

The Kind of Person God Uses • John 1:19-28

The beginning of the first century was a troubled time for the Jewish nation of Israel. It had been over 400 years since the last prophet and the last revelation. That had done strange and interesting things to the Jewish people. They were under the oppressive yolk of Rome and they hoped for deliverance. Frankly, they were hoping for a prophet, a great spiritual leader, to come along to give them hope and vision and excitement. They wanted someone to believe in.

We understand that. We, too, have always been on the lookout for some great man to capture our imagination—a prophet; a president; a pastor; a preacher.

There have been too many tragic examples of misplaced loyalties in leaders. Nearly a thousand disciples of the Reverend Jim Jones believed enough to all drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. Entire nations have fallen in line behind the political proclamations of Adolph Hitler or the revolutionary oratory of the Ayatollah Khoumeni.

It's not just "them." We do it, too. We are quick to read the latest book by the latest author, hear the newest preacher or follow the most promising political candidate because we, too, want a leader. So we understand, at least a little bit, the mood of those first century Jews when they heard about a man named John the Baptizer. They sent a delegation from Jerusalem into the wilderness to check him out. No doubt they were wondering and hoping that maybe he was the real thing in their generation, a generation with too many fakes.

John was no power-monger, no glory-hound, no charlatan. True, he wasn't all that the people wanted nor was he all that the people expected. But he was the real thing. He was a real man of God who sought no glory for himself, no fame or honor or power or office. He simply pointed the way to Jesus Christ.

Quite a man, this John! He was God's kind of man. John was someone who knew who he was; he had an identity. And part of that identity meant that he had no delusions of greatness.

The people thought he was the Messiah. That's what the Bible tells us. The Jews had waited a long time for the Messiah. They are still waiting! Some looked for a Messiah to bring peace to the whole world. Some expected a reign of righteousness, a return to the Law of Moses. Others expected a military and political leader to overthrow the rule of Rome. Some expected a mere man. Some expected that the Messiah would be purely someone sent from heaven by God.

There were lots of pretenders in those days who claimed to be the Christ. But John did not rally to the opportunity for personal honor. He flatly denied that he was the Christ.

The last words written in the Old Testament in Malachi 4:5 say, "*I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.*" Many people in the first century believed in reincarnation and thought that Elijah would actually return in someone else's body. Perhaps John was the reincarnated Elijah!

The coming of Elijah was an important event looked forward to by most of the Jews of the first century. It was so important in Jewish thinking that legally disputed property and money must wait "until Elijah returns" to be properly distributed. They believed that the coming of Elijah would solve every problem.

When Jesus was dying on the cross he said, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." Some of the spectators thought he was calling for Elijah because the folklore of the day, built on Malachi 4:5, said that righteous people were periodically saved from distressful circumstances by Elijah stepping down from heaven and rescuing the favorite ones of God.

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What an honor. What a privilege. What an opportunity to be considered to be Elijah! But John denied it. John would not accept an honor that was not rightly his. In fact, if I see the picture clearly, John was not seeking honor at all, whether his or anyone else's.

The inquisitors wouldn't give up so they asked, "Are you the Prophet?" You see, another significant verse to the people in those days was a quotation by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*" The Jews thought that maybe John was this unnamed Prophet Par Excellence who would be in the tradition of Moses himself.

Maybe John could have convinced himself that he was the one referred to by Moses. At least he could have taken advantage of the opportunity and made himself great and effective for God. But John answered simply and straightforwardly with one word: No.

John clearly knew and lived the fact that he was nobody outside of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus John had no mission, John had no identity, John had no worthiness. He was nothing. He was nobody.

But John did find his identity and his worth and his mission in Jesus Christ! In Christ he found fulfillment. John knew who he was and would have it no other way. John was the kind of person God uses!

We must look for spiritual leaders like John today—men and women who do not seek fame, money, power or influence. Men and women who insist on dropping into the background so that Jesus Christ can step into the limelight.

My heart breaks when I see spiritual leaders pushing and promoting themselves. There is no place for building personal empires when we ought to be building Christ's kingdom. There is no need for anyone but Jesus Christ to be recognized and known and honored. Look for spiritual leadership from people like John who had no delusions about his greatness, who knew that he was absolutely nobody outside of Jesus Christ.

But it's not just a matter of looking for that kind of spiritual leader, it's also a matter of being that kind of a person. We must make the uplifting of Jesus Christ the goal of our lives. We must

not push ourselves. We must not build ourselves up. We must not live for ourselves alone. The issue is not who knows us but who knows Jesus. The concern is not our success, it is Jesus' success. The goal isn't our glory, it is Jesus' glory. So, if you want to be the kind of person that God uses—know who you are and have no delusions about greatness. Instead, have an identity that is totally fixed to Jesus Christ!

John not only knew who he was, John knew what he was supposed to do. In John 1:22-25 we find a man who is not bent on fulfilling the expectations of the people around him. Their expectations were many. They wanted a prophet. They wanted a leader. They wanted someone with all the answers. They wanted someone to solve their problems. But John knew and lived one of the most important principles of life. He knew he could not fulfill everyone's expectation. He knew that he could not be what everyone one wanted him to be. He knew that he could not answer everyone's questions. All John needed to do was what God expected him to do.

