

I am continuing this morning in my summer sermon series The Power of One Life, looking at the lives of minor Biblical characters whose lives can be preached through in one Sunday. This morning we will be looking at one of the most important of all the minor Biblical characters, a man known as John the Baptist. Each one of the gospel stories of Jesus' life tells us about John, who occupied a critical role in salvation history and the story of Jesus. Let's read the gospel of John's account. John the Baptist is not the same person as the John who wrote the book. The one who wrote the book was most likely one of Jesus' twelve disciples, or else an early church leader named John.

John 1:6-37 - *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.*⁷ *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.*⁸ *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*⁹ *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*¹⁰ *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.*¹¹ *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*¹² *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--*¹³ *children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*¹⁵ *John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*¹⁶ *From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.*¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*¹⁸ *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*¹⁹ *Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.*²⁰ *He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."*²¹ *They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."*²² *"Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."*²² *Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"*²³ *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*²⁴ *Now some Pharisees who had been sent*²⁵ *questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"*²⁶ *"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know."*²⁷ *He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."*²⁸ *This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*²⁹ *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*³⁰ *This is the one I meant when*

*I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be **revealed to Israel.**" ³² Then **John** gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." ³⁵ The next day **John** was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.*

So before Jesus arrives on the scene, we have a man known as John the Baptist who comes baptizing people as a way of cleansing them from their sins in order to prepare them for the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. Although John's life and ministry were very undoubtedly very unique, I believe there are three important and very countercultural implications for our lives today.

1) You are not the center of the universe; God is

Many of us are familiar with Galileo and the story of how people came to realize that the sun and not the earth is the center of our solar system. But that seismic paradigm shift is nothing compared to the realization that you are not the center of the universe, but God is. I remember when I first realized this at a Promise Keepers rally at RFK Stadium in Washington D.C., looking around and seeing 60,000 men gathered to worship God.

The world does not revolve around you. John was clear about that. Listen to how he describes himself in a couple of passages in John's gospel:

John 1:20-23 - *He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ **John** replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

He is not the Christ, the Messiah, but instead has been sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord. And:

John 3:26-30 – [Some of John’s disciples] came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan-- the one you testified about-- well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." ²⁷ To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ **The bride belongs to the bridegroom.** The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ **He must become greater; I must become less.**

How did John understand himself? Look at the language he uses: In the first section, John quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to say that he is a voice calling in the desert, telling people to prepare themselves for the coming of God. And in John 3, he compares himself the friend of the groom, or the best man. What a great analogy. In other words, John knew that he was not meant to be the center of attention, just as the best man or maid of honor should not be the center of attention at a wedding. He was not the main attraction. He is there to bring the bride – God’s people – and the bridegroom – Jesus – together; that this is his calling and joy. And John ends this section by saying these incredible words: **He must become greater; I must become less.** Jesus must occupy center stage; I must not steal His spotlight.

This is so countercultural. We live in a world where every message seems to be about you. Have it your way. Because you’re worth it. Just do it. Look out for number one. All that matters is what you think and what you want and what you feel. You do you and don’t let anyone else tell you what to do. But what do you get in a world where everyone is all about themselves? Chaos.

What would it look like for you to truly recognize that the world does not revolve around you but God? That God does not exist to serve you, but you to serve Him? That others do not exist to serve you either? What would it look like to make John 3:30 your life verse, your mantra: He must become greater; I must become less.

2) Your purpose is to glorify Jesus and point people to Him

John 1:6-9 - There came a man who was sent from God; his name was **John**. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

What is John's primary calling, his main responsibility, according to John? He writes that John came as a **witness** testifying about Jesus, the light of the world. When you hear the words witness and testifying, I would imagine for most of you it brings to mind the courtroom. The basic role of the witness is to tell the court what he or she saw, so that the judge or jury can render a verdict. John is described here as a witness telling people about Jesus, the light of the world, the Word of God.

So if he is a witness, what is his testimony? He testifies that **Jesus is God in human form**:

John 1:23 - *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am **the voice** of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

John 1:15 - *John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*

John 1:34 – *"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*

He testifies that Jesus is the Lord, the eternal Word of God, the Son of God. **He testifies that Jesus is the light in the darkness**, illuminating the world so you can see instead of going around blindly.

John 1:6-8 - *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a **witness** to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a **witness** to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*

He gives the Holy Spirit of God and new, spiritual life:

John 1:33 - *I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'*

He makes a way for us to be adopted by God:

John 1:11-13 - *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the*

right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

He is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

John 3:29-31, 36 - *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

The Lamb of God hearkens back to the Passover Lamb who was slain so that the people might be spared from death and go free. When John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God, I believe God gave Him spiritual insight in order to testify to the sacrificial death that Jesus would die for the sins of the world as the ultimate Passover Lamb.

