

SESSION 5

JOHN THE BAPTIST: A FAITH THAT CHALLENGES OTHERS

Leader pages on pp. 118-121

THE POINT:
FAITH STANDS
UNWAVERINGLY ON
THE TRUTH.

MATTHEW 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" ³ For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!

⁴ Now John had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵ Then people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were going out to him,

⁶ and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

.....
⁷ When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance.

⁹ And don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

.....
¹¹ **"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

¹² His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out."

MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

Camel-hair garment (v.4)—John's dress and lifestyle, including his diet, were connected to other people who lived in the desert.

Pharisees and Sadducees (v. 7)—Were two of the three main Jewish religious groups in the first century.

Brood of vipers (v. 7)—John was echoing Genesis 3 when the first man and woman were led astray by a serpent.

Winnowing shovel (v.12)—A tool used by farmers to separate wheat or other grain from the chaff, a process both useful and valuable.

HOW CAN WE PRESENT CHRIST TO OUR CURRENT CULTURE?

Social media has changed its users's lives in unprecedented ways. We have what they call, "Influencers." The influencers are essentially content creators who share information that affects the behaviors, attitudes, and choices of their audience. Major companies have hired them to promote their brand. For instance, if an influencer were to wear a certain clothing brand, their followers would be influenced to buy that same brand. Many of our youth and young adults visit this platform hoping to be an influencer because they can be someone they admire.

They seek validation and acceptance. These influencers can drive a person to think differently. We all have seen our youth with their eyes glued to a screen, watching videos of people that they are being influenced by. These influencers sometimes have more control over a young person than their own parents. Many have put their faith in the person they see on those platforms.

As Christians, we have an influencer who is 100% right 100% of the time. Following Him will give us peace, contentment, and joy. In a world of brokenness, let us lead others to the solution. How will they hear if we keep silent?

Call to Repentance // Matthew 3:1-6

Let me ask you a question: When did you last talk with someone about your faith in Jesus Christ? You may or may not want to share your answer out loud. Far too many Christ-followers answer rarely or never. Some would say, "That's what ministers or preachers do." Faith in Jesus isn't just received; it's meant to be shared. Even baseball would be boring if the pitcher never pitched to the batter.

The Bible contains the stories of many people of great faith. And most of them shared their faith with others. Some were called to a ministry of preaching and telling their audiences how they could receive the gift of faith. One such man was John the Baptist. Jesus had this to say about John: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared" (Matt. 11:11a).

This passage begins with a description of John. He certainly wasn't your run of the mill religious leader. The Bible says he "had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey."



THE POINT: FAITH STANDS UNWAVERINGLY ON THE TRUTH.

Not exactly the kind of charismatic leader folks flock to in normal circumstances. But this was the appointed time for God's Messiah, and John was to be His herald.

Isaiah had prophesied John's arrival on the scene. His ministry began prior to Jesus, and his role was to prepare people for the coming Messiah. This mission included crying out in the wilderness and making the way clear for Jesus. John's clothing and diet weren't the only unique things about him. He shared a simple message with urgency. His impact was immediate. John the Baptist said to the crowd, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (3:2).

The kingdom of heaven is still near. People need to be told about salvation through faith in Jesus and given an opportunity to respond, whether it is a late-night visit to an emergency room, a discussion with a neighbor while doing yardwork, or a final conversation with someone on a mission trip to Eastern Europe. All Christ-followers must share their faith with someone. This is why God saves us and leaves us here! There are far too many people without faith in Jesus to leave all the sharing to a handful of people.

Analytics is "information resulting from the systematic analysis of data or statistics." Analytics has entered every aspect of our lives, including ministry. John's responsibility was to tell his audience to repent. He left the sorting to God. When Christ-followers are obedient and share their faith with someone, they're successful. Successfully sharing your faith in Jesus doesn't depend on the results; it's all about being a faithful herald for our King.

God's message of truth through John drew large crowds of people. Many found faith in God's truth, resulting in repentance and baptism. Faith must be found before it can be shared. Of course, it must be shared before it can be found. This is God's cycle of evangelism.

HOW DOES YOUR FAITH MAKE YOU STAND OUT FROM THE WORLD?

