

**BEHOLD THE LAMB**  
**John 1:19-34**

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A distant figure on horseback approaches through shimmering, midday heat. He's nearer now – a bearded man in a dark cowboy hat and a long, dusty overcoat. The stranger is Clint Eastwood. The movie is *High Plains Drifter*. The townspeople fear him, and three renegade gunmen try, unsuccessfully, to kill him. He, nonetheless, takes a room and decides to stay. Meanwhile, a group of outlaws are about to return to the town to take their revenge. Could the town's leaders convince this mysterious man to help? This man, who is so good with a whip and a gun. Mysterious at best, another outlaw at worst. At the end of the movie, as he is gunning down the jailbirds, the dying man shouts the most memorable line from the movie: "Who are you?" Eastwood shoots the gun out of his hand and returns gunfire. With his dying breath, he whispers the question again, "Who are you?"

Most of the Clint Eastwood movies I have seen are the edited for TV version. But this week I learned you can't find many Clint Eastwood movie quotes suitable for sermonic material. But "Who are you" is a famous one, asked by a co-star in a Clint Eastwood movie. Some others I found were, "Go ahead, make my day," "You're a legend in your own mind," and "Get three coffins ready."

Well, John the Baptist isn't exactly Clint Eastwood. He's a more of a moral character, to be sure – not a mysterious gunman. But the question is the same, because they, too, do not know the identity, the real essence of the mysterious man before them in John 1.

Look at John 1:19-20

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ."

Maybe if I put it in the King James language it won't sound so Clint Eastwood-ish. "Who art thou?" is the King James Version.

We have a deputation from Jerusalem that badgers the Baptist. They need to know. They've been sent to get an answer. Who is John the Baptist?

John's preaching has gotten too much mention. Matthew tells us that Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the regions around the Jordan went out to meet John the Baptist. How could the Jewish authorities, the religiously righteous themselves, overlook a man with such a following flocking his way? If this preacher gains any more popularity, he might garner the attention of Rome, who just might come down on the Jews.

It's a simple question, "Who are you?"

John was a puzzle. How do you figure out a man like John? He didn't conform to any of the customary categories or normal notions of the Pharisees. Now, nobody said anything about his being the Messiah; but expectations were in the air. The Jews were tired of oppression. They were looking for the holy one of Israel, the very Son of God, to come – the one to come to liberate and deliver them. John knows what they are asking, "Who are you?" They are asking, "Are you claiming to be the Christ?"

Others had come, and others had failed – each claiming to be the Christ. But what about you? Are you, too, claiming to be the one sent from God?

When they asked "Who are you," John knew what they meant. "Are you the Christ?"

Verse 20

And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ."

John vigorously shunned any suggestion that he might be the Messiah. "Nothing doing" is a good translation. The Greek construction is emphatic. "I, myself, am not the Christ." He pulls no punches. Whoever else John might be, he is not the Christ.

Now for us, Christ has become, unfortunately, something of a personal name – like Jesus was his first name, and Christ was his last name. Of course that's not the case. "Christ" is a title. It means Messiah, the anointed One of Israel.

"If you're not the Christ" (v. 21), "are you Elijah?"

Malachi 4:5 says that before the great and terrible day of Yahweh, God would send Elijah the prophet who had been taken away in the fiery chariot. Elijah would return before the Messiah made his entrance.

"I am not Elijah either," he says.

"Okay, then, are you the prophet?" They are desperate now. They need an answer. The Jews, apparently, expected all sorts of prophets to appear before the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 16:14; Mark 6:15; Luke 9:19). Most specifically, they thought of the prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:15ff. But John has news for them: He is not that prophet, either. In fact, from the earliest Christian preaching, we learn that the prophet was actually identical with the Messiah, with Jesus. He wasn't a third character after Elijah and the Messiah.

In Acts 3:22, Peter's sermon declares, "The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to him you shall give heed in everything he says to you" (he's using Deuteronomy 18:15).

John is getting agitated. "Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?" His answers get successfully curter. "No, no, no," John declines. They press him: "The Pharisees have sent

us” (verse 24). We have to come up with an answer. “If you’re not the Christ, if you’re not Elijah, if you’re not the prophet, why are you baptizing?”

