

By a show of hands, how many of you have purchased something online before? It looks like most of you; I thought that would be the case. A follow up question then—what percentage of your purchases take place online? How many would estimate 30%? 50%? 70%?

When I first began to make purchases online, I felt nervous for two primary reasons: (1) Trusting the world wide web with my credit card information seemed a little sketchy; and (2) Since I couldn't actually touch the product, or ask a "live" person questions about the product, I could never be sure that the product was as advertised.

These days, like most of you, before I make an online purchase, I always read the customer reviews. While I do not know the reviewers personally, their review is often the difference between me buying the product, or, walking away. In the truest sense of the word, the reviewers function as **witnesses**; they have first-hand knowledge and experience that I don't. I may not agree with their conclusions, but I would be wise to at least consider their counsel.

Properly defined a **witness** is a person who has seen or heard something—like an accident, or a crime—and is willing to give testimony to what they have seen or heard.

If you enjoy watching movies, no doubt you have seen more than a few that feature law court drama—a judge, a prosecutor, a defendant and a jury. Perhaps you seen movies like, *A Few Good Men*, *A Time to Kill*, or, *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

Predictably, these movie concludes with a brilliant, passionate, and convincing closing argument, but every case rises and falls with the **witnesses** who are called to take the stand. Their eye-witness account *is* the evidence that determines the ruling. In the case of a murder trial, depending on the laws of the land, a witness' testimony could mean life—or death—for the defendant.

Last week we began a new preaching series through the Gospel of John. The author of this Gospel, John, was one of Jesus' 12 disciples; over a three year period, he followed Jesus wherever He went. First and foremost, John is a witness; he saw what Jesus did and heard what Jesus said.

At the conclusion of his Gospel, John states his aim in writing: "*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*"¹

John didn't write to inform or to educate; he wrote to persuade us to believe in Jesus. Why? *That we might have life in His name*. I want you to stop for a moment and let that sink in. In writing about Jesus, John is addressing matters of life and death. John saw, heard, and came to know Jesus; as a witness, John has something to say—something weighty, something he cannot keep to himself.

The same is true for everyone who comes to know Jesus; we have something to say, something weighty. When we speak of Jesus, we're

¹ John 20:30-31.

not addressing matters of preference, but matters of life and death. We cannot keep this to ourselves.

This morning we're going to take a look at John 1:19-34. If you were here last week, you may wonder why I'm not beginning at the beginning—with John 1:1. We are we will return to vs. 1-18 during the Christmas season. This morning we are going to take a closer look at one of the very first witnesses to Jesus—not John the disciple, but John the Baptist.

If you have a Bible with you, either paper or electronic, please turn with me to John 1:19. **Read.**

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in 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 Messiah." 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 wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, 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 straps 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.

If we were to recast John the Baptist in the language of today, we might say that he was an eccentric. He had a unique sense of fashion: the other Gospels describe him as wearing a camel-hair robe and a leather belt). He had a strange diet—wild honey and locusts—and he lived off the grid (in the desert). But in spite of his eccentricities, John was what we would call a “young influencer”. He was 30 years old, and drawing massive crowds from all over the country; if he had lived in the social media age, John would have been trending.

Jerusalem was the religious, political, and financial capital of Israel; it was the place of power and influence. And so, when word got out that crowds were flocking to the desert—to hear John preach, and to be baptized—a delegation of religious leaders was sent to investigate.

There was more going on than mere curiosity, this religious delegation was commissioned to protect its own interests, and, the larger interests of Israel. Remember, Israel had a tenuous relationship with the Roman Empire. As a vassal state, with a history of rebellion, Israel was one step away from suffering the wrath of Rome's military might.

And so, when someone like John starts attracting giant crowds, there's bound to be talk about a Messiah figure—someone who would raise Israel's army and throw off their Roman oppressors. As the old saying goes, “*where there's smoke, there's fire,*” this delegation was sent to make sure there wasn't going to be trouble.

vs. 20: But when they put John on the witness stand, they got more than they bargained for. The exchange begins not with a question, but with a response; John confessed, “*I am not the Messiah.*” The Baptist

knew *why* the delegation had come and *what* they wanted to know—his response pre-empted their question.

