



JOHN THE BAPTIZER, PART 2

Part 29 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 7:28-35 | May 23, 2010

Luke 7:28-35

²⁸ “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” ²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

³¹ “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’ ³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

INTRODUCTION

All right, Mars Hill, we continue in Luke's Gospel. We're in Luke 7:28-35, the second of a two-part series looking at John the Baptist. And as we look at his life, and examine his life, it gives us an opportunity to not only learn vicariously from his life, but to examine our own. And what we find today is one of the most extraordinary lives that was ever lived, in relation to Jesus, in the history of the world, and by God's grace, we would aspire to the same thing, a life of greatness in relation to Jesus. And regarding John, here is, in fact, what his cousin Jesus had to say regarding him. Luke 7:28, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.” This is an extraordinary statement from Jesus.

You'll find a little later in Luke 7, that some of John's critics, in fact, said that he was demon possessed. The opinions and estimations of John varied wildly, but what really counts is Jesus' estimation of one's life, and that's what we learn from John. People can say whatever they like, it's what Jesus says about your life, mine, and John's that truly matters.

And Jesus says that apart from his own life, the greatest person who has, or will, live is John the Baptist, which is a curious statement because this statement is made during the reign of a man named Herod. He was the king and his nickname was Herod the Great. Jesus says, in fact, that John is greater than Herod. But unlike Herod, John is poor. He is not rich. He is very rural, not urban. He is very simple. He did not come from a premier family. He came from a humble family, yet, John is the greatest man who ever lived.

And what I would tell you is there is such a thing as godly, holy, redeemed ambition, not a selfish pride, but a desire to make your life count, to invest it wisely, to pour it out for Jesus nobly. And John serves as a great example of that kind of redeemed, humble ambition. He lives his life aggressively, passionately, purposefully for Jesus, and Jesus declares his life to be the greatest. And we'll examine today four aspects of John's greatness.

1. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE CALLED PEOPLE TO REPENTANCE.

The first is this: John was great because he called people to repentance. Luke 7:29-30, “(When all the people heard this,” Jesus' summary of John's life, “And the tax collectors too,” those are the crooks, “They declared God just,” or right and good, “Having been baptized with the baptism of John, but—” here come the religious guys, “The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)”

So John comes in the line of the Old Testament prophets, and he is proclaiming, “Repent, repent, repent of sin.” Some receive this message, publicly identify themselves as sinners, and come to the river to be baptized by John, showing that they need to be cleansed from sin, as water cleanses from filth, all foreshadowing the forthcoming of the resurrection of Jesus in our place, for our sins.

Others do not receive this message, they reject it. These are the religious types, and they're offended to hear that they are sinners, and they are offended to be invited into the baptismal waters of the river, along with those who are thieves, and crooks, and perverts, and murderers. They feel as religious people wrongly do, that they are good, while others are bad, and they do not want to be associated with those who are sinful.

And so herein, in John's ministry, there are two mega themes of our faith that I really want you, need you to understand: sin and repentance. Christians often use these words “sin” and “repentance” without defining them, which can lead to some confusion. And if you don't understand sin and repentance, the Bible truly makes no sense, and your life, in addition, makes no sense. And so we'll take these in succession.

John is calling people to repent of sin. Sin is a mega theme of your Bible. The Bible speaks of it with a constellation of images, and metaphors, and analogies, and words. Cornelius Plantinga wrote a great book called, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. And he defines sin in this way: "The Bible presents sin by way of major concepts, principally lawlessness and faithlessness, expressed in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God."

Sin is going too far. It's not going far enough. It's a hard heart, a stiff neck. Sin is living your life with anyone or anything other than the God of the Bible as the center of your identity, and the source of your joy. Sin is what we think, what we feel, what we do. It is what we fail to think, feel, and do. Sin is commission, where we do that which is evil. It is also omission, where we fail to do that which is right. Sin is not just action, it's also conditioned. We are sinners by nature and choice. The Bible says, in fact, from our mother's womb. It's all the way down in the roots. Sin is the human problem that leads to all of the -isms: racism, classism. All of that is the result of sin. But sin is the root problem, and we can trace all of the effects. And if we don't get to the root of the problem, which is sin, our lives, our cultures, our world never changes.

And so John is going right to the heart of the matter with his preaching. He's addressing the issue of sin, and he is commanding, compelling people to repent of sin. This is a very significant word at Mars Hill, you'll hear the word "repent" a lot, and the word "sin" a lot. And if I might be so bold, it's not popular today to talk about sin, and it's certainly not popular to talk about repentance. It's okay to talk about other people's sin, but not your sin, and to not call you to repent of sin, but to enable sin.

And John stands against a whole nation, saying that their problem is sin, and their answer is repentance. And so we're going to spend a bit of time looking at repentance. I'm going to sit down because I am old, and I have the flu. I do, and someday I'll have a resurrection body, and I will not have the flu.

COUNTERFEITS OF REPENTANCE

So let me explain to you what repentance is and is not. And for some of you, this will be completely new, you've never heard this. For others of you, this will be information that you've got bits and pieces of throughout the course of your life. For some of you, this will be revisiting things that I've taught you before, but maybe you still need to do. And for the rest of you, maybe you do know and practice repentance, and this will help clarify your ability to counsel others. I want you to pay attention, this is really important stuff. If you don't know what to do with sin, you'll ruin your life, and destroy anyone who is connected to you. It's that big of a deal.

1. RELIGIOUS REPENTANCE

So, true repentance is not religious repentance. Religious repentance is this: "I see your sin, not my own. I confess your sin, not my own. I'm really unhappy with your sin, but I'm not really troubled by my own." It's because religious people tend to think that they are self-righteous, and pious, and holy, and better than everyone else. The result is that they think they are good, and everyone else is bad. And religious people like to busybody, and gossip, and neatnik, and nitpick, and just be a perennial pain in the Levi's. That's what religious people do. And the way this works is they're always glad to talk about all the things you've done wrong, but they never say things like, "It was my fault. I'm sorry. I was wrong." Some of you are married to that person, I apologize. And you can nudge them, and now they can pay attention.

