

John 1:19-34

Part One

I recently went to an art shop to have a drawing framed. And, if you've never done that sort of thing before, then it is really quite interesting to watch someone who knows something about the art of picture framing. Because a good frame is one which will complement the work it is defining in a number of different ways - in color, in texture, composition, size, shape, etc. A good frame is one that highlights a work of art in all sorts of ways, but *without drawing attention to itself*. If the frame does its job right, then your attention is drawn into the work, and you will be more focused on the work *because* of the frame, than you might have been *without it*.

As we continue our study of John's Gospel this morning, I want us to begin looking at verses 19-34 of chapter 1 because I think they form a coherent unit. However, because of our time constraints, we will break up our study of this section into two parts, this morning concentrating on the first half, verses, 19-28, and in our next study, verses 29-34. But as we begin our study of this unit this morning, I hope you will see how that analogy of picture and frame is *one* useful way of thinking about the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus that is depicted in these verses. Before we go any further, however, let's pray together.....

Father in Heaven, please guide us now as we look at this Gospel, this "good news" of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Help us to benefit from our reading of these verses in the way that you intended us to benefit from them - that is, help us, by your Spirit to read and understand these things aright. And please use these things to draw us closer to yourself, that we might love you more and then demonstrate this reality in increasingly obvious ways. In Jesus' name we ask it....

Now those of you who were with us last week will know that we have already seen how the first 18 verses of John's Gospel are a kind of "prologue" or introduction. And in much the same way as an opening movement in a symphony will often introduce most of the main musical ideas that will then be developed throughout the *rest* of the symphony, so it is the case that the first 18 verses of this Gospel introduce a number of themes that will be picked up on in the chapters that follow, in various ways.

Some of the themes that we saw last week included *the relationship between Jesus and God*, and *the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist and Jesus and Moses*, and also *the relationship between Jesus and the Rest of Humanity*. And there are other themes as well, including the overall theme of *the identity of Jesus as God in human flesh*.

And so, a number of themes were introduced in the opening verses and in our study this week we see John now picking up on and expanding upon at least two of these, namely *the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus* and, as a consequence of clarifying that relationship, he inevitably ends up telling us things that help to further his readers' understanding of *who Jesus is*. In particular, the verses he seems to be expanding upon are verses 6-10,

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him....

And so, in our next two studies on John, we're going to look at three things. This morning we will look at John the Baptist as "the witness to the light" which is, of course, Jesus. Or, in terms of our opening analogy, we're going to look at John as the "frame" that defines and draws our attention to the picture that God was painting. Then, when we return to this study in a couple of weeks we will take up the *second* matter which is to look at Jesus as the one that John was witnessing TO - as the "picture" upon which John wants to focus peoples' attention. Finally, I want to finish our look at this section of John by thinking briefly about what it might mean to live in the light of the legacy that John the Baptist has left behind.

(Read the Passage)

John the Baptist's Witness to the Light

John the Baptist, as we know from the other Gospels, was a man who lived in the Judean wilderness and there carried out his God-given assignment of preaching a message of repentance - i.e., calling people back to faithful living, challenging them to turn their hearts back toward God. And those who responded to John's preaching were then given a ritual baptism which pointed to their need for cleansing and purification.

Now, as the story of verses 19-34 unfolds, John has been carrying on this ministry for some time- for how long we cannot say - but it was apparently having some sort of impact. People were starting to pay attention to him. People were starting to *talk* about him, and even to wonder about who he was and whether or not there might be something special going on with him.

Back in Jerusalem, amongst the Sanhedrin - which was the reigning Jewish religious authority of the day - but amongst the Sanhedrin there was apparently a growing concern and curiosity about John the Baptist.

Now the Sanhedrin consisted primarily of two groups of people. The larger group were called Sadducees. They were wealthier and more formally educated and more numerous than the other group. The Sadducees were sort of like the "old guard" - keepers of the religious traditions of the Jewish people. They were all about policy and procedure and formal religion.

Over against them were the less numerous Pharisees, which were a kind of reform movement within Judaism. What were the Pharisees like? One commentator - Leon Morris - is helpful here. He describes them as "ordinary people" who distinguished themselves from the Sadducees by their piety and pursuit of "holiness". They studied the Mosaic law carefully but, as Morris says, "...they tended to surround [God's law] with a mass of their own interpretations.

