

A Voice in the Wilderness

John 1:19-23

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Good morning to you again. It is always a privilege and a highlight to come to this pinnacle moment in our week where we get to open God's precious word and to feast together on what is here. Turn with me to John 1 today as we are in verses 19 to 23 and continue to make our way through this wonderful book.

If you've ever been to a concert then you know there's usually what's called the opening act. Up and coming musicians are often given the opportunity to travel with more well-known bands and as they tour they get to open the concert with a few of their own songs to entertain the crowd and to get them ready for the main event. Now most of the time these opening acts are basically entertaining, but the truth is most of the crowd doesn't really know who they are and the longer they play the more the crowd is looking at their watch waiting for the actual show to begin. After all, that's what they've paid to see.

But imagine with me for just a moment that you don't know anything about concerts and you don't know anything about music at all. In fact, imagine with me that you've never heard music before in your life. In fact, imagine that no one in your town or your city has ever heard music for 400 years and one day you just happen to be walking by a building and you hear some noises reverberating out of that building and you're curious so you enter into the building and to your amazement there's a band playing live music. You can't believe it. You've only ever read about it. You've heard about it from history books, you and your friends have speculated as to what music may sound like, your professors have told you about famous musicians of old, but you've never actually heard it before and here standing in front of this band listening to them play tears begin to fill your eyes, the hair stands up on the back of your neck and a smile comes up involuntarily across your face.

It's beautiful, it's awe-inspiring. And then the guy on the stage says something curious like this. He says, hey guys, thanks for coming to the show we've got one more song for you then the show will officially begin. And you're thinking, what do you mean the show will begin? This isn't the show? This is amazing! What could possibly be coming after this that would be better?

And now you have just a small glimpse of what the ministry of John the Baptist was like. The people of Israel have been waiting anxiously for the coming of Messiah, and not only that but they're waiting even just for a real prophet to be sent by God. Some 400 years have passed since the last true prophet has come to them. No prophets, no new revelation from God, only priests teaching the messages of the former prophets recorded in Scripture and promising that other prophets are prophesied to come.

And then it happens. Whispers and rumors begin to spread around town hey, there's a guy, he's preaching out in the wilderness by the Jordan River. This guy is the real thing, this is a real prophet, you've got to come out and hear him preach. We've never heard preaching like this. He preaches with authority and with conviction. And so you go out and you hear

this preacher and sure enough there he is and he's everything everyone has said to you about him, but all that he keeps saying is that his ministry is really not about him but about the One who's coming after him.

In our passage today we now officially arrive at the ministry of John the Baptist. We have touched on it in the prologue, but today John takes us specifically to the ministry of John the Baptist.

The theme of the book of John continues to be laid before us **Jesus as the Son of God**. We've now finished the prologue in the first 18 verses, and now in verse 19 we enter into John's ministry. Read with me John 1:19-23:

*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."*

This week and over the next few weeks as we look at John's ministry we're going to come away continually with this response: **We are to heed God's messenger, prepare for his master, and follow his example**. Heed God's messenger, prepare for his master, and follow his example. In verses 19-34, we're going to see three observations about John's ministry laid before us. Today we'll just study the first of those three observations in verses 19-23 and **Observation 1 is John's Identity**. John's identity. He opens in verse 19 by simply saying *this is the testimony of John*, meaning, of course, that we have summarized certain aspects of John and his ministry in the prologue, but now we come to the ministry itself and he will expound on it in greater detail and show us how this connects to the overarching point that he's making in the gospel as a whole.

True to form, John mentions things about John the Baptist's ministry that are not recorded or recorded slightly differently with different details added in or left out as he does throughout his gospel. Remember there's more unique material in the Gospel of John than any of the other gospels and of course the way that John orients his gospel is to highlight the key theme of the deity of Christ and we'll see that laid out before us.