Jesus gives a story of two people going into the temple, the Old Testament equivalent of the church, and one prays with haughty eyes and head held high, full of pride. "God, thank you that I'm not like other men. Thank you that I'm better than they are. Thank you that I don't do all these horrible things." He's confessing someone else's sin. A second man in the story goes in, and he's not filled with pride, he's filled with grief. And he looks to the ground. He can't even raise his eyes, and he simply declares, "God, have mercy on me. I'm a sinner." He's dealing with his own sin, not anyone else's sin. He's filled with humility, and not pride. And Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, this man, and not the other, left justified, declared righteous in the sight of God." Religious people are notorious for overlooking their own sin, and talking about everyone else's, sometimes couching it in the form of a prayer request, so that it looks particularly holy when it's not.

2. PAGAN REPENTANCE

Real repentance is not pagan repentance, and I tell you these false forms because there are many counterfeits of repentance. One of the aspects that distinguishes paganism from Christianity is the Bible says that God is good, and we don't need to make God be good. He just is. Paganism assumes that God isn't good, and we have to manipulate God, as if we could, to make God be good. And so paganism and pagan repentance is, "So if I tell God I'm sorry, then he has to do something for me." So examples would be, "I know I shouldn't be dating this person, but if I tell God I'm sorry, then he's obligated to save them, and make it all better. I know that I've done a bad thing, but if I tell God I'm sorry, then he's obligated to cover for me, and not let my sin get caught and found out. If I tell God I'm sorry, then he has to heal me. If I tell God I'm sorry, then he has to bless me. If I tell God I'm sorry, then he has to prosper me." God is sovereign, and free, and good. God cannot be manipulated, and God is not obligated to anyone.

3. WORLDLY SORROW

Additionally, true repentance is not worldly sorrow. Paul tells this to the Corinthians. He says, "I perceive that you have worldly sorrow," or some of your translations will say, "worldly grief," and that is because non-Christians can feel bad. I talked to a guy not long ago. He said, "I feel bad. Why is that?" Answer: you're bad. You feel bad because you're bad. Now it all makes sense, doesn't it? Don't need to dig for some deep psychological investigation. You feel bad because you're bad. God gave you a conscience. We're his image bearers. It's a moral rudder. We can grieve, quench, resist

the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit works through our conscience, Jesus promised he would, to convict us of sin. We also know of our sin from the Bible, and Bible teaching, and godly friends.

And what happens in worldly sorrow, or grief, is we feel bad, but we don't change. You just feel bad. And what can even happen in culture is that we set up this false religion, with false prophets, and pastors, and priests, and priestesses, and what happens then is we present a false gospel. Not to pick on him, but to pick on him, I'll give you an example from Tiger Woods. What happened in the Tiger Woods scenario is something that happens fairly frequently. First of all, someone doesn't repent, they get caught. The opposite of repenting is getting caught, and that is that you didn't come forward and say, "I've said or done a bad thing, or failed to say or do a good thing, I got caught," which means "I wasn't gonna stop unless you made me." You get caught. And then you have to present worldly sorrow. You have to say, "I am really sorry. I did a horrible thing. I feel really bad." "Ideally," your PR rep will tell you, "you should probably cry, 'cause that will help. It shows that you're really, really sad about what you've done."

And then we get basically a cultural equivalent of pagan Catholicism. Let me unpack all of this. I grew up as a Catholic boy, went to Catholic school, was an altar boy for some years. And the way it would work in Catholicism is you would go into the confessional with the priest. You would say, "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It's been so long since my last confession." And then you would tell the priest what you did, and then the priest would say, "I declare you forgiven. I forgive you. Go say this many 'Hail Marys,' or 'Acts of Contrition,' or 'Our Fathers', or go do these good deeds, and then you'll make it up to God, and everything will be okay," something like that.

So what happens in culture is someone has worldly sorrow. They know they've done wrong, so they need to find someone who's in the cultural position of a priest. And just so you know, I don't believe in any of this. Jesus is my great high priest. A priest can't forgive me. The psalmist says, "Against you only, Lord God, have I sinned." So I don't go to a priest, I go to the great high priest, Jesus. But what happens in our culture then, we've gotta find someone to play that morally superior role, so we get Barbara Walters, or Larry King, or Oprah, or Dr. Phil. We go get somebody to set up their stage for their show, their set, like a confessional. And the person who has sinned walks in looking very sad, and very scared, and, "I'm really sorry for what I've done." And then the person in the position of moral, spiritual authority, the priest of culture says, "Tell us about what you've done, and how you feel." And then you cry, and you say the things that your PR rep told you to say.

But your sins are not yet forgiven, because you need to go to purgatory and pay back, and so you go to rehab. Rehab is our cultural version of purgatory. Everybody has to go to rehab. If you've done something bad, you've gotta go to rehab, drug rehab, sex rehab, alcohol rehab, "My dad didn't hug me" rehab, gambling rehab, whatever rehab it is. And you go to rehab for a while. It's like purgatory, you go there and you pay your dues. And then later you get out, and you go back, and you meet with the high priest or priestess. You say, "You know what? I'm really, really sad, and I did a very bad thing, but I feel like I paid it off, and I went to rehab. And now I've kind of been born-again. I'm a whole new person, and I'm going to give lots of money to women, children, or animals. Anything cute, I will give money to, to show that I have sorrow." And then all of this is told to the population, the public, the culture, and they decide whether or not you're forgiven. They're in the position of God. "Oh, you said you were sorry, you went to rehab, you wrote a big check for people in need. We forgive you. You can golf again. Go and sin no more."

