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## JOHN THE BAPTIZER, PART 1

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### Part 28 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 7:18-27 | May 16, 2010

*Luke 7:18–27*

<sup>18</sup> The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, <sup>19</sup> calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” <sup>20</sup> And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” <sup>21</sup> In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. <sup>22</sup> And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>23</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

<sup>24</sup> When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup> What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. <sup>26</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup> This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’”

## INTRODUCTION

Howdy, Mars Hill. We continue in Luke’s Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God. We are in Luke 7:18–27, a brief two-week series on a man named John the Baptizer. And if you were with us early on in Luke, you know a little bit about this man. His family is a rather extraordinary story. His dad’s name is Zechariah, was essentially a pastor in a small town, likely working a part-time job, small congregation, maybe a town of dozens, a hundred, a congregation of singles, or dozens of people. A very humble, simple family. His family was likely poor, working primarily among those who were in large part illiterate. His mother was a devout woman, really did love the Lord. Her name was Elizabeth. And this simple, humble, hard-working, rural couple devoted to God, they loved God, they loved one another. They loved the people that they served in ministry, and what they really wanted was a child. They wanted to extend their love to the next generation, and so they prayed for many years. “God, please entrust to us a child. We’d love to get pregnant and have a baby.” And that prayer was not answered for many years.

What they did not do is what Abraham and Sarah had done many years prior, and that is sin against God, take matters into their own hands, encourage an adultery, and the birth of a child out of the marriage covenant, and all of the chaos that has ensued since. Instead, they kept loving God, kept loving one another, kept loving the people that God called them to serve in ministry, and asking God for the gift of a child. And even though they were older, perhaps fifty years old or more, we don’t know exactly, we read early in Luke’s Gospel that God answered their prayer. And by a miracle of God’s grace, Elizabeth was able to become pregnant with a son whose name was to be John. At roughly the same time, and perhaps even a few weeks or months after Elizabeth conceived, her relative, a young woman named Mary, a teenage virgin, also conceived by the power of God, through a miracle of the Holy Spirit, so that she and Elizabeth were pregnant at the same time with two cousins: John and Jesus. Both boys were born. They grew up, in all likelihood, knowing one another, getting some time together, playing with one another.

And John started his public ministry first, and he was a mighty preacher. After four hundred years of silence from the Old to the New Testament, there had not been a prophet of God raised up to preach. And John came preaching. And he came out of the wilderness, and he was Jesus’ eccentric, home-schooled cousin. He just was an odd kid, he just was. He lived in the woods. He walked out of the woods preaching. He’s wearing camel-hair clothing. He eats a steady diet of bugs and honey, and he yells at people for a living. Very eccentric guy, very eccentric guy. Would have been a great front man for an indie band, that kind of guy, just larger-than-life, eccentric personality. And he starts his ministry of preaching and teaching, and multitudes come to him to hear him preach and repent of their sin. And then ultimately, Jesus is baptized by him.

## THE GREATEST MAN IN THE WORLD

And Jesus later will make a statement about John that is extraordinary. And I would ask you this question by way of preface, other than Jesus Christ in the history of the world, who would you say—first thought that comes to mind—is the greatest person who has ever lived in the history of the world? If we were to take a poll, my assumption is it would be Billy Graham, or Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King, Jr., at least that’s who Americans would probably vote for. Who would Jesus say is the greatest person, other than himself, who has ever lived in the history of the world? Mohammed Ali said it was Mohammed Ali. Jesus says it’s John the Baptizer.

Here's what Jesus says. Luke 7:28, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John." What Jesus says is, "Of all the people born in all of the world's history, other than myself," him being the God-man. "There is no mere man or woman who is equal to John." That is a staggering statement. The greatest man in the history of the world. And since Jesus bestows this kind of dignity on John, obviously we should examine his life and see what we can learn.

And the first thing that we learn, and you'll see it today, as well as next week as we continue to examine John's life, is that first of all, his life doesn't fit the criteria of greatness that most of us would ascribe to greatness. In that day there is a political ruler, and his name is Herod the Great. And everyone considered him to be "the Great." And Jesus says, "No, John is greater than Herod." And John's a simple, humble preacher. And Herod is a king. And John is poor, and Herod is rich. And John lives in the wilderness, and Herod lives in the city. And John is a simple man, and Herod is a complex, well-educated, powerful man. How is it that Jesus could look at John, and say John is greater than anyone who's ever lived, including Herod the Great?