Let me take a few moments to explain this term, “**Messiah**”. “**Messiah**” is a Jewish title that simply means “*Anointed One*;” the corresponding title in Greek is “Christ”. To speak of “Jesus Christ” is to speak of *Jesus the Messiah*, or *Jesus, the Anointed One*.

Now, throughout the Bible, there have been many who were anointed by God—which is to say, they were chosen and set apart for a particular task. But, writes Leon Morris, “in due course the expectation grew up that one day God would send into the world... a mighty Deliverer, One who would represent Him in a very special sense, this coming great One was thought of not as ‘an anointed one,’ but as the anointed one,’ ‘the Messiah.’”²

Vs. 21: When John denied being the Messiah, his prosecutors moved on to the next possibility: “*Are you Elijah?*” You see, hundreds of years earlier, God had spoken through a prophet—Malachi—about a time when God Himself would come in judgement against His own people—Israel. But included in this word of judgement, there was a provision of mercy; first, God would send a prophet to them—Elijah—and if the people listened to Elijah’s preaching, and turned back to the Lord, judgement would be suspended.

“*Are you Elijah?*” they asked. John replied, “*I am not.*”

² Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According To John*, 118.

³ Deuteronomy 18:15.

⁴ Jean Vanier, *The Gospel of John, The Gospel of Relationship*, 6.

The Baptist’s second denial prompted a third question, “*Are you the Prophet?*” Once again, the religious leaders point to an ancient prophecy, this time from the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses promised that God would raise up a future prophet for them to listen to and follow.³

“*Are you the Prophet?*” Once again, John answered, “*No.*”

You know how it goes... when you are sent to find answers you can’t come back empty-handed. We are not meant to miss the brevity of John’s responses; he has almost nothing to say—*I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, I am not the Prophet*. Finally, in exasperation, the delegation said, “*Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?*”

And the Baptist responds, in the words of Isaiah 40:3, “*I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’*” John wasn’t trying to make a name for himself, or to “build his own brand;” he used his voice to point away from himself. In the words of Jean Vanier, “The mission of John the Baptist was to witness, to announce, and to incite a movement towards Jesus... Sometimes the danger with witnesses is that they draw too much attention to themselves. Not so with John.”⁴

To “make straight the way for the Lord” was a call to wake people up from their spiritual slumber, to get them ready—the Lord was

coming—there wasn't a moment to spare. There was an urgency to John the Baptist's ministry, or at the very least, an awareness that what he was doing mattered. Being a witness mattered. Waking people up, getting them ready, pointing away from himself—to God—mattered.

My dear people, nothing has changed, and at least in one respect—we too are witnesses of what we have seen, heard, and know. And we, like John, are called to point people to Jesus; *will we be His witnesses?*

One final question rounds out this section; we find it in vs. 26. *If you're not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, then why are you baptizing? In other words, what makes you think we need to be prepared for God's coming?* As an Old Testament ceremonial practice, baptism was a physical act that pointed to the spiritual need for cleansing. The religious leaders were prepared to accept that outsiders were defiled: *Surely those kind of people need to be cleansed, but not us.*

But instead of answering the question he was asked, John pointed away from himself to the One who was coming—the Messiah. Vs. 26, *Among you stands One you do not know...I am unworthy to even untie the straps of His sandals.* We're not told if the Baptist said any more, but as a witness, John was just getting warmed up.

In vs. 29 we read, “**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 And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' 34 I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.”*

In the English language, we regularly make use of metaphorical language: your hair is as black as a raven, or, your teeth are as white as snow. We draw upon common word pictures to help us describe something in a vivid and compelling way. Strangely, the Baptist likens Jesus to a lamb who will deal with the sin of the world.