Address Hard Truths //

Matthew 3:7-10

John the Baptist boldly preached God's truth, and many people responded with repentance and baptism. However, some Jewish religious leaders who came to hear John believed they were excluded from his warnings because Abraham was their father.

They weren't there to respectfully listen to John but to confront him. John didn't sugarcoat his words.



DIGGING DEEPER THE SADDUCEES

Sadducees and the Pharisees were influential leaders who made up the Sanhedrin which was the 70-member supreme court of Israel at that time. They oversaw religious teaching and were also involved in the government. They were different in certain areas. The Sadducees didn't believe everything God said in the Old Testament. They were usually wealthy and held more powerful positions. By today's standards, they would be considered the elite of society. They held the majority of seats in the Sanhedrin council. The Sadducees were intensely interested in government and were more sympathetic to Roman laws. The Pharisees believed most of the things God said in the Old Testament and were more representative of the familiar working people. They were more concerned about religion. They believed in strictly adhering to customs and rules. The Sadducee's power was the temple in Jerusalem, and the Pharisees controlled the synagogue.

How can believers be mindful not to fall into the same mindset as the Sadducees?

Standing on his faith in God and His word, John took the first shot. He faced a group of angry religious leaders who believed their heritage was enough to protect them from God's coming wrath. John used the image of a fruit tree to communicate the importance of God's truth. This image can apply to people of all religious backgrounds.

John described the Jewish leaders as a fruit tree. God's judgment, an ax, was ready to cut them down if they didn't repent and produce fruit. Fruit is the natural result of obedience to God.

It's dangerous to tell the truth. John knew God's truth must be proclaimed, even if it cost him his life. Let's pause from our story for a moment and fast-forward to Matthew 14:1-12 and hear the story of John's death.

Herod was a political leader in Galilee. He married his brother's wife, Herodias, and John boldly told Herod this action was unlawful. Herod had John arrested but was afraid to execute him because the people loved John. At Herod's birthday party, Herodias asked her daughter to dance for Herod. This pleased him, and in turn, he told her he would give her whatever she wanted. Herodias told her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter. Herod had to grant her request, so John was beheaded.

Followers of Jesus Christ have countless opportunities to confront people lovingly or boldly with the truth of God's Word. Sadly, more times than we care to admit, we let these opportunities pass us by without saying a word. We get caught up with our own challenges and decide to let someone else deal with them. Yet, God has charged each follower of Jesus to be bold and courageous with His truth.

HOW CAN WE SHARE THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL IN WAYS THAT CONNECT IN OUR CULTURE?

Point to Christ // Matthew 3:11-12

The church and preaching and teaching aren't about you; they're about Jesus. John the Baptist knew that reality all too well, and his words proved it. His preaching pointed people toward Jesus and away from himself, and the ability to do that requires at least two things: discipline and humility.



As John continued his conversation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, he revealed his discipline in several ways. First, he was disciplined with his message. John's message was one of hope. Jesus Christ is the only one in whom our hope should be placed. Having faith in Jesus is the only hope for mankind's salvation. John's message always included a warning. People must know the consequences of rejecting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Jesus was the coming Messiah and the Judge of mankind at the end of time. John warned the people and the religious leaders alike. No one would be excluded from Jesus's winnowing shovel.

John was also disciplined in his humility. Although he acknowledged his role in the kingdom of God, John's message was never about himself. The Bible speaks about the importance of humility and mentions two of the most notable people who practiced humility:

Moses. "Moses was a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).

Jesus. "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Dr. Billy Graham, one of the greatest preachers in human history, preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people than any other person in recorded history. According to the Billy Graham Evangelist Association's website, from 1949 until his retirement, he spoke in person to over

THE POINT: FAITH STANDS UNWAVERINGLY ON THE TRUTH.

215 million people in some 185 countries and territories and countless others through media outlets.³ In spite of his fame, Billy Graham remained committed to the simple message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Mr. Graham was also uncomfortable receiving honors or awards, even to the point that he preferred to be called Mr. Graham rather than Dr. Graham.