That's worldly sorrow. The whole culture we live in is built on that, and people don't change, not at the heart level. There's no atonement, there's no penalty paid for sin. There's no Jesus, there's no Savior. There's no new life in Christ, there's none of that, just a bunch of counterfeits—worldly sorrow. But I tell you that not just to pick on a man, but to say that we're all prone toward that, and our culture has this desire for something like a high priest, who forgives our sins, and gives us new life. But without Jesus, we end up with a lot of impotent counterfeits.

4. MERE CONFESSION

True repentance is also not mere confession. Mere confession is very confusing, particularly for Christians, because it is when someone sins, and you confront, or rebuke them, call them to repentance as John does. You say, "That was really wrong." And they say, "You know what? You're right, that was terrible." You say, "Oh good, I'm glad you recognized that. Let me hug you, and we're all better now." And then they do it again. You say, "I thought you were sorry." "Oh, I was. I'm sorry again, and I'll be sorry next week, and the week after that. I'm sorry a lot. And every time I do it, at least I'm not a hypocrite, I'm authentic, I'm honest, I'm real, I'm true. And I'll just tell ya how bad I am, and I'm gonna keep being bad." Some of you are dating that person. Run, run, run, run Forrest run, run for your life. And they confuse you, 'cause you'll say, "Hey, you shouldn't have said or done that." "You're right, that was wrong," and they keep doing it. Mere confession is an acknowledgment of sin, without a repentance of sin.

5. BLAME SHIFTING

Additionally, real repentance is not blame shifting, that is, "Yeah, something bad happened, but it's their fault." This goes all the way back to the garden. Adam sins, says, "God, you made a woman. She's defective. The two of you need to sort this out." Eve says, "Oh, don't look at me, the devil made me do it." She was charismatic. And the truth is that they both were morally responsible for their own transgression. And we can do this. "Yes, I lost my temper, but they made me very angry." Oh well, it's obviously their fault. "Yes, I stole from my boss, but after all, they weren't paying me enough." "I did cheat on my spouse, but they weren't meeting my needs." Oh, you poor victim. Blame someone else.

6. MINIMIZING

Real repentance is also not minimizing. What happens is you sin, someone calls you to repent, and the first thing you do is you find someone who's done something worse. "At least I didn't kill someone." Oh, duckie for you, we'll put a gold star on your "No Murder" chart, another whole day. You find someone worse than you. "You're a terrible spouse." "Well, at least you're not married to so and so." And if all else fails, hit the Hitler button, that's what you do. Just hit the Hitler button, which is, "At least I'm not a Nazi." Oh, that's true. And you put yourself next to Hitler, and you're like, "See, I look pretty good." Yeah, compared to Hitler, everyone does. That's not really moral high ground, but that's what people do. It's minimizing.

“Oh, it’s not a big deal. You’re freaking out. You’re overreacting. Why do you gotta get so emotional?”

7. EXCUSE MAKING

Additionally, real repentance is not excuse making. “Yeah, I did it, but I had a rough upbringing. You know, I didn’t get a good education. My dad didn’t hug me it. I’m genetically predisposed. My personality type is J-E-R-K. You know, there’s just— P-E-R-V, you know, my personality type is that way.”

REAL REPENTANCE

No, real repentance is a five-fold process, and I’ve shared this before.

1. CONVICTION

It starts with conviction, that is a work of God. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit would come to convict us of sin. Works through the conscience, the Scriptures, works through good friends, and Bible teaching. And conviction is where you feel it, you know it, you blew it. Conviction, that comes from God.

2. CONFESSION

Now at this point, we can grieve, quench, or resist, the Bible says, the Holy Spirit. Or we can agree with God. Here it says that they declared God just, that’s agreeing with God. That’s what they’re doing. “You’re right, I’m wrong.” That moves on to confession. Confession is declaring, talking about, owning it. “You’re right, God, I’m wrong. The Bible says something, and I am in violation of what you say.” Confession is talking to God about your sin. Confession is talking to others about your sin, and some of you haven’t repented—your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, don’t even know, your spouse, what you’ve done, or are doing. You’ve not repented. You’re just waiting to get caught, and if you never get caught, you’re never going to talk about it. This is my exhortation and admonition to you, to confess, to talk about it. To say, “You know what? There’s some stuff I need to tell you. We need to have that conversation. Here’s who I am, here’s what I’ve done.” Confession is talking about sin with God, whom you’ve sinned against, and talking with people about sin, whom you’ve sinned against. That’s why the Bible says in 1 John 1:9, “if we confess our sin,” gotta talk about it. Conviction, confession. Confession is responding.

3. REPENTANCE

Third is repentance. Repentance is not managing, or minimizing sin. “I used to do it every week, now I do it once a month, or once every six months, or once a year. I used to, you know, do it to this degree, and I’ve ratcheted it back a little bit. I’m trying to manage, or I’m trying to minimize, or maintain my sin.” That’s not it. Our sin is worse than we think. Our sin is so bad that God, Jesus, had to die for it. And if it’s important enough for Jesus to die for, we need to put it to death. We need to put it to death. If Jesus died for that sin, then that sin must die. Can’t just wound it, you have to kill it. Repentance is the putting to death of sin, putting it to death, not just feeling bad. Not just saying you’re sorry. Not just trying harder. Killing it, because it killed Jesus.

4. RESTITUTION

This leads to step number four—and by the way, that was John’s whole ministry: repent, repent, repent. That’s what he’s getting at. Step number four then is restitution, and this is not penance, where you pay God back, this is just trying to make it right. If you’ve stolen, you should pay it back. If you’ve lied about someone and damaged their reputation, you need to go to those people you’ve lied to and say, “That wasn’t true. I sinned and I lied.” See, because some of you have done great, horrific damage to other people, and you can tell God, “I’m sorry.” And you can tell them, “I’m sorry,” but if you don’t try and fix it, it’s like shooting someone and driving away, rather than giving them a ride to the hospital. “Sorry, that hurts. Good luck with that, good-bye.” No, real repentance is: “And I need to try and make this right in as much as by God’s grace I’m able, ‘cause if I was part of your wounding, I need to be part of your healing, if you will let me.” Conviction, confession, repentance, restitution.