1 Peter 1:18-19 - *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

We are also called to be witnesses, to testify to the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done. It's not about us, it's about him.

Acts 1:8 – *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Matthew 28:18-20 - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

As the **Westminster Shorter Catechism** puts it: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

And as the band **Fleet Foxes** put it in Helplessness Blues – *I was raised up believing I was somehow unique, like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes/Unique in each way you'd conceive. And now after some thinking I'd say I'd rather be a functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me.*

The world teaches us that we are the center of the universe. But what happens when everyone thinks they are the center of the universe? Chaos. We were created to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, to be witnesses to Jesus. **He must become greater and we must become less.** That is where life to the full is found.

Matthew 16:24-26 - *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and **take up** his **cross** and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

It is not about you! You are not the center of the universe. You are a witness called to testify to Jesus, the light of the world, the eternal Son of God, the Savior of the world. We can not save anyone, give anyone eternal life, adopt anyone as a child of God. But He can. What does this look like practically for you?

Less boasting in ourselves. Less talking about how awesome we are and more about how awesome He is. Less trusting in our own way and more trusting in Him. Being willing to make ourselves uncomfortable for the sake of others. Being friendlier. Asking people if they have any spiritual background, or what they believe. What will it mean for you to become less and for Him to become greater?

What if God calls you to a hard life for His glory? To not achieve your dreams? To not find true love? To struggle? Would you be willing to give it all for His glory? After all, remember John:

Matthew 3:4 - *John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.*

John lived in the desert eating locusts and wild honey, wearing clothing made of camel's hair. But he knew his purpose – it was not about him, but to glorify Jesus and point people to Him, even though he had never met him

3) You are to courageously call people to repentance and faith in Jesus

Part of being a witness is testifying to how God has changed our lives. But that is not all. There are many things out there that have brought improvement to people's lives – yoga, p90x, weight-loss surgery, having kids. Yes, he has probably improved your life. But the gospel is not about self-improvement. It is about the eternal Son of God who loves us so much that He lived and died for the sins of the world, that all who turn from sinful self-centeredness to faith in Him might be justified, adopted, and regenerated. And part of that message is the need to repent from sin:

***Matthew 3:5-11** - People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, **'We have Abraham as our father.'** I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

John was a prophet, calling people to repent so that they might put their faith in Jesus. Not just confess, but repent – turn from sin to Jesus. The line he says, “produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” shows that true repentance results in a change of behavior.

It takes courage to proclaim this part of the gospel. It is not a message of “you do you” or that you are God's perfect masterpiece just the way you are or that God loves you just as you are, so just keeping being your wonderful self. It is a message that proclaims that you are not perfect just the way you are, that the desires of your heart are not pure, that you and I are both part of the problem in this world, and that this not only has terrible consequences this side of eternity but can have disastrous consequences for eternity. And the proper response is NOT to just keep living as you are but to repent, to align yourself under the leadership and lordship of the God who created you and knows how you were created to live.

This is not an easy message to proclaim. John the Baptist, while not Elijah, came in the spirit of Elijah.

Matthew 11:13-14 - *For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.*

This is a reference to the end of the Old Testament, where God promises that before the day of the Lord comes, he will send the prophet Elijah. Elijah stood up against the prophets of Ba'al and Jezebel and Ahab at the risk of his own life. The prophet is not loved, but is typically hated by people because he tells people that they do not measure up to God's holy standard, that they need to repent and turn to God and get their lives together. It doesn't often turn out well for the prophet. We read in Matthew 14 that John the Baptist was beheaded by King Herod because he dared confront the king for taking his brother's wife to be his own.

It will not be easy to be a witness. It takes courage to testify about Jesus and to call people to repentance. But God will be with you, and you will be blessed if you are faithful to Him.

Matthew 10:32-33 - *Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.³³ But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*

Matthew 5:10-12 - *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

But shouldn't we just keep it to ourselves and not push our faith on others? This is not telemarketing; it is the cure for cancer. This is rescue from sin and Hell. This is a relationship with God himself. This is the purpose for which you were created. It would be wrong to keep it to ourselves.

Repent of sin and trust in Jesus. We proclaim that through baptism.

Matthew 3:11 - *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

Baptism does not save. But it is an identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus. We will be doing baptisms in two weeks, and I encourage you to be baptized.

