

Humility Clothed in Camel Hair

John 1:19-34; 3:22-30 • September 18, 2011

Let's take a quick poll. Other than Jesus, who would you choose as the greatest person of ALL TIME?" (Responses)

Perhaps some of you would say your father or grandfather. Mother or grandmother.

Others might name their favorite president or athlete or hero.

Well, do you know who Jesus would name? And we don't have to ask because He's already given us His answer. In Matthew 11:11 Jesus—Who, by the way, is an expert authority on people—Jesus said this:

Matthew 11:11 Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.

I mention all this because today we move into verse 19 of John chapter 1, where he records his testimony of the first week of Jesus' earthly ministry. And the FIRST person we encounter on that FIRST day is John the Baptist—the Greatest Person of All Time—according to Jesus.

We talked about John the Baptist several weeks ago. You may remember that God gave John the Baptist His authority to baptize and Jesus, knowing how important that was, walked 60 miles to be baptized by John.

Well, God had also chosen John the Baptist for the special privilege of introducing Jesus to the nation of Israel, which meant he had the difficult job of preparing that nation to receive the Messiah.

We see how important John the Baptist was in God's plan by the fact that he's mentioned at least 89 times in the New Testament.

Now, if you've ever read about John the Baptist then I'm sure you'll agree with me when I say that he was a very different kind of person. In his gospel account Mark tells us he came walking out of the desert wearing a coat made of camel hair with a home-made leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey.

Definitely not the kind of guy you would want your daughter to bring home one day. And John the Baptist definitely was NOT a people pleaser. He didn't hesitate to tell it like it was, even if it offended other people.

In fact his straight talk is what got John beheaded. Remember, when he preached against the sexual immorality of King Herod? I mean, John the Baptist was NOT a salesman who'd try to sweet talk you into something. He wasn't a politician, who'd try to match his words to the popular opinion of the day.

No, John the Baptist didn't care what people said or thought about him. All he cared about was pleasing God, so His one and only focus was on delivering God's message.

But—in spite of his non-politically correct way of preaching and his radical diet and dress, John the Baptist became VERY popular. In his gospel, Luke tells us that “multitudes” went out to hear him preach.

[Map] Matthew says that people came to hear him from “Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.” (Matthew 3:5) And these multitudes included all segments of society—Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors, soldiers, the rich, and the poor.

Why do you think John the Baptist was so popular among so many different kinds of people? I mean, why did the multitudes come? I believe it was because the people of that day had really wanted to hear from God.

Remember, it'd been 400 years since a prophet had appeared in Israel and that shouldn't have been a surprise because the prophet Amos had predicted those years of “spiritual famine.” Listen as I read Amos 8:11 & 12:

Amos 8:11 "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the Lord.

12 They shall wander from sea to sea, And from north to east; They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, But shall not find it.

The literature written in those 400 “famine years” between the Old and New Testaments shows us the desire burning in the Jews' hearts to hear a word from God. Now, the news has spread that God's voice could be heard in John's bold, no-compromise preaching, so people came from everywhere to hear him.

Everyone sensed that with John's message, the years of silence had finally ended. Well, when word of this phenomenon reached the ears of the religious

leaders in Jerusalem, they sent a committee to check this guy out—and that leads us to this morning's text.

So, take your Bibles and follow along as I read, beginning with John 1:19-34, which include the Apostle John's account of the first two days of Jesus' ministry. Then we'll skip ahead to chapter 3:22-30 and read some of the last words spoken by John the Baptist.

John 1:19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."

24 Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. 25 And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26 John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.

27 It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

30 This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'

31 I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water."

32 And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.

33 I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

34 And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Okay, this morning as we look at the life and ministry of John the Baptist, I want us to try and understand what it is that made him such an amazing person.

I want us to do this because if Jesus said John was the greatest man ever born, then wouldn't you agree that he's the kind of person all of us should try to be like?

So, what makes John the Baptist such a great example? Why is he someone we should try to imitate? One word. Humility.

You see, beneath is rough exterior – his camel hair coat, beneath his wilderness way – locusts and wild honey, beneath his direct, honest manner of speaking...AND in spite of his huge popularity, John was a very HUMBLE man. He ALWAYS put Jesus first. Remember when the committee from Jerusalem showed up to ask John the Baptist who he really was?

John 1:19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

Juan 1:19 Este es el testimonio de Juan, cuando los judíos enviaron de Jerusalén sacerdotes y levitas para que le preguntasen: ¿Tú, quién eres? 20 Confesó, y no negó, sino confesó: Yo no soy el Cristo.

He knew what they were getting at so when they asked about his identity, he gave them a very forceful reply. He said, "I am not the Christ!"

Ever since God said He was going to send a Savior, history has been full of guys coming along claiming to be the Messiah. That's still true today and it was true in Jesus' day.

In Acts 5:36-37, the religious leaders were trying to decide what to do about all the new followers of Jesus. Listen to what they say.

Acts 5:36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing.

37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.

All through history guys would claim to be the Messiah, gather a lot of followers. What an ego trip! Center of attention! But it wasn't long before people saw who they REALLY were and they faded into oblivion.

But ego was NOT a problem for John the Baptist. Not only did he make it clear that he was NOT the Messiah, he also implied that God's TRUE Messiah HAD come and was already in Israel.

You see, by this time he'd baptized Jesus and when he did God revealed to him that his cousin was, indeed, the Messiah.

We see how firmly John believed this in the forcefulness of his reply.

