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The Basic Essentials of Witnessing John 1:19-28 Part 1

Over the course of our lives we will be called upon to perform many different tasks. There will be some tasks that will be more challenging than other tasks. But there is no task that is more important for the church than witnessing for Christ. It is our stewardship.

How well are you prepared to do this? Your answer to this question very much depends upon what you consider essential in effective witnessing. This particular consideration will take us into our study of the Gospel of John.

We have just finished our study of the introduction which gave us an extensive list of reasons why the Word was qualified to reveal God to man. We are now entering into the main text of the Gospel. And just as Matthew, Mark and Luke were compelled in their Gospel accounts to introduce John the Baptist before detailing how Jesus explained God through his life and ministry, the apostle John does the same thing here. He is also compelled.

As we examine what the Apostle John tells us in **John 1:19-34** about John the Baptist (perhaps the greatest witness to Christ that has ever lived) we will be able to identify two basic essentials of an effective witness for Christ. Knowing that this is what the passage will provide us the question that we will begin to ask this weekend is this, "What are the basic essentials highlighted in John 1:19-34 that must characterize an effective *witness* for Christ?" I would hope that as we study this passage that we will be personally challenged by the life of John the Baptist in such a way that our effectiveness as a witness for Christ would be dramatically impacted.

The first basic essential that characterizes an effective witness for Christ is *humility* (John 1:19-28).

Let me read for you **John 1:19-28**, "And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" (20) And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ." (21) And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah? And he said, "I am not." Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." (22) They said then to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? "What do you say about yourself?" (23) He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." (24) Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. (25) And they asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (26) John answered them saying, "I baptize with water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. (27) It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." (28) These things took place in Bethany, beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing." The verses that I have just read contain the first basic essential that characterizes an effective witness. And what is that first basic essential that John the Baptist exemplifies for us? Humility.

Why do people do what they do? Most people do what they do because they believe that it will in some way serve them. Their life is all about them. How much fun can they have? How much

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comfort they can enjoy? How much recognition they can receive? This certainly was not true of John the Baptist at all. Let us consider the text.

Let us read **John 1:19**, "**And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you.'**" How will he respond to this delegation? Will his response be "all about John or not?" Let us seek to answer this question by first of all considering the delegation that came from Jerusalem. Who sent them? The "Jews" sent them.

The "Jews" in John 1:19 were the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin were the highest Jewish authority in Palestine at the time of Christ. The Sanhedrin was a group of 70 men who were presided over by the high priest and typically dominated by the priestly aristocracy. This meant that there were typically more Sadducees in this ruling body than Pharisees.

The Sadducees, who typically came from the priestly aristocracy, denied the possibility of resurrection, the reality of the spirit world and the immortality of man. The Sadducees were concerned mostly with political issues rather than religious issues. The Pharisees, in contrast did hold out the hope of resurrection, believed in the reality of the spirit world as well as the immortality of man. And because of this the Pharisees were mostly concerned with religious issues rather than political issues. "The Jews" or in other words "The Sanhedrin" sent a delegation of priests and Levites to John the Baptist.

Who exactly are the priests and Levites? The priests basically were responsible for the offering of sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem. The Levites served the priests as needed. The original purpose of the Levites is spelled out for us in **Numbers 1:50**, "**They shall bear the tabernacle, and all the vessels thereof; and they shall minister unto it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle.**" Since the Levites served the priests we would have to conclude that the priests would have taken the lead in their questioning of John the Baptist. In fact, when the initial question was asked by this delegation from the "Jews" it was most likely asked by the priests.

Why would the Sanhedrin be interested in John the Baptist? They were interested in John the Baptist for the simple reason he was causing quite a stir among the people and was being considered by many to be the Messiah. Therefore, the Sanhedrin sent the priests and Levites to John the Baptist in order to determine his specific identity. At least this is what appears to be happening on the surface when they start out their questioning with "Who are you?"

How would you answer that question? You would probably answer the question directly. You might give your name and maybe a little bit about yourself. But this is not how John the Baptist responded. He first of all tells them who he is not. Let us read **John 1:20**, "**And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'**" Why would he respond by telling them who he is not, before telling them who he is?

John the Baptist chose to answer their initial question of "Who are you" by telling them that he was not the Christ because he knew this was an issue with many people. He answered them formally and carefully, notice it says, "confess" or "confessed" twice in verse 20: "I am not the Christ." If John had said he was the Christ, thousands would have followed him. But he readily and emphatically denies that he is the Christ.

