

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part six

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THE RELIGIOUS CONFRONTATION WITH JOHN AND WHY IT MATTERS

John 1:19-28 - "And 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] So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" [23] He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." [24] (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) [25] They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" [26] John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, [27] even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." [28] These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

This text harkens our minds back to something the apostle John made clear in his opening prologue - **John 1:10-11** - "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."

Now we see that the **opposition** - or, at the very least in these early stages, the **suspicion** - toward Jesus was being exercised by His own people, the **Jews** - "...**the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem...**"(1:19). And the push back against the Christ, the Messiah, actually began before Jesus was even on the scene. John the Baptist - the one preparing the way for the Messiah - is already facing cross examination.

That use of the simple designation, "**the Jews**," is significant. Unlike the synoptic gospels John rarely uses the terms "**Israel**," or "**Israelites**." But he uses the designation "**the Jews**" over seventy times. And usually he uses this term to convey God's ethnic covenant people as they manifest themselves **against** the Messiah.

A classic example of John's use of this designation can be seen in **John 7:10-13** - "But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he [Jesus] also went up, not publicly but in private. [11] The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" [12] And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." [13] **Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.**"

Notice those words, "...**for fear of the Jews**." Not fear of the **Roman soldiers**, but fear of the **Jewish religious leaders**. And our minds flash back to the Apostle John's words in **verse 11** - "He came to his own, and **his own people** did not receive him." It's these same **Jews** who came to John the Baptist. And this is the Apostle John's way of signaling right out of the gate that the light really does shine "**in the darkness**" (1:5). There was opposition to the **mission** of Jesus even before the **person** Jesus declared Himself openly.

In our text today, the darkness gathers around John the Baptist. And we're gazing at the prototype - the model of treatment - the coming pattern of what is to be expected by **all** who would bear specific, faithful witness to the unique saving work of Christ. Jesus said prophetically, "**They hated me. And they'll hate you too.**" The truth of those words has been spilling over in the history of the church for two thousand years.

1) **THE KINGDOM OF GOD REQUIRES RADICAL HUMILITY ON THE PART OF ALL WHO WOULD ENTER IT AND HUMILITY IS NOT THE NATURAL RESPONSE OF THE HUMAN HEART TO THE CALL TO REPENTANCE**

John 1:19 - "And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent **priests and Levites from Jerusalem** to ask him, 'Who are you?'"

John the Baptist, in his answer, will insinuate, somewhat carefully, that this delegation from Jerusalem should have **known** who he was. He cites Isaiah, one of their major prophets, as predicting his ministry. Why hadn't they noticed this?

But there's another sense in which their approach to John is reasonable. The apostle John identified this group as composed of "**priests and Levites from Jerusalem**" (19). And they come because the Baptist is doing some pretty nifty things. He's preaching alarming sermons. He's predicting the coming of God's wrath on the ungodly. And he's calling the people to a rather radical baptism of repentance - which will picture the total drowning of all they had relied on for happiness,

security, and standing before God in this world.

And here's the huge problem that hadn't gone unnoticed by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. He was calling **God's chosen people** to repent and be baptized. Everyone knew the Gentiles had to repent. Everyone knew those **outside** God's covenant people had to repent. There was no issue to investigate there.

But what was so wrong with the **Jews**, that **they** needed to heed the Baptist's warning and turn from their sins? And, more to the point - and now we see how the whole issue of **humility** enters the picture - what was wrong with the work of these **"priests and Levites"** that the people had to go out to John the Baptist for repentance and forgiveness? The priests and Levites were God's **appointed Old Testament people** to deal with sacrifice and purification. They were the ones **chosen** to deal with the people's sins.

Just go through your Old Testament and start to stack up the mountain of passages where God calls and blesses and provides for and uses the Levites in administering the offerings for sin. And now, all of the sudden, the Levitical establishment in Jerusalem hears of this maniac Baptist in the wilderness baptizing God's people as they repented of their sins. No wonder the religious authorities in Jerusalem felt the need for a chat.

You can hear the edge in their voice as they try to pin John down. **"Who are you?" (19)**. Which really means **"Who in the world are you to be doing what you're doing?"** And we just start to see exactly what God is up to in preparing the way for the Messiah with the rough edged John the Baptist.

