

John 1-19-35
No greater saint!

Preamble:

Applied for a grant for 1.1 million (John C. Lasko foundation).

Sermon introduction:

Tennis was my passion during my teen years.

In tennis greatness is measured in grand slams won. There are four grand slam tournaments a year (the French Open, Wimbledon, The Australian open, and the US Open).

For years and years, the men's record was 13 grand slam titles. No one thought this record could ever be broken. Then along came Peter Sampras. He was my hero. He won 14. This was an incredible feat of greatness. No one thought Pete's record would ever be broken.

Then along came Roger Federer. He has won a whopping 20 grand slam titles.
For years and years, all he did was break records.
Most appearances in a grand slam final.
Most grand slam match wins.
Most career prize money.
The most weeks ranked number one in the world.

His list of records is a record... go to Wikipedia to check it out.

But then, to my great dismay, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic caught up to Federer's slam record!

As you can imagine, now sports writers fiercely debate the identity of the greatest tennis player of all time. I still think it is Federer. But that is just my opinion.

This raises the questions who determines the GOAT and what is the criteria?

What if Jesus said someone was the Goat? I think that would pretty much settle it, don't you!

In Matthew 11:11 Jesus utters these amazing words.

Matthew 11:11 (ESV) — 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Jesus says that John the Baptist was the greatest person in the entire OT. But why was John the Baptist the greatest person in the entire OT? The Bible never specifically tells us, although this morning's sermon text gives us some clues...

What made him John the Baptist so great?

*His humility made him great.
His message made him great.*

First, John's humility made him great!

John 1:19 marks a key transition in the gospel of John. The prologue, introducing Jesus Christ, is over. Now John moves into historical narrative. This means that our sermon texts will get longer.

John 1:19a (ESV) — 19a And this is the testimony of John,...

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, every time the name John is mentioned in the gospel of John it is a reference to John the Baptist.

There has never been anyone quite like John the Baptist!

Secular historians from the first century wrote more about John the Baptist than Jesus Christ. (Sproul)

John was a crucial figure because he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and the first to herald of the arrival of God's promised Messiah (Isa. 40:3).

His entire life's work was preparing the nation of Israel to meet the long-awaited Messiah. What a calling!!!

After 400 years of prophetic Silence, John the Baptist explodes onto the scene preaching fiery sermons, which attracted thousands (Mark 1:4-5). If he was alive today, he would be a you tube sensation, have thousands of twitter followers, and probably a few lucrative book deals.

His preaching was so popular that huge crowds walked for days through the sunbaked dessert just to hear him preach, causing the religious leaders to take notice.

Most people with John's "success" would have a massive ego, but John was very humble. How do we know?

We see John's humility in his self-perception.

John 1:19–20 (ESV) — 19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" **20** He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

John's ministry was having such an impact that many wondered if he was the promised Messiah. Yet, when asked, John the Baptist humbly said, "I am not the Christ/Messiah."

John 1:21a (ESV) — 21a And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

Elijah never died. Furthermore, the prophet Malachi promised that God would send "the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (Mal 4:5). Therefore, some mistakenly thought that John the Baptist was really Elijah reincarnated, sent to announce the arrival of Messiah?

But John said, "no, I'm not Elijah." Although he came in the Spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17).

John 1:21 (ESV) — 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

The prophet was a reference to Moses. Some mistakenly thought God would bring Moses back from the dead to lead Israel (Duet. 18:15). When asked, John said, "no, I'm not him either."

So, who was John the Baptist?

John thought of himself as merely a voice!

John 1:22–23 (ESV) — 22 So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” **23** He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John answers by quoting from Isa. 40:3, on OT prophesy. The prophet Isaiah promised 700 years beforehand that God would raise up a voice to prepare the way for Jesus. John the Baptist is that voice.

John the Baptist could have said,

“I’m kind of a big deal. I was chosen by God himself to herald the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. I’m the cousin of Jesus. I was also full of the Holy Spirit while in my mother’s womb. I’m so Godly that I lived in the dessert for years eating nothing but locust and wild honey. In addition, people walk for miles to hear me preach. Finally, I don’t know if you have noticed or not, but I have baptized a lot of people.”

John was a rock star!!!

But he said none of those things, rather he says, “I’m just a voice.”

You can’t even see a voice; you can only hear it. You don’t know what a voice wears, looks like, or drives. A voice is just a voice.

Illustration:

I recently read this story.

