

John 1:19-28 "Do You Know Who You Are?" [**](#)

Main Idea: In John 1:19-28 John the Baptist faced and answered two questions that we need to answer as well.

I. The identity question: Who are you? (19-23)

A. John the Baptist acknowledged who he wasn't (19-21).

1. Beware of the Messiah complex.
2. There's only one Messiah, and it's not you or me.

B. John the Baptist acknowledged who he was (22-23).

1. He saw himself in light of the Scriptures.
2. He saw himself as a humble servant of God.
3. He saw himself as one entrusted with a divine purpose.

II. The implications question: Why are you doing what you are doing? (24-28)

A. John did what he did even though it raised questions (24-25).

1. Baptism shows you are turning from living your way.
2. Baptism shows you want to live God's way.

B. John did what he did because he lived to exalt the Savior (26-28).

1. He saw himself as unworthy.
2. He saw Jesus alone as worthy.
3. His view of Jesus affected everything in his life.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself some personal questions...

1. How do you view yourself?
2. How do you view Christ?
3. Is what you say about yourself and Christ consistent with the evidence of your life?
4. What change most needs to occur today to show that Christ is supreme?

Last week I received a copy of a new book, *At the Other End of the Stethoscope*, by Dr. Lincoln Nelson, M.D. The author, of course, is a friend of our church, for Link and his dear wife Lenore have served as part of our missionary family for decades. The Nelsons invested their lives as medical missionaries in the Philippines from 1951 to 1987, where they helped start a hospital, and then following a return stateside to care for Link's dying father, the Nelsons did short term work in Togo, the Gambia, Kenya, Brazil,

Bangladesh, and Thailand.

In 2006, while driving across Texas en route to visit their daughter, Link started feeling a little sick, pulled off the highway, and then went unconscious. As it turned out, the crippling effects of meningitis and encephalitis had struck him, thrust him into a coma, put him on death's door for months, and altered the direction of his life (and family's life) to this day. In the course of one day, the doctor became the patient.

IV's. Trach tube. Bed sores. Paralysis. The loss of ability to think and speak. Tremors. Spinal taps. Ventilators. Rehab. Wheelchairs. Nursing home life. Seizures. Amnesia. These words no longer described what Dr. Link did for others. They described Link the patient's own experience.

I want to read to you what our brother had to say about his ordeal. Here are his words on July 14, 2008:

This is Link Nelson now for the first time in about two years. Our purpose is to thank you all for your continuing prayers. Progress is being made that you should know about as you thank our heavenly Father for his faithfulness over the past two years.

The big change has been my returning mental acuity. I am continuing therapy training at a local center that is devoted to rehabilitating patients like me. But the greatest help has been the presence and help of our family members nearby. Dave and Mike [his sons; Dave actually resigned from his pastorate in New York and moved to Michigan to care for his parents] are taking turns at the required daily care. In due time, I should be able to bathe and dress myself and get around without dependence on the wheelchair.

The few skin cancers have been removed successfully, and visits to my doctors are fewer now. They all seem pleased with my progress. Best of all, my devoted wife, Lenore, keeps my spirits up, and we are confident that God has kept me here for His perfect will and purpose. We even get out to church regularly now and enjoy fellowship with our class once again. [\[1\]](#)

As you ponder Link's testimonial, it points out an important principle. How you view yourself has a direct bearing on how you approach your life, especially when life gets hard.

I'm a doctor, and I deserve better than this after all I've done to help people in my life.

No, I'm a servant of Christ, and if my Master wants to teach me or others through me through a season of suffering, then I'm willing because I trust Him.

How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as an important person that deserves (and even demands) first class treatment from others (including God Himself)? Or do you see yourself as a servant who belongs to a wise and loving Master whose purpose for your life is what matters most?

I want us to think about two questions this morning. Question one—who are you? And question two—why are you doing what you are doing in life?

Let's call them the *identity question*—who are you? and the *implications question*—why are you doing what you are doing? The two are related, of course, for how you view yourself has tremendous implications for why you do what you do with the life God has entrusted to you.

Why do I get upset when the phone rings and interrupts my agenda? It's because at that moment I see myself as an important person doing important things that I want to accomplish rather than as a servant of Christ who lives to accomplish whatever my Master sends my way. Why does it bother us so much when it's raining, or when the traffic is backed up, or when the waitress takes too long with our food? Same reason. We're not thinking rightly about ourselves, and when that happens, it shows.