How else could God show that that whole Old Covenant system was about to be folded up and put away in the fulfillment of Christ, God the Son? Isn't this in fact the very best way to show the **universal need** for the Lamb of God? God calls the very people - **"priests and Levites"** - whom He had appointed to kill and prepare all of those lambs, to leave those offerings behind and let John the Baptist point them all to Christ, the final redemption to which all those Levitical efforts only pointed.

God uses someone so visibly unqualified - someone from **outside** the sacrificial system (though John's father was a priest) - so these religious leaders are forced to look for their forgiveness somewhere **apart** from the Old Covenant structures of the Jewish Temple. These priests and Levites really have to **bow low** if they're going to recognize and hear John's message.

And so we're seeing something important unfolding right in the first chapter of John's gospel. We're learning one **old** lesson, and one **newer** one. **First**, we learn people have to confess their sins if they're going to enter Christ's new kingdom.

And **second**, we learn something else. We learn one of the **first** sins they will have to leave is the pride that would cling to any hope of reform and recovery **on their own terms**. Christ, the Messiah, **replaced** all the other options for pardon and mercy. John the Baptist is God's way of calling people to leave every other hope of receiving grace - anything that would leave the specific redemptive work of Jesus Christ out of the picture.

And it's these **two lessons** in tandem that must be learned and held together. **First**, we become aware of transgression. We have a conscience. We have God's Word. We hear the truth in some way. We know we aren't perfect. Then, at some point, God is faithful to open our eyes and make our sin **offensive enough to us that we want to be rid of it**.

But what then? And the **second** lesson in this passage is we don't have **options** in dealing with our own sins. There aren't **several** ways out. It's one thing to feel somewhat **guilty** of some inward offence. That's a good start. But the process of redemption and restoration can still go awry. We must be brought to an **end** of our own striving and resource. We must cast all on Christ Jesus, the great Sin Bearer and Re-maker of our minds and hearts.

There's a life-lesson here. Many church-goers feel badly about their lives. And many still go on resisting the call of Christ to Himself in humility and surrender. Feeling guilt and bowing before Christ are **two different** things. Not **the same**.

2) WHO JOHN THE BAPTIST WASN'T AND WHO HE WAS - AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER BOTH

John 1:20-22 - "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] So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

First, just consider some of the strange details in the words of the text and then we'll draw out a principle of application.

The really interesting thing about John's reply in **verse 20** is these Levites and Pharisees never actually *asked* if John the Baptist was the Christ, the Messiah. All they asked was **"Who are you?" (19)**. John the Baptist seems to be jumping to an issue they never even raised.

And then there's the strangeness of John's answer in **verse 20** - **"He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"** It's hard to get past all the repetition. **"He confessed....did not deny....but confessed....I am not the Christ."** It smacks of overkill. You just can't miss the Baptist's **emphatic** denial. It's as though he knows what's **behind** their question and wants to put something to bed immediately. Four times in one answer he says he's not the Christ.

The Levites and Pharisees press John further - **John 1:21-22 - "And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." [22] So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"**

These questions get all jumbled up in order. Being that these Jewish leaders were convinced that the Messiah wouldn't come until Elijah the prophet returned, it seems ludicrous to first ask if John were the Messiah and **then** ask if he were Elijah. If Elijah **hadn't** returned - and obviously he **hadn't** if they had to **ask** John the Baptist if **he** were Elijah - then John couldn't possibly have been the Messiah in the first place.

The whole Jewish legend of the return of Elijah is a fascinating one. Elijah, as far as anyone on earth knows, was simply transported to heaven on a chariot of fire. And the Jews, to this day, keep an empty chair, saved for Elijah's return, at Passover celebrations.

What's more, the Old Testament prophets seemed to predict that Elijah **would** return before the Day of the Lord - **Malachi 4:5-6 - "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. [6] And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."**

So these Levites and Pharisees want to know if perhaps the Baptist **is** Elijah returned. And the issue gets further complication by the fact that Jesus seemed to contradict John the Baptist by saying he **was** Elijah - **Matthew 11:13-15 - "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, [14] and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. [15] He who has ears to hear, let him hear."**

So is John Elijah or isn't he? John is right in saying, **"No. I'm not that same Elijah who left the earth in that chariot of fire. That person is not this person standing before you."**

Fair enough. John speaks the truth. But, as Jesus said, the Baptist **is** the Elijah in the sense of being that final one who would come on the scene to prepare the world for the coming Messiah. And the reason that fact **matters** so much to Jesus is it means **there are no other prophetic voices still to come before the Messiah.**

In other words, it is categorically wrong to think we are still waiting for the Messiah to come into this world because we're holding an empty chair for Elijah. Both Elijah and the Messiah have **already** come. And everyone needs to bow before the Christ. We are waiting for His **second** coming, to be sure. But not His **first**.

