly, it actually causes us, because of what He's done in His son, not to recoil from Him in fear, but to draw near to Him in love. Because the one whom we have no business being near has brought us near through His son, even calling us not just slaves, but sons and daughters. This is the good news of the gospel.

But as we look at John's life and his view of Christ, it not only transforms us in the sense of our humility, it should transform us in the way we think about serving this Jesus. I want us to consider how John's right understanding of Jesus affected the way he served him.

First of all, consider the fact that John the Baptist's ministry was never about him, was it? He's famous for the fact that he didn't make his ministry about him. It wasn't self-serving. John didn't attempt to deviate in any way from the mission that God gave him. He sought to fulfill it to a T by God's grace. And though actually, in reality, the ministry John did lifted him in the eyes of the people. They had a high view of John. But John, all he kept doing was giving a high view of Jesus. The people kept trying to lift up John, and John was just lifting up Jesus.

And this is how we should think about our service of the Lord, both inside the walls of the church and outside the walls of the church. It should, by example, affect the way we evangelize. Our evangelism should never become a source of pride for us. It can be so tempting for each of us, particularly if we're very passionate about sharing the gospel, to begin to look down upon others in our heart who maybe don't have the same zeal, at least from our perspective, that we do.

And yet when John the Baptist was actually fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of being the actual voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord, and he was asked about his own significance, what does he say? You're asking the wrong question. This is not about me. This is about Him. We should do the same.

All of us should ardently desire to share the gospel, but, listen, our fervor for sharing the gospel and our boldness in sharing the gospel should overflow out of the humility and love that we have for Christ, not out of pride or of sense of self-importance. So we don't share the gospel because it makes us feel good. We don't share the gospel so that we might be seen a certain way by others. We share the gospel because we're overwhelmed with the glory of God and the love of God in Christ so that when He says, go and make disciples, we say, yes and amen.

But John the Baptist's example also extends, I believe, by way of application to our service within the walls of the church. Oh how easy it is for our service of Christ to become more about ourselves than others. We get fixated on serving only in certain ways or certain capacities, and when we can't serve in those ways, we often are tempted towards bitterness or anger. We can easily be tempted to look around the church and compare our service to other people and say, oh, look at how I'm here. I'm the first one here. I'm the last one here.

Nobody else seems to want to serve. If everybody would just serve like I did, what a revival we would have in this church. At the same time, we can be tempted to the opposite extreme and say, well, no one seems to really want or need me. It looks like they've got it all handled, and so I'll just sit on the sidelines. I won't do anything because I'm not needed.

But I'm convinced that if we really learn from John's example this morning, it will be transformational of our service of Christ both here in the church and when we go outside of the walls of the church. But listen, this is the key. There's an order to this. It has to be birthed out of our love and our understanding of who Jesus is first and foremost, and then that humility and desire to serve sacrificially flows out of that.

It can't go the other way around. It didn't go that way for John. John first understood who Jesus was, and that changed everything about him, and then it affected the way he served and the way he thought of himself.

A true humility results in more faithful service of the Lord, not less. A true humility will result in more boldness and fervor for the Lord, not less. True humility will bring more joy and more happiness in serving Christ, not less.

And a true humility birthed out of the right love for Jesus will produce a willingness to serve in ways that make us more uncomfortable, not less. Like John, we really have to understand Jesus rightly, and when we do, no act of service will be beneath us because we will say, I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes, let alone get to do whatever I'm doing today in this church.

And so you see, Christian, there's so much practical instruction for us to take away from the ministry of John. First and foremost, his view of Christ, and then secondly, his humility and commitment to serve him.

This scene is bracketed here at the end with one final note in verse 28. It's really a historical note, but I think there is some significance here to note for us. In verse 28, it says: *These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

You need to understand there were two towns called Bethany at this time. Bethany, the most well-known Bethany, was closer to Jerusalem, just outside of Jerusalem. It's where we'll see Lazarus and his sisters in John 11. But that can't be where John the Baptist's ministry took place because he ministers in the wilderness. And so the way it's stated here in verse 28 is meant to distinguish this Bethany from the more well-known Bethany, which is why he says it's Bethany beyond the Jordan.