“One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was a brilliant performance; at the end the audience went absolutely wild! They clapped, whistled, and stamped their feet, totally absorbed in the greatness of the performance.

As Toscanini stood there, he bowed and bowed and bowed, then acknowledged his orchestra. When the ovation finally began to subside, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians. He was almost out of control as he whispered, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The orchestra leaned forward to listen. In a fiercely enunciated whisper Toscanini said, "Gentlemen, I am nothing." That was an extraordinary admission since Toscanini was blessed with an enormous ego.

He added, "Gentlemen, you are nothing. But Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!" (Hughes)

We are nothing, Jesus is everything. John fully understood this mentality.

Later on, when the huge crowds left John’s ministry to follow Jesus’ ministry, he humbly said...

John 3:30 (ESV) — 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

Application:

So often, we very subtly position ourselves to highlight our accomplishments. We want people to be impressed with what we drive, what we wear, where we work, our income, our titles, what we have built, or our kids accomplishments.

We don't want to brag too much, that is socially unacceptable, but we still like it when our accomplishments somehow come to light. Don't we???

John the Baptist was so very different. He wanted people to be impressed with Jesus. He knew that he was only a voice to tell people about Jesus.

The apostle Paul said it like this,

2 Corinthians 4:5 (ESV) — 5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

Our goal in life must be to make much of Jesus, and make little of ourselves.

When someone says,

“Wow, what a great business you have built...” Our response should be, “Jesus has given me grace every step of the way.”

“Wow, your kids are so accomplished...” Our response should be, “Jesus has really helped us despite our failures.”

“Wow, you seem to respond so well during trials....” Our response should be, “Jesus has been my rock. Let me tell you how about him.”

John knew who he was, he was merely a voice!!! That is all we are!!!

We see John's humility in his self-perception

We also see John's humility in his lowly service.

John 1:24–28 (ESV) — 24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

This is a reference to Jewish proselyte baptism, not new covenant water baptism. When gentiles converted to Judaism they got baptized in water because they were considered unclean.

26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John's mention of Jesus' sandal strap was a reference to a specific cultural idiom. A disciple of a rabbi not only attended the lectures of the rabbi, but he also became the personal slave/servant of the rabbi—taking care of all his needs—making his housing arrangements, getting his food, and so forth.

But the one thing that differentiated a disciple in a rabbinical school from an actual slave was that the disciple was never required to take care of the shoes or the sandals of his teacher. A slave could be reduced to that humiliating task, but not a disciple.

“Therefore, when John said, ‘I'm not even worthy to unstrap His sandals,’ he was saying: ‘Don't look at me. I'm lower than a disciple. I'm even lower than a slave. I'm not even worthy to untie His shoes, to take off His sandals, to clean His feet. Don't look to me. Look to Him.’” (Sproul)

Application:

If we want to be great, we too must be committed to lowly service. We must think of ourselves as slaves, yes slaves. Slaves had no rights, as Christians we have no rights. Our only desire should be to do our master's bidding.

This is true humility.

Humility is the chief virtue. Said another way, humility is the necessary foundation for every other Christian virtue.

Humble people forgive.
Humble people serve.
Humble people trust God, not themselves.
Humble people love others.
Humble people are very teachable.
Humble people filled with joy.
I could go on and on...

On the other hand, pride is the chief vice.

Sadly, most of us are not very humble. If you think your humble, you are not. Our pride blinds us to our pride.

What should we do? Ask God to help us grow in humility. Ask God to help us embrace lowly service. Ask God to help us have a right self-perception.

If we really want to grow in humility, we must look to the cross!!! At the cross we see the greatest act of humility in the world, we also see that God forgives proud people.

Why was John considered so great???

First, John's humility made him great. But that is not all...

Second, John's message made him great!

What was John's message?

John's message centered on Jesus' work!

John 1:29–31 (ESV) — 29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **30** This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ **31** I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”

John's message centered on the lamb of God. In one sense, the message of the entire Bible can be summed up with three little words, “Lamb of God.”

The lamb of God motif fills the pages of Scripture. Here are a few highlights.

During the period of the patriarchs,

Abraham is about to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Then Isaac says to his father,

Genesis 22:7b–8 (ESV) — **7b** “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” **8** Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

At the last minute, God provides a substitutionary sacrifice for Isaac. Isaac lives and the lamb dies!!!

During the period of the Exodus...