5. RECONCILIATION

Step number five, reconciliation. This is where God and people are reconciled, and people and people are reconciled, that Jesus takes away sin, that reconciliation may happen. Jesus makes this possible through his death, burial, resurrection. That’s the means for reconciliation. Let me say this: forgiveness takes one person. Repentance takes one person. Reconciliation takes two. If you have sinned, or when you sin, ‘cause we’re all sinning, you go to the person you’ve sinned against and you repent. “I have sinned. You may have not even known about it, but let me come clean and be honest. Let me tell you who I am, and what I’ve done, or what I’ve failed to do. And I’m repenting, I’m killing that. It’s gonna stop by the grace of God.” Takes one person to repent. What do you have to repent of? Who do you need to talk to? What needs to be made known?

It takes one person to forgive. “I forgive you for what you’ve done, or failed to do.” Some of you would say, “I cannot forgive them, because they have not repented.” You must forgive them either way, because it frees you of bitterness. It opens the door of reconciliation. You are willing to meet them at the threshold, and they must turn from sin, and walk toward you. Additionally, it leaves them to God. “God, I have forgiven them. They are now in your hands. My prayer is that they would repent, and if not, justice will come from you.” Either justice comes from the cross of Jesus, or justice comes in hell, either way, justice comes. Who do you need to forgive? What have they done? Some of you would say, “I cannot forgive.” You must. You must.

And I feel prompted by the Holy Spirit. I didn’t intend to say this, and I didn’t say this all day. I feel as if some of you right now in your mind are saying this—and if this is you, this is a gift to you from the Holy Spirit. “I cannot forgive myself.” And let me tell you that, as spiritual as that sounds, it’s blasphemy, because if the God of the Bible forgives you, and you will not forgive yourself, you are saying that you are above the God of the Bible. What you’re saying is when Jesus declared on the cross, “Father, forgive them,” you are saying, “Even if the Father forgives me, I do not forgive

myself.” And so you are in effect saying, “I am a superior God than him.” You need to repent of sin. You need to forgive those who’ve sinned against you, and you need not say that you cannot forgive yourself, because it’s blasphemy. If Jesus forgives you, there is no higher God, and you and I have no right to place ourselves above Jesus, and to withhold from ourselves forgiveness that he guarantees through his death and resurrection. This is all very serious business.

And Jesus declares that John is great, because he calls people to repentance. He cut through all of the cultural clutter, and noise, and nonsense. He does not settle for religious repentance, pagan repentance, worldly sorrow, mere confession, blame shifting, minimizing, excuse making, mere conviction, or mere confession. He lays an ax at the root of the problem, and he goes after sin with a furious courage, and he calls people to repent of sin. And God would call us all to repent of sin, because he loves us. And sin leads to death, and repentance is a gift to be enjoyed. That is the greatness of John.

And again, some in this account of Luke, they receive it, and they go down to the river, and they say publicly with their actions, “I’m a sinner, and I’m repenting.” And others reject, and they become religious, and they fight, and they argue, and they defend themselves to their own shame and folly. And you and I are given this divine moment of opportunity to make that decision for ourselves. Will we declare God to be just, by ourselves declaring ourselves to be unjust, and in need of his justice through the cross of Jesus? You know why John had such strong reaction now, don’t you? He was loved and hated, but he could not be ignored. That’s John.

2. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE ENDURED IMPOSSIBLE PEOPLE.

Jesus goes on to say that John was great because he endured impossible people. Luke 7:31–32, Jesus says, “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’” Jesus here is offending people. See, for some of you the worst sin of all is offending someone. Jesus offended people, and he did so in love. He did so to point out their sin and folly.

One commentator rightly calls this the “parable of the brats,” which I think is a pretty cool band name. That would be an awesome Christian band. “We are the parable of the brats.” And the “parable of the brats” is this: if any of you have, or have seen small children, they tend to look at big events in life, and then mimic them, correct?

And in that day, the two big events were funerals and weddings. Funerals are dark, and weddings are light. And funerals are grieving, and weddings are celebrating. And what would happen in a funeral is everyone would get dressed in black, and the processional would leave town, out to the cemetery, and the wailers would be wailing, and the mourners would be mourning, and the flute players would be playing.

And in a wedding, everyone would stay in town, and there was oftentimes a multi-day feast, and the bride would come out in all glory, dressed in white, and there’d be dancing, and singing, and celebration, and song. And so the little kids would get to together, and they would either play funeral or wedding. So the emo kids, the punk rock kids, they would play funeral. And all the pop kids, and the hip-hop kids, they’d all play wedding. Do you have kids? Do they do this to this day? They see a big event, and they go home, and then try and reenact it? This happens right?

Yet there were always a group of kids who wanted to play funeral, and a group of kids who wanted to play wedding, and a group of kids who wouldn’t play anything, those were the religious kids. They’d say, “We don’t want to play funeral, it’s too sad. We don’t want to play wedding, it’s too happy.” What do you want to play? “I want to play miserable critic,” and that was their game. And they would never join in and participate. Some people are like this, Jesus says, even when it comes to church. “That one’s too big, that one’s too small. That one’s too serious, that one’s too irreverent. That one’s too organized. That one’s too disorganized. That one’s too formal. That one’s too casual.”