And this ties in with John's wrap up words in our text and the response of these Jewish leaders:

3) **ALL PEOPLE MUST DEAL HONESTLY WITH THE TRUTH THAT HAS BEEN REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST**

John 1:23-27 - "He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." [24] (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) [25] They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" [26] John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, [27] even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

Notice what happens in **verses 23-25**. John identifies himself - as per their request - from the prophet Isaiah. And he does so in such a way that should be convicting to these Jewish leaders. John says, ***"I'm here to cut through all the fog and red tape that people put up to keep from facing the claim of Christ on their lives. That's who I am! I'm here to draw the straightest line between the two points of mankind's sin and God's Redeemer. That's who I am!"***

And then, ***silence***. They don't ask John ***one word*** about Isaiah's comments. They make no mention of one word John just said. They change the subject and move on - ***Verse 25*** - ***"...Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"***

And what you're beholding right before your eyes is how ***stubbornly unprepared our hearts are to renounce pride and self-justification*** when God reaches out to us in Christ Jesus. You're beholding ***human caginess*** at its most blackened state. You're beholding how quickly church people change the subject when the Spirit of God speaks in their conscience. You're beholding church people ***pretending*** not to hear.

John is asked why he is baptizing (**25**) and responds in a way that again draws all attention to the coming work of Christ - ***John 1:26-27*** - ***"John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, [27] even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."***

John can't wait to talk about Jesus. He races over his own work - ***"I baptize with water but....."*** "My work is external with ordinary water. What everyone needs is the work of the One coming after me."

And again, when John faithfully points them to Christ - when he points these Jewish leaders ***beyond*** the ceremonial and the outward to the One coming after him, these religious leaders have no questions whatsoever. They aren't up to facing the truth about themselves or their accountability before God the Son.

John is ***trying*** to get them ready for Jesus. And many times it's hard work getting people ready for Jesus. And here's something to notice in closing. It ***matters*** whether or not we allow ourselves to have our hearts opened up to Jesus through the words and efforts of those God uses to do His advance work in our minds. It matters because hard hearted people won't be any more responsive to Jesus than they are to those who bear witness in His name. Our hearts get set in a certain direction and shape.

Consider these words, not from ***John the Baptist***, but from ***Jesus Himself*** to the same group of Jewish religious leaders: ***Luke 20:1-8*** - ***"One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up [2] and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." [3] He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, [4] Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" [5] And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' [6] But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." [7] So they answered that they did not know where it came from. [8] And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."***

Here these leaders are - cagy as ever with Jesus. They don't want to acknowledge Him. They want to be clever with Him. They're using words and sentences just to ***avoid*** being confronted by Him. And Jesus ends the conversation Himself. ***Verse 8*** is Jesus' way of saying ***"This conversation is over. I'm not talking to you anymore."***

Pause right here and think about this. How do you respond when Jesus reveals things way deep down inside that you've kept from reflection and repentance? All of us need to confront the ***habit of craftiness*** with the voice of the Holy Spirit - the

deeply entrenched habit of **preserving your own rights against Christ's liberating Lordship**.

Consider some of these areas:

You go to church but never change certain parts of your personal life.

You read the Bible, a bit, but not with a regular, humble, repentant heart. It usually get crowded out by other forms of entertainment and social life.

You don't take seriously the Lordship of Jesus - His **absolute ownership** of your whole life - when you're with non-Christians.

That can change this morning. Let His Word in **deeper** than the common **light hearing** that happens all over in North American churches. Do you really want to have it all **blown away** by the wind again and again? Let it put down roots in your soul.

Let the truth about Jesus in. Let it in today. Refuse **craftiness** when you speak to the Lord. Only the truth can set your heart free.