“I’m not worthy to untie the sandals of the real Christ,” John replies. And then, seeing Jesus on the next day, he identifies the Christ: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29).

I want us to pick up four truths from this passage in John 1. Let’s see the passage with new eyes and see if we glean both some old and some new truths.

### **I. No man is who he is in his own eyes.**

That’s really true, isn’t it? I am not who I think I am. I might declare to you this morning that I’m the greatest singer in the world. I could believe that with all my heart. I could cut CDs, mail them out to all the members, try to become a You Tube sensation. I could even appear on “American Idol.” But just because I think I’m a great singer, doesn’t make me one. How many times have we seen the contestants walk across the American Idol stage, confident they are a magnificent musician? Their grandmother told them they sounded great, while the rest of us shamefully chuckle at their intonation – or lack thereof. (Meadowbrook – deacon to poor soloist: “Kim, I’ll never forget your interpretation of that song. It brought tears to my eyes.”)

No man is who he things he is in his own eyes.

Likewise, no man is who other men think that he is. It doesn’t matter if the Pharisees think he is the Christ – or Elijah or the Prophet. That doesn’t make it so. You and I are not who we think we are, nor are we who others think we are. All that matters is who God thinks we are (or knows).

Now, how did I get that out of this passage? They asked him, “Are you the Christ.” He said no, then, “Are you Elijah.” He said, “I am not.” Has no one told John the Baptizer that, in fact, he is Elijah.

In Matthew 11:14, Jesus clearly says, “And if you care to accept it, John, himself, is Elijah, who was to come.

Jesus, speaking of John the Baptist, said, “John was the essence of Elijah. He is the return of Elijah, of which the prophets have spoken.

Why did John say “No.” Well, the Jews saw Elijah leave the earth in a chariot of fire without passing through death. And they expected, in due course, the identical figure would reappear before the Messiah.

In that sense, John the Baptizer is right – he’s not exactly that Elijah.

And while Jesus equates John with the Elijah of Malachi’s prophecy, that does not mean that John the Baptizer has any idea who God sees him to be. He doesn’t know his true position in God. And

while the other gospel writers give something of a biography of the Baptist, John, in the fourth gospel, does not.

But Jesus gives him his true significance.

No man is who he is in his own eyes. No man is who he is in the eyes of others. Every man is only truly known by God. Thus, John is really only what Jesus knows him to be – the presence of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the Messiah.

If you think highly of yourself, take little comfort – it means nothing. Do others give you accolades? Again, they crumble before the throne of God. The only evaluation that matters at the end of the day is, “Who does God think I am?”

## **II. We’re all builders of the roadway.**

We are all a little bit sensitive about the topic of builders on the roadway.

Amarillo could possibly be the orange cone capital of the country. We choke down I-27 and I-40 at the same time. Our planning is the equivalent of a cardiologist who says let’s just restrict all the arteries at once and hope nothing bad happens. Like restricted blood flow, our cars have nowhere to go. Try to exist downtown at 5:15 and see how safe you feel on a clogged artery.

When this delegation can’t get a good description of John, they ask him “Who are you? We’ve got to take an answer back.” His words come from Isaiah 43. He’s not even a person; he’s not even the Word we learned in John 1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He is a voice proclaiming the word.

Verse 23

He said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said” (Isaiah 43).

It’s the imagery of roadway repair. Before a dignitary, before a king could come, or a commander could visit, cities would make the road ready. Ancient roads were made with crude compositions. They would fill in the low spots, flatten the high spots, and even take out the sharp bends to make straight the way of the lord.” Straight – the way of the king.

Each one of us, like a Roman road builder, is to be busy preparing the way for Christ. John’s focus, your focus, my focus, is to get ready for the Messiah when He comes again in His full consummation.

Are we preparing the hearts and minds of people around us to receive the message of Messiah? Do we see ourselves as a voice giving the clarion call of the Christ to all peoples and all nations. “Get ready. He’s coming.”

### III. Once you know who He is, you disappear.

“Okay, you’re not going to answer any of our questions, then you, yourself tell us ‘Who are you?’” You’re baptizing. What right do you have to baptize if you’re not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet.

Once you know who He is, you do forget who you are.