Any of you have a kid like that, a really picky eater, for example? Do you want a sandwich? “No.” How about eggs? “No.” Cereal? “No.” Pizza? “No.” These are the kids, it doesn’t matter what you propose: “No.” They’re just always negative. Some of you are like that, you’re always negative. You find something wrong with everyone, and everything, and you just refuse—you just cross your arms, “I’m not becoming a member. I’m not joining a community group. I’m not getting involved. I have lots of reasons that I’m unhappy.” You’re always unhappy. You’re Puddleglum. You’re Eeyore, you just are.

And see, John endured these people in his ministry, and ministry are often—ministry is, rather, often consumed with these kind of negative people. It’s always something. Are you negative? Are you always against someone, always against something? Do you always have a reason why you’re not gonna get involved with God’s people, why you’re not gonna be in community, actively involved on mission, as the church? Like, “There are issues.” Yeah, with you, you’re right, there are. And John was great because he endured this.

3. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE SUFFERED CRITICS.

Number three, John was great because he suffered critics. He had lots of critics. Here’s what Jesus says, Luke 7:33–35, “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’” Some blogger threw that out there. “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

Here’s what happens, those who are critics, they criticize John and Jesus, for exactly opposite reasons. This is Jesus saying, “Critics are coo-coo for cocoa puffs. They don’t make any sense.” So they look at John, and John is—I’ll call him a hippy Baptist, okay? Because he’s gluten-free and alcohol-free, so we’ll call John a hippy Baptist. That’s what Jesus says. He doesn’t eat bread, and he doesn’t drink wine. Gluten-free, hippy Baptist, okay? And they look at John, and they say, “We don’t like John because he’s gluten-free, and alcohol free.” Then they look at Jesus, and they say, “Well, what do you think of Jesus?” “We don’t like him either.” “Why?” “Cause he eats bread and drinks wine.” What? “Yeah, and today’s too hot, and it’s too cold.

And you're too tall, and you're too short." Okay?

This is the heart of a critic. They're impossible. They're incorrigible. They're insane. They don't make any sense. "We don't like John, and we don't like Jesus." Why? "One eats bread, one doesn't. One drinks wine, one doesn't. We don't like either of them." And this is how critics are. A critic is someone who takes upon themselves the disposition of defining themselves by who or what they're against. That's it. All you know is who or what they're against, not who or what they are for. And they're not pointing out real sin, critics will sometimes make wildly outlandish claims.

And be careful, Mars Hill, be careful. Number one, that we are not a church known as the critics. See, there is a difference between calling someone to repentance, which is what John did nobly, and falsely accusing people of things that are not true. See, here with John, they say, "He has a demon." That's a horrible false allegation. Some of you would say, "Yeah, but the truth is always in the middle. 'Cause someone says really bad things about someone, someone says really good things. The truth is always in the middle." It's not always in the middle. The critics say John is demon possessed. Jesus says he's the greatest man who's ever lived. The truth is not somewhere in the middle. The truth is John is a godly man, not perfect, but by the grace of God, a remarkable man, a great man.

You and I, as Mars Hill Church, have this big opportunity, because of the voice and platform that God has given us, and this begins with me, to yeah, to do a bit of what John did, and to call people, beginning with ourselves, to repentance of sin. But not to falsely accuse people of things that are not true, not to have conjecture, and speculation, and busyboding, and gossiping. Not taking bits and pieces of information, and building a case to attack someone without checking the other side of the story to confirm it.

See, in that day, had some people run with this lie, which is what it was of John, that he was demon possessed, they would have started blogging, Facebooking, Twittering. There would have been a media campaign. The whole thing would have blown up, and they should have went and checked with Jesus, and said, "Okay Jesus, we've heard these things about John." Jesus says, "Greatest man who's ever lived." "Wow, that's a really different take on John. Glad we didn't run with the smear campaign. Glad we double-checked the facts." Don't believe everything you hear. Don't believe everything you read. Don't believe everything you think. Check the facts. And if there really is sin or heresy, calling to repentance is a good thing. But if there's not, don't be a liar, and don't bear false witness. We have commandments against these sorts of things. It's a big deal, and in the age of media, if it is true, as Jesus said, that we will be held accountable for every word that we utter, we're all in grave danger. We don't want to falsely accuse people in general, and spiritual leaders in particular. And that's exactly what's happening with John.

And the sad thing for me, and this really is emotionally grievous for me. Matthew's Gospel adds the caveat that at this point in John's ministry, he's in prison. He can't come out and preach and meet, and, you know, correct the critics. He's in prison. He's defenseless. Have you wrongly criticized someone? Have you put yourself in that position of critic to where you're defining yourself by who or what you're against rather than for? Are you that person who takes bits of information, and enables the worst kind of self-righteous and religious people, even if they've been offended? I've been criticized a lot. Some of it, quite frankly, is totally deserved.

SIX KINDS OF CRITICS

I want to do a bit of pastoral counseling, just for a moment if you'd be so kind. And this is not directly taken from the text, but it's what I've seen in my own life. And I offer it to you that there are different kinds of critics, and different kinds of critics, I think, require different kinds responses. And in this, I would give you the words of Billy Graham as well. In the book, *Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham*, they came to Billy, who is a hero of mine, and a wonderful man who I really appreciate. And I can't imagine the kind of suffering that he endured from the critics. And he said that we should turn our critics into coaches, that even if their information is erroneous, and their motives are dubious, that ultimately, we can take those criticisms, see if there is any truth in them that might make us more like Jesus and better servants of his cause, and to turn our critics into coaches. And I appreciate that. That's a wise word.

As I've investigated and endured, I've seen six kinds of critics, and I'm sure there are more. And some of you would say, "Oh, I know more," and you would criticize my list. And you can certainly do that, and we'll add you as number seven.

