

# John's Gospel - to Tell the Truth

by John Vissers

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*John Vissers explores the testimony of John the Baptist in John's Gospel, emphasizing the importance of knowing one's identity in relation to Christ.*

**Duration:** 36:57

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, John 1:1-28

**Topics:** "Truth"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher introduces the Gospel of John and uses the imagery of a courtroom trial to help understand the message of the Gospel. The preacher emphasizes the importance of knowing one's identity and understanding one's mission, just as John the Baptist did. The sermon also highlights the trial motif in the Gospel of John, which ultimately leads to the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The preacher encourages the listeners to consider their verdict on Jesus and to see the opening verses of John as the opening argument in this trial.

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## Transcript

Turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 1, where we come to our lesson for this evening. Last week we started a series of studies in John's Gospel, and tonight we want to come to look at verses 19 through to the end of verse 28, which is what I should like to read this evening. In case you're wondering why we just sang an Advent hymn, that may become a little clearer now as we read the text, because the text is about John the Baptist.

So let's hear God's Word together. Now, this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Christ.

They asked him, then, who are you? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? He answered, no. Finally they said, who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us.

What do you say about yourself? John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, I am the voice of one calling in the desert to make straight the way for the Lord. Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him. Why, then, do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? 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. This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight.

Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we pray tonight that you would prepare our hearts and our minds to receive your word, that you would silence within us any voice but your own voice, that, hearing your word tonight, you might instruct us, and that, indeed, we may obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Last week, as I've indicated, we began a series of studies in John's Gospel, and last week we looked at the opening 18 verses of the first chapter of John's Gospel, which are usually called the prologue, in which Jesus is described as the Word of God. And I indicated to you and suggested to you last Sunday evening that it might be helpful to think about the prologue to John's Gospel as a great overture, as an overture to a great musical score, to a symphony, where the themes are introduced, where they're not fully developed, but all of the themes that we'll find developed throughout the Gospel are indeed introduced. And we began to look at some of those themes last week.

Well, tonight, as we think together about John's Gospel, and as we think particularly into our passage for the evening, starting at verse 19 through the end of verse 28 in John chapter 1, I want to introduce another image or another picture or something else to think about, another image to help us think about the Gospel of John. In order to understand the Gospel of John, and in order to understand this particular passage tonight, you need to imagine yourself sitting in a courtroom. It's the first day of court, and the trial has just started.

The crown prosecutor and the defense lawyers have made their opening arguments, and the examination of the evidence now begins. And the first witness is called to the witness stand to give evidence and to give testimony concerning the matter at hand. He's asked, of course, whether he'll tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And after promising to do so, the interrogation begins. State your name and your occupation. Who are you, and what is it that you do? Now, if you think in those terms, I suggest to you that that's what's going on here in John chapter 1, in verses 19 to 28.

The religious establishment has come, and they have come to interrogate John the Baptist, to question him, to find out who he is, and to find out precisely what it is that he is doing. And in fact, the Gospel of John in its entirety is like a great trial. The whole story of Jesus in this Gospel is shot through with the motif of a trial.

People are interrogated throughout the Gospel. Witnesses are called. Testimony is given.

The witnesses are examined. Their testimony is questioned. They are cross-examined.

The credibility of their testimony is weighed. And in fact, at one point, as we'll see in John's Gospel, Jesus' own testimony about himself is called into question. And underlying this motif in the Gospel of John is the basic question that John the Gospel writer wants to place before us.

Are you for Jesus, or are you against him? What is your verdict? As you weigh the evidence, as the witnesses are called, as the testimony is given, as you begin to understand and see who Jesus is, are you for him or are you against him? And in fact, in the Gospel, this trial motif in the Gospel of John ends, of

course, with the trial of Jesus himself, which John takes great pains to describe in detail, and it culminates in the cross. And so I'd like you to think, if you could tonight, to rethink John 1, in verses 1 to 18, which we talked about last week, and think about those verses as the opening argument. The prologue is really the opening argument.

And John's witness, John the Baptist's witness, was already introduced in the opening argument in the prologue of the Gospel, verses 6 to 8 and verse 15, if you go back to just the beginning of the Gospel earlier in the chapter. 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. John testifies concerning him.