We don't actually know historically where this place was exactly, but it was likely a multi-day walk from Jerusalem, probably on the eastern side of the Jordan River, ministering there to the people coming out of the towns and cities around, as Isaiah 40 prophesied. Now, initially, John doesn't see a huge group of people take him up on following Jesus.

When he points to Jesus and says, this is the One that I've been proclaiming. Obviously, the disciples follow Him. There's a group that follows Him, but not in droves, initially. And I think there's a lesson for us here about our own service of the Lord that we can take heart.

Because later in Jesus' ministry in John 10, we see that Jesus returns to this same spot, the very spot mentioned here where John carried out his ministry. And listen to what it says in John 10:40-42:

40 And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. 41 Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." 42 Many believed in Him there.

I think that's encouraging, because you know what? God doesn't always choose to show us the results of our service. Share the gospel, no one seems to care. Serve in the church, as far as you can tell, it's not changing anyone's life in front of you. We can get discouraged pretty easily when we don't see fruit coming before our eyes of our ministry. But John didn't immediately see fruit of his ministry, but that doesn't mean God didn't bring fruit of his ministry. He did.

And so it's an encouragement to us to remember, keep planting the seeds, keep sowing the seed of the gospel, keep serving others in the church, and let the results be up to God. Whatever God does with it is perfect, and He will do it in His time. We may get to see it, we may not, but God never lets His word fall flat. Keep preaching the gospel, keep serving His people.

So as we bring this now to a close, really the takeaways are the same as they were in our previous message, only with a different emphasis.

Number one, we must heed John's message. We have to hear the voice in the wilderness to repent and believe in Jesus the Messiah, the very Son of God. Maybe you're here this morning, and for the first time, you're really coming to understand the significance of who Jesus is.

You've heard about Him, you know some details about Him, but now you're seeing who He really is as God in human flesh and your relationship to Him as a sinner and your need for the gospel. If that's true of you this morning, call out to Him in repentance and faith, and you will be saved. He will save you from the wrath of God for your sins and make you a son or daughter. But don't miss the message of John.

Secondly, follow John's example. If you're a believer this morning, specifically in the two areas we've mentioned, in humility and in service, seek to follow the example of John.

Let me just ask us a couple of questions to help us think on these things. What motivates your service of Christ, both inside and outside the walls of the church? Truly, what is the motivation? Or think of it this way, what motivates your lack of service of Christ, both inside and outside the walls of the church? Why have you not engaged in serving Christ in the ways you know he calls us to do?

If you're honest, is your service of God birthed out of humility? Is Jesus so exalted in your eyes that you just can't help but love and serve Him? Is that what propels you to use your gifts in the church and to share the gospel with the lost? Are you only willing to serve the Lord in ways that align with your personal preferences? When you serve the Lord, how do

you respond when no one notices, no one says anything? Or, on the other hand, when you serve the Lord, how do you respond when people do take notice and either give you praise or constructive criticism? How do you respond?

You see, humility that grows out of the love and awe of Christ not only compels us to serve Him, but it also changes our opinion of ourselves and our own self-importance, or the lack thereof. When our service is driven by our love and appreciation for Christ, Christ in His glory truly becomes the aim of our service, so we're less affected by people not noticing, and we're more sensitive when others bring us something that we could do better, we want to do better, we want to grow.

It keeps us from temptations like bitterness and anger and self-pity. It keeps us from chasing the praise of men. And it keeps us from pridefully disregarding the feedback of others instead of taking it as the help that it can be.

In short, when we serve out of a true love and awe of the Lord Jesus Christ, it flows out as humble, sacrificial, bold, Christ-exalting service. May God help us to have the humility that's birthed out of our love for Christ in a selfless, sacrificial servant's heart as John had until the Lord brings us home.

Let's pray together. Lord God, this is our prayer. We confess our need for Your help in these things. It's easy for us in our flesh, even in serving You in ways that are most noble, to make it about us. It's not about us. It's about our Savior. God, we pray that You would help us to be humble and that that humility would be birthed out of the right thing, out of truly beholding You for who You are, and that our love and appreciation for You, what You've done for us, would cause us to truly, freely, want to serve You with all our heart. Use our service however You would see fit to cause it to bear whatever fruit You intend for it to bear for Your glory. We ask in Christ's name, amen.