1. THEOLOGICAL

Number one, there are theological critics. These are people who just really disagree with you. And I would say this, don't just rush to some crazy, theological opinion, but if you've carefully and prayerfully studied your Bible, you've checked with Christian scholars, you've run it by spiritual authority, you've investigated it through church history, you say, "You know what? The Bible's true. I'm a sinner, Jesus is God. There's only one way to salvation, hell is real, heaven is real. This is what I believe." You know what? The Mormons are not gonna agree with you. The Jehovah's Witnesses are not gonna agree with you. The Orthodox Jews are not gonna agree with you. The Atheists are not gonna agree with you. The vague general spiritualists and the yoga-ites are not going to agree with you. And the Muslims are not going to agree with you, and the list goes on and on. When you meet with them, they may push you or criticize you, and they may be family, friends, coworkers. There are people in this church who have converted to Jesus, whose family has rejected them. Some have actually told them, "We now consider you dead." It can be very painful to be criticized from those you love and have sincere affection for. What do you do? You have to accept it. If the only way for us to have peace is for me to deny Christ, then I will live with the awkwardness. I'll accept it. You should do so humbly, not bitterly, but you've gotta live with it.

2. JEALOUSY OF SUCCESS

Number two, there is jealousy of success critics, and that is that your life is going better, in their estimation, than theirs. God healed you, he didn't heal them. God gave you a job. They're still unemployed. God gave you a promotion. They got a demotion. You are married, and they're single, or reverse. You're married, and they're single. Either way, you're jealous. You'll get that on the way home. That was funny. You want to have children, but you're

infertile, and someone that you know has children, jealousy. You want to be in leadership and ministry, and you didn't get that opportunity, someone else did. It's jealousy of success. They didn't sin against you, they just succeeded, and you were jealous. What do you do with people like that? Well, not to accept or enable their sin, but my counsel is to serve them. Maybe they're hurting. Maybe they're suffering. Maybe they're struggling. And maybe they've taken and made the matter personal with you. And it really doesn't have anything to do with you. So you serve them, and you love them. "I'm sorry, you're going through a hard time. Is there anything I can do to serve you? I do love you. I want good for you. Is there anything I can do to be a good friend to you?" And it disarms them, and it forces them to work it through with God, and no longer project that on you.

3. MISINFORMED

Number three, there are those who are misinformed. And what you try to do with them is inform them. These are people who will say, "I don't like you because you said or did this." And you can say, "If I said or did that, that would be absolutely right, but the truth is that's not what I said or did. You have wrong information. Let me clarify. Let me tell you the truth." This is not excuse making or lying; this is clarifying. Just tell them the truth.

4. PERSONAL DISLIKE

Number four, sometimes it's personal dislike. These are not issues of sin, these are issues of style. They don't like the way you dress. They don't like your attitude. They don't like your sense of humor. They don't like your hobbies. Not that any of those things are sinful. Religious people have a very difficult time distinguishing between sin and style. "So your style's different than mine, you're wicked 'cause I am godly. All right, not that Christ is the model, I am." What do you do with those people? I get this all the time. You either accommodate them, "Okay, I love you, Grandpa. When I'm with you, I know you don't want to look at the mohawk. I'll wear a hat." Okay? All right? "I know, Grandma, you don't like the tattoo, but it is a verse about Jesus. So I'll wear long sleeves when I hang out with you. I'll try to accommodate you, 'cause I love you." Or you could just ignore them and say, "I love you. We're not gonna ride a tandem bike. We're not gonna be BFF. It's just not gonna go well. It's just not." Personal dislike. This is part of the issue that Jesus has with the Pharisees. We'll get to that in a moment.

5. LEGITIMATE

There's also legitimate sin. This is where you have a sin that you've committed, or you made a mistake. You blew it. You know what you do? You repent, you own it. "You're right, I'm wrong. That was out of line. I gotta make this right. I'm asking your forgiveness. Jesus died. That's how bad this was. I'm sorry." It's totally disarming. You may have to do CPR on someone after you just repent. They don't see it coming.

6. TAKE UP OFFENSE FOR ANOTHER PERSON

And number six, there is take up offense for another person. There is where person A and person B have a conflict, and person C gets involved. We call that meddling. We call that busybodying. I call that annoying. People are trying to resolve something, and let's say person A and person B in some sort of conflict. It may be a sin, or an offense, or transgression was committed, but person B goes and talks to person C. And now we call this triangulation. We get person C involved. And sometimes person C isn't a mediator, they're a complicator. Like we got a letter recently. There's an issue we're dealing with, and it's like, someone sent a letter, "We demand this, we demand that. I demand this, I demand that. I'm getting in the middle. Dada, dada, dada, da." I read the letter, I'm like, "Who is this? I don't even know who this is." So we call, "Who are you?" "I am now in the middle." Really? Why do you need to get in the middle? "Because I have made myself the 'take up offense for another person' superhero, and I have a cape that says 'take up offense for another person,' and I fly in to resolve the conflict." And all of a sudden they align with someone and they're like two barrels on a gun, and you gotta deal with both of them. You get out of this. This doesn't even affect you. What is this, junior high? "Sally's really unhappy, now we're really unhappy. There's a whole bunch of us really unhappy. We've created a Facebook group about it." Really? Let A and B deal with it. Get person C out. And some of you people who are real priestly and pastoral, you will think, "Ah-ha, I'm going to help. I'm going to be merciful." And what you mean is, "I'm going to be meddling, I'm going to be enabling." It's take up offense for another person. You rebuke those people. You're not helping. You're not mediating, you are meddling. Get out.