And it's because what tends to happen is here's how we define greatness. First of all, we see ourselves as individuals, so our primary allegiance is to ourselves. We become very selfish, and then we come up with some vision for our life. "I want to be this, have this, do this, achieve or accomplish this." And then we devote our life to serving ourselves, and pursuing our vision, our potential. And then we judge ourselves as to whether or not we feel like we lived a great life. And what we see with John is altogether different. He saw himself as part of a family trying to carry on a legacy of faithfulness that began with his mother and father. He saw himself as part of the people of God, the church of the Old Covenant, not standing alone, but standing as a part of a family, and as part of a spiritual community.

Additionally, John does not have a vision for his life. He has a calling on his life. John's not becoming what he wants to become, he is doing what God has called him to do. Furthermore, John doesn't evaluate his own life, and declare himself to be great. He waits for Jesus to make that determination. So true greatness is humbly serving God's people. It is obeying God's calling on your life, and allowing Jesus to decide whether or not you lived a faithful life that was great in his eyes.

And John's life, in all likelihood, in the eyes and minds of those who were in his day, was not considered a great life, but Jesus says of all the children that have ever been born to mothers, other than himself, of course, the greatest of all is John. So what we want to do is examine John's greatness. How was John great? Why was John great? And see what God might have for us.

## **1. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE SOUGHT ANSWERS FOR HIS QUESTIONS ABOUT JESUS.**

And the first is that John was great because he sought answers for his questions about Jesus. We read this in Luke 7:18-20. "The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And when the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"'"

Now here's the situation with John. His parents were devout. He learned the Bible growing up. They taught him the Old Testament Scriptures. He learned to pray, and walk with God, and serve God from a young age. He's part of a ministry family, and then he becomes this mighty preacher, and God speaks through him by the power of the Holy Spirit. And multitudes come out to learn from him, yet, he still has questions. That's curious. Here's the guy with all the answers who still has some questions. And what we learn is all of us have questions about Jesus, and we shouldn't be embarrassed by that. We shouldn't be ashamed of that. We should accept that as a good thing.

It doesn't matter how long you walk with Jesus. It doesn't matter how many books you've read, or how much Scripture you've memorized, or how many sermons you've listened to, or how much truth you have embraced, you're still going to occasionally have a question. And this isn't unbelief. This is just a question. He doesn't have a rejection of Jesus. He's just looking for clarification.

For some of you, those would be new questions. Life circumstances bring up a situation where you need to go learn, read the right books, listen to the right sermons, take the right classes, meet with the right people, and figure it out. Sometimes it's revisiting things that you've always believed, but they're being tested in that moment, so you need to double-check and confirm what you've always held to be true, and make sure that it's indeed factual.

And that's what's happening with John. He's got questions about Jesus. Many people, most people, maybe even all people have questions about Jesus. But what makes John great is that he pursues answers to those questions. He isn't willing to just have doubts or questions about Jesus, he also is passionate to pursue answers about them. He's got that rigorous curiosity that is greatness.

What are your questions about Jesus? What are you doing to seek answers to them? Reading the Bible, going to church, join a community group, read good books, download the right lectures, meeting with people who have answers. Find trustworthy friends and ask them for counsel. It's great to pursue that kind of knowledge that leads to a more rooted faith in Jesus.

Now, some of the commentators at this point, they actually sort of disparagingly critique John. They'll say things like, "Here he's demonstrating unbelief. Maybe he's wavering in his faith." No, he's not. Matthew adds another detail for this story that helps illuminate what is happening here, and that is that John has questions about Jesus, and sends some of his disciples to Jesus, because he, himself, cannot go to Jesus because he, himself, is in prison. That's helpful. That's helpful. He's in prison. He has been in prison, and he is suffering for his devotion to Jesus. And ultimately, they're going to behead him. John likely has some idea that he could be in prison for a really long time, that his life could be very hard. His life, in fact, could be taken from him, so he's got a very reasonable question. "Go ask my cousin Jesus."

And how many you just worshipping your cousin alone would be more than enough? Right? He is worshipping his cousin as God, is in prison for him, and will die for him. So let's not belittle John and say, "Oh, ye of little faith." That's a big deal to worship your younger cousin as God. And so what he sends his disciples to find out, 'cause John had many who followed him in ministry, "Go ask my cousin Jesus, are you the one we've been waiting for, or is someone else coming? Because if someone else is coming, I'm going to keep my head on my body. And if you're the one, I'm happy to suffer whatever the cost may be." That's a very reasonable thing.

This is what happens all the time, people believe something, but then when it's tested, or their life is in danger, they're just double-checking. I had this once with a guy who was dying in the hospital. "Can I see Pastor Mark?" "Yeah." I go visit. He says, "Okay, I'm gonna die, and I'm just double-checking, right, Jesus is God, and he rose from death, right?" "Yeah." "Okay, I just needed to double-check 'cause I'm gonna die." "Yeah, tell him I said, 'Hi.' Yes, he will meet you on the other side. He does bring life from death. You can and will rise to be like him. Yes, Jesus is God, and he rose from death." This guy ultimately did die, and the answer is he wasn't demonstrating a lack of faith or unbelief, he's just double-checking.

