

John the Baptist's Testimony about Christ

John 1:19-34

The Gospel of John Sermon Series

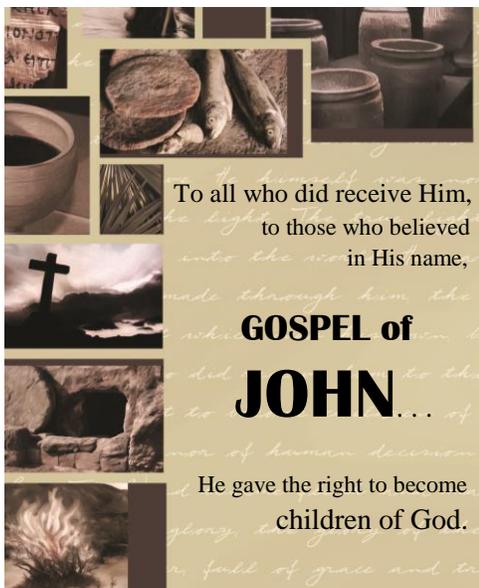
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

February 16, 2014

TEXT: John 1:19-34

This morning we continue in our series on the Gospel of John. We will journey through John's Gospel through a series of testimonies to the truth about Jesus Christ, and not many weeks



from this point, we will be celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. We began with John's own testimony last week, and this Sunday, we turn our attention to the testimony of John the Baptist. John the Baptist forms a crucial introduction to all of the Gospels and sets forth a very powerful example for us. In John the Baptist's testimony, we learn how we should think and speak about ourselves in relation to Jesus. We also learn how we are to think and speak about Jesus Himself. My prayer is that throughout this whole series, we, as a church family, would grow with greater confidence and clarity in who Jesus is, and by knowing that, we would have greater confidence in sharing our own testimony to the lives around us. We have two large movements this morning: How we should think and speak

about ourselves in relation to Jesus; and how we should think and speak about Jesus Himself, all through the lens of John.

The first movement in this text is John the Baptist's own testimony showing us how we should think and speak about ourselves in relation to Jesus. John the Evangelist begins in John 1:19 by telling us that this was John's own testimony, and we see right here the legitimacy of the category of *testimony* or *witness*. The Greek word is the one from which we get the word *martyr*. To be a martyr is to give ultimate witness to the truth of a public question. The question, "Who is Jesus?" is a massive question of crucial importance, and John the Evangelist will keep adding testimonies in a public way to establish this truth. Here we have John the Baptist's testimony. When religious leaders came from Jerusalem, they sent priests and Levites to ask John who he was. We notice right away that John's behavior prompts questions from

people around him, and there is a mini-application for us right at this point. The presence of Christ within us, the aroma of Christ radiating out from us, should provoke and produce questions towards us from other people. People come to John, and they asked him, "John, who are you?" and John replies in John 1:20:

"I am not the Christ."

This is a very important lesson for Christians. We have to be absolutely clear that we are not the Messiah; we are not the Christ. Most people have never thought they were the Messiah, so you might be tempted to guard yourself from this text and say, "This has nothing to do with me." Yet, if you probe further within, it is often the case that we posture ourselves to be the solution for the people around us. John the Baptist is absolutely certain, right at the beginning, about who he is not. We have to be very clear about this as well. John tells us, he did not fail to openly confess freely, "I am not the Messiah; I am not the Savior, and I'm absolutely clear about that." There is a strong denial at the beginning of his testimony. Dale Bruner says:

"Christians are messianic, but they are not Messiah. This is a fine but crucial distinction. We are the Body of Christ, but we are not Christ Himself, and it is always good to know the difference."

When John the Baptist is introduced to us in John 1:6-8, he is introduced as:

"There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

Be absolutely clear in the depths of your being who you are not. John presses further when he's asked in John 1:21:

"Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He answers: *"I am not."* He's dressed in an Elijah-like costume. He has the right outfit for Elijah: he has a leather belt, he has the camel-hair jacket, he has the Elijah-diet – the locusts and wild honey; and yet he's certain that he is not Elijah. Elijah is supposed to come with the ministry of repentance. In Malachi 4:5-6, the last sentence in the Greek Old Testament, we read:

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

When he is asked if he is Elijah, John replies, "No." They dial in a little further and ask in John



1:21b:

"Are you the Prophet?"

Again, he replies: *"I am not."* Surely these religious leaders, who know the Scripture well, are referring to that great promise in Deuteronomy 18:18-19 where the Lord God says:

"I will raise up for them a prophet like [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to My words that the prophet speaks in My name, I myself will call him to account."