He cries out, saying, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. And so the prologue is really giving us this opening argument, and it tells us four things about John the Baptist. First of all, he was sent from God.

Secondly, he came as a witness to the light. Thirdly, he came that men and women might believe in Jesus, might believe in the light. And fourthly, he himself was not the light.

And it's as if those making the opening argument in the Gospel of John are presenting this case concerning John the Baptist. But then notice what happens. As the story of Jesus begins, the first thing which is questioned is the witness of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is the first one called up to the stand to give testimony. And in verse 19, we move now from the far reaches of history, from eternity into the story of Jesus. Day one.

And the first thing that happens is that the Jewish leaders send priests and Levites to examine John the Baptist and to ask who he was. Now it's important to understand, and I want to underline this, that when it says in verse 19, now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites, the phrase the Jews there refers to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. It doesn't refer to the Jewish people in general.

It refers to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and others, the religious establishment, and they are the ones who have sent out these people to examine John the Baptist. Now no doubt the religious establishment in Jerusalem had heard about John the Baptist. He'd been out there in the desert preaching the Gospel.

He'd been out there baptizing people. He was the people's prophet. His reputation preceded him.

He was popular. He was out there preaching the judgment of God. He was calling people to repentance, to baptism.

And no doubt there were all kinds of rumors flying about concerning his identity. He also had a band of disciples. Some people were saying no doubt that he was the Messiah, that he was the one who had been promised long ago.

But John the Baptist was not playing the religious game by the book. He was not doing what the religious establishment in Jerusalem expected that a prophet would do. And of course the priests and the Levites and the Pharisees had a vested interest in protecting their own religious territory.

And so what they do is they send out a party to interrogate John the Baptist. And basically they want to know two things. First of all, who is he? And secondly, what is he doing? And in the course of the interrogation, John the Baptist in fact responds to all of their questions.

He tells them the truth. He tells them the truth about who he is, about his identity, and about what he has come to do. And it's that truth that he tells about himself and that truth that he tells about what he has come to do and that truth that he tells about his relationship to Jesus that I think is instructive for us tonight as we think together about this particular passage.

Now, the first thing I want us to notice is that John the Baptist responds to them and tells them the truth about who he was not. He makes a series of denials. In the course of this interrogation, they ask him a series of questions, and he makes a series of denials.

They begin the questions by placing before John the Baptist a series of possibilities concerning his identity. Now, one can imagine that the greater Jerusalem area was probably rife with rumors concerning the identity of John the Baptist. Some were saying he was the Messiah.

Some were saying that he was Elijah the prophet. Some were saying that he was one of the other prophets. And you will recall, if you think carefully about the rumors going around concerning John the Baptist, that these were the same rumors that were going around later about Jesus himself.

Do you remember in Matthew 16 when Jesus is walking down the road with his disciples and he says, Who do men say that the Son of Man is? And they respond, Well, some are saying that you are Elijah. Some are saying that you are one of the other prophets, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. And then Jesus says, But who do you say that I am? And, of course, then Peter makes his marvelous confession, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

But here the same kinds of rumors are circulating concerning John the Baptist. Now, why was that the case? Well, it was the case because in the first century people were expecting the Messiah to come. People were expecting a sign from God.

They were expecting that God was going to intervene and that God was going to act on their behalf. And so the first thing that John the Baptist says is, I am not the Messiah. I am not the Christ.

Now, people had all kinds of different images concerning who they thought the Messiah was going to be. Some people were expecting the Messiah to be a political deliverer. Someone who was going to move into Palestine.

Someone who was going to move into Jerusalem and lead an army to overthrow the Romans so that they could be freed from the oppression and the domination of the Roman Empire. Something similar to what Moses did in leading the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Other people thought that the Messiah was going to usher in a golden age.

That the end of the age would come, that God's judgment would be announced, that the kingdom of God would be in their midst. And so there were all these different images, all these different pictures, all these different understandings concerning the identity of the Messiah. But John makes it very clear, whatever you think, whoever you think the Messiah is going to be, understand this, I am not he.