Consider this: John the Baptist and Billy Graham are no longer here to preach the simple message of God's love for the world through Jesus Christ. The world's population is growing faster and faster. People need to hear about Jesus. Who will tell them? We can't wait for the next John the Baptist or Billy Graham, and even that wouldn't be enough. Each Christ-follower must help tell the world about the story of Jesus and His love for the world. This was always Jesus's plan.

If you have experienced forgiveness of your sins by faith in Jesus Christ, someone prayed for you, shared God's message of love, and challenged you to ask God to forgive you, it's now your responsibility to tell others about Jesus.

WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST?

DID YOU KNOW?

Matthew 28:19-20 tells us to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." Did you know that the International Mission Board has 3,590 total missionaries in the field as of July 31, 2024?⁴ These are believers who are committed to spreading the gospel even though they might be in a hostile area. Fifteen sub-Saharan countries scored "extremely high"⁵ on Open Doors' s violence metric. Although these are alarming statistics. There are still missionaries wishing to risk their lives to share their faith. Let us be prayerful for our fellow brothers and sisters as they go out boldly to spread the good news. As you read this, prayerfully consider if the Holy Spirit is leading you to the International Mission field.

Biblical Truth: Every follower of Christ has a responsibility to share the gospel.

Are the opportunities in your home, on your job, in your church or community to tell someone about Christ?

LIVE IT

How do we stand on the absolute truth of God's Word in a culture that makes truth relative?

God's Word is truth—unchanging truth. Though culture and the world's opinions are ever-changing, God's call and standards are not. We can stand quietly in our commitment to God's standards for righteousness, but if we're silent, we keep others from knowing the truth and having their own encounter

+ + + of faith in Jesus. Choose one of the following applications:

- **Ask.** Ask God to help you become a person who stands for truth, no matter the cost. Ask Him to give you courage for the journey.
- **Analyze.** Look at your life. Are you willing to let go of disobedience to God's Word that is keeping you from telling others about your faith in Jesus Christ? Make a list of those things that are obstacles right now and pray for God to remove them.
- **Act.** Don't wait for the perfect time, place, or opportunity. Put into practice the things you have learned about sharing your faith and do it. The more you act, the more comfortable you will become in being a soul-winner.

DAILY READINGS

1. BE THE SALT // MATTHEW 5:13-16

At some point in our lives, we've all seen the ministers on street corners yelling to the masses to repent of their sins. This might reach some, but for the majority of people, walking testimonies are much more effective. In real time, they see our faith through our response in the face of adversity. It is so unlike the world that it cannot be ignored. This is what it means to be the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). People want an answer for our lifestyle, and this is the time to show them Jesus! Salt is used to preserve and enhance the flavor of food. Christ is calling believers to preserve truth and enhance godliness in the world.

Many will come to know Jesus because of what they see in us.

2. THEY'RE COUNTING ON YOU! // MATTHEW 3:1-3

John the Baptist spent many years of his life calling for repentance as the time of Jesus drew near. He knew that to receive the gift of life, they'd have to give up their own. This means turning away from the sinful lives they once knew. To many at the time, he seemed like a crazy man, but he didn't allow comments to stop him from telling the people what they needed to hear. When we speak of repentance today, we can be met with hurtful comments as well, but we can't be deterred. People's lives are at stake, and God has called us to spread the truth of the gospel in love.

We can't allow the opinions of others to stop us from speaking the truth of the Gospel.

3. A TARGET FOR CHRIST // DEUTERONOMY 31:8; ROMANS 8:31

Living for God can feel like wearing a target sometimes. In response, many choose to simply say nothing, refusing to address the hard truths of the Word to ensure some sense of self-preservation. But that's not the life God called us to. We know that Jesus "came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him" (John 1:11-12). If

this was the response to Him, should we expect anything different? Still, no matter the cost to our personal or professional lives, we must still proclaim Jesus. "The Lord is the one who will go before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or abandon you. Do not be afraid or discouraged." (Deut. 31:8).

We may face obstacles in life, but Christ has already given us victory.

4. THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT YOU! // MATTHEW 3:6

Even though many did not receive John the Baptist's message, many did. Those he baptized in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:6). Because he chose to obey God, their lives, and likely the lives of their family, were changed. It's important to remember that on this journey for every naysayer against us, there will always be those who listen and receive. Their lives matter. We wouldn't be here if someone didn't care enough to speak the truth to us. As Christ followers, we have a responsibility to share the good news of the gospel we have received. Someone shared with us. If they didn't give up on us, how can we give up on someone else?

Lives hang in the balance. We can't stop advancing the kingdom.

5. ACTION! // MATTHEW 4:4

You are God's answer to someone's prayers. Did you know that? You are here at this moment and time on purpose, and people will come to know Jesus because we listened and obeyed. Living out bold faith means understanding that we live by the Word of God and move by assignment. Some describe it as a "knowing." Others describe it as a nudge. Regardless, when we sense God moving on our hearts, we must have enough faith to act. Our world is broken, and people are crying out for the answer—Jesus. Many are seeking answers to life in all the wrong places. The world needs the truth that comes only from the Bread of Life. How selfish would it be to only live with ourselves in mind?

People are waiting for an answer, and God is giving it through you.



Risk-taking Faith

MARK CROSTON

A survey was done of people over the age of eighty. They were asked what they would do differently if they had their lives to live over again. I am not sure how you might answer, but their responses can be summarized in three statements:

- They would reflect more, taking time to think about what's important, impactful and meaningful.
- They would do more things that would be remembered after their death. Feeling their personal mortality, they want something from their lives to live on.
- They would take more risks. They would not take the easy, cheap, safe path in life.

Risk is the possibility of loss, injury, failure or peril. Risks: we sometimes fear them; run from them; question them; and yield to them. We are sometimes immobilized by them, but taking risks is what faith is all about. Faith remember...

“is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

Faith is all about acting in belief, confidence and trust when you don't have all the measurable and observable facts. Faith is all about risk-taking. Things don't fully add up, you can't see fully how to do it; you don't know fully where the resources will come from; you don't know fully how to get there. At points like these, some will freeze in their steps, fear advancing, or forsake the path, but some will continue to move forward in faith.

Remember Moses? In Exodus 3 and 4, God was calling Moses to be the leader for the liberation of His people, Israel, from over four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. Moses was raised in the house of the Pharaoh of Egypt, but in Exodus 4, he is eighty years old and living as a shepherd in the land of Midian, near the mountain, Horeb. Moses raised excuse after excuse about why he could not do what God was

calling him to do and over and over again, God gave Moses reasons to trust Him.

Exodus 3:11-12

- Moses: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”
- God: “I will certainly be with you.”

Exodus 3:13-14

- Moses: “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I tell them?”
- God: “...This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.”

Exodus 4:1-9

- Moses: “What if they won’t believe me and will not obey me?”
- God: “What is that in your hand?”
- Moses: “A staff”

Exodus 4:10-12

- Moses: “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent—either in the past or recently or since you have been speaking to your servant—because my mouth and my tongue are sluggish.”
- God: “I will help you speak, and I will teach you what to say.”

Exodus 4:13-16

- Moses: “Please, Lord, send someone else.”
- God: “Isn’t Aaron, the Levite, your brother? I know that he can speak well...He will speak to the people for you. He will serve as a mouth for you.”

After all this, Moses still had to take a risk and step out on faith. God used him to successfully confront Pharaoh and lead the nation of Israel through forty years in the wilderness to the edge of Canaan, the promised land.



So, what can we learn from eighty-year-old Moses and the other eighty-year-olds in the survey? One takeaway is that we should push ourselves to live by risk-taking faith. Attributed to Thomas Jefferson is a quote that says, “With great risk comes great reward.”⁶ We hear this in the regrets of those octogenarians in the survey. We also see this in the life of Moses. His greatest work came from his willingness to act with risk-taking faith.

In fact, God requires all who will walk with Him in obedience to walk in risk-taking faith. Hebrews 11:6 informs us, “Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Risk and faith go hand in hand. Sometimes the risks are greater and sometimes smaller, but all faith is risk-taking faith. Or to say it another way, you are not walking by faith if you are not taking a risk.

Dr. Mark Croston serves as national director of Black Church Ministries and general editor for the YOU curriculum at Lifeway.