But the place that John chooses, or inspired to choose rather, to take us in the opening of John the Baptist's ministry is really at the climax of John the Baptist's ministry. It's near the end of his ministry. This is a scene that takes place over the course of three consecutive days. Day one is recorded in verses 19 to 23, day two is recorded in verses 24 to 28, and the third day is recorded in verses 29 to 34. And this marks a transition point, a key transition point from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of our Lord. And because this comes at the end of John's ministry, you need to understand, just contextually, the baptism of Jesus has already taken place. Jesus has already gone out into the wilderness to be tempted and He's now returned, and so we are right at this transition point between these two ministries.

Remember that the apostle John's intention in writing the gospel is the same intention really as the other gospel writers, at least in the general sense, which is to tell us of the ministry and message and person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is at the center of each of the gospels, and yet all four gospel writers record the ministry of John the Baptist. Why? Why in a book written about Jesus does John find such a prominent place in each of these gospel accounts? And it's of course because the ministry of John the Baptist lays the foundation for the coming ministry of our Lord. He is the opening, act if you will, the attention of the people is caught by John's ministry, there's a stir among the people. God the Father has orchestrated this moment in time in which the people's hearts will already be primed and ready through the preaching of John for the coming of our Lord.

It's as if God uses John the Baptist to draw the crowd, and once the crowd is there he points them to Christ. So, John chooses this particular scene from the ministry of John the Baptist because it perfectly highlights the purpose of John's ministry and it illustrates how John's ministry paved the way for the ministry of Christ.

Now as we study this narrative, I want to encourage you as I would encourage you in any narrative passage in the scripture to really put yourself here in the story. These are real events, real people, real places, and read this and let it unfold for you as if it's the first time, as if you haven't ever heard this story and you don't know what's coming next, because we have the privilege of John laying out for us what the original audience, some of them may have seen, others are hearing about it now through John, and it's as if we get to be there in person by studying John's account. So put yourself in the narrative in real time and let's consider this together.

19 This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him,

Now first of all, let me just explain the significance of the scene of what's happening here. Remember the center of Jewish life at the time both politically and when it came to their religion was of course Jerusalem. That's where the Sanhedrin was, that's where the temple was, that's where Jewish life really found its heartbeat.

This delegation sent to John the Baptist is said to come from the Jews in Jerusalem. Now that's interesting that he would use that phrase the Jews because of course John the Apostle is a Jew, John the Baptist was a Jew, the people who were coming to hear John generally were Jews and so what does he mean by the Jews from Jerusalem came or were sent to John? Well that phrase "the Jews" is used in a variety of different ways that we'll see in the Gospel of John but often it's used for those who were antagonistic to our Lord Jesus and it's used of those particularly of the leadership of Israel who were antagonistic to our Lord. And so what this may very well be is an official delegation sent with the authority of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body over the Jewish people, to question John.

This is an official questioning this is not just a matter of curiosity on behalf of these messengers. They've been sent on a mission. Remember the Jews are under Roman authority, Roman occupation so therefore Roman law, but they allowed the Jews to have their own law as it pertains to their religion and the Sanhedrin was the ruling body over the

Jewish people in that sense. It's very likely these visitors are coming officially from at least a portion of the Sanhedrin to question John on their behalf.

Now why does John warrant such a delegation? Why would they be so concerned with his ministry? I do think it's important we understand they are not coming because they're excited to hear John preach. They're not coming because they're excited about what John is doing. Instead, as will happen with our Lord it appears they're there out of concern because the ministry of John has caused quite a stir and it is a concern to them as if it's a threat to them in their leadership.

Listen to Mark 1, verses 4 and 5 about the impact of John's ministry:

4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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.

Now, John is ministering in the wilderness, the exact location is unknown but it was out by the Jordan River. This is a long distance, a multi-day journey from Jerusalem on foot. It was not easy to get there, in other words and yet people are flocking to hear him preach from all of Judea and Jerusalem itself. This has great concern for the leadership and what they specifically want to understand is who John claims to be.

