

Look, the Lamb of God

John 1:19-34,

Key Verse: 1:29

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’”

Do you know what everyone’s favorite topic of conversation is? Of course, it is themselves. I saw on the internet that neuroscientists have actually done research with MRIs to figure out why it is people get such pleasure from talking about themselves. But I don’t know if that research will make it any nicer to be around a self-centered person. Today we have the unique privilege of seeing somebody who truly overcame this character flaw. His name is John the Baptist. In John’s gospel, John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus appears two times. The first testimony, in 1:19-36, was at the beginning of his ministry when John was very popular. Yet he overcame all temptation to make himself the center of attention. The last testimony, in 3:22-36, was at the end of his ministry when it was diminishing day by day. But he was not discouraged; he was full of joy, because as always he was not thinking about himself but about Jesus’ glory that was shining brighter and brighter.

By this attitude John showed himself worthy to receive and deliver a very great revelation about Jesus. In the last passage we saw how Jesus is the eternal Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Today we see, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, what John reveals further about his identity. John calls Jesus “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Today we want to think about the attitude of John the Baptist as a witness and how we can imitate it. Then we want to meditate on the identity of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Those are the two parts of this message.

First, the attitude of a witness (19-28).

In last week’s passage we learned that John the Baptist was a man sent from God as a witness, to testify to the true light that was coming into the world. Now we can see how he did that practically, at a time when heavy pressure was being brought on him by some religious leaders.

John the Baptist’s appearance in Israel made a big splash at the end of a long spiritual dry period. There had been no prophets in Israel since Malachi, whose prophecies make up the last book of the Old Testament. This gap between the Old and New Testament is called the 400 years of silence. John the Baptist broke that silence with a loud and clear message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 3:2). John lived an austere life in the wilderness, separating himself from the corruption of the world. He uncompromisingly called people to purify their hearts and their daily lives.

The spiritually thirsty people responded to John’s message wholeheartedly, coming out to the desert to be baptized, confessing their sins. John’s ministry filled people with the anticipation that the Messiah and the kingdom of God would be coming soon, and rightly so. People even began to wonder if John himself was the Messiah. The Jewish religious leaders also began to wonder about John. It seems pretty clear that they felt their authority was threatened by John’s popularity.

That brings us to verse 19. “Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.” Of course, they already knew what John’s name was; this verse means they wanted him to tell them what kind of spiritual authority he thought he possessed—who he was in the context of God’s history and salvation work.

Now we see what kind of witness John really was. His first answer, interestingly, is not positive but negative—he doesn’t say who he is, he says who he’s not. “He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Messiah.’” (20) John immediately put to rest any speculation that he might be the Messiah. We shouldn’t take it for granted that John said this. The verse even says, “He did not fail to confess,” pointing out that John, if he were less humble, might have given a less clear answer. He could have said, “I’m somebody really important in God’s history, but I’ll let you figure that out.” That’s called “playing the mystery angle.” Did you know that sometimes we can boast about ourselves without even saying a word? Sometimes there is a temptation to let others think we are greater than we really are. We don’t come out and say we are somebody great, but then we don’t exactly mind if people think we are. But John the Baptist actually stopped people from thinking too highly of him, first of all by not failing to confess: “I am not the Messiah.”

Because John didn’t give them any positive answer, they asked again. “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” (21) This question actually has its basis in the scriptures. The book of Malachi said that the prophet Elijah would return before the day of the Lord (Mal 4:5). John the Baptist resembled Elijah in his lifestyle, spirit and power. Jesus even said that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come (Mk 9:13). But John didn’t even want to make an issue of it. Then they said, “Are you the Prophet?” (21b). “The Prophet” refers to someone whose coming was prophesied by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 18:15). The Jewish scholars probably had several interpretations about whether this meant Elijah or the Messiah or somebody else. Anyway, John just answered, “No.” (21c).