In practice this meant that the keeping of their tradition” over time, took on a greater significance than even the Law itself, so much so that, “on occasion, as Jesus pointed out, their traditions hindered people from living in accordance with the *spirit* of the Law. Even further, Morris writes, “...their [numerous] regulations led to an emphasis on the outward” - all of which turned out to be a great breeding ground for spiritual pride and hypocrisy.

And so, these two groups - the Sadducees and the Pharisees - get a team of people together consisting of priests and Levites and send them out on a fact-finding mission to try and work out what John the Baptist is up to. This is the group that then approaches John, in vs 19, asking “Who are you?”

And John’s response to them is *very* interesting.

Rather than answer their question, John starts out by telling them who he is NOT: “I am not the Christ” he said. Which is a curious way to reply and it bears looking at a little more closely. For starters, it needs to be said that the word “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “Messiah”. Who was the Messiah? Within and throughout the writings of the Old Testament, there was this growing expectation among God’s people that God was going to send someone, who had a very special relationship to Him, and that this someone would be uniquely anointed by God and would be filled with His power and His Spirit and would somehow bring about the deliverance or “salvation” of God’s people in some miraculous way.

Which leads us back to the interesting thing about John’s response - and that is the fact that he said it at all. In other words, you notice that the delegation didn’t ask, “Are you the Christ?” They asked, “Who are you?” To which John responded that he was not the Christ, as if to say, “I know what you’re thinking and, NO, I’m *not* the Christ.” Which, in fact, would have been precisely the thing that was on their mind. And we know this because of Luke 3:15 which makes it quite clear that John’s ministry was having such an impact that many people were wondering if HE might have been the Messiah. And so, John puts an end to such speculation right away. “I am not the Christ”.

As a result, since John has denied the thing that was foremost in their minds, they questioned him further about *other* possibilities from Scripture. You can almost see them pulling out their notepads and putting a check by the box “not the Christ” and then moving down to the next option - Elijah. If John wasn’t the Christ, was he Elijah?

Now where were they getting this idea from? Well, turn with me to the last book of the Old Testament - Malachi, one book to the left of Matthew, and to the closing words of that book, where God says,

"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."

Now, as some of you may know, Elijah was a prophet in the OT and was one of only two people in the Bible who were taken up into heaven without seeing death (2 Kings 2:11). With this in mind, many Jews understood the words of Malachi to mean that Elijah - the actual Elijah, the same one who had been taken up into heaven - would return before the great day of the Lord which is a reference to the time, at the end of history, when God would render judgment upon all the peoples of the earth.

And so, some of the religious leaders in John the Baptist's day were wondering if he might be Elijah and if, therefore, the great Day of the Lord might be at hand. But to this possibility John again says, "No."

Now the interesting thing about John's response is that while he himself denies that he is Elijah, Jesus, in Matthew 11, says otherwise,

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, ¹ let him hear.

So what is going on here? Why does *John* say that he is not Elijah, while Jesus says that he is? Well, in response to that, let me say a couple things which, I hope, will clarify the matter a bit. For starters, it needs to be said that John's denial was absolutely correct. He *wasn't* Elijah. He wasn't the Elijah of 2 Kings who was carried away in a chariot of fire. That was a different person. And John knew that.

Secondly, it needs to be pointed out that in John's Gospel it is John commenting on his *own* identity while, in Matthew, it is *Jesus* who is talking about John. And notice that Jesus does not simply say that John is Elijah but he actually makes some qualifying remarks *before* he says that. He says, "...if you are willing to accept it he [John] is Elijah..." What does Jesus mean by "if you are willing to accept it"? Well, he means exactly what is meant in Luke's Gospel, chapter 1, when the angel of the Lord appeared to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, to tell him about his son. Listen to what the angel said to Zechariah,

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will 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 for the Lord a people prepared.

Again, notice that it says that John will go "in the spirit and power of Elijah" but not AS Elijah. As one commentator succinctly puts it, John came fulfilling the forerunner's *role* of Elijah in preparing the way of the Lord.