Now, back to the story, John is being criticized, I think, for five of six reasons. What he's not being criticized for is number five, he didn't—he's not sinless, but he didn't do anything. But you know what? There are theological differences. He tells the religious people, "You're sinners." They say, "No, we're not." Number two, his ministry's growing, theirs is not. I think there's some jealousy. Misinformed, "We heard he's demon possessed." He's not, go check with Jesus. Number four, personal dislike. He wears camel-hair clothing. He lives in the woods. He eats bugs and honey, and he yells at people. That is a different style. "We don't like his wardrobe. We don't like his hygiene. We don't like his diet, and we don't like the fact that he yells at us. Just walks out of the woods, just like a crazy guy, 'Repent!'" I see him with a big Afro, and bugs in his teeth. And all these guys in robes who went to grad school are like, "He has emotional woundedness." No, he's just upset. He doesn't like you. And number six, take up offense for another person. I am assuming that there were people that he called to repentance, and they didn't like it, so they went and got their scholar, and their teacher, and their counselor, and their rabbi, and their friends, and their family, and their team, and their tribe. And everybody gets involved, and it's a big mess. And that's gonna happen with Herod's family later, which leads to the beheading of John.

If you are a Christian, you will endure criticism. And the more you're willing to come out of the closet with your faith in Christ, not in a Ned Flanders uber-annoying way. Just say, "Yeah, I'm a Christian. I love Jesus. I believe the Bible. Whack me like a piñata, I know how this is gonna go, but that's where I'm at." You will be criticized. Family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, even complete strangers, everyone will give their opinion of you, your beliefs, and Christianity, and our church, and Christian history. And you've gotta examine, "How can I turn these critics into coaches? How, like John, can I endure criticism and critics, and is there a way to respond depending upon the kind of criticism I am facing?" And what Jesus is saying here is that those who are criticized are in good company, 'cause we're not only in good company with John, we're in good company with Jesus. Jesus tells us here that he suffered criticism as well.

Let's go back to that previous slide, the Scriptures. Here's the criticism. "John the Baptist has come eating no bread, drinking no wine, you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man," that is Jesus, "Has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" Here's what they say, "John's too dark. Jesus is too light. John's too much of an introvert. Jesus is too much of an extrovert. John is too melancholy. Jesus is too happy. John is too much of a loner, and Jesus goes to too many parties." See, John and Jesus, they have the same mission, and ministry, and message, but they're different men with different personalities, and they're operating by different callings and convictions. One drinks, one doesn't. One eats bread, one doesn't. They get along just fine, like we should too. Religious people criticize them unnecessarily.

And I love the criticism of Jesus. "People like him." That's the criticism. See, that's religious people. See, because Jesus keeps getting invited to parties, religious people never have to worry about that. Their evenings are all free. The sinful people, the tax collectors, the people who had a bad reputation, "Hey Jesus, we're having a party, do you want to come to our party?" Jesus got invited—this will blow your religious mind—Jesus got invited to a lot of parties, and he went. Did he get drunk? No. Was he a glutton? No. What they said was, "Jesus knows gluttons, so he must be a glutton. Jesus knows drunkards, he must be a drunkard." No, Jesus knows gluttons, and Jesus knows drunkards, and Jesus has come as their savior, not as their enabler. He's not overeating and overdrinking. He's doing the same thing John is. He's bringing sinners to repentance. He's doing it in homes. He's doing it in friendships. He's doing it in community. He's doing it in relationship. That's why he keeps getting invited to parties. Jesus never sinned, but he did have a good time. It's true.

Jesus was the kind of guy—I don't mean this in a disrespectful, or in any way denigrating way of Jesus, but if you can see it, Jesus is the kind of guy that some people would come and say, "Hey Jesus, we're all gonna eat chicken wings and throw darts tonight. Would you like to come and hang out with the guys?" Now, you probably wouldn't do that with a highly religious person because number one, you wouldn't want to be with them. Number two, they probably wouldn't even know what to do with a chicken wing. And number three, they'd probably throw the darts at you. All right, so you wouldn't want to do that with a religious—but with Jesus, and Jesus would say, "Yeah, I'll eat chicken wings, and throw darts with you guys. And we're gonna talk about life, and we're gonna get into some things that matter, 'cause I love you, and I'm here to save." Religious people said, "Oh, that's unacceptable behavior."

What the religious people don't understand, their sin is the worst of all. Self-righteousness, and smugness, and religion, and self-righteous judgmentalism, and pride, hubris. In fact, they're gonna murder Jesus, and the tax collectors, and the sinners, and the perverts, they're gonna weep, and mourn because someone who loved them died at the hands of religious people.

4. JOHN WAS GREAT BECAUSE HE WAS FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Last aspect of John's greatness. John was great because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. If at this point all I did was told you, "John was great, you can be great, aspire to greatness," I would be nothing more than a motivational speaker. This would be a pep assembly, and we wouldn't even need God. But as we look at the story of John in the context of Luke, we go back to some statements regarding him in his mother's womb, and also some snapshots of his early developing life as a young man. Luke 1:15, the angel Gabriel said, "He," that is John, "will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." And Luke 1:66 says, quote, "As he was a young man and growing, the hand of the Lord was with him." How did John live his great life? Not only do we want the ends that John enjoyed, greatness, we want the means that John pursued. Spirit-filled life.

What does that mean? The Holy Spirit is not an it, Jesus says the Holy Spirit is he. The Holy Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture, but contrary to the functional teaching of some, the Trinity is not Father, Son, and Holy Bible. The Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who writes the Bible, to be sure. But information, apart from the Spirit, does not result in transformation. What the Spirit has inspired to be written, he must also awaken, quicken in us. And what the Holy Spirit does, he takes the work of Jesus, and applies it to us, so that we can live the life of Jesus.

Or to say it another way, or a better way, friends, John's life is not a life lived for God. Your life is not to be a life lived for God. It's not about what you or I or we do for God. It is about what God does for us. It's about what God does for us, that our God comes for us, that our God lives without sin for us, that our God dies as a substitute for us, that our God rises for us. It's what God does for us. We call that justification. We're given the righteousness of God, and we are declared righteous and just in his sight. It's also about what God does in us. This is regeneration. He takes out our old nature, gives us a new nature, gives us the indwelling presence and power of none other than God the Holy Spirit, the same God who empowered and enabled not only the life of John, but the perfect sinless life of Jesus. And it's what God does through us. We call that sanctification and new life, that the person and work of Jesus for us, leads to transformation in us, and results in new life by God's power to God's glory through us.

