

The Life of Jesus

Sermon 3: Jesus and John the Baptist

Passages: Acts 19:1-7
Matthew 3:1-17

Let's pray.

We went to the beach yesterday at Catherine Hill Bay. As I looked out over the ocean, I became fascinated by two, blond-haired, twin boys, about 5 or 6 years old, both wearing identical wetsuits, playing together in the shallows.

Everything one did, the other would do. One would jump over a wave and so would the other. One would splash water and so would the other. One would run into the surf and, sure enough, he would be immediately followed by the other. They were twins; and they were identical in so many ways!

It made me think about today's passage from Matthew's Gospel, about John the Baptist. You see, John and Jesus were contemporaries. And for many reasons, it would be easy to think of them as twin brothers—identical in so many ways!

Let me give you a quick list of some of the similarities:

1. Both John's and Jesus' family lineages could be traced back to important characters of the OT. (John was from a family of Levi, Israel's first priest, while Jesus came from the lineage of King David.)
2. Both John and Jesus were supernaturally conceived. (Elizabeth was barren. Mary was a virgin.)
3. Even while they were still in their mothers' wombs, they each had encounters with the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1).
4. From an early age, both John and Jesus were radically inspired by God's Spirit to step out in public ministry.
5. Both men were quickly recognised by the community as *prophets*.

But there's more! You see, the one thing that really struck me as I read today's passage in Matthew 3 was **the many similarities** in the **ministries of both John and Jesus**.

In verse 1, we're told that **John the Baptist was a preacher**. *So was Jesus*. In verse 2, we're told that **John called people to repent**. *So did Jesus*. Again, in verse 2, we're told that **John called people to consider the invisible realm of the Kingdom of Heaven**. Well, *so did Jesus*. In fact, the exact same words used by John in verse 2 ("**Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near**") will be uttered by Jesus in chapter 4, verse 17!

And even though Jesus may have had better dress sense than John (in verse 4, we read that John wore clothes of camel's hair), and perhaps he had a better diet than John (we're told that John ate locusts and wild honey), nevertheless, when we get to verse 6, we're told that **John baptised those who came to him confessing their sins**. (Indeed, we often think that this was John's *unique* ministry- We call him "*John the baptiser*".) But, according to the 3rd chapter of John's Gospel, *Jesus also baptised*. (In fact, verse 26 of John 3 tells us that, at one point, Jesus and His disciples were even baptising more people than John!)

Finally, jumping to verses 7 to 10, we read how John got angry with the self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees. In verse 7, he calls them a "*brood of vipers!*" But, as we shall see in chapters 12 and 23 of this same Gospel, Jesus will use these exact same words as he scolds the Pharisees and Sadducees for being hypocrites. In verse 9, John scolds them for relying on their ancestry to Abraham, saying that God could "**raise up children to Abraham from these stones**". But, of course, Jesus will say something very similar to them in John 8. Finally, in verse 10, John speaks about God chopping down "**every tree that does not bear fruit**". But, in Matthew 7, Jesus will repeat this expression word-for-word in his Sermon on the Mount! (It makes me wonder if Jesus could be charged with plagiarism.)

The point I'm trying to make is simple: **The similarities between John and Jesus are so numerous as to make you think they were identical twins!** In fact, the similarities continue!

- John had disciples; so did Jesus.
- John's disciples called him "Rabbi" or "teacher" ...and so did the disciples of *Jesus*.
- John had a ministry which rocked the political boat and got him killed; and so did Jesus.

- In fact, both John and Jesus will be martyred by the same King, Herod Agrippa (the son of Herod the Great).

As I said, it's almost as if John and Jesus were reading from the same song sheet... following the same agenda!

Indeed, *this is what bothers me!* With all these striking parallels between John and Jesus, it is far too easy to think that John and Jesus were **equals!** Just a couple of prophets; Co-workers for God. (This is exactly what Muslims believe.) And if they were equals, then ***why should anyone believe that Jesus is unique, or that He is more worthy of honour than John?***

(Just to accentuate my question, did you know that there's a small religious sect found in southern Iraq and Iran, called ***the Mandeans*** who actually believe that John the Baptist has a higher status than Jesus! According to their teaching, Jesus went off the rails and perverted the teachings of John the Baptist!)