And the reason is because speculation is growing among the people. Luke chapter 3 verse 15 says this:

Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ,

People are starting to say hey, is this him? Is this the Messiah? Remember Christ is the Greek term for Messiah. Is this the anointed one? Is this the one we've been waiting for? And so the Jewish leadership wants to know John's answer to that question. So specifically, what they ask him is who are you? This is the question. Who are you? Now they don't mean what's your name. Obviously, they know who John is in that sense. They may even have been familiar with his family heritage. Remember his dad was a priest. He comes from a priestly line. Not just a priest but the angel Gabriel appeared to him. It was a fairly significant event.

So it's possible that they are familiar at least with some of the story of his family. So they're not really asking about his heritage in that sense. They want to know who he's claiming to be in the sense of are you claiming to be the fulfillment of some Old Testament prophecy of someone that we're to be expecting? That's what they want to know.

And so he answers their question and he knows that really the key question off the bat has to be put to bed. And so the text says they ask him *who are you?* *20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* Same phrase is used here later when Jesus says *I am the way and the truth and the life*. That *I am*, the emphatic use of *I am*. John uses that same phrase but in the negative sense *I am not the Christ*.

And the apostle John records this in such a way that is emphatic. Notice he introduces John's answer with three different phrases that basically mean the same thing. And he

confessed, and did not deny, but confessed I am not the Christ. The emphasis, the reason for the emphasis likely is because remember John's purpose in writing is to point us to the true Messiah Jesus and he wants us to understand and anyone at the time that's still confused about John's place in this redemptive history that John is not the Messiah. From his own mouth he confesses not to be the true Messiah. That's not his role. He comes out plainly and answers the question.

So now the big question is well then who are you? If you're not the Messiah, who do you claim to be? And there were other important figures who were prophesied that they were coming in the Old Testament so the Jews began to work their way down through some of these other important people. Starting next with Elijah. *They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"*

Now you remember Elijah. Elijah was one of the most famous and influential prophets in Israel's history. It was Elijah who would stand toe to toe with one of the most wicked kings that Israel would see and his wife Jezebel. It was Elijah who would see the call down fire. God would send fire in response to his prayer on Mount Carmel making a distinction between Baal and Yahweh. It was Elijah also, we can't forget, who was taken to heaven without having experienced death. One of only two people in scripture that that's true of. Elijah and of course Enoch.

Now why would the priest and Levites ask John the Baptist if he was Elijah? The answer is because of something in the book of Malachi. Remember there's this 400 year period of silence that's transpired since Malachi now with the coming of John, and one of the last things said then by a true prophet to the people was a prophecy that Elijah would come.

This is Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6:

5 "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. 6 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."

So now you see the reason they ask the question. This was prophesied that Elijah is going to come and so they say well you're not the Messiah. Are you then the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy in Malachi chapter 4? Now John's answer to their question presents us with a bit of a conundrum because John clearly says this *And he *said, "I am not."* No, I am not Elijah.

There's no mistaking that this is a negative answer. So why the conundrum? There's no ambiguity in John's answer so why the conundrum? And the conundrum comes because of two other important passages of Scripture and I do want to answer this question because it's an important question that may be in some of your minds. Let's just talk briefly about why John says no when the answer appears to be yes in other places.

For example, the angel Gabriel when he comes to John's father, Zacharias, says that at least in part that he's going to come, his son's going to come in the spirit of Elijah. We'll see that in just a moment. Jesus also explains the significance of his ministry and says something similar.

Listen to Luke 1, verses 16 and 17. These are the words of Gabriel speaking to John's father about his son that's going to be born. He says:

16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17 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."

Clearly Gabriel is quoting Malachi's prophecy to John's father here. Then we come to the ministry of Jesus and I want you to see two instances in which Jesus speaks to the significance of John and then we're going to put all this together and try and answer this conundrum.

First of all, listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 11 about John. This is Matthew 11:11 to 14:

11 Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.