A LIFE OUT OF THE BOX

And so you cannot live a great life in the eyes and estimation of Jesus apart from being filled with the Holy Spirit. And this is controlled, led, empowered, made new, to be someone you cannot be, to live a life you cannot live. I was mindful of this—not long ago, our family took a spring break down to Ocean Shores. And it's the Northwest, so you wear a parka, and gloves, and a wool hat, and boots to go to the beach. And there were a few days where the wind was very strong, and we got some sun breaks, so we went and bought kites for the kids.

And when you first get the kite, the kite is functionally dead. This kite has no life. It's going nowhere. It's doing nothing. So we got these big, cool kites, and my six-year-old daughter, Alexie, was with the other kids, but she seemed to be, perhaps, the most excited about this kite. And she looks like Tinker Bell, blond hair, blue eyes, big eyes. And we're taking the kite out of the box, and she's just very excited. "Dad, what's the kite going to do? What it gonna do?" "I don't know, we gotta get it out of the box. We gotta see what happens." This is very exciting. We get the kite out of the box, put the kite together, put it on the string. And you know what you need to do? Let it go, so that kite can be filled with the power of the wind, and it will go

wherever the wind takes it, and it'll soar as high as the wind chooses.

And the language in the New Testament, "do not be drunk with wine," 'cause everyone wants to be filled with something: pride, knowledge, security, comfort, love, alcohol, drugs, self-medication, food. The Bible says, "Don't be filled with those things. Don't be controlled, and mastered, and governed by those things. Be filled with the Holy Spirit." Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit is not a force, he's a person, but he's like the wind. He just absolutely is strong, and powerful, and brings life to dead things, and causes us to soar by God's grace.

So we take the kite out of the box, and put the string on it. And I hold it, and boom, the kite springs to life. And it's dancing, and flying, and the tail is waving. And all of a sudden, this kite's alive, and it's soaring. And Alexie's looking at me, "Daddy, what do I do? What do I do?" Let the string out. Don't fight it. Don't fight it. Let go of the string, let it go. She lets the kite go up, up, up, up, it dances. It's alive. It's soaring. The tail is jumping. She is cheering and shouting. And the whole time I'm thinking of that movie, *Up*, and I'm like, "Don't let her fly away. Don't let her fly away. Don't let her fly away." And I told her, "Honey, if it starts to take you off the ground, let go. Daddy can totally buy another kite."

And what happens is she gets it all the way out to the end of the string. She doesn't control where the kite goes, the wind does. She doesn't make the kite fly, the wind does. She doesn't make it come to life, the wind does that, and the kite's filled with the power of the wind. And then I watched my daughter, and I sat on a log, and I just watched her. I don't have a better word than magical. Any of you dads of daughters with that great delight, you know what I'm talking about. I watched my little girl dance with a kite, 'cause she's a singing, dancing, happy gal. And she's dancing with the kite. And she's, "Whoop-a-doop-a-doop-a-doop," she's singing and dancing with the kite.

And I thought, "Oh, thank you, Holy Spirit. That's a good picture for me of what it means to be Spirit-filled." That our life, so many of us because of sin, is just in the box. It's just dead. There's no life. And some of us are negotiating with God. "You know what, God, I'll take my life out of the box if I get to decide where my proverbial kite goes. You make me happy, you make me healthy, you make me rich. I'll let the kite out of the box. Other than that, I will grieve, quench, resist the Holy Spirit. I'll keep my life in a box. I'm not flying my kite. I'm gonna be like the parable of the spoiled brat. I'm just gonna sit there and complain about kites in general, and the wind in particular, but I'm not flying my kite." Faith is releasing, relinquishing that which is not your own, your life. Saying, "God, I trust you, make it alive. Fill it. Direct me wherever you want me to go. Cause me to be whomever you want me to become."

And at this point, if I was a false teacher, I would tell ya, "Because God wants you to soar to new heights, and be an absolutely great victor like John!" And I would forget to tell you that he was in prison, poor, and got his head chopped off, and that was the greatest Spirit-filled life of any mere mortal. Are you willing to be who God wants you to be? Are you willing to go where God wants you to go? Are you willing to suffer what God wants you to suffer? John is the greatest man who ever lived. Wasn't rich, wasn't powerful. Didn't live long. His reputation was destroyed, and his body was beheaded. Oh, but what a good ride it was. What a great kite John was. He flew high, he flew strong. That's such a better life than a life that never gets out of the box.

I'll close with something that I don't even know what it means, but I give it to you to meditate on. Jesus says, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." I read all the commentators. They don't know what it means either. They use big words. That's what commentators do when they don't know what it means. It's not clear, but it's compelling, that John had not yet seen Jesus die, had not yet seen Jesus rise, had not yet seen the Holy Spirit poured out on the day of Pentecost. And the least in the kingdom of God by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than John. It's not clear, but it's compelling.

Father God, I pray for our people individually and corporately. I pray, Lord God, for those who are here and have never truly repented of sin, that they would repent to you for salvation, that they would repent to others for reconciliation. I pray for those, Lord God, who would hear this message, and their deep sins and secrets that they just need to come clean with and walk in the light from, that they would. God, may we not by your grace accept religious repentance, pagan repentance, worldly sorrow, mere confession, blame shifting, minimizing, or excuse making. May we enjoy this great gift of repentance. May we, Lord God, by your grace, repent, call others to repent, endure impossible people, suffer unnecessary criticism, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and by your grace, get our life out of the box, to come alive, filled, led, guided, transformed, empowered to dance with you, Lord God. By the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name, Amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.