In short, Jesus' qualifying remarks, as well as the direct statements of the angel in Luke make it clear that to interpret Malachi 4:5 as describing a *literal* return of Elijah is to misunderstand the prophet's intent. John did come in the spirit and power of Elijah, but he did so figuratively, not literally.

Which is why both John's response, and Jesus' description of John are correct, when taken in context. John responded negatively when asked if he was the literal Elijah, while Jesus spoke positively when explaining that John was Elijah, figuratively speaking.

Having struck out twice, the delegation moves on to a third possibility as to John's identity. "Are you the prophet?", they asked, to which John again answers, "No.". Who is this "prophet" to whom they are referring? Most likely they were thinking of God's words to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18,

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

Just as many of the Jews in that day were looking for the Messiah, and for Elijah, so also were many of the view that the prophet referred to in Deuteronomy had not yet come. And so they asked John if he might be the one. But, again, he says no.

And so, having struck out three times, and unwilling to return to Jerusalem with an inadequate report, they ask one more time, "Who are you?" And this time they get a more concrete answer, although still not the one they were expecting. They wanted to know WHO John was and he replied by telling them WHAT he was: *A Voice*. And not just any voice, he was THE voice. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. The voice that the prophet Isaiah had spoken of in chapter 40, saying,

A voice cries:¹ "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Now, in context, the prophet Isaiah is referring to the return of God's people from exile and how, metaphorically, God was going to prepare the way for that great return by creating a smooth path for them, one with no valleys and no mountains. And this passage, and the return spoken of here, was one which was understood as describing events that would immediately precede the coming of the Lord himself - the Messiah.

And this is how John refers to himself. This is how John understands his ministry and his place in the scheme of things. The religious authorities had come to him, asking about his identity, and John responded by telling them about his *function*.

Well, the delegation have asked their questions, and they finally have *something* to report to the Jewish leaders other than John's denials. However, John's denying that he was the Christ, or Elijah, or "the Prophet", raises a further question in their minds. If John is not one of the three persons mentioned, then *why is he baptizing people?* And the issue they are really getting at here is *authority*. If John is not any of the three people they have mentioned, then by what authority is he going around doing the things he is doing - and to *Jews* nonetheless? Who and what gives him the right to go about performing ritual baptisms on people? The Jewish leaders had not granted him that authority. He wasn't claiming to be anyone special. So why was he doing this?

And to understand the full significance of this question, you need to know something about baptism in that day, as practiced among the Jews. As the late Leon Morris points out,

Baptism was not a new practice in Judaism. It was the regular rite in the admission of converts from other religions. When such a conversion took place, the males of the family were circumcised and all, of both sexes, were baptized. This was seen as the ceremonial removal of all the pollutions contracted in the Gentile world. The novelty in John's case and the sting in his practice was that he applied to Jews the ceremony that was held to be appropriate in the case of Gentiles coming newly into the faith. All Jews were prepared to accept the view that Gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing. But to put Jews in the same class was horrifying.

And so the question of John's baptism was not only a question about *authority*, it was a question about its *significance*. Why was John applying to Jews - the chosen people of God - the ritual that had been used to show the need that *outsiders* had of being cleansed before becoming part of God's people? What was John saying, not only about the *individuals* he was baptizing, but about the Jewish people *as a whole*?

And in response to this question John, once again, gives them an indirect answer which, really, is more of a deflection than anything else. They want to know why John is doing what he is doing and he basically responds by saying, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." In other words, it's as if John is saying to them, "Look, you ain't seen *nothing* yet. Sure, I'm baptizing people with water, but the guy coming after me.....oh my gosh....let me tell you how great he is. He's so great, that I am not even fit to untie the strap of his sandals...."

Now, to get the full sense of what is being said here, you have to understand that at the time John said this, there was a very popular Rabbinic saying going around that went something like this: "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong". In other words, disciples were expected to respond to any request their teacher might make EXCEPT a request to loosen or untie his sandal. That was considered to be too menial, too humiliating for a disciple to perform.