And that's a good idea, and that's what John's doing. "Are you the one we've been waiting for since sin entered the world? Are you the one we've been waiting for since death entered the world? Are you the one we've been waiting for? Are you the savior, the redeemer, the Messiah, the Christ, the God-man? Is it you, Jesus? I'm pretty sure it is. I bet my life, literally, on that fact, and I'm confirming whether or not that's the case."

And John's doing this not just for himself, but also for his disciples. A large crowd of people were following him, and if he's gonna be in prison and maybe even die, that means he is going to send all his people to follow Jesus. His ministry will shut down. Jesus' ministry will blow up. Many of Jesus' early followers were initially followers of John. This would be like when the day comes and my ministry at Mars Hill comes to an end—and I hope it's thirty, forty, fifty years from now. But whenever that day comes, and I have the great honor of transitioning the people that God has entrusted to my oversight to another leader that God would raise up, you just want to double-check, make sure that they're godly, trustworthy, and gonna love and serve the people. That's what John's doing. He's looking for himself to have confirmation. He's looking on behalf of his people because he really loves them and has responsibility for them as well. So he sends his friends to Jesus. "Jesus, are you the one we have been waiting for, or will there be another?" That's the question. He seeks answers to that question. I would encourage you to seek answers to your questions.

## 2. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE TRUSTED IN JESUS.

Number two, John was great because he trusted in Jesus. That's faith. Luke 7:21–23, "In that hour he—" that is Jesus, "Healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits," those are demons, "And on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'"

Here Jesus is pulling from at least five sections of Isaiah. Jesus is someone who knows the Scriptures very, very, very well. He has committed them to memory, and he can recall them as needed. It's a really great example for us all to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly like the Bible says, to study, to read, to pray, to memorize Scripture, so that when it's needed, the Holy Spirit can bring it to remembrance, and we can apply God's Word to the circumstances of life. That's exactly what Jesus is doing.

Isaiah was a book written in the Old Testament, hundreds of years before Jesus was born. And some called it, in fact, the fifth gospel because it has so many promises and prophecies about Jesus. It foretells the coming of Jesus in great detail. And it says Jesus will do this, and he will do this, and he will do this, and he will do this. And he'll be like this, and born of a virgin, and this is how you will know that the one you've been waiting for, the Christ, the savior, the redeemer, the Son of God is among you. And so he pulls sections of Isaiah 8:14–15, Isaiah 26:19, Isaiah 29:18, Isaiah 35:5, and Isaiah 61:1. He grabs portions of Isaiah, and he tells John's followers, "Go tell John that everything that Isaiah promised would happen when God was among you is happening because I am God among you."

He says, "Tell John these things, number one: the blind receive their sight." And see the concept here is that Jesus is a king, and he rules over a perfect kingdom, and that God made the world without sickness, suffering, sin, or death. And that because of sin, there is sickness, there is suffering, there is death. And that our God is ushering in a kingdom, and this world will come to an end, and the eternal kingdom will be unveiled. And that kingdom was inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus, and it will be consummated, forever installed at the second coming of Jesus. And so when Jesus comes, the king is among us, and glimpses of the kingdom are revealed. Kingdom life starts to break out. Kingdom power starts to show up. And among those was the giving of sight to the blind. This is miraculous power that Jesus demonstrates, kingdom power as king.

Do you know, love someone, perhaps it is even you, whose sight is fading or gone? Every time I think of this, I remember a dear friend of mine. I'll tell you his story. His name is Grant Fishbook. He's the pastor at Christ the King Church up in Bellingham. He's a friend. I really like him. He's a good man, and I really enjoy him. And when I first met him some years ago, he had taken over a church in a very crisis moment, and he was installed to leadership under crisis, not of his own doing. But he demonstrated great character, unifying the church. The church has since grown, many have met Jesus, and the church has expanded, planted lots of other churches. And he's a guy that I really appreciate.

And he has a wife who has, apart from a miracle of God, an incurable genetic condition where she is progressively going blind, going blind. That apart from God doing a miracle, which we still pray for, she will go from a woman who had fully functional sight to a woman who spends the last half of her life altogether blind. They've got beautiful children. She's a sweet, nice, great gal. Grace and I had them over for dinner a few years ago. And I was so touched. I'll never forget it. When they showed up, because her eyesight was starting to fail, sometimes she would have a difficult time in new surroundings, or in a darker room. And they showed up at our house, and before they entered in, Grant didn't say a word. He was very loving and gracious with his wife, and he simply stepped in front of her. And she very gently put her hand on his shoulder, and he led her into the house, showed

her around. Got her accustomed, just to quietly—not embarrass her, but to tend to her. I thought what a great, considerate, affectionate husband.