Now compare that statement from Jesus to a second statement that he makes in chapter 17. This is right after the transfiguration. Remember when Jesus reveals his glory to Peter, James, and John, Moses and Elijah also appear there with him. Coming down that mountain from that experience these disciples have some questions and one of them pertains to Elijah. Listen to this, Matthew 17 verses 10 to 13:

10 And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11 And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12 but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

Okay, let's put all this together. Three pieces of evidence. First, John the Baptist himself says no, I'm not Elijah. Secondly, Gabriel the angel tells Zacharias your son's going to come in the spirit and power of Elijah. Thirdly, Jesus on two occasions affirms that at least in part, John was the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy about Elijah, but then he also says in the future tense that Elijah is coming. So, how do we put all this together?

The answer must be that Malachi's prophecy concerning Elijah has what is called both a near and far fulfillment. That is there are aspects of the prophecy about Elijah that are indeed fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist. Yet there are other aspects of that prophecy that are yet to be fulfilled, that will be fulfilled with the second coming of our Lord. So then the obvious question we all want to know is well when then is he coming? When is the next part going to be fulfilled about Elijah?

The answer to that, we have to be careful not to be dogmatic on because the Scriptures don't clearly reveal that to us by name, but I would say there's a good chance at least that

Elijah will be one of the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11. This is another sermon for another day but I believe a strong case can be made for Elijah and Moses as potentially being the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who are to come.

Now, I do want to address the issue of why does John the Baptist so clearly and definitively say no? Why doesn't he at least give kind of the balanced answer that maybe we see in Christ's response? And I believe because in context, John knew exactly what these people were asking and the answer to what they were asking was definitively no. They were insinuating are you Elijah returned from heaven to earth? And John is saying no, I am not. I am not the fulfillment of Malachi 4 in that sense.

Some people speculate that maybe John didn't know that he was the fulfillment. I find that a little odd and hard to believe if his father received an angelic visitation from Gabriel telling him that at least in part he would be the fulfillment of that that his dad forgot to tell him that. I just, I have a hard time believing that. I think the issue is in context he knew what they were asking and the answer was no to the question that they were specifically asking.

Now, as fun as that was, let's put that aside for a moment and come back now to the passage itself. He's not the Messiah. He's not Elijah in the flesh. There's a third key figure from the Old Testament that had also been prophesied so they move on to that person and say then *"Are you the Prophet?"* Are you the prophet? Notice they don't say are you a prophet? They say are you the prophet? If they had just asked are you a prophet, he would have had to have answered yes. But they're specifically saying are you the prophet? Meaning a specific person that was anticipated specifically from the book of Deuteronomy.

Remember, Deuteronomy was written by Moses. It is a book that was to remind the new generation of all that God had done. This new generation is about to enter into the promised land. He reiterates the law. He reiterates God's faithfulness. He brings them up to the point of entering into the promised land.

And remember that before the coming of Christ, there had never been a prophet like Moses. Moses was the prophet of prophets. The miracles that he did through his ministry, the giving of the law through Moses, the way that he had fellowship. Moses had unique intimate fellowship that even God said was unique to him. The way that God affirmed Moses' ministry. There was no prophet that had been as intimately close to God or affirmed by God as Moses.

So he had the highest respect of the Jewish people and rightly so. And therefore, understand what it means then, the exalted nature of the statement of Deuteronomy 18:15 when Moses, the prophet of prophets, says this:

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him."

He goes on to mention this further in verse 18. Clearly God's going to raise up a prophet, and not just a prophet because Joshua of course comes after him and other prophets come after that. They are not the fulfillment of that prophecy and the Jewish people knew that because they're still asking John, are you the prophet? They understood it hadn't happened

yet because this was going to be a prophet like Moses. Jesus is the fulfillment by the way of this prophecy and so John the Baptist knowing that he's not the fulfillment of this prophecy answers the same. No. I'm not the prophet.

Okay. Well you can see maybe the frustration of these Jewish leaders now. Then who are you? Right? You've told us who you aren't. Who are you? And so they say:

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?"

It's interesting the way they ask that question. They want to know from him, who do you understand that you are? What are you saying about yourself? We know what everybody else is saying. So what are you saying about who you are, John? Specifically, John answers their question with just a quote.

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."