Maybe one of the clearest images of a coming figure, covenant mediator in the books of Moses, is in Deuteronomy 18. When they say, "John, are you this prophet?" He says, "No! No, no, no!" So, when you get ready to tell people about Jesus Christ, you have to discipline yourself, first of all, to say, "No, no, no," about yourself. This is a very important lesson from John. He's crystal clear that he is **not** the answer; he is **not** the Savior. The solution for the world does not ride on his shoulders. Well, then, who is he? The question remains. When John is pressed further and they say, "Who are you then if you're not the Messiah, if you're not Elijah, if you're not the Prophet? Who are you?" His answer comes in John 1:23. John replies with a quotation from Isaiah. He says:

"I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

He says, "I am not the Messiah. I'm a voice calling out in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight His paths.' I am calling people to prepare for an encounter with God Himself." Again, Dale Bruner says this so well. He says:

"John the Baptist is not the Word, but he is a voice pointing to the Word.
He is not the Point, but he is the biblically promised pointer.
He is not Scripture's subject, but he is a Scripture verse.
He is not something Else, but he is something important,
Pointing to Scripture's main messianic subject: Jesus Christ."

You and I are not the point, but God has called us all to be pointers to Christ. John's quotation from Isaiah is a precious promise in Scripture to call out to people to prepare for God. The image Handel uses so beautifully in his oratorio, *The Messiah*, presents musical brilliance to me, to make the lines of music actually reflect the words. Don't you love how it says, ". . . and the rough places plain"? I think that's so beautiful. In Isaiah 40:4-5, the image is smoothing things out, getting the area ready, so that Christ can have a straight shot at people.

"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

That's our role. We are like those workers in the field who go out and remove the rocks; we are like God's construction workers smoothing out the path so that Christ can have a straight shot right at the hearts of people; we are to be people who remove barriers so He need not slow down as He approaches their hearts. We are people who smooth the way, prepare the sign, prepare the site for His own arrival. In Isaiah 40:6-8, the voice in the wilderness also calls out:

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

Part of our role is to very quietly, sometimes not so quietly, pop the bubble of vanity or pride and confidence in this world. We remind people through our lives and actions, that One much greater is at hand. So, John says he is a voice pointing. In John 1:26, he says:

"I baptize with water."

He's out in the desert, baptizing people to prepare them, and people are asking, "What are you doing? Why are you doing what you're doing?" Wouldn't it be great if people asked this of you, if they saw the way that you live, and the way that you live made people say, "What are you doing? Why are you doing that?" and you could respond that your behavior is flowing out of your knowledge of the Lord. That's why I'm doing what I'm doing.

John says in John 1:26-27:

"I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'"

John sets before us here a posture of tremendous humility in light of the preeminent greatness of Christ. He uses this image of a servant: "I'm not worthy to loosen His sandal." This picture is a



sandal found from the first century, a leather sandal. This was the rage, a first century sandal style. Everybody wanted a pair. If you look at the sandal closely, you can see the way that the sandals are put on and taken off. There is a small piece of leather on that central strip coming down towards the toe, and you can see a little round piece. It slides up to tighten the sandal, and slides down to loosen it. When

someone would come into a house, it was the role of the lowest servant to bend down to those dust-covered feet and just move that slider down so the sandal could be removed and the feet

could be washed. John is so clear about who he is as a pointer to Christ, and his own role as a servant of Christ. He says, "I'm not even worthy to slide that sandal up." It is so important for us to know who we are and who we are not. If we're sure only of who we're not, though, we tend to become silent and we are fearful. If we're only sure of who we are, a sense of pride is close at hand. We must know both who we are not and who we are, pointing to Christ.

The second movement in this text is John's testimony about Christ Himself, how should we think and speak about Jesus Himself. What do we say when it's time to speak of Christ Himself? John tells us in John 1:29:

"The next day John [the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

When John saw Jesus approaching him, he was not silent. He saw Jesus moving towards him and pointed towards Him in the midst of the crowd and spoke. This is the first sighting of Jesus in the Gospel John, the first time we actually see Jesus. He moves towards John the Baptist, and John points to Him and identifies Him as that glorious Lamb of God who is bearing the sin of the world upon Himself. Right at the beginning of John's Gospel, he is pointing us already towards the cross. Jesus is introduced with the sacrificial imagery, as the sin-bearing Lamb. Udo Schnelle, a German writer, says:

"Precisely in the place where Jesus comes into actual view in John's Gospel, he appears as the Crucified One. Already, in the beginning, the end is present, and the hearers and readers know that the way of the preexistent and incarnate Word leads to the Cross."