Oh that we could all learn that lesson! We spend so much of life trying to live up to the contradictory expectations of everyone around us. How many lives have been wasted trying to fulfill the career expectations of parents, the business expectations of associates, the physical expectations of society and the religious expectations of the church?

John the Baptist was a man of singular purpose in life. He knew what he was supposed to do and he did it—rather than wasting life in a futile attempt to fulfill the expectations of others. And what was John supposed to do? He was supposed to "*Make straight the way for the Lord.*"

Ancient roads weren't really roads at all. They were rutted dirt paths that wound through villages, fields and over mountain passes. When a king or conqueror was coming, the people would go out and prepare the roads to handle chariots. They would straighten out and pave the roads in anticipation of the coming king. John was say, "I'm nobody, but the King is coming. Get ready! The King is coming! Straighten out the path, pave the road."

Maybe that doesn't seem too all-important as a calling in life, but to John it was very important because to him God was the measurer of what is of value in life.

Now the obvious question is what are you supposed to do in life? What is the goal or purpose by which you measure all your priorities? What does God want you to do with your life? Maybe the most important thing for you is being a Christian mother. Perhaps you are supposed to be a witness from Jesus on your job. Maybe your key role in life is teaching Sunday School. Maybe God wants you to represent him in the area of politics. I don't know what you are supposed to do, but God knows and he wants and expects you to know.

If you want to be the kind of person God uses, make it your business to clearly know what you are supposed to do for God. Then, don't worry about fulfilling everyone else's expectations. Know what you are supposed to do for God - - - and do it!

How do you find out? Make it a matter of prayer. Make it a consideration every time you read the Bible. Seek the counsel of godly Christians.

In John 1:26-28 we find that John was not only a man who knew who he was and what he was supposed to do but he was also a man who knew his relationship to Jesus Christ. John was truly aware of Jesus' presence.

Try to picture John's situation. On the east side of the Jordan River in the wilderness of Judea is John, a man who is really out of sync with the rest of society. But the rest of society has come to him. He has been baptizing large numbers of people, symbolically cleansing them for the arrival of the king. He is having a press conference surrounded by disciples, admirers, representatives of the powerful leaders in Jerusalem. John's name is on everyone's lips. He is the topic of everyone's conversation. John is the center of everyone's attention.

But, in the midst of all the attention and acclaim, John's thoughts are on Jesus! He tells them that "*among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me.*" Jesus!

A right relationship with Jesus Christ makes all the other pieces of life fall into place.

Of course John was the kind of person God uses! His head was not turned nor was his ego inflated by the admiration of other people. His eyes and his thoughts and his awareness were totally focused on Jesus Christ.

Are you that kind of person? When successes are piled up at your feet, when your boss gives you a raise, when you hear the applause of people around you is your mind and your heart filled with yourself? Or, are you aware of the presence of Jesus? In the midst of the greatest successes or the worst of failures are you keenly and almost exclusively aware of Jesus Christ? Then you, too, are the kind of person whom God uses!

Although John was so keenly aware of Jesus, at the same time he was keenly aware of his own unworthiness and he chose an interesting way to express it. You see, people in those days went around in sandals. The roads were very dusty in the dry season and muddy when it rained. There weren't sewage systems as we have in our country today. Sewage ran in the streets outside the homes where people walked. As a result, feet were filthy and so were the sandals. The job of untying sandal straps was the most menial of tasks. It was what slaves did. An ancient rabbinic saying was that a teacher's disciple could do anything for his teacher that a slave could do except to untie the teacher's sandals. That was too low a task.

John was saying, "I am not worthy to be a slave of Jesus!" And John was right. He was not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. It

was only by the good grace of God that he could have any relationship to Jesus Christ at all. Yet, John had a very close relationship to Jesus. In fact, it was John who baptized Jesus.

There is no contradiction here. You see, John was close to Jesus because he knew so well his unworthiness and because he knew so well the grace of God that makes a relationship to Jesus Christ possible anywhere at anytime. It is only by God's goodness and only by God's grace that we can ever know him in any way.

We, too, are unworthy. We have no merit or right to have any relationship at all with God. But, through the grace of God in Jesus Christ we can have the closest and most intimate of relationships with him. Because of the grace that flows through Jesus Christ we can snuggle up and share an intimacy with God that hardly could be dreamed of. We can then live in constant awareness of him and be continual recipients of his grace.

Really, this third point is the most important of all because it is out of the relationship to Jesus that we have an understanding of who we are and what we are supposed to do. A right relationship with Jesus Christ makes all the other pieces of life fall into place.

I believe that you want to be the kind of person that God uses. And now you have an understandable model of the kind of person that is. My prayer for you is that you will have the very best relationship with Jesus Christ and that out of that

relationship you will clearly know who you are and what you are supposed to do!

Heavenly Father, I pray that your Holy Spirit will touch life

after life after life. Man, woman and child; young and old, rich and poor; educated and ignorant; experienced Christian and seeker alike.

By your grace, may we be the kind of people you can use. May we

be rightly related to your Son. May we clearly know who we are and what we are supposed to do.

Lord, make us your people, the kind of people that you can

and will use. We look for it; we claim it; we sense your touch and

we praise you for it.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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