So, here's my question again: **Why should anybody believe that Jesus is *more important or more worthy of honour* than John? Particularly in this day of all-inclusive spirituality and tolerance, who would dare say that Jesus is unique or special amongst the prophets?**

Well, according to today's text, Matthew certainly did! Look at verse 3. As Matthew introduces us to John's ministry, he makes it clear that John the Baptist was only Jesus' forerunner-- that John was merely "a voice" calling people to turn and discover Jesus. In fact, Matthew quotes from Isaiah to show, not only that John came to prepare the way for Jesus but that Jesus was none other than God-- ***the LORD!***

But, of course, John was also aware that Jesus was unique. In verse 11, John freely admits this: ***'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with^{tb} the Holy Spirit and fire.'***

Later on in the passage, as John reluctantly baptises Jesus, he gains more understanding of Jesus' divine status when he hears a voice from heaven proclaim, ***"This is my beloved Son!"***

It's no wonder why, in John 3, the Baptist tells his own disciples, ***"I must decrease and He must increase."***

But all this begs the question: So why, then, did John baptise? Didn't John see his baptism as a way of cleansing people from their sins?

Not at all! John was clear in the fact that his baptism could never take away people's sins! On the day when John finally saw Jesus coming, he was quick to say, ***"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."*** John's baptism could never come close to doing what Jesus alone could do!

In fact, John only ever saw his baptism as a preliminary plunge...a baptism that would lead to **another baptism**; one that would be administered by the Messiah involving the Holy Spirit and fire. This explains why John didn't get upset when he heard that Jesus and His disciples was baptising more people than he. John's baptism was only a signpost to a greater baptism!

But we still haven't really answered the question, **"Why did John baptise?"** To answer that question, we must not start so much with the act of baptism, but with the place where John chose to baptise—**the Jordan River**. If you think back to the OT Book of Joshua, you'll remember that the Jordan River was the last obstacle that the people of Israel needed to cross before they could enter into the Promised Land of Canaan. This final stage of their redemption finally took place under the overall leadership of Joshua. The actual procession into the river, however, was initiated by the priests.

So, why did John baptise? John, a man from the lineage of priests, entered part way into **the Jordan River** and baptised the people of Israel as a way of speaking about a new redemption that was about to occur; for, in John's mind, *a new Joshua* was about to arrive on the scene! (Interestingly, in Hebrew, the names of Joshua and Jesus are exactly the same—Yoshu'a/Yesu'a). As John, the priest, stood there **in the middle of** the Jordan River, he told people to come and get themselves ready for the One who would soon come to **take them across** the River. This new Joshua would finally bring them into the Promised Land of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In other words, John's baptism was a priestly act of preparation. He entered the River and stood there (like the priests did in Joshua's day), waiting for the LORD to come and complete this great movement of redemption.

And so, on a multitude of fronts, Jesus was head and shoulders above John...and John knew it!

Take their preaching, for example. In today's passage, John speaks with the words of a hellfire and brimstone preacher—he talks of ***“a fire that will blaze”*** and ***“an axe that will chop down the lifeless tree”***. Although it is true that Jesus occasionally scolded the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the Sadducees with words like this, Jesus dominant message was one of hope and comfort to the poor and the outcast.

This, in fact, could be the reason why, in Matthew 11, John becomes puzzled by Jesus and His ministry...to the point that he even sends some of his disciples to inquire as to whether Jesus is really the Christ! You get the impression that John was looking for more hellfire and brimstone!

And, of course, there's the whole issue of baptism. Although Jesus and John both baptised, **John's baptism** was only designed to point people *forward* to the new Joshua who would lead them across the great River, while **Jesus' baptism** was designed to *celebrate the fact that the River has now been crossed and that we now stand in the Promised Land!*

Yes, it is true that many aspects of the life and ministry of John and Jesus were similar. **But**, we must not make the mistake of so many who have elevated John the Baptist to a status that is *above* what he really deserves. If you do, then you haven't understood what Jesus has done and the radical shift He has single-handedly caused in the world!

For, the fact is that a new age has dawned in Him! And as a result, **even you and I now stand in a place *above* John!**

Just listen to what Jesus said in Luke 7:28.

28 I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Did you hear that? ***“He who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John.”*** How can that be? Wasn't John the Baptist a great prophet? Wasn't he a great preacher? Didn't he baptise the multitudes in Israel? Didn't he die a martyr's death? Aren't a whole lot of churches (like ours) named after him?

Yes, all that is true! But the fact is, Jesus has come to bring us across the River! As a result, you and I now live in a new era! We live in a new age! We live in the time of the Kingdom of Heaven! And for this reason, you and I are **greater** than John!

In short;

- We have a **greater assurance** that the Promised Land is ours
- We have a **greater experience** of our freedom from sin in the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- We have a **greater knowledge** of God's love and grace in His Son.
- We have **greater voices** that can lead others to Jesus. John was a voice crying in the wilderness...on the edge of the Jordan River. But we are a voice that calls from within the Promised Land...come over and join us! And our voices are matched by the grace we now share and the visible change demonstrated in our lives.

John was great, but because of Jesus, we are greater than he! **John stood** in the river...but now **we stand** inside the Promised Land, beckoning the world to come and join us as fellow members of the Kingdom of Heaven!

Let's pray.