He looks at Jesus and points to Him with great conviction that He is the sin-bearing Lamb. Notice that he says that He is the Lamb who bears the sin of the world. This is the first time in any Jewish literature that we have this image of bearing the sin of the world; the first time this expression is used, that Christ bears the sin of the world. Not just my sin or yours, but the sin of the whole world, sin viewed in its totality, is before us right here. He is referring to the sum amount of the sin of all the world, and not just to a set of individual acts. The reference to the world is a glance; it's a pointer to the comprehensive nature of Christ's atoning work on the cross: He bears the sin of all the world. John will tell us soon that God so loved the world that He sent His Son. John the Baptist's first statement is that Jesus is the sin-bearing Lamb, and He is all-sufficient for all people. There is no other solution to the plight of humanity than the death of the beloved Son of God. He is the Savior of all. He calls us to believe this truth and to embrace it, knowing that if we believe this, we will have new life. You and I are called to bear testimony to this great truth. You cannot know these things and keep them to yourself. You cannot know this and not be affected by it. If you're not affected by these truths, then you don't know these truths. If you are affected by these truths, you cannot keep these truths to

yourself because they pertain to everyone around you, and you and I are called to bear our own testimony to this sin-bearing Lamb.

Let me tell you about a time that I totally failed in this. God set a perfect opportunity right in front of me. I was in Chicago a few months ago, and I was going through the art museum. There are a number of fascinating things at the art museum of Chicago. I came by this glass

case, and inside this case there were a number of very beautiful medieval objects, works of art. One in particular, shown in this picture, captured my attention. You can see in the middle of this is a gold pendant studded with emeralds, pearls, and rubies. It came from Spain in the 16th century. If you look closely, you can see it's a lamb. The lamb has a cup in front of it and there is blood flowing out from the lamb into this cup. I was looking at this and I thought, "What a beautiful picture of the Lamb of God."



The cup, if you look very closely at it, is clearly a communion cup, and it's an image of the Lamb giving His life, His blood, for the sin of the world. While I was there looking at this work of art, two young women came through the gallery. They were looking, they were moving quickly, and the one young woman came by this work of art. There I was, standing, just praising and worshiping the Lord, and this young woman came by. She looked at it about .56 seconds. She turned to her friend, and she said, "It's a lamb bleeding in a cup. No, it's a sheep bleeding in a cup," and then they went on. I was standing there, and I thought, "She doesn't know. She doesn't know what this means at all. It just looks to her like a sheep bleeding in a cup." It welled up inside of me, and I wanted to say, "Wait, wait. No, it's the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. It's an image to remind you that He gave His life for your redemption and your salvation. Do you know Who that's depicting?" And do you know what I said? Nothing! Nothing! I might have been the only person in that art gallery at that moment who could have explained that, but I didn't, and I have regretted it. God will bring opportunities right to you. You will smell like Christ; you will look like Christ; people will ask you questions, and you have to share what you know. You cannot keep silent if you know this precious Lamb.

John continues pointing to Christ in this passage. In John 1:30, he says that Christ has absolute preeminence:

"This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'"

John made clear that though Jesus comes after him in time, yet He is before him, the preexistent Word of God. In John 1:32, John gives this testimony:

"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him."

For those who know the Bible well, there should be texts that are just exploding in your mind when he says that, texts like Isaiah 11:1-2:

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him."

In another text, Isaiah 42:1, we see:

"Here is My Servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations."

Again, we see in Isaiah 61:1:

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor."

And John testifies in John 1:32-34:

"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him. 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.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

John testified that He is the One who will fill us with the Spirit, the Lamb of God takes away our major problem, sin. The dove inserts our major resource, the Spirit.

I have the best view in Kenwood Baptist Church. I get to look at all of you, and I see you



listening attentively to the Word of God. But above you is a towering picture of Christ who is the real audience of the services. Christ is in the picture with the cross in the center. Next to Christ is the imagery of John 1. As you look at the picture, you see the Lamb bearing the sin of the world on the cross. Then you see the dove moving towards Christ. The Lamb of God bears our sins and takes away our major problem, and the dove is