I saw him a few weeks ago, and I asked him, I said, “How’s your wife doing?” And he got choked up. This is a man who really loves his wife. And he said, “It’s not going well.” He had to build her a home that was able to accommodate her as she’s going blind so that everything’s familiar. She’s lost her driver’s license, so he has to drive her everywhere that she goes. And if she needs to go somewhere or do something, he has to be her eyes. He said, “She’s pretty much lost all sight in one eye, and the other eye had a bit of sight that wasn’t great. But she woke up on Easter morning, and there was a big black spot right in the middle of her vision in the marginally functioning eye, which means that blindness is coming very quickly.” And so she’s, apart from a miracle, she’s not gonna see her kids grow up. She’s not gonna see her daughter wear white on her wedding day. She’s not gonna see the chubby rolls on her grandkid. She’s not gonna see her husband’s hair grow gray.

But in the kingdom of God, the blind see, and for some that’s a miracle in this life. And for all the children of God, it’s guaranteed healing in the life to come, in the resurrection body that Jesus gives patterned after his own. Jesus says, “Tell John, people have opened their eyes.” And it’s amazing ‘cause in Scripture there are occasions where Jesus heals blindness, and people open their eyes, and the first person they see in their whole life is Jesus. What an amazing experience that must have been. “Tell John that the blind see. Tell John that mothers are seeing their children for the first time. Tell John that fathers are seeing their children for the first time. Tell John that spouses are seeing their beloved for the first time. Tell John that people are squinting who have never squinted, because they’ve never seen the rays of the sun.”

Number two: “Tell John that the lame walk.” Any of you have nagging, debilitating, physical issues? For some of you it’s degenerative and coming. For others of you, it is either yourself or those you love, who need transport, scooters, walkers, canes, crutches, wheelchairs. Lame, physically unable. There are a few children at Mars Hill who are wheeled in every Sunday. Every time I see those kids, I pray: Jesus, heal those kids. And if not in this life, the promise is that when the King returns, and the kingdom is unveiled, the lame will walk. Jesus says, “Tell John little kids in wheelchairs are signing up for soccer. Tell John that kids who just sat there watching their friends play are now chasing them around, and first one to climb the tree, first one to jump into the river and go for a swim. Tell John that the lame are walking.”

Number three: “Tell John that the lepers are cleansed.” Those who were at the bottom of the social order, those who were outcasts couldn’t go around people without crying, “Unclean, unclean.” Those who were considered to be cursed by God, those who had such a debilitating, contagious skin condition that they had a lack of feeling that would cause them to be burned and not know it, or cut themselves without feeling it. The result being that they would die of all kinds of horrific suffering. Their skin would fall off their body. They would be, oftentimes, physically disfigured, both in their joints, and in their flesh. These are people who could no longer snuggle with the one they love, or hold their children, or enjoy the company of friends. These were some of the saddest, loneliest people, and Jesus healed them of their leprosy. He says, “Tell John that the lepers aren’t shouting, ‘Unclean,’ but ‘Clean.’ Tell John that the lepers are not running away from people, but toward them, to embrace them, because they’ve not been hugged in decades. Tell John that the lepers are being healed.”

He goes on to say, number four, “Tell John that the deaf hear.” Those who have never heard a bird chirp, those who have never heard a congregation sing, those who have never heard the intonation of affection from a loved one are hearing for the first time.

Number five, “And tell John that the poor have good news preached to them.” See, Jesus has a particular affection for the poor. He loves rich and poor. He saves rich and poor, but he has an affection for the poor. See, Jesus, himself, comes from a poor family. John, his cousin, comes from a poor family. They grew up in small villages and towns comprised largely of poor families.

And what Jesus is not commending here is unrighteous poverty. There are those who are unrighteous and poor. Proverbs speaks of them. These are people who are able-bodied, but too lazy and unwilling to work. These are people who chase get-rich-quick schemes and scams. These are people who invest foolishly. They’re trying to retire prematurely. These are people who gamble or drink away their money. These are people who are not generous with others. These are people who are foolish, and they’re reaping what they’re sowing, and their poverty is the consequence of their folly. He’s not talking about that kind of poverty. The guy holding the sign, “I need money for beer.” He’s not talking about that guy.