Verse 27

It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

Don’t forget that Jesus said about John, “He was the greatest one born of a woman” (Luke 7:28). If Jesus can call John the greatest man born of a woman, and he sees himself as unworthy to untie the lace of the sandal of our Lord, what shall we think of ourselves?

Baptism was not anything new in the first century. The Jews were all for baptism, as long as it was the Gentiles, filthy Gentiles, who were washed and cleansed from their sins. Both Gentile men and women were baptized, as they try to become part of the people of God (males are also circumcised). The anomaly in John’s case, however, was that he asked the Jews, the people of God, to come and be baptized and cleansed from their sins. He was asking the Jews to humble themselves and act like Gentiles and go through a ceremonial washing.

When you know who He is, you disappear. The humility of John is found in his response, “I’m not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

Loosening the sandal was the task of a slave. A disciple was not expected to perform this humiliating task for his teacher. Bear in mind, roads were dusty and full of dung. The feet were filthy. Teachers in ancient Palestine were not always paid. So the disciples were in the habit of performing little services for their rabbis instead. But you have to draw the line somewhere.

In fact, in AD 250, there was a rabbinic saying (surely older before recorded), “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher, except the loosening of his sandal thong.” (SBk, I, p.121)

You have trouble with pride? You learn who Jesus really is, and you’ll learn that you’re nothing.

Later, John the Baptist will say – look at John 3:30 – “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Isn’t that your testimony? My will must decrease, and the will of the Christ within me must increase. My sinful self must be crucified while the Spirit of Christ within me fills the void. “I must decrease, but He must increase.”

How great do you and I think we really are?

**A CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station to get gas. He went inside to pay, and when he came out he noticed his wife engaged in a deep discussion with the service**

**station attendant. It turned out that she knew him. In fact, back in high school before she met her eventual husband, she used to date this man.**

**The CEO got in the car, and the two drove in silence. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he finally spoke: “I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking you’re glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant.”**

**“No, I was thinking if I’d married him, he’d be a Fortune 500 CEO and you’d be a service station attendant. (From John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason*, 1998)**

I guess neither one of them had the gift of humility.

The word “humility” is related to our word humus, meaning earth or earthy. If you’re humble, you’re close to the ground, you’re near the bottom.

Humility is not just being gentle or meek. It has nothing to do with whether you’re an extrovert or an introvert in your personality type. What it means is you’re willing to be vulnerable, you’re willing to be hurt, you’re willing to go unnoticed, to be last, to receive the least. It describes the way of Christ better than any other word. It is the way of Christ. And as such it brings the deepest and most lasting peace. (Johann Christoph Arnold, *Seeking Peace*, p.123)

#### **IV. The real message of John is “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the earth”**

Look at verse 29

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

I’m so happy to say that the Greek construction is a present tense participle. Behold the Lamb of God who *is taking* away the sin of the world. When Jesus was crucified, it was a once and for all act that continues to even today. He is taking away the sin of the world.

Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 5, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

In 1 John 2:2, our same writer, John, says, “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not only for ours only but also for those of the whole world.”

Don’t water this down. He died for all sins – the sins of everybody in the world. Now, we have to receive it. We have to accept it. But His atonement is powerful enough for every human sin ever committed. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

What did John have in mind when he called Him the “Lamb of God?” Surely he had in mind Isaiah 53:7-8, “He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his

mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he is cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.”

Or Isaiah 53:4-6, “Surely, he has borne our infirmities, and he has carried our diseases; yet we thought of him as stricken, struck down by God, and that was why he was so afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every single one of us, to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

He has in mind the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. And perhaps, also, he has in mind the Passover lamb, whose blood was shed for forgiveness of sins.

Whether it’s the suffering servant lamb of Isaiah or the Passover lamb, it doesn’t matter. The point is the same. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that pays for all sins.

What if you had to carry the weight of every sin you’ve ever committed? What if you had to bear on your back the burdens of yesterday’s iniquities?

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the earth.

If you’re here this morning, I want you to see the person of Jesus – the one who takes away the sins of the world. I want you to come and commit yourself to being His disciple, to being His follower. If you’ve already accepted the invitation to follow Jesus, I want you to come and be a part of this community of Christ – to go and make ready the way of the Lord, to be a voice in the wilderness saying, “Let’s get ready. The Christ is coming.”