John 1:19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

Look at verse 20 where it says that John "did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" In the Greek the personal pronoun is emphasized so it could be translated, "I am not the Messiah—but the One Who is stands among you. He's already come."

But, instead of asking for more information about the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, the committee asked, "Well, if you're not the Messiah, then, are you Elijah?"

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

They asked this because they knew it'd been prophesied that Elijah would return. In the very last verses of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, God had said, "I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."

But they misunderstood the prophecy. Elijah would come—but not in the flesh—at least not yet. Listen to what the angel told John the Baptist's father, Zacharias, about John before he was born.

Luke 1:17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

So when he was asked if he was Elijah in the flesh John said, "I'm not." Well, with two negative answers, the committee asked John if he was "the prophet," a reference to something Moses said in Deuteronomy 18:15, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."

But John denied being "the prophet" Moses talked about. So basically the men in the committee scratched their heads and said, "Well, we've gone down our checklist. If you're not the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet, then who are you? We need an answer to take back to the other priests and Levites."

So John the Baptist responded by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."

Notice how John HUMBLER himself here in the things he did NOT say.

He did NOT say, "I am John, the son of Zacharias the priest."

He did NOT say, "An angel predicted my birth! God made it possible for me to be born to elderly parents."

He did NOT say, "The Holy Spirit entered my body when I was still in my mother's womb."

He did NOT say, "I am God's greatest prophet and the Messiah is my cousin."

All VERY impressive. But John didn't even say he was a MAN! He simply said, "I'm just a voice." No claims for himself, just a voice crying out, "Make straight the way of the Lord."

Remember we're in first century Israel. The roads weren't surfaced with concrete or asphalt. They were dirt tracks and when it rained the tracks made by carts would harden into ruts. When a king was about to visit a province, the people would first repair the road by smoothing it out.

So, what John was saying then was this, "I'm a nobody; I'm just the road repairman; I'm only a voice telling you to get ready for the King. He's here!"

John the Baptist really IS an example for us to follow. He was what every CHRISTIAN ought to be: a VOICE pointing to the King.

Listen, anytime people see US instead of Jesus, anytime WE get in the way of people hearing of God's great love, we are NOT following the example that John the Baptist has set.

To be great in God's eyes we need to remember that we're NOT great. We're to be just a voice, pointing people to Jesus.

The second place we see John's humility is in John 3. Jesus was baptizing up river from John the Baptist and every day more of John's crowd were leaving John and going to hear Jesus.

When John's followers asked him how he felt about the fact that his followers were becoming fewer and Jesus' were becoming more, he once again showed his humility. Let's start in 3:22.

John 3:22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.

23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.

24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification.

26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified — behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"

27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.

28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'

29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.

30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

In the Old Testament the nation of Israel is repeatedly pictured as the bride and God as the Bridegroom. For example, when Israel left to follow false idols, God used this word picture and charged them with spiritual adultery.

All Jews were familiar with this word picture; that's why John used it. He knew that Jesus was God in the flesh, which made Israel His lawful bride. So John drew on that word picture said he was the FRIEND of the bridegroom...the "shoshben" in Hebrew.

Now, the "shoshben" had a unique place at a Jewish wedding. He was like a combination best man/wedding planner (padrino para toda la boda). He arranged the wedding. He delivered the invitations and set everything up for the wedding feast. And when all this was done he had one more VERY SPECIAL duty.

After the ceremony, it was his job to guard the bride until the bridegroom came to her bedroom. He would stay inside the room with her and guard the door to make sure no one would come in. He'd open the door only when he heard and recognized the bridegroom's voice.

When he did, he let the groom in and then he left, knowing he'd finished his job. He wasn't jealous of the bridegroom. He knew that his only job was to bring them together and when that was done, he willingly and gladly faded out of the picture.

Do you see the connection? John's mission was to bring the Messiah and Israel together. Once that was done he was happy to fade from the scene – kind of like the echo a voice makes that eventually disappears.

So when John said that Jesus must increase and he must decrease, it was with the joyful awareness that he'd finished the job God gave him to do.

John's attitude is a great example for us to follow. We should do everything we can to point people to Jesus. That should be OUR joy.

Anytime people start focusing on US and praising US for what we do. Anytime we find ourselves wanting to make sure people notice what WE do for God...

we're in dangerous territory...because our job is like John's. We are to point people to Jesus.

It's not about us—EVER. We need to embrace the kind of self-denial that John practiced. Jesus must increase. We must decrease. Our lives are to be all about Jesus, but so often we make it all about us.

John the Baptist was a very HUMBLE man. He ALWAYS put Jesus first. He truly is an example for us to follow, a model for us to imitate.

I wonder what would happen in our world if more of us followed the example of the man Jesus called the greatest man of all time? What would change IN us, AROUND us, if we laid aside our ego – crucified our self, as Paul says – and gave ourselves to being like humble John the Baptist, always pointing people toward Jesus?

As I told you when I began, Jesus said that no one was better than John the Baptist—that in essence he was the Greatest Man of All Time. But did you ALSO know that in a very real sense the “contest” for this title isn't over? You see, I didn't read the rest of Matthew 11:11.

Matthew 11:11 Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

If we embrace John's attitude and actions....if we humble ourselves and do all we can to help people understand Who Jesus is and what He has done, God can do even greater things through us.

Here's our challenge as we close. Do we choose pride or humility? Do we make life all about US? Or all about Christ? God tells us in 1 Peter 5:5:

1 Peter 5:5 ... be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." 6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time

The consequences of pride and the rewards of humility are tremendous. Which we experience depends on us. Let's pray.