What he’s talking about are those who are righteous and poor, those who work hard, but they don’t have much. My dad was a guy like that. My dad was a guy who hung sheetrock to feed a family of five. He did it for twenty years till he broke his back. I talk about my dad a lot because, to me, that’s amazing. And we didn’t have much. My mom stayed home to raise five kids, and sometimes there was no work for my dad, though he was willing to work, and he would take side jobs and odd jobs and do anything. Very hard-working family, but we were poor. My dad didn’t drink the money. My dad didn’t gamble the money. My dad didn’t blow the money. My family was actually generous with other families in need, out of what we had. We were just poor. Jesus’ family was like that. John’s family was like that. The families that they grew up with, the children that they played with were like that.

And those kinds of people tend to get overlooked. And religion sometimes chases the rich people. Plant the church in the richest neighborhood, go after the richest people. And God loves the rich, and the rich need Jesus, and the rich need a church. But Jesus says, “You know the kingdom of God has come when there’s an emphasis and an affection for the poor.” All right, at Mars Hill, this would be the college students, all right, this would be all the working class. This would be those who are single and out of school with a debt load just getting started. This would be those families who have downsized to one income so mom could stay home with the kids. In our economic situation, those are people who are not going to have the same income level as others.

But the truth is, Mars Hill, as I’ve traveled the world, in the eye of the world, we are all the rich. Once you’ve been to totally impoverished nations, and starving people, you realize that even the poor among us are the rich among the world. So we’ve got to always be careful, that just because we’re poor

in one circumstance, does not mean that we're always the poor that Jesus speaks of. And when it is that the rich need to be generous toward the poor as Theophilus was, the rich man who funded the writing of the gospel and research undergirding Luke, it means that we need those who are rich among us to be generous for the gospel to go forth to the poor. But even those of us who are poor need to be generous, for those who look at us as though we were the rich in the world's eyes.

And Jesus says, "Tell John good news has been preached to the poor." And here's the good news to the poor: salvation is free, not because it's cheap, but because it's priceless. Salvation comes through the substitutionary death of Jesus in our place, for our sins. It comes through his resurrection from the dead, conquering our enemies of sin and death. And it's a gift that God gives. And so it's good news to the poor, because the poor would ask, "What must we do to be saved? How much must we give to please God?" And the answer is: Jesus has paid it all. Jesus has canceled our debt. Jesus' life is the purchase of our salvation, and it is given to us by grace, which means if you are poor, all you need do is receive Jesus, and his gift of salvation, which is free. That's why church attendance is free. That's why Bibles at Mars Hill are free. That's why classes and groups and counseling is free. That's why everything is given away on the Internet free, so that even the poor have access to the Lord. And for those of us who are Christian, we want to be generous, not so that God will love us, but because he already does. And because God has a heart for those in need, we want to help meet that need, because everything we have comes from him anyways.

He says, "Tell John there's good news for the poor, and addition, that the dead are raised up." That's how you know that the king is among us, and that the kingdom is being inaugurated. The penalty, wage, consequence for sin is death, and so we die, but through Jesus we rise, and as Jesus rises people from death, there's at least three by name in the gospels: Jairus' daughter, the widow's son, and Jesus' friend Lazarus. He raises people from the dead, showing that he is the king of death, that he is come to die in defeat of death, and rise in victory over death. And as he raises the dead, he is foreshadowing his own resurrection from death, and he is also foreshadowing our eventual resurrection from death at the end of the age.

He says, "Tell John here's what I've been doing. Here's what I've been doing." And John is great because he trusted in Jesus. John didn't see this, and John didn't hear this, but he trusted the testimony of those who did. You and I are in the same position. We're not there to see Jesus teach. We're not there to hear him preach, so we have to trust the eyewitness testimony faithfully recorded in Scripture, as John faithfully trusted the testimony that was given to him about Jesus from those who did see him and did hear him. And John is great because he trusted. He actually was willing to die for things he didn't see or hear, trusting those who did. We should have that same devotion to the revelation of Scripture, and the person of Jesus.

And then Jesus closes with this amazing little line. "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." It's as if Jesus anticipates, knowing his cousin fairly well, "John could be offended by this, so I'll tell him he's not allowed to be." And perhaps it is John having a preconception of how Jesus should be doing things, and Jesus isn't doing things the way that John expected. And John could become frustrated, disappointed, perhaps even offended.

Some of you are like that. Your life with Jesus isn't going the way you wanted it. You had a script. You handed it to Jesus, and for some reason, he won't read his lines. Part of it may be his resume is the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. His resume's a lot better than yours. And so if you disagree with him, you should probably change your mind. You should assuredly change your mind.