So what does John do here? John selects the very task that the rabbinic saying describes as too humiliating for a disciple to perform, and says that with regard to the one who is coming after him, he is not even *worthy* enough to do this thing that no disciple would dream of doing for his own teacher. In short, the implication here is that just as the comparison between himself and the one coming after him - Jesus - is so off the charts it's ridiculous, so too is the difference between the *mere* water baptism that he is performing and what's going to take place when Jesus comes. John's baptism ought to be the least of their concerns.

Now, when we pick up the second part of this study, we're going to see how in verses 29-34 an answer **is** given as to the *purpose* of John's baptismal activities as well as to the concerns that the Jewish leaders had with regard to John's authority for doing these things. But I want to stop where we are, for now, and use what little time we have left to try and tie up a couple loose ends.

At the beginning of our time this morning, I said that we were going to focus on John as "the witness to the light" and as the frame which would define and direct the world's attention to Jesus, who was coming after him. And we see how John has done that here. The form that his witness has taken is essentially two-fold. On the one hand, he has set the religious authorities straight as to his *own* identity - as compared to Jesus - and thus squashed any rumors that might have been going around as to his being the Messiah himself. He has made it clear both who he is NOT, as well as who he IS. And even in *that* regard, his self descriptions are more about his purpose and role than they are about his name or identity. But at any rate, John has been very clear. He is not Jesus, he is not "the Word". He is, instead, the *voice* that was sent to prepare the way for 'the Word'.

Now, as is always the case, there is a lot that could be said about the significance of these words for God's people in this and every age, but let me just quickly draw your attention to two things. Firstly, please notice John's *humility*. While there was plenty of opportunity for him to promote himself and the unique and privileged position in which he stood with regard to God's purposes, John never took advantage of that fact. He never rubbed anyone's nose in it. He didn't make a big deal out of it. Here John is *self-deferential*. Not self-REFERENTIAL but self-DEFERENTIAL. He was supremely, gloriously, even scandalously un-interested in himself or his reputation.

At the same time, while being extremely *self-deferential* he is, at the same time, very *Christ-REFERENTIAL*. When the delegation came to him, he immediately responded to them in a way which would bring to a screeching halt any thoughts of putting him on some sort of pedestal, or making him out to be some sort of prophetic hero. When the delegation persist in questions about his *identity*, he is more concerned to talk about his *function* - what he was sent to do - to be a voice, a forerunner, one who prepares the way for another. When the delegates want to engage him in a discussion about the meaning and significance of his baptism, he responds in a way that, again, would cause them to stop thinking about him and to wonder, again, at this person who was coming, that was even already in their midst - and for whom John was not worthy of even un-tying his shoes.

And that basic movement - FROM self and TO Christ - is not only a pattern worth *identifying* it is, and remains, a pattern worth *imitating*, a dance worth learning.

Because it is not only the privilege of John to be the first and greatest witness to Christ, it is also our privilege and responsibility, as Christ's disciples, to serve him in that same way. There is all sorts of descriptive language in the NT that points to this reality. The fact that we are bearers of God's image points to this reality. The fact that the Spirit of God dwells within us points to this reality. The fact that we are a "called out" people points to this reality. The fact that we are described as "ambassadors" for Christ, points to this reality.

This movement - from self and toward Christ - can be a discernible pattern in our lives. When we are successful, and the world wants to praise us, there is an opportunity to re-direct the attention from ourselves, to Christ - who is the giver of all good gifts. In our relationships, the day to day of living with and struggling with and loving people there are countless opportunities to keep pointing people to Christ. When we fail - and we are mostly if not entirely to blame for it - even then there are opportunities to continue this pattern as we bravely embrace and take responsibility for our sin and failure and then go on to respond in the way that gospel repentance requires - remembering the sufficiency of Christ for our sin and failure, casting ourselves again on his mercy - and as we do making it know that this is *exactly* what we are doing - and then being willing to make amends and repair the damage that true gospel repentance would require. Even when we are troubled and face various hardships, and our hearts are breaking, even in the dark places we sometimes find ourselves in there is an opportunity as we move from the mere acknowledgment of the things that trouble us to fixing our gaze on the One without whose sovereign permission this painful providence would not have been allowed to pass.

Self deferential. Christ referential.

Let us pray.....