That's a quote from Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5. I want you to notice the humility in John throughout this account. In fact, we'll see it even more so on day 2. But you know, many people would be thrilled to stand on a soapbox and talk about their own self-importance. They would love the questions about their own significance and their ministry. John doesn't do that. In fact, John's first concern is that they know clearly who he is not. He doesn't want anyone to get mixed up on who he really is and his importance. He dispels the rumors. He quiets the whispers. And in setting the record straight, John doesn't even take a title to himself. He just quotes a passage. A passage that he knows definitively they will know.

He knows they will know exactly what I mean if I just quote the words. And John says, actually my role is to be a voice. I'm the voice. And I'm a voice in the wilderness and my message is very simple. Make straight the way of the Lord. That's who I am. Here John, again, is quoting Isaiah 40. I want to read to you the full passage that he's quoting. Again, this would have been familiar. They wouldn't have needed him to quote the rest of the passage, but I think it's helpful for us to refresh our memories on the fullness of the passage that he's referring to. Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5. This is who John was:

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."

Now, just quickly, an overview of Isaiah in a couple of sentences. Isaiah bounces back and forth between passages of judgment that is coming, both on Israel and other nations, and salvation that is coming. That God will be gracious. He's going to be just. He's also going to be gracious. Ultimately, He's going to preserve a remnant of the Jewish people. He speaks of the goodness that He has planned for them.

Isaiah 40 is one of those passages speaking of this future goodness and future salvation that is going to come to the people of Israel, God's true people who will be a remnant. What I

want you to see is that every gospel writer, all four of the gospels record that John was the fulfillment of this passage. All of them. But only here in John do we have John himself saying that he's the fulfillment. In the other gospels, it's the gospel writers telling us as the narrator that he is the fulfillment. But here John says this is who I am. I am the voice in the wilderness.

This is why John has been so humble in his response to these questions. It's because he understands what his role is and what his role isn't. Especially at this point in his ministry. Because the baptism of Christ has already happened. He's already seen the Holy Spirit identify Jesus as the true Messiah. He knows the One that he's come to prepare the way for and to point to. So what is the meaning then of Isaiah 40 verses 3-5? What's the significance of this prophecy that John fulfilled? In those verses in Isaiah 40, he uses a historical illustration that the people would have clearly understood at the time.

When a king was scheduled to visit a certain city, it was a common practice for a forerunner to be sent out ahead of the king to make sure the road was prepared. Notice he talks about valleys being lifted up and hills being brought low. What is he saying? Make a smooth road. Make the roadway clear. Clear the debris. Make a smooth path so it's easy for the king to enter into town.

That was a common illustration that people would have understood except in Isaiah it's not a human king that he says is going to be coming. Who does Isaiah say is coming? Look back at verse 3:

"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

Wow. This is significant. This is not just an earthly king that's going to be coming, although Jesus is a king. It's God Himself is coming. Notice what will be the result for those who heed the message of the voice and prepare the way for Yahweh to come. Verse 3: *"Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.*

Then in verse 5:

Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together;

Those who hear the voice of the Lord in the wilderness and obey his message by preparing the way for God to come will have the privilege of seeing the glory of God. Now do you see how this fits with what we've seen in the prologue? What did John say in verse 14 about the word?

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So John is saying this is how it happened. In the prologue it gives us a summary of what's going to happen. Now he's backing up and saying let me show you in detail how it happened. How it was fulfilled. The voice came in the wilderness and after the voice came God in human flesh and we saw His glory. This is the fulfillment of Isaiah 40. And it started through the proclamation of a voice in the wilderness.

What we're going to see not only in this section but in the coming sections of this passage is that John understood his part in God's plan of redemption and he fulfilled by God's grace his role to a T. And his answer to the question about his identity should have been instructive to those who were questioning him and it should be instructive for you and me this morning as we consider his answer. Because what John is saying to them is that their true concern should not be him. I'm not the Messiah. I'm not Elijah. I'm not the prophet.

I'm a voice. I'm a forerunner. What is he saying? Your real concern is the one who's coming after me. If you really understand who I am and what I'm doing and the role I'm playing, then you will be anxiously looking around saying, who's coming next? Because that's my significance. That's what I'm here to do is to prepare a road for a smooth arrival of God.