And what could happen is some people are offended by Jesus. He said he's God. That's offensive. He said that there's only one God. That's offensive. He said there's only way to salvation and forgiveness of sin through him. That's offensive. He says certain things are sinful. That's offensive. He says other things are demonic. That's offensive. And some of you would be offended by Jesus. And Jesus would say, if you want to be blessed, and I hope that you would, then don't be offended by him, trust him. Are you offended by Jesus? And there are parts of the Christian faith, truths of Christian doctrine that you just say, "That offends me." Jesus would say, "I kind of anticipated that. You shouldn't be offended. Trust me. I know what I'm doing. I'm good to complete that which I have begun." And John is great because he trusts in Jesus, and he's, in his heart, willing to relinquish the right—it's not even a right, but for some they consider it a right—to judge Jesus. And he allows Jesus to do whatever is best, and that's what Jesus always does.

### **3. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE WAS FEARLESS IN HIS SERVICE TO JESUS.**

Number three: John was great because he was fearless in his service to Jesus. This is one of the most, arguably the most, passionate, devoted, committed servants of Christ in the history of the world. Luke 7:24–27, "When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?'" You know I'm gonna ring that bell. "'Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written—'" He quotes Malachi 1, written four hundred years before Jesus was born. The prophecy, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before me.'"

John's in prison. His ministry is coming to an end, as his life is coming to an end. Jesus is still free. It'll be a while before they kill him as well. His ministry is rising and growing. And everyone gathers around and they want to know, "Jesus, it seems like we are at this transition point from one leader to another leader, from one man to another man. What do you think about John? Jesus, we want you to go on public record, give us your opinion about John." Now, Jesus, at this point, could have made John look bad to make himself look good, and he doesn't.

Let us follow, Mars Hill, in the example of Jesus. Don't speak ill of other Christian leaders. Don't speak ill of other Christian ministries. Don't speak ill of other Christian churches. If there is blatant, unrepentant sin, we should grievously, humbly, honestly speak of that to warn others, and to encourage them to repent. But the truth is, a lot of times there is jealousy, bickering, infighting, nitpicking, neatniking, and criticizing among God's people that is unacceptable. And in the days of the Internet, half—no, not half, all of what you read is not true. And what will happen is because of busy

bodying, and rumor mongering, and gossiping, you will hear something about a leader or their ministry, and then rush to judgment, and speak ill of them, and go on record. Yeah, if someone is in unrepentant sin and a leader, or they're teaching false doctrine, to be sure, that cannot be tolerated for the love of God's people, and the reputation of God's name.

And God is doing something very wonderful among a lot of churches, both in the Seattle area and the Albuquerque area, where we have campuses, bringing together lots of pastors. And we have a lot of friends and a lot of favor. There's a lot of kindness. There's a lot of large church pastors, especially younger pastors, always texting, calling, e-mailing. We're praying for each other. Sharing information, getting meals together, hanging out together, encouraging one another. We tend not to talk about this a lot publicly, 'cause we just want to enjoy one another and be friends, and not invite all the critics to give their opinion of Christians loving one another. But it's really a good, beautiful thing. And I've got some great friends who are pastors of known churches, and they are very, very, very kind to me, and they love us. And I love them, and we want to be on good terms. So we want to learn from Jesus' example. Make sure you get your facts right, and make sure you don't speak ill of people that God speaks well of.

So Jesus goes on record about John. People have already said a lot of things about John, you'll learn next week. Some people, the rumor was going around, some theologians were actually teaching that John was demon-possessed. So John's reputation is being criticized and questioned. I'm sure some are saying, "Oh, if he really loved God, do you think he'd be in prison? Do you think God would let him suffer? Obviously he's being judged as a false prophet." All kinds of horrible things are being said about the greatest man who ever lived, John. Jesus says, "John is courageous and bold and strong." When you went to see John preach in the wilderness, and that's where he preached—you know you can preach well when you get a crowd in the wilderness. That's a good sign of a good preacher. A lot of people came out, where? To the woods. Oh, he must have been really good. It's hard to get people to come where there are restrooms, and coffee, and seats—the woods?

He said, "What did you expect to see when you saw John, a reed swayed by the wind, a total pushover?" See some people are like that. "I'm totally committed to Jesus, uh-oh, I got criticized." "I'm totally committed to Jesus, uh-oh, she's hot." "I'm totally committed to Jesus, all right, uh-oh, my grade point average might go down." "I'm totally committed to Jesus, uh-oh, my boss might not give me the promotion." "I'm totally committed to Jesus, uh-oh, my family doesn't like it." And all of a sudden, we compromise, we wilt, we yield to opposition, criticism, or suffering.

He says, "Is that what you expected from John? Just a little criticism and he's gonna wilt?" Nah, not John. John's not like that. John's strong, sturdy, dependable, stable. He's not a reed blown by the wind. What he's saying is John's not a pushover. That's one of the reasons he's great. He believes in Jesus. Damage his reputation. He still believes in Jesus. Publicly oppose him. Still believes in Jesus. Put him in prison. Still believes in Jesus. Chop his head off. Till the end he's praising Jesus. That's John. For you guys, I hope that puts steel in your spine. Some guys just bend too easy.