You may have noticed that the word “sin” has largely been banished by our culture as an embarrassing relic from the past. To talk about “sin” is to make a judgement about what's right and wrong, and surely—we reason—that's up to individuals to decide, isn't it? The real difficulty in embracing this kind of thinking is being consistent. We don't want anyone telling us what's right and wrong, but what do I do when what's “right” for you ends up causing “wrong” for me? No matter how loudly we protest that right and wrong are a matter of individual preference, deep down, we know better.

The Bible describes sin in a variety of ways: as *rebellion*, as *infidelity*, as *getting dirty*, as *wandering*, as *breaking God's law*, and as *missing the mark*. Most of us tend to think about sin in a one dimensional way, but the Bible presents sin as a multi-dimensional problem.

As much as we may dislike the word “sin,” can we not agree that as we look around us, and look within ourselves, there’s something desperately wrong?

- Things have been broken that needs to be healed.
- Things have been lost that needs to be found.
- Things are wrong that need to be made right.
- Things have died, or are dying, that need to be raised.

John the Baptist describes Jesus as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” In doing so, John draws upon sacrificial imagery from the Old Testament. Without explaining how it all works, the Baptist declares that Jesus’ sacrifice will deal with sin—with all that is wrong with me, you, and the world.

The Baptist is on the witness stand, speaking of what he has seen, heard, and knows. God didn’t give John any advanced knowledge on who the Messiah would be; what he did know was that he would know when he saw Him. God revealed to John that the Messiah would appear when he began to baptize. And more, the One God had chosen would be accompanied by a sign—the Holy Spirit would come down on Him and remain. The Baptist offers this eye-witness testimony concerning Jesus, “*I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.*”

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to direct our attention to Jesus, the Lamb of God; at the Cross, He gave His life, that we might experience life with God.

When a relationship has been broken, rarely can the one who has done the breaking bring about the repair. For reconciliation to take place, forgiveness must first be offered in order to be received. Often, the one who has been injured must take the first step. This is what God did, through Jesus, at the cross.

In Romans 5:6-8 we read, “*at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...*”

These verses follow a basic outline: vs. 6 states the premise—*Christ died for the ungodly*; vs. 7 comments on the premise—*it’s rare to find someone who’s willing to die for a worthy person*; and vs. 8 draws the conclusion—*the cross of Christ reveals the magnitude of God’s love*. This work of reconciliation is God’s initiative, fuelled by His steadfast love.⁵

It’s very important that we understand the order of Paul’s thought. God acted in Christ before humanity wanted to be reconciled; God loved us while we were still enemies. Put another way, while humanity was still running from God, He took the initiative to draw near.

But even if we begin to grasp the enormity of God’s love, the question must be asked: *how did the death of Jesus bring about life and forgiveness for humanity?* The answer is wrapped up in the word “reconcile”.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Day Revolution Began*, 137.

The New Testament Greek equivalent of the word “reconcile” is *katallasso*, and this verb expresses the idea of a substitutionary exchange.

In becoming human, God the Son bound Himself to our sinful condition. He became what we are, He took our sin upon Himself. At the cross, Jesus was rejected and we are accepted; He was forsaken and we are forgiven.

It is a marvellous thing, to be loved by God. It’s worth dwelling on the fact that God knows everything about us—every thought we have, every word spoken, every action taken. And though nothing is hidden from God’s sight—He sees us at our worst—His love doesn’t waiver. God’s love is freely given. Let that sink in for a moment.

Shame has a way of drowning out the Voice of Love; it convinces us that love must be earned, and, that we will never measure up. Perhaps this week you have said or done something that has allowed shame to overwhelm God’s voice; you have convinced yourself that God could not love someone like you.

John the Baptist calls to us, “*Look to the Lamb of God—He takes away the sin of the world!*” At the cross, Jesus dealt with our sin, securing forgiveness and peace for all who turn to Him. This morning, I urge you to turn to Jesus, to receive His forgiveness, and to embrace God’s love.

Guided Prayer: As the band comes to lead us in a final song, let me invite you to spend a few moments in silent prayer, contemplating the love of God.

Holy Spirit, come and apply the love of God to our minds and heart.

Worship

Benediction