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Apparently John the Baptist after confessing that he was not the Christ simply stopped speaking. This of course, was not a sufficient answer for this delegation from the Sanhedrin. They needed to know who he was if he was not the Christ. So they went on to question him more specifically.

Let us begin to read verse 21, "They asked him, '**Are you Elijah?**'" Why did they ask him this question? I think you can very easily understand the question if you are familiar with **Malachi 4:5**. Let me read this verse for you, "**Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming great and terrible day of the Lord.**" If John the Baptist is not the Christ, maybe, they thought, he is Elijah. And of course that would be significant because if he were Elijah this would mean that the day of the Lord would have been right around the corner.

The day of the Lord is a period of time that starts immediately after the rapture of the church and stretches through the millennial kingdom. But since Malachi describes it as the "**terrible day of the Lord**" we would have to understand his focus to be on that terrible seven year period of tribulation described in the Book of Revelation that occurs at the very beginning of the day of the Lord. So now we come back to their question, "Are you Elijah?"

Now, although John went forth in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), and was, therefore, called Elijah by Christ Himself (Matthew 17:12), he was not literally Elijah.

Because John the Baptist was not the *literal* second coming of Elijah, which many Jews expected based on a poor interpretation of Malachi 4:5 he denied that he was him.

The delegation that came from the Sanhedrin seemed to accept this answer. But they were not finished. They asked John the Baptist another very specific question, "Are you the Prophet?" They did not ask him if he were "a prophet." They asked him if he was "the prophet." What did the delegation mean when they asked this question?

When the delegation asked if John the Baptist was "the prophet," they referred to "the prophet" Moses wrote about in Deuteronomy 18:15. Let me read for you this particular passage, "**And the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.**" Some thought that this particular prophet would be a forerunner of Christ. And if this was in fact true, then of course, John the Baptist could have easily been a fulfillment of this passage. But the reference by God to "a prophet like me" in Deuteronomy was not referring to a forerunner of the Messiah but rather to the *Messiah* Himself (Acts 3:22) which is made very clear in Acts 3:19-22. Therefore John the Baptist again answered correctly when he said, "No, I am not."

So far the delegation had not done very well. They had been asked to get some information about John the Baptist, and all that they had was a string of negatives. Since they had to go back to Jerusalem saying who he was, not who he was not, they turned directly to the subject of their inquisition. Let us read **John 1:22**, "**They said then to him, 'Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?'**"

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It is very difficult for people in general at a moment like this not to be looking out for number one. And who is number one to most people? Themselves. But this certainly was not true of John the Baptist. Listen to what he says in **John 1:23-27**. Let me read for you his response, "**He said, 'I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said, (24) Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. (25) And they asked him, and said to him, 'Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' (26) John answered them saying, 'I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. (27) It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.'**"

His answer reveals what is of primary importance in the matter of sharing our faith. From the example of John the Baptist we learn that what is most important for someone who wants to be an effective witness for Christ is to be humble. If we want to be an effective witness for Christ we must demonstrate the kind of humility demonstrated by John the Baptist in **John 1:23**. Where do we first see the humility of John the Baptist in this passage?

The humility of John the Baptist is first seen in John 1:23 when he simply identified himself as a "voice." Let us once again read John 1:23 and see if we cannot see humility demonstrated in the life of John the Baptist. What did John say? "**He said, 'I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said.**"

What passage is John the Baptist quoting in the Book of Isaiah in order to describe himself? John the Baptist, when referring to himself as "a voice crying in the wilderness," quoted Isaiah 40:3. It is a rather free quotation of Isaiah 40:3 but this verse is unquestionably the verse that John the Baptist referenced. Who was John the Baptist? John the Baptist is the voice prophesied by the prophet Isaiah who would one day cry in the wilderness "Make straight the way of the Lord." Was John the Baptist actually doing the very thing that Isaiah described?

Was John making his voice heard in the wilderness? And the answer is, yes! Let us read **John 1:28, "These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing."** The Bethany that is referred to here as being the place where the ministry of John the Baptist was taking place was not the Bethany that was near Jerusalem. This is the Bethany that is beyond the Jordan. This was a Podunk place out in the middle of nowhere. John the Baptist was not a big city kind of guy.