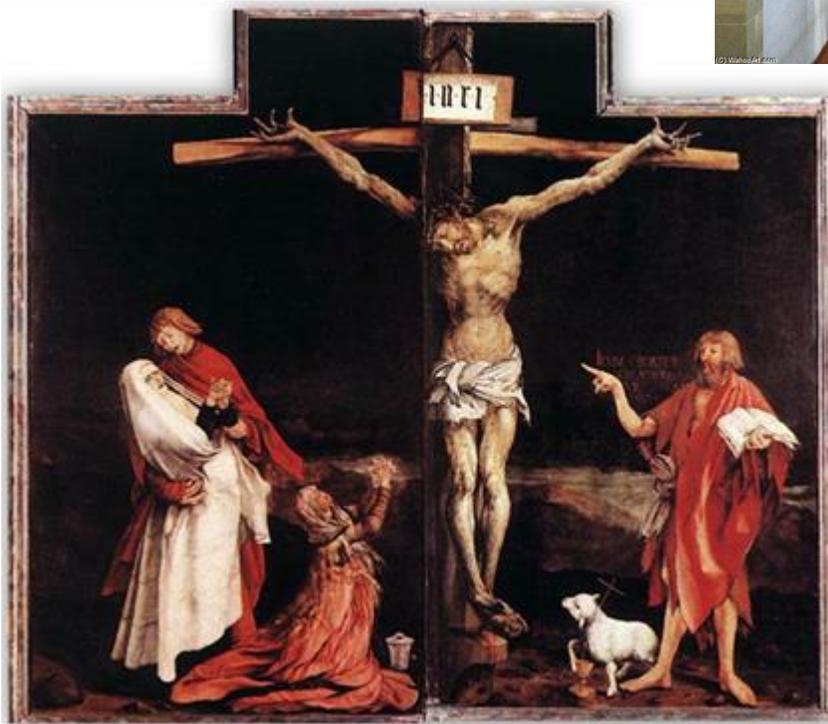
coming to give our major resource, the power of the Spirit of God. If you can take a picture of

that, then you can testify to Jesus this week. If you can just remember seeing that, you can speak.

John says at the end, in John 1:34:

*"I have seen and I testify that **this One** is the Son of God."*

That is John's mission, to know who he is not, and to know who Christ is. John the Baptist has fired the imagination of many artists and painters throughout history. A very famous painting, done about 500 years ago by Matthias Grünewald, is known as the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. If you go into this sacred space, you move towards this large painting. As you get a little closer to it, you see that this painting has a central section of Christ, and there are two figures on the side panels, the wings, of St. Anthony and St. Sebastian. Christ is buried at the bottom.



If you move in a little closer to that central picture, you see that Grünewald is depicting Christ's death on the cross. This painting was done in the midst of the huge outbreak of the plague, and it was painted for a monastery where people were serving people who had been afflicted by the plague. The figure of Christ in this painting depicts Christ as afflicted with the plague, which is very moving. On one side, you can

see John the Evangelist holding Mary. At the base of the cross is Mary Magdalene, and on the other side, you can see John the Baptist holding the Scripture, and the Lamb of God is right below him. The most conspicuous feature of John the Baptist is his finger. You see John's finger

pointing to Christ. Remember, **Christ** is the point, and **we** are blessed to be pointers to Him. **He** is the Messiah, **we** are not! Right behind his finger there are the Latin words of John 3:30 that say: "**He** must increase, and **I** must decrease." The final words, the final epilogue to John the Baptist's testimony in the Gospel of John, is this very same verse, John 3:30. In the end of John 3, some people come who were John's disciples, and they report the distressing news in John 3:26:

"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."

What were they to make of the fact that everyone was streaming to Jesus? John answers them, and I am paraphrasing: "Look, guys, I told you I'm not the Christ. I'm not Messiah. I had the job of going in front of Him." Then, John ends the final scene with an image of a wedding. He says in John 3:29:

"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."

Can you imagine one of the groomsmen, at the moment when the bride is coming down the aisle and there's joy in the sanctuary, can you imagine how inappropriate it would be for a groomsmen to say, "I'll take this one." Unthinkable! But John says, "I'm just a friend." Notice this subtle change when he says, "I am **a** voice, and my greatest joy is when I hear **His** voice. Do you see that: **a** voice; **the** voice. "I'm just a voice pointing you to Him.

His last line is this memorable one, our memory verse, John 3:30:

"He must increase, but I must decrease."

I was getting a cup of coffee a couple of weeks ago, and the man in front of me was wearing this black shirt. I love languages, but I didn't understand what was on his shirt. I looked at his



shirt as I was waiting to get my coffee. After a while, I think, "I think I got it. That's John 3:30 in four characters: "*He must increase and I must decrease.*" Can you remember that? Can we as a church family get serious about pointing other people to Jesus Christ with however much we know of Him? Share what

you know to be true about Him. That's our call, and that's our challenge from John.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for this morning. We thank You for John the Baptist's testimony that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world, that there

is no one that we would ever meet for whom this bleeding Lamb of God would be irrelevant. We pray, Father, that You would help us to grow in our confidence in who Christ is and who we are not. Help us to embrace the call, to bear testimony to Him. Oh, Lamb of God, You are worthy, You are worthy!

Will you stand with me, and let's worship this Lamb who is worthy, and ask Him to fill us with His presence in His Spirit that we might live for Him this week. Amen.