Number two: love this one. "Did you expect to see a guy in soft clothing?" Oh, there's a lot here, so I have to be very careful. "Really, you expected to see a guy wearing a Snuggie giving out hugs?" 'Cause the softest clothing I can think of is a Snuggie. No prophet ever wore a Snuggie, ever. "Repent," said the guy in the Snuggie. That just doesn't work. Doesn't work at all. What do you expect to see, a guy wearing a Snuggie, open-toed sandals, flicking his hair, rocking out to Elton John, drinking decaf, listening to tape sounds of running water, got most huggable in high school? You expecting that guy? That's not John. That's not John. John's a man's man, a guy's guy. He's a dude among dudes. That's John. Somebody breaks into your house, call John. After they've stolen everything and left, call the guy in the Snuggie. He'll come give ya a hug, but that's not John. John's not like that. That's John.

And so Jesus says he's great 'cause he's a man's man, he's a guy's guy, he's a dude's dude. Don't see a lot of guys like that, but that's who he is. That's how John conducts himself. If you met him guys, he'd look—I mean he's got crazy hair, bug in his teeth. He'd give you a firm handshake, and the wild-eyed look. You're like, "This guy loves God, or he's crazy." But he's that guy, and he is 100% devoted, committed passionately to serving Jesus, whatever the cost, all the way to the end.

So Jesus says John's not a pushover, he's not a pansy. He's a prophet. Malachi 3:1 said that, "A messenger would come preparing the way for me. And that's John. He's the prophet. He is preparing people for my coming."

## HOW DO YOU LIVE A GREAT LIFE?

Back to my original point. Here's what Jesus says about John. "I tell you, among those born of women none," big statement, "is greater than John." Here's my question: how did John become great? Some of you would hear this, and you would say, "I don't aspire to greatness, I'm humble." You're a coward. You're a coward. In the name of humility—it's false humility. Some people say, "Well, I'm not gonna have a great life. I'm not gonna have a great ministry. I'm not gonna run a great business that gives generously to help the poor. I'm not gonna do anything great, 'cause I'm just very humble." No, you're a coward. You're a coward if you don't live big and bold. Some of you would say, "Yeah, I'm gonna live big and bold," and you're arrogant. You're proud and self-righteous. Some say, "Okay, so do I live big or not live big?" Yeah, live big, live bold, live a great life, humbly. Say, "How do you do that?" Well, it's a needle we've all gotta learn to thread. A great, big, bold, humble life. That's John. You're gonna see that with John later. They ask John, "Jesus is really gaining preeminence and prominence, what do you think about that?" John says, "He increase, I decrease, that's good." Wow. That's humility. How do you live a great life? How can you live a great life, and raise children that live a great life, like Elizabeth and Zechariah raised a great man? They should be rightly encouraged by this son. How are we gonna do it?

I'll give you two options, the first is wrong. Option number one, it goes like this: you should be doing blank. You're not doing blank, so do blank. All right, everything from pop psychology to self-help to vague spiritualism to Oprah-guiltism to Dr. Phil-ism, to nagging-Mom-ism to Christian fundamentalism is all this. "Hey, you're supposed to do this, you're not, so do it." There's no God in it. There's no God in it. All right, so you should be reading your Bible. You're not reading your Bible, read your Bible. You should be generous. You're not generous, so be generous. You should go

to church. You're not going to church, so go to church. You eat too much. You shouldn't eat so much. Don't eat so much. Okay. And then sometimes he'll kick it in, and if you do, then you really love yourself, as if loving yourself was the seat, sum, center of your whole existence, me-ism. Well, do it for God. As if God needs you do anything for him. Some of you are that way. Parents can be the worst, 'cause kids sometimes drive their parents nuts. That's their job description. "Johnny, you're supposed to do that. You're not doing it. Do it!" So from a young age, it's moralism, guilt, threat, intimidation.

Or, number two: you should be doing blank. You can't do blank. Jesus did blank, and he'll send the Holy Spirit so you can do blank too. That's Christianity. All right, you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You're a sinner, you can't. Jesus did, he'll send the Holy Spirit so that by the power of God, by the same power that Jesus lived his life, you can live your life patterned after Jesus. Some of you say, "I could stop eating." But you can't worship God with your food, you can't 'cause we're sinners, and our motives are always convoluted and confused. Even when we do good things, it's so that we look good, which is all about pride and self-righteousness, and we're all hypocrites, and we're a convoluted mess. We can't live the life that God has for us. Whatever life God has called us to, we can't do that, so Jesus came. He lived without sin. He lived the perfect life. He lived the righteous life. He lived the life that we're supposed to live, and he died the death we're supposed to die. And he sends the Spirit to indwell the children of God, so that we might live by a new power as new people. What this means is we can live a great life, not because we're great, but because our God is great. And we can live by a great power, which is not our power, but it's God's power, which means we can live big and bold, humbly. Thank you, God. Thank you, God.

