

Where Are The John the Baptists Today

A Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

It was February 23, 155AD. Polycarp, a student of John the Apostle, was the bishop of Smyrna. He was unwaveringly committed to the saving lordship of Jesus Christ, leaving no room for Emperor Worship. Because of this, Polycarp had been arrested and sentenced to death. But before being burned at the stake, the Roman proconsul gave him the opportunity to curse the name of Jesus and worship Caesar. "Swear," said the proconsul, "and I will set you free. Reproach Christ."

Some of you have heard Polycarp's reply, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul threatened Polycarp again, to which Polycarp responded, "You threaten me with fire which awaits the wicked in judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come, do what you will."

As they approached him and prepared to tie him to the stake to be burned, he shouted, "Leave me as I am, for He who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails." Loosely bound, with flames flashing about him, Polycarp prayed, "O Lord God Almighty, Father of Thy beloved Child, Jesus Christ... I bless Thee that Thou has granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life." This was the evidence of Polycarp's certainty in the person of Jesus Christ, and the foundations of his faith.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we revisit a similar, but frequently overlooked character in Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist. He had faithfully fulfilled his mission as one called to "prepare the way of the Lord," even baptizing the Lord Jesus and experiencing the Father's pronouncement over Him. However, his bold and unbending personality had crossed King Herod one too many times, and now John finds himself a prisoner in chains in Herod's dungeons - his life coming to an apparent end.

But even now, he longed for confirmation from Jesus. After all, no one wants to get to the end of a mission, or their life, and find that they've invested their time and energy in vain.

Matt 11:2-3 Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent {word} by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"

John had seen the miracles and heard the teachings of this Man he had known all his life. But even now, "Cousin John" seemed unsure, and desired Jesus' verification.

John believed Jesus to be the Messiah; the one who would free Israel from the tyranny of their oppressors. (see *John 1:29ff*) But as John reached the end of his life, it didn't appear that Jesus was any closer to achieving the fullness

of His calling...at least as the masses expected it. So now, John's disciples came to Jesus asking for clarification.

Jesus' answer to them is short and succinct. Jesus recounts for John's disciples the wonders and miracles He's worked, and the transforming gospel he's delivered. As if to say, "Are these not evidence enough?"

Matt 11:4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 {the} BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and {the} lame walk, {the} lepers are cleansed and {the} deaf hear, {the} dead are raised up, and {the} POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 "And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."

Jesus' words convey the challenge, "John, look beyond the surface. Don't limit yourself to some social or civic expectation. What I've been sent to accomplish goes much deeper than mere political agendas. I have come to bring complete redemption and eternal restoration."

Well, apparently, this satisfies John's representatives, for we neither see, nor hear of John or his followers again, except for the details of His execution. However, not one to let an opportunity slip by, Jesus suddenly turns to the crowd. Evidently, Jesus assumes that many of His own followers, had at one time been followers of John. Because Jesus asks them why they had previously sought out this strange, seemingly rebellious man, John.

Matt 11:7 As these men were going {away,} Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"

"Let's see," Jesus begins. "Would you have come all this way into the wilderness to see a reed, or tall blade of grass, waving in the wind? Of course not!" They could go down to the nearest shore or pond to see such things, and Jesus knew it. Neither would the people go out into the wilderness to see a man waving back and forth in the political or spiritual winds of the times. Those types of "yellow-bellied" men could be found anywhere.

Today, many spiritual pundits declare that in order for the gospel to be accepted, you'd be advised not to offend your audience. There are conferences and seminars geared for the sole purpose of teaching church leadership how to "package" and "market" the gospel. The basic premise of many of our "seeker-sensitive" programs is, "Don't condemn. Don't offend. Love people where they're at." Sadly, in many of these organizations, people are being loved right into hell!

No, Jesus wanted them to admit to themselves that it was precisely John's unbending and consistent message of repentance and conversion that drew them to him. In fact, it was this uncompromising nature that had landed John in prison at this very moment. That is the reality of human nature; we rebuke inflexibility when we're being convicted, but we're drawn to it as a matter of character.

Actually, it wasn't John's sympathetic, tolerant approach that drew people out to the wilderness. It was his bold, unswerving commitment to repentance and truth! And that is also what our society needs today.

Matt 11:8 "But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft {clothing?} Those who wear soft {clothing} are in kings' palaces! (see Matt. 3:4)

"Could it be that you were awed by John's fancy clothes or lavish surroundings?" Jesus doesn't even wait for them to answer. He replies, *"Of course not! You wouldn't find such things out here in the middle of nowhere. If wealth and luxury were your interest, you would have gone to the nearest palace. That's where people who play political games live. They bend and sway to royal whims and societal winds and are rewarded with wealth and comfort."*

Again Jesus wants the people to admit to themselves that it was also not appearance that drew them to John. For if John's message had been meant to please, or gain favor, he surely would be dressed in more appropriate clothing than prisoners chains.

Jesus appeals to the people a 3rd time, *"If it wasn't a weak, compromising figure, or a self-serving character you sought. Then what did you go out to see?"*

Matt 11:9 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen {anyone} greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

This time Jesus offers the only truthful answer the people could give. *"A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."* He goes on to explain that John is actually the messenger foretold by the prophets of old; even going so far as to say that to that point, there had been nobody who held a greater place of responsibility than John the Baptist. John alone was given the awesome task of preparing the way for the coming Messiah. In fact, all the Law and the Prophets lead up to John.

But even with John's great place of honor, Jesus explained that the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than John. You see, John, though the forerunner of the Messiah, still had only limited knowledge and understanding of the full purpose and mission that lay before Jesus. That would mean that any disciple yet to come, though lower in rank or office than John, would enjoy greater knowledge than he possessed. Jesus explains two things to His listeners:

1. The people need a clearer, more elevated view of John's place in God's plan.
2. The vast honor and value of what God was giving them, the opportunity to hear and witness the teaching, miracles, and eventual death and resurrection of the Messiah.

Jesus, much like His predecessor John, did not mince words. He spoke truth. He did not pacify or pander to the egos or temperaments of His listeners, and there was too much at stake to waste time worrying about what people

would think or how He would be received. In the end, faith is a matter of the will, not of the intellect. Faith is either received or rejected, not scrutinized or rationalized.

Jesus was forcing these people to make a choice. They would need to either willingly embrace the obvious (that John was Elijah, and Jesus was the Messiah), or be honest with their rejection. There could be no middle ground. Acceptance meant heavenly privilege but required complete abandon. Denial meant social safety and acceptance, but brought divine guilt and condemnation.

Jesus closes this teaching with a statement on the current state of the society.

Matthew 11:16-19 "But to what shall I compare this generation?

It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children,¹⁷ and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!'¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Jesus points out that the generation had tried to dictate what behavior would be acceptable, and what message should be taught. But John didn't give in to their pleas for moderation, and instead, faithfully preached God's message of repentance and brokenness. In turn, the people accused him of being an intolerant devil.

"Then I came into your sin-sickened world," Jesus continued. *"You wanted everyone to play by your rules. Instead, I brought mercy, healing, and joy to those broken and wounded by your pride and meanness. Therefore, you label me a partier and a drunkard."* And then he ends with the injunction, *"But wisdom (both yours and ours), is proved by its actions. Our actions have validated our wisdom and message, your actions have proven your foolishness."* And the same could be said to our culture. So where are the John's of today...are you one of them?