The Israelites were told to kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorpost of their homes. When the angel of death passed over their homes, he would spare their lives because a lamb was slaughtered in their place (Ex. 12:3-13).

During the period of the tabernacle and temple...

A lamb was offered up every day, to remind Israel of their constant need for a substitutionary sacrifice (Ex. 29:38–42; Num. 28:1–8; cf. Heb. 10:5–7).

During the period of the prophets...

Isaiah 53:6–7 (ESV) — **6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. **7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

During the ministry of the apostles...

1 Peter 1:18–19 (ESV) — **18** knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

During the period of eternal rest in heaven....

We will worship the lamb 24-7...

Revelation 5:12–14 (ESV) — **12** saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” **13** And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” **14** And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Why does this matter?

The arrival of *the* lamb means the end of the sacrificial system!

The arrival of *the* lamb means the suffering servant has arrived!

The arrival of *the* lamb means the sinless substitute can save!

The arrival of *the* lamb means the angel of death will pass over us!

The arrival of the lamb means that all our sins can be forgiven, we can become friends of God, we can be adopted by God, the power of sin is broken in us, and we will spend eternity in glory!!!

Jesus Christ was much more than a good person, a great moral teacher, a wise religious sage, a great philosopher, a miracle worker, or a great organizer, although he was all these things.

Jesus Christ is first and foremost the lamb of God who died in our place, so that we might live.

Illustration:

The story is told of a man who went for a hike in the Swiss Alps all by himself. Somehow, he got lost. He tried to stay calm, but it was hard not to panic as the temperatures dropped lower and lower and lower. He thought for sure he was going to freeze to death.

The man had been staying at a lodge. The lodge owner was waiting for him to check in by early evening. The check in time came and went. The lodge owner became increasingly concerned about his lodger. Eventually, he sent out his best rescue dog to find the man.

The dog found the man half-conscious, grabbed him carefully with his teeth, and started to shake him to wake him up. On coming to his senses, the man, saw the dog and thought the dog was a wolf. So, he reached into his pocket grabbed his knife and stabbed the dog in the side.

The dog let go and whimpered back to the lodge, bleeding the whole way. Right after he arrived at the lodge he died.

The dog's owner followed the trail of blood left by the dog and found the man and saved him. The dog's shed blood saved the man.

The lamb of God shed his blood so that we might live. We killed him with our sins, but through his death we find life.

Application:

Some of you have been Christians for years. You know all this stuff, but are you living like it is true?

Are you living like you are forgiven?
Are you living like you are freed?
Are you living like an adopted child of God?
Are you living like God loves you?

Others of you know this stuff, but it is not enough to simply know this stuff. You must personally trust the lamb! Is he your lamb? Have you personally appropriated his sacrifice through faith?

Others have lost the wonder!!! Ask God to help you understand your sins, so that you can be amazed by his grace.

Others believe the gospel, but they keep it to themselves. Like John the Baptist we must proclaim this message from the rooftops.

John's message centered on Jesus' work! In addition...

John's message centered on Jesus' identity!

John 1:32–34 (ESV) — 32 And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. **33** I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ **34** And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

John describes what happened when he baptized Jesus. This probably raises a few questions...

Why was Jesus baptized?

More than likely Jesus’ baptism was a picture of the “baptism” he would endure *on the cross* when he would die as the sacrificial Lamb of God (Isa. 53:7; Luke 12:50). Furthermore, we learn in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15).

Next question, what happened when he was baptized?

In the other gospel accounts we learn that the holy spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove when he was baptized. Why a dove? Probably because dove’s symbolized purity, gentleness, and innocence.

When this happened, God the father declared in a loud voice, “this is my son in whom I’m well pleased.”

John is testifying that Jesus is...

The one and only son of God.
The spirit anointed Messiah.
The lamb of God who takes away our sins.

John the Baptist’s message was great. He proclaimed that Jesus was the lamb of God and the son of God.

We have the same privilege to preach the same great message.

Conclusion:

Back to where we started. Initially, it is somewhat hard to believe that John the Baptist was the greatest saint in the OT. Especially when we consider the lives of saints like Abraham, Moses, David, Joshua, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, or Elijah.

Why was John the greatest?

John’s humility made him great.
John’s message made him great.

Here is the good news. Motivated by grace and empowered by the holy spirit, we too can be great in God’s eyes as we humble ourselves before him and proclaim the message that John proclaimed.

Let’s pray.