Did you notice that every time John is asked a question about himself, his answers become shorter and shorter? It’s like he’s getting tired of the subject. Most people never get tired of talking when the subject is themselves, even though they wear out their listeners. Why do people do this? Of course, it’s because of the natural human desire to be recognized, appreciated and validated. But some people really seem to go too far in the pursuit of recognition. If they are not recognized by people they feel sorry for themselves and demonstrate in many ways. In the pursuit of recognition or validation from others, people damage their bodies and souls. I’m not saying it’s always wrong to talk about ourselves. It’s good to share our prayer topics and concerns, and even our life testimony when called upon for the glory of God. But we have to be a blessing to others and not just focus on our own interests.

How can we overcome self-centeredness? We read one answer to this in last week’s passage. **Verse 12 says, “Yet to all who did receive him” (that is, Jesus,) “to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”** By knowing how we are valued as children of God, we can begin to overcome self-centeredness and find what’s interesting in others and find joy in our mission to lead others to the truth. We won’t need to struggle to make people think this way or that about us. We can also help each other overcome the thirst for

human recognition. How? By giving each other appropriate recognition and validation as children of God. That's what can help people be healed of seeking people's praise too much, or seeking it from the wrong places.

Now, let's think about the positive testimony of John the Baptist about himself. Finally, the religious leaders said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" It's sad that they had no spiritual desire of their own, but just wanted an official statement to take back to their bosses. Nonetheless, John gave a most excellent answer. Let's read verse 23. **"John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"**

Though John was humble, he actually had a clear identity and mission that he had personally accepted based on the word of God. Here John is quoting Isaiah 40:3. John defined himself through his mission from the word of God. By faith in the word of God, John received God's calling to be the herald of the Messiah. This was his source of courage, confidence and strength. John's sense of calling enabled him to give up worldly pleasure to live in the wilderness for the sake of his mission. It enabled him to go through misunderstandings, rejection, temptations, persecutions, prison and even martyrdom.

I think we also need to find the right word to define our calling, and the more specific details it has, the better. To talk about myself, which I probably shouldn't do in this message above all, but anyway, When M. Anastasia and I were married we received a verse from Acts 18, verse 26: **"He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately."** This verse was so great for our life of mission because it gave specific actions that Priscilla and Aquila took, which we could imitate. They invited someone to their house.

John said, **"I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"** It's a beautiful answer, and the content of this verse is so hopeful about the coming of the kingdom of God. But the Pharisees who had been sent to John didn't care. They only replied, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (24-25). They were only interested in questions of authority. They wanted to accuse John of baptizing without a license. They were not concerned about the work of God that was being done through John. They were concerned about being in control of things.

Their language had now become plainly threatening. But John was not shaken at all. Amazingly, John didn't even defend his own baptism but continued to downplay his own work in order to magnify Jesus. Look at verses 26 and 27. **"I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'"** This could be taken as a kind of warning. John and Jesus both spoke in judgment of the corrupted religious institution at that time. John's statement about the greatness of who is coming next should really lead these religious leaders to get their act together.

John said that the one coming after him would be so much greater that it would sweep aside all concerns about what John himself was doing. By comparison to the one who was coming after,

John said, he's not even worthy to tie the shoes of the greater one. From this we see the final and greatest way to overcome self-centeredness. It is to be Jesus-centered. In the end, we are all just servants of the light who are unworthy to have such a tremendous calling. The mission we received is not something we earned or qualified ourselves for over others. It is 100% God's grace toward an undeserving sinner.

Second, the contents of John's testimony (29-34).

Finally, after one-and-a-half messages of buildup, Jesus himself appears on the scene in John's gospel. Let's read verse 29. **"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"** It seems that Jesus came to John to be baptized. We say that John pointed the way to Jesus. This time, he did it literally, with his finger. "Look!" As soon as John saw Jesus, he cried out, **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"**

With these words, John defined the identity and mission of the Messiah with a level of spiritual insight that no human could have revealed to him. Who at that time would have called the promised Messiah, Israel's long-awaited deliverer, a "lamb"? A lamb is a meek, gentle, defenseless animal. The Messiah is also called the "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah," but that's not the word John used. John said the Messiah is, most importantly, the Lamb of God.

The phrase "Lamb of God" is rooted in the Jewish sacrificial system. Its origin is in Exodus 12. The Israelites were groaning in slavery to the Egyptian king, Pharaoh. They were treated mercilessly and powerless to escape. In their desperate situation, they cried out to God. He heard their prayers and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and sent Moses as a deliverer. Moses challenged the power of Pharaoh through plagues sent from God. But Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the Israelites go, even though his country was being devastated by the plagues.