I am not the Christ. And then notice what they ask him. They ask him, are you then Elijah? That may seem like a strange thing to ask of John the Baptist, but if you understand some of the background here in Malachi chapter 4 and in verse 5, on the basis of that text, many of the Jewish people of the day believed that before the Messiah came, Elijah the prophet would return.

And so with the expectation that the Messiah was going to come soon, it was understandable that the prophet Elijah may return. And so they ask him, are you the one who's coming then before the Messiah? If you're not the Messiah, then certainly you must be the one coming before the Messiah. Elijah, you are therefore Elijah the prophet come and returned to us.

But John says, no, I am not. And then the interrogation intensifies, and now they try a third option, are you the prophet? Now this is a reference to Deuteronomy chapter 18 and verse 15, the basis of which was the promise or the expectation that the Jews had that they would have another prophet like Moses. When Moses was going to be taken from them, God said there will be another prophet, I will raise up another prophet like Moses in your midst.

And so they say, are you this prophet spoken about in Deuteronomy chapter 18 and verse 15? And again he says, no, I am not. I am not the Christ, I am not Elijah, I am not the prophet. Now John knows who he is, but he also knows who he is not.

And that's the first thing that I want to underline here. He won't play any religious games with the religious establishment that's come to interrogate him from Jerusalem. He's not the Messiah, he's not Elijah, he's not the prophet, but given his popularity and given his power base, he could have very easily strung them on a little.

I can imagine him saying something like, in response to their questions, he may have responded by saying, well, maybe I am, and maybe I'm not. But he doesn't do that, he tells the truth in a very straightforward way. He understands his role, he understands who he is, and he's very clear and courageous to tell them who he's not, to deny all these things that are being attributed to him.

And I want to suggest to you that this aspect of the witness of John the Baptist is very important for believers today to understand, especially if we want to be effective witnesses for Jesus Christ. But let me back up from that and say here that true faith in Jesus Christ, that true faith begins when we understand who we are, but also who we are not. In Romans chapter 12, the Apostle Paul says, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the measure of faith that God has given you.

Now, does this mean that we're to take this text and use it to squash ourselves down? No, it doesn't mean that. But here in John the Baptist's witness and throughout the New Testament, one of the things that's made very clear is that all of us have a tendency to try to save ourselves. The first step in becoming a Christian is realizing that you cannot save yourself, that you cannot be your own Messiah, that you are not the Christ.

And the first step of effective witness for Jesus Christ is to realize that in fact it's Jesus Christ who saves others and not we ourselves. Sin is turning yourself into a savior for yourself and indeed turning yourself into a savior for others. Now, this cuts across the grain of our self-help culture.

Every day we are told that we can save ourselves. Every day we are told that we can help ourselves, that we can find salvation in and through what we ourselves do. And the fact of the matter is that it's absolute and utter nonsense.

The Bible says that we trust in Christ alone for our salvation, and in trusting in Christ alone for our salvation, we no longer need to justify ourselves before God. And unfortunately, many Christians even sometimes develop a kind of Messianic attitude, a kind of Messiah complex. We somehow sense that we can save the world, but the Bible makes it very clear there is only one Messiah.

John the Baptist denied that he was that person, and so should we. The job has been filled in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ alone. John the Baptist knew that he was not the Messiah, even though he had a vital role in pointing to the one who was to come.

He told the truth about who he was not, denying the affirmations, denying the questions that they were placing before him. But secondly, John the Baptist then goes on, and he tells the truth about who he was in verses 22 and 23. Now, you can imagine at this point in the conversation, if you think through the dynamics of this conversation, this interrogation, that by this point, the religious leaders are getting somewhat frustrated.

They've asked him this series of questions to which they've gotten denials, and so finally they just blurted out, well, who are you? Give us an answer. What do you say about yourself? We need to have an answer to take back to those who sent us from Jerusalem. What do you say about yourself? And John the Baptist gives a wonderfully enigmatic response.