Now, let's talk about that illustration for a moment of a road. Isaiah is saying this way needs to be prepared and valleys lifted and hills lowered, a smooth road, a smooth path. But clearly the road that Isaiah is speaking of is not a physical road of dirt and rocks. So what is the road then that John is calling people to prepare through his preaching in the wilderness? What's the road?

Well, the other gospel writers make it clear. We read this passage earlier, but now let's read it again and consider it in light of this question. Mark 1:4-5:

4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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.

John understood that the road that had to be prepared for the coming of Messiah was not dirt and rocks. It was the hearts of men and women. The heart of man was the road that had to be prepared. And what was the means by which the heart had to be prepared to be a smooth road for faith in the Messiah when he appeared? It was repentance. The heart prepared to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is a humble heart prepared by repentance from sin.

This was John's clear message: Repent of your sins and return to Yahweh. Make your heart ready for the coming of Messiah. And understand, John wasn't alone in that message. When John is arrested and his ministry is over, Jesus comes on the scene and begins to pick right up where John left and preaches the same message. Mark 1: 14-15:

14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

John came to prepare the hearts of the Jewish people for the Messiah and the road work that was needed was the road work of repentance from sin. Which is instructive for us that repentance in this case is not a call to clean up your life so that God will accept you as some kind of work- based salvation. It's a call to humble yourself and to recognize your true condition not just as one who has committed some sins, but as a sinner. You are a sinner separated from God, deserving His wrath and judgment for your sin. Repentance is a

complete change of the disposition of the heart in which we want to turn from sin and turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness to follow after Him.

A repentant heart not only confesses that it has sinned, but it wants to forsake that sin and follow after Christ. So John's message then is just as relevant today as it was then. The Messiah has come. Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Humble yourself and confess that you are a sinner and have nothing to bring to God that you would offer to Him. What you need to do is realize that He has done it all in His son and turn from your sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ has taken the wrath of God on Himself that we might be saved by grace through faith. And this was John's ministry to get people ready to see and to behold God in human flesh with a repentant heart ready to believe in Messiah.

Let me ask you this morning. Have you repented of your sins before God? Have you confessed to God not only that you have sinned, but that you are a sinner and that you desire by His grace to turn from your sin to follow Christ? Understand, we are all slaves in this life. You're either a slave to your sin or you're a slave to the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is no autonomy. That's a myth that unbelievers like to believe about themselves. I'm the master of my own universe. I make my own choices. I don't want another master. No. You're under the domination of your sin.

Repentance is a gracious gift of God when He opens our eyes to realize the truth of our condition and we turn from enslavement to our sin freely to the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to follow You as my Master. This is the great gift of repentance and faith.

Have you repented of your sins, friend? Because this is the **first application: Heed John's message**. Is your heart a smooth road before the Lord because it's a repentant heart? You see, many people won't turn to Christ in faith, not because they don't believe the historical facts about Him, but because they know it will mean forsaking the sins they love so much. I don't want to follow Jesus. They say, I want to live my life. I want to do what I want. I like my sin. I want my immorality. I want my selfishness. I like my pride. I like my self-righteousness. It makes me feel holy about myself. This was the great problem of the Jewish leaders, as we'll see, a love of sin and self and self-righteousness.

John's message confronts that self-righteous approach and calls for humble repentance and recognition of the Lord Jesus Christ as all we need. Are you harboring sin in your heart? Understand what God wants, what He's always wanted is the heart of His people, not a facade of outward righteousness.

John's message calls us this morning to remember we can't be good enough. Christ has been good enough. He alone, and He's offered that goodness on the cross to pay for our sins. Humble your heart by God's grace and repentance and faith.

By the way, this confronts the common misconception that to preach repentance is to preach a works-based salvation. John the Baptist preached repentance. Jesus preached repentance. The first gospel message at Pentecost after Jesus has ascended is a message of repentance from Peter. No, repentance is not a call to work your way to salvation. Yes,

repentance goes on to bear fruit, as even John says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance, but it's a matter of the heart. It's a gift like faith that takes place in the heart. Heed the prophetic message of John the Baptist and repent.