Finally, God sent a plague of death on all the firstborn. Interestingly, the angel of death did not itself discriminate between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. But God provided a way for the Israelites to be saved from the midst of this judgment. Did God manifest legions of angels to protect them? No, they would be saved by lambs. God said that each family had to slaughter a year-old lamb without defect and smear its blood on the doorframes of their houses. That night, the angel of death passed through Egypt to strike down all the firstborn sons, from that of the king to that of the lowest slave. However, whenever the angel of death saw blood on a doorframe, he passed over that house. Those inside were spared. The blood of the lamb had power to save people from judgment.

By calling Jesus "The Lamb of God", John the Baptist foreshadowed Jesus' death before his ministry even started, and gave its interpretation: that Jesus would be a sacrifice to set us free from the death penalty of our sin. He is the Lamb that God provided for our sin, just as Abraham told his son Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah, **"God himself will provide the Lamb for the burnt offering."** As the lambs in Exodus were to be without defects, Jesus is the sinless Son of God, who alone can be a perfect sacrifice to atone for sins. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, **"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed**

from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

John said that the Lamb of God “takes away the sin of the world.” In this, John made another revolutionary claim—he is saying that the real problem of the world is the sin problem. The Jews were no doubt hoping that when the Messiah come, he would save them by overthrowing their Roman conquerors. But without being saved from the sin in our own hearts, no other kind of salvation can actually save us at all in the end. It is sin that makes us powerless and unable to fulfill the purpose of our lives. Instead, we waste our lives doing things that make us less and less able to live for God’s glory the more we do them. But the Lamb of God brings the power of forgiveness, of being set free from condemnation. Hebrews 9:14 says, **“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.”** John also understood that Jesus’ salvation was universal in scope. This Messiah was not just to help the people of Israel; he would take away the sin of the whole world.

How can we receive this blessing of having our sins taken away? Can we buy it with money? Can we earn it by punishing ourselves, doing some work, or finishing some achievement? We can find a clue to an answer in this key verse. John said, “Look, the Lamb of God.” Many Bible teachers have seen in this one word, “Look,” the full description of the act of saving faith. The power of the Lamb’s blood works to wash away all our sins when we turn our eyes upon Jesus with faith. That means we stop looking to ourselves and all that we think we can do, and simply accept what Jesus did for us on the cross. This is like smearing the Lamb’s blood on the doorpost of our heart.

Bible scholar Benjamin Warfield asked us to imagine a man who has been robbed and badly beaten and thrown in the gutter. Of course, if you find such a person in real life you should be a Good Samaritan and help him. But that’s not what this story is about. Here, the robbed man is a representation of us and what the power of sin does to us. The man is robbed of everything, wounded so badly he can’t move a muscle, lying and shivering in a puddle of cold water that’s soaking through his clothes—his very life is draining out of him. What can a man in such a condition do for himself? The only part of his body he can move is his eyes. He can look in this direction or that. Warfield says that in the same way, a sinner can do nothing to change himself or his situation. Spiritually, he can do just one thing, and that is to look at Jesus and his cross. When, by faith, we lift our eyes to Jesus from wherever we are, that is salvation. That is the very act that gives the blood of the Lamb its great power in our lives. **“Look, the Lamb of God.”**

In verse 30, John said, **“This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”** Here John testifies that Jesus is the Eternal God. When this Jesus died as the Lamb of God, it was not mere human blood that he shed. It was the blood of the Son of God. This is why his blood is powerful enough to take away the sin of the world. How did John know all this about Jesus? He emphasized that he himself had not known Jesus (31,33a). It wasn’t his human insight or diligent research that gave him this knowledge. But by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, he could know Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (32,33b). So he said, **“I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One” (34).**

Today we learned about the good attitude that John the Baptist had, and, more importantly, the content of his testimony about Jesus, the Lamb of God. Let's pray that we may be free from the sin of self-glory-seeking, by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Lamb of God. Let's pray that we can be able to make such a good testimony.