John the Baptist doesn't answer them directly at first. He simply quotes from the Old Testament. I suppose he could have pulled out his birth certificate, or he could have pulled out his social insurance card or his driver's license and shown them who he was, or he could have pulled out his diploma from the Jerusalem Bible College and shown that to them, or he could have said to one of his disciples, his band of disciples, you tell them who I am.

I'm getting sick of answering all their questions. But he doesn't take any of those routes. What he does is he quotes from Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3. He says, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord.

Now this is a lovely response, and it's a lovely response for a couple of reasons. First of all, John says he is a voice. Now, I don't know whether you've ever thought about it this way, but most of us would not respond to a question about who we are by saying that we are a voice.

I am a voice. Some people, of course, are known by their voices, especially people who have distinctive voices, who may be radio personalities or television personalities. They may be known by their voices, but very few people, I suggest to you, would describe themselves as a voice or want to be known by their voice alone.

I mean, you can't see a voice. You can only hear a voice. And John the Baptist is saying, I am a voice.

I don't want to be seen. You've come here to find out who I am, and I'm not the point. I don't want to be seen.

I don't want you to see me. I am just a voice. I want you just to hear what it is that I am saying.

And what is it that he's saying? Well, this brings us to the second aspect of his response. He says, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord. Now, John here is describing himself as a forerunner.

And in the ancient world, often before a king or some dignitary would come for a visit into a city or into a town or into a particular region of the empire, someone would go on ahead. And that person's job, and usually there were a group of people who would do this, their job would be to take the stones out of the road, to make smooth the highway. And if there were really sudden turns or sharp turns, those turns would be taken out of the road so it was a little straighter.

Or if there were dips in the road, those dips would be filled in so that it was more level. Things would be cleaned up. Any graffiti that was on the rocks would be washed away.

Things would be put into good order. And then the job of the forerunner would also be to go and to announce that the king was coming, that the king would be traveling on this road, perhaps even in the next hour. And John the Baptist is saying to those who have come to interrogate him, I am this voice who has been called by God to prepare the way of the king, to prepare the way of the Lord, to preach repentance, to get people's lives cleaned up, to announce that the king's coming was imminent.

And it's as if John is saying, if you really understood that, then you would understand that a forerunner is not someone you look at. When a king is coming, when a dignitary is coming, you don't focus your attention on the person who comes to make the announcement, but rather you focus your attention on the coming king. And so John the Baptist says, that's who I am.

You're not supposed to be looking at me. I'm not the one who's supposed to be creating this stir. I'm not supposed to be drawing attention to myself, but I am simply pointing to another.

I am simply holding up my finger and pointing to another and saying there is another coming. And I am making way for the Lord. Now I want to suggest to you again, if we're to draw a lesson from this text, if we're to draw a lesson from John's witness, this is a very powerful and profound and poignant lesson to draw.

That the task of every witness to Jesus Christ, that the task that we have as believers is not to point to ourselves, but to point away from ourselves to another. To point to the one who has made the difference in our lives. To point to Jesus Christ, the King and the Lord.

Those who are the most effective witnesses for Jesus Christ are those who are transparent. Those whose lives are shot through with the reality of Jesus so that the reality of Jesus is bubbling over in their lives and people see not in them themselves, but see the reality of Jesus at work. And if we are to be a witness for Jesus Christ, we must first of all forget about pointing to ourselves.

And those of us who are in Christian ministry and those of us who are in Christian leadership and those of us who are called to different tasks in the life of the Church need most to learn this lesson. One of the words of Spurgeon in his book Lectures to My Students, which I read for the first time when I was a student, when I was a theological student, has stuck with me throughout all these years. And it's a word that I certainly know that I need to be reminded of again and again and again.

And I think all of us, as we seek to be a witness for Jesus Christ, need to be reminded of. Spurgeon used to pray after he finished preaching these words, Lord, may people not say what a wonderful sermon or

what a wonderful preacher, but rather what a wonderful Savior. And when people look at our lives or when people look at the programs of our church, do they say what a wonderful program or what a wonderful person or what a wonderful sermon or what a wonderful preacher, what a wonderful Bible study or what a wonderful counselor or what a wonderful thing that you are doing? Or do they see through that? Are they able to see through that to the point that really matters? Can they see Jesus? John the Baptist was transparent, and he wanted people to see in him his witness to Jesus Christ.