Who am I? Why am I doing what I am doing in my life right now? Those are two critical questions for each of us, and this morning we're going to take a look at a man who faced them and answered them well. In John 1:19-28 John the Baptist actually encountered and responded to those two questions, and we can learn much from him.

I. The identity question: Who are you? (19-23)

Verse 19 sets the stage, "Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was."

"John" here refers to John the Baptist who at the time was about twenty-nine or thirty years of age. The apostle John doesn't give us much background concerning John the Baptizer because he knew that's already available in the first three gospel accounts by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

John the Baptist was the miracle child God gave to the elderly priest, Zechariah, and his barren wife, Elizabeth. "Your wife will bear a son, and you are to give him the name John," the angel told Zechariah in Luke 1:13. "He will be great in the sight of the Lord (Luke 1:15)." And then the angel made this staggering prediction, "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:16-17)."

And about thirty years later, that's what he did. "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John," says John 1:6-7. "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe."

John 1:15 states, "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.'"

As our story begins, it's early March in the year 27.^[2] John has been preaching and baptizing "at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan," according to verse 28. That's a different Bethany than the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. This Bethany is east of the Jordan River, about thirteen miles south of the Sea of Galilee, making it twenty miles southeast of Nazareth.^[3] That's significant because just a few weeks earlier, Jesus made that twenty mile trip when He left His hometown of Nazareth and went to be baptized by John at Bethany.

The Jews from headquarters in Jerusalem sent an inspection committee to check out John, says verse 19. It included some priests and Levites (and some Pharisees according to verse 24). You can understand why they came. John himself was a Levite and the son of a priest, but he sure wasn't keeping the party line. In fact, to say he was non-traditional is an understatement, for John didn't act like any priest Israel had ever known.

To put all this in perspective, let's sketch a timeline. About six weeks before the inspection team arrived, Jesus came to John to be baptized (see Mark 1:9-11). John didn't know who Jesus was prior to His baptism, as he affirms in John 1:31, which I take to mean he didn't know He was the Messiah since they were cousins. And do you remember what happened right after John performed the baptism? The Holy Spirit descended on the Lord Jesus, and the Father announced, "This is my beloved Son."

And then, as Mark 1:12-13 says, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan."

So for the past almost six weeks, while John has been baptizing other people, Jesus has been in the wilderness being tempted. But now His temptation period is over, and now it's time to go public.

In fact, John 1:29 tells us what happened on "the next day," the very day *after* the Jews interviewed John. It says, "John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God.'"

So there's the timeline. John baptized Jesus. Then Jesus went into the wilderness for His forty day temptation experience. Then Jesus came back to John, and in so doing made it clear that it was time to launch His public ministry. Not surprisingly, John 1:35 says that the following day John started sending his

followers to follow Jesus.^[4]

That's the kind of man John was, a humble man who embraced his role, did his job, and then got out of the way. Let's take a closer look at how John answered the identity question. He started by clarifying who he *wasn't*.

A. John the Baptist acknowledged who he wasn't (19-21). "Now this was John's testimony," says verse 19. John talked about his own identity in verses 19-28, and then about Jesus' identity in verses 29-34.

"Who are you, John?" the entourage asked. Listen to his response in verses 20-21, "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.'"

It's worth noting these religious leaders later interrogated Jesus with the same sort of questions. Who are you? Are you the Christ, the Messiah?

Absolutely not, says John. I am not the Christ.

Well then, are you Elijah? John sort of dressed like Elijah, according to Mark 1:6, for he "wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist." That's reminiscent of Elijah who wore, according to 2 Kings 1:8, "a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." And he preached like him, too.

Are you Elijah? They knew their Bibles. They knew the prophecy of Malachi 4:5, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes."

No, I am not Elijah, John replied.

Are you the Prophet? That question grows out of what Moses said in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 when he announced that a prophet like him was coming. First century Jews were divided concerning the identity of "the Prophet." Some said that he, like Elijah, would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Others said he himself would be the Messiah, which turned out to be the case, as both Peter (Acts 3:22-23) and Stephen (Acts 7:37) later affirmed.

To that question John responded with just one word. "No."

Did you notice how John's answers keep getting shorter. "I am not the Christ." "I am not." "No." He's making it clear he doesn't like talking about himself, and would much rather talk about someone else, someone else who is worthy of the attention.