Some of you say, "Where is this in Scripture?" Well, we have to look at John's life in light of the whole story of Luke. This is a very simple, but important principle for Bible study. You can't just read Luke 7 without going back to Luke 1. John was introduced to us in Luke 1 as a baby in his mother's womb. Then we meet him as a young boy growing up, and here he appears again as a grown man. So, if we want to understand his greatness as a grown man, we have to go look at the seeds that were planted early in his life, and what God did when he was little.

And we find that in Luke 1 beginning in verse 15. The angel Gabriel said of John, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." That is remarkable. For those who abort or miscarry, there's hope here. God can save, elect, redeem, fill with the Holy Spirit, even from the mother's womb. An unborn child is a child, a person, an image bearer of God, and can be saved, and receive the indwelling presence and power of God the Holy Spirit, the same power that enabled the life of Jesus, could take up residence in a baby, in the mother's womb. That's amazing. So we are to see from this point on, if John's life begins with the Holy Spirit, and it ends in greatness, there is most assuredly a connection there. The Holy Spirit is a great God, and he enables a great life. You see where it's a big, bold, humble life? John lives a big, bold life, but he doesn't get any credit for it. It's by the power of the Holy Spirit, so there is to be humility, would acknowledge that John's life is lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Number two: we read of him after he's born, and he's a young boy, and he's growing up. Luke 1:66, "And the hand of the Lord was on him." Hand of the Lord was on him. That God's a father. We get this picture that God's a father who puts his hand on his kid, and directs him, and leads him, and guides him, and corrects him.

I was thinking about this last night. We went out to dinner as a family, and my youngest son, Gideon, who is four, needed to use the washroom, so I was taking him. But there was a crowd of people and had to get through a lot of traffic to get him into the restroom. And he's short so he's easy to lose, and he's a free-range boy, and he has a proclivity to wander. So I have to keep an eye on him. So I lovingly put a hand on his head, not to push him, but just kind of, you know, steer him around through the traffic and all the tall people, and get him to the washroom. And when we hit traffic and people, he took his hand and put it on my hand. I thought this is a good picture of the Christian life. God's a father who puts his hand on his kids. And the kids, by faith, take their dad's hand and trust him, and dad leads them and guides them.

And that's John's life. He's filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and he yields to the Father's leading throughout the course of his life. So if the Father wants him to go here and not here, he follows the Father, he doesn't rebel. The Father convicts him of sin. He repents. If the Father teaches him, he learns. If the Father corrects him, he changes. He's yielded, submitted to the Father, and that's the Christian life. It's the life like Jesus. John's life is a life like Jesus. It's selfless, it's big, it's passionate, it's humble, it's truthful, it's bold, and it suffers to the glory of God and the good of others. A great life like John's is patterned after Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and led by the affectionate direction of the Father. It's a Trinitarian life.

So if you're here and you're not a Christian, you can't just do better and try harder. You need Jesus to forgive your sin and give you the Holy Spirit, so that you might live by the power of God with God as your Father, his hand on your head directing the course of your life. For those of you who are here and you've sinned, and you've wandered, and strayed, and you've run away from Dad, the Holy Spirit would convict you now and say, "Time to repent. Come back. Put yourself under Dad's hand. Put your hand on his in faith. Trust him and walk with him. He knows what he's doing. Don't be offended by him, trust in him."

If you have questions about Jesus, seek answers to them. When you get truth about Jesus, receive it, and trust it, and live your life great in service to God. We want greatness for you, not greatness in the world's eyes, but greatness in Jesus' eyes. Not greatness for your own glory, but greatness for Jesus' glory. Not greatness by your own power, but greatness by the power of our great God, the Holy Spirit, Amen? What a great, great insight the Scriptures give. I'm so glad that we're Christians, and I don't have to get up and say, "You can do better. You can try harder. You can be great." I can tell you about one who is greater than us, and how he does great things through us, and that allows us to live a great life, and enjoy humility, so that we can be happy. It's amazing. I invite you all to that in Christ.

Father God, I pray that we would be able to hear one day the voice of Jesus tell us that our life was great, not that we're great, but that our Savior's great, and the Father who leads us is great, and the Holy Spirit who indwells us is great, so that we might live a life that is great. Father, please help us to consider these things this week, that this would not be just information, but transformation. And we invite you, Holy Spirit, to have your way with us,

so that we might live a life that is pleasing to Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

*[End of Audio]*

*Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.*

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