Obviously he met the first criteria spelled out by Isaiah in respect to this "voice" but what about the second criteria spelled out by Isaiah? Was John crying out "Make straight the way of the Lord?" There is no record of John the Baptist actually using this phrase but let us ask the question, "What does this phrase mean?"

The imagery of making straight the way of the Lord is of preparing a roadway for Him by clearing away *obstacles*. Did John the Baptist actually call people to do that for the Lord?

John the Baptist called people to prepare the roadway for the coming king when he called them to *repent*. What was the message that John the Baptist proclaimed in the wilderness recorded for us in **Matthew 3:2, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."**

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When John the Baptist said that he was "a voice of one crying in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord" he was in essence telling the delegation he was simply a road worker calling people to clear away obstacles for the approaching king. He was not the Messiah. He was not the Elijah of the Old Testament. He was not the prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15. He was simply a voice. He did not see himself as particularly special.

John 1:23-28 reeks of humility. We see that humility first all demonstrated in the way John the Baptist sees himself in John 1:23. But this is not all. We also see his humility demonstrated in John 1:24-27. Let us read these verses, "**Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. (25) And they asked him, and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ (26) John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. (27) It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’**" Let us begin by looking at verse 24, "**Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.**"

Yes, the Sanhedrin or the "Jews" sent this delegation but ultimately they were not representing the politically minded members of the Sanhedrin but rather the more religious minded members of the Sanhedrin who were the Pharisees. And in light of the answer that John the Baptist gave this delegation they knew that the Pharisees would not be happy with him doing baptisms. Let me read for you **John 1:25, "And they asked him, and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’"** Why was baptism an issue for these Pharisees?

Baptism was not a new practice in Judaism. It was the regular rite in the admission of converts from other religions. When such a conversion took place, the males of the family were circumcised and all, of both sexes, were baptized. Jewish baptism was seen as the ceremonial removal of all the pollutions contracted in the Gentile world. Now you can see the problem. All Jews were prepared to accept the view that gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing. But John baptizing Jews, from the perspective of the Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular, would have been unnecessary and unacceptable. How would John respond to their concern voiced in verse 25?

Let me read for you these two verses, "**John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. (27) It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’"** John the Baptist in responding to the question of why he was baptizing deflected the attention from himself to Christ.

Let us break down his response phrase by phrase. John begins by saying, "**I baptize in water but among you stands One whom you do not know.**" John the Baptist in this particular instance chose to change the focus of the discussion from baptism to Jesus and drops the subject of baptism altogether. We should not conclude by this that he does not regard baptism as important. He does not depreciate it. But his baptism is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to point people to Christ. (V. 31). John's interest is in the Christ and in nothing else. So he proceeds to tell his inquisitors about Jesus.

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He is saying you are all concerned about me and what I am doing. But let me tell you about someone whom you do not know. And what does he say about him? He tells them that this person that they do not know is younger than himself. But just because he may be younger you had better not dismiss him. Why is this?

Let us go to verse 27, "**It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.**" In this verse, John the Baptist now brings out the greatness of the one who was to come by referring to his own personal unworthiness. He was not worthy to loosen the thong or strap of the one they did not know. What is the significance of the reference to the sandal?

For the Jews loosing the sandal was the task of a *slave*. Consider this common rabbinic saying, "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the losing of his sandal-thong."

John chooses the very task that the rabbinic saying stresses was too menial for any disciple, and declares himself unworthy to perform it.

John 1:23-28 reeks of humility. First of all we see the humility of John the Baptist demonstrated in the way he sees himself in John 1:23. And secondly we see the humility of John the Baptist demonstrated in the way he sees Christ in John 1:26-27.

CONCLUSION

Humility, a basic essential to effective witnessing, requires us to see ourselves as nothing and Christ as *everything*.

One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was a brilliant performance, at the end of which the audience went absolutely wild! They clapped, whistled, and stamped their feet, absolutely caught up in the greatness of that performance. As Toscanini stood there, he bowed and bowed and bowed, then acknowledged his orchestra. When the ovation finally began to subside, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians and whispered, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! I am nothing." He then added, "Gentlemen, you are nothing but Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!" This is the attitude we need toward ourselves and toward the Lord Jesus Christ. I am nothing, you are nothing but He is *everything*! This is the attitude of every effective witness for Christ.