Secondly, if you're in Christ this morning, **follow John's example**. Follow John's example. We're going to see multiple ways that we ought to be encouraged and inspired by the example of John as we study the passages to come.

I do want to say very clearly though that we are not John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a unique individual in history that God gave a specific mission to. We don't have his same mission and we are not him, and I'm not saying that we are.

I am saying though that there are things we can learn from the way that he went about fulfilling the mission that God gave to him. Because while we don't have the same mission as John, we have the Great Commission. If you're a Christian today, you have been sent out. Go, make disciples. And there's things that we can learn about how we ought to go about doing that. And specifically this morning, I just want you to focus on John's faithfulness.

Notice his faithfulness. Notice that John didn't deviate or add to the mission that God had given to him. John wasn't a pragmatist in that sense. He didn't just say, well, I'm just going to do it my way, whatever way that I determine is the best way to get the result that I'm intending, I'm going to do that. That's not what he did. Instead, he obeyed God to the T. If John was a pragmatist, for example, he wouldn't have set up shop in the wilderness, out in the middle of nowhere, where people had to travel at a time where you don't have public restrooms and easy access to food and fresh water. This was not easy. People had to sacrifice to go out here to hear this guy preach. He's not dressed in a way that would be attractive. He's eating weird things.

Like, there's things about John that, from a human standpoint, we're saying, I don't think he read all the books on church planting. Right? John went out to the wilderness because that's where God said he would go, because Isaiah said, guess what, you're going to hear a voice proclaiming from the wilderness. So John went to the wilderness. Also, if John was a pragmatist, he would have probably thought, maybe I should change the message just a bit. Maybe I should just dumb it down. Because, after all, preaching repentance has never been a great way to make friends. Especially when the people you're preaching to are the people who are considered the religious leaders of the day. And yet, John didn't change the message. He humbly stood there, flat-footed, in the middle of the wilderness, and said, repent. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and prepare your heart for the coming of Messiah.

What do we take away from that? Just be faithful, Christian. Don't mess with what God has said in His Word. If God says this is how we live, it's how we live. If God says this is the message, it's the message. We don't change the message. We want to be gracious messengers. We want to speak the truth in love. But we want to say what God has said we must say, and do what God says we must do, and we must not add to it or subtract from it.

What does it require to be faithful? I was thinking about that this week. To be faithful requires trust in God. To be faithful to God requires trust, because what we are saying, we

are yielding our own preferences, and our own creativity, and our own desires, and we're saying, okay, God, I'm trusting that what You have said is true, and that what You have said is best, and it is not to me to do it my way. I will be faithful and trust, and do what You have said.

Do you trust God enough to simply be faithful? Just be a son or daughter of God. Live for Him. Obey His Word. Open your mouth. Speak the Gospel. When God saves someone, they become a disciple. Teach them all things that He commanded that they might walk in them. This is the Christian life. And the pressure to deviate from that is only going to increase. There are already many places in our country where, to them, as evangelical Christians, we might as well be wearing camel clothes and eating locusts and honey. We are the strangest thing that they've ever heard of. What do you do? You just be faithful.

You trust that God will save who He will save. He will build His church through His Gospel. He will build up His church through discipleship. Just be faithful. Love Him. Serve Him. Proclaim Him. Live for Him. Walk with Him until He brings you home. May we heed God's messenger, prepare for His Master, and follow His example.

Let's pray together. Lord God, this is our prayer. We ask that You would help us to be faithful. We realize that ultimately it is You who have been perfectly faithful. That's why we're here today. The Lord Jesus Christ, the One who came after John, was perfect in His faithfulness to the point of dying on a cross in our place and rising again. We ask for Your grace and Your help to heed the message and that our lives would be faithful to the task, as John was, to the task that You've given to us for Your glory. We ask it in Christ's name. Amen.