And then finally, notice that John the Baptist told the truth about his relationship to Jesus in verses 24 to 28. It's interesting to me that the deputation of the religious establishment still didn't get it. Here they had asked John the Baptist all these questions.

Here they had been interrogating him, but they still didn't get it. And I might say those of us who are ordained and those of us who are in the religious establishment are sometimes the thickest of all. It takes us a little while to get the point, and that's certainly the case here.

If you are not the Christ, they say, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, then why in the world are you baptizing people? Now, you need to understand that this is a very serious question. This is a very serious question because it wasn't normal for a Jewish preacher of any stripe to be baptizing Jewish people. In the 1st century, baptism was for non-Jews who wanted to become Jews.

It was for proselytes. And it wouldn't at all be ordinary or normal for a Jew to be baptized in this way in the 1st century. And so what they're really saying is if you're a good Jewish prophet or a good Jewish rabbi or a good Jewish teacher, it doesn't make sense that you're baptizing.

That's not what we do. That's not part of our system. That's not part of our worldview.

That's not part of our understanding. You're blowing our paradigm apart. You're blowing our worldview out of the water.

And John the Baptist answers this in simply a very interesting way. He says, I baptize with water. But among you stands one that you do not know.

He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Now what is he saying here? And stay with me here because I think this is a very interesting point as you begin to understand what's really going on. First of all, John the Baptist is saying you think that this baptism is a problem? You think that I've blown your paradigm apart by baptizing with water? There is someone standing in your midst whom you do not know who is going to baptize with fire and with the Holy Spirit.

You think that I'm turning the world upside down. You ain't seen nothing yet. There is someone coming who is going to lead people into the kingdom of God.

There is someone who is coming who is going to enable people to be born again. There is someone who is coming who is going to enable people to be new creatures in and through his ministry. Jesus is going to do a new work in people's lives.

People are going to be changed. People are going to be transformed. There's going to be a revolution.

And if you think what I'm doing doesn't fit the picture that you've painted, then you're never going to understand who Jesus is. And of course that's precisely what happens in John's Gospel. The religious

leaders can't get it.

They can't figure out how it is this one named Jesus fits into their idea, their understanding of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah had come to do. And then John the Baptist very humbly says, Jesus is so great, and what he is going to do is so great that I am not even worthy to untie his sandals. Now you need to understand that those who heard him say this would have been familiar with an old rabbinic saying, the saying of the rabbis.

And the saying went like this, a disciple can do anything that a servant did for his master except untie his sandals. In other words, if you're the disciple of someone, you can do anything that a servant might normally do except untie their sandals because that's too low to stoop to that level. Only a servant would do that.

And what John the Baptist is saying is, I'm not even worthy to be a disciple of this one who's coming. I'm not even worthy to be a servant of this one who's coming because his ministry is going to be so great and his person is going to be so wonderful. I am just the voice calling out in the desert.

Make straight the way for the Lord. Prepare the highway for our God. Now we're not told how the religious leaders responded at this point.

We do know that later, of course, they began to plot against Jesus as they began to understand who he was and what he had come to do. But that's not really the point for us tonight. The point for us is simply this, how do we respond to this witness by the people's prophet? John the Baptist knew who he was.

He knew who he wasn't, that he couldn't save himself, that there was one coming who was going to save him. He knew his mission. He knew his Lord.

What about you? Wherever you are in your life tonight, wherever you are in your struggles, do you know who you are? Do you know who you are not? Do you have a solid biblical self-understanding and do you know what your Lord has called you to do? The first day of court is now over and we have heard this witness from this first testimony. Are you yet ready to render a verdict concerning who Jesus is? Let us pray. Lord, we thank you tonight for the witness of John the Baptist, for the ministry which you entrusted to him, and for the lessons which are ours from his life and ministry.

Teach us what it is to be effective witnesses for Jesus and even at a deeper level, teach us what it is to understand a right and a fresh and a new, our relationship to Jesus. In his name we pray, amen.

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