Take note, my friend, for there's much we can learn from John. "I am *not* the Christ," he said. "That's not who I am. It's not how I see myself. It's not how I want you to see me. *I am not the Christ.*"

Beloved, there's a caution here and we need to heed it.

1. *Beware of the Messiah complex.* Quite frankly, I would never say I'm the Messiah, but I act like it. I act like it when I drive like I own the road, and when I complain about people who interrupt my schedule, and when I get upset with my wife for not meeting my needs, and when I think a ministry can't exist without me. I can justify it all by saying I'm having a bad day, but think about it. The reason I say it's a bad day is because I think I deserve better. And I think I deserve better because I have a Messiah complex. Can you relate?

Here's something we need to remind ourselves of on a regular basis...

2. *There's only one Messiah, and it's not you or me.* That's how John could lose his ministry and even his life at the premature age of thirty without regret. He knew and affirmed who he *wasn't*. *I am not the Christ.*

The priests and Levites had a job to do and it's not getting done. Listen to their mounting frustration as they respond to John in verse 22, "Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'"

There's the identity question. Who are you? At that point...

B. John the Baptist acknowledged who he was (22-23). Verse 23—"John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

There's John's answer to the identity question, and it's quite revealing. If you want to know what made John tick, here it is. Three things shaped his identity.

1. *He saw himself in light of the Scriptures.* When asked who he was, John didn't talk about what his mother told him, or what the school aptitude tests said, or what his coach said. John didn't find his identity in what people said about him. He quoted Scripture.

Why Scripture? Because the Scriptures are the Word of God, and what God has to say about us is what matters. It's worth noting that all four gospels include this quotation from Isaiah 40:3 and apply it to John the Baptist. But here is the only place where John the Baptist himself quotes this verse and says it points to him.

There's a lot of talk about low self-esteem and how to help people who have it. Years ago when I was trained to help young people with their "self-esteem problem," I was told to have them make a list of all the good things they could think of about themselves. But it didn't work because the solution for dealing with self-image problems isn't found by looking at yourself, but by looking away from yourself, and specifically to the Scriptures.

When you look to the Scriptures, it's then that you begin to see yourself rightly. And quite honestly, it's then that you feel poorly but for the *right reason*. Not because you're self absorbed and life isn't giving you what you think you deserve out of it, but because you're a sinner who has offended a holy God. But keep reading His Word and you'll see that in His grace God provided a Savior who loved you and died in your place. And keep reading and you'll learn that by repenting of your sin and believing in His Son, God will remove your sins and make you His child of God. Then you'll start feeling good, not about yourself, but about *your Savior!* My friend, if you're struggling with identity issues, I encourage you to stop looking at yourself and start seeing yourself in light of the Scriptures, as John did.

2. *He saw himself as a humble servant of God.* Hear John's reply, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert."

That's interesting. I am a *voice*, says John. Jesus is the Word, but John is a voice that speaks the Word. In fact, it's all he wants to talk about. Listen to John you'll discover he's got a one track mind. He's a voice that points people, not to himself, but to his God.

That's what's important, says John, not the messenger, but the person the message is about. I'm just a voice. The Living God is the one who deserves your attention. John saw himself, first in light of the Scriptures, and secondly as a humble servant of God.

3. *He saw himself as one entrusted with a divine purpose.* It's the purpose he found when he searched the prophecy of Isaiah. In Isaiah 40:3 Isaiah used a word picture and John picks up on it here. "*Make straight the way for the Lord.*"

The king is coming, says John, and we need to get the road ready for his arrival. That's what happened in Bible times whenever a king came to visit a region in his empire. The people worked on the roads so their king wouldn't have any obstacles to hinder his arrival.

It makes me think of what's happening in South Africa these days. In about a month people from a hundred countries will be coming to Cape Town for the World Cup, and South Africa is getting ready for the

big day. There's actually a web site focused on "Preparing South Africa for the World," as the heading states. Last week I read about some of the things they're doing to get ready, like having simulated plane hijackings and bomb threats in the airport, shutting down street traders around the stadium, and beefing up the police presence. And I read the following warning for the locals:

"Capetonians can expect to be shoved to the side of the road by convoys with blaring sirens and flashing blue lights from the end of the month, when FIFA bigwigs and 2010 World Cup teams and their entourages start arriving in the city. The Cape Argus reports that the FIFA family, the world's top football players, their wives, and more than 80 heads of state are on their way. And their convoys are expected to take over our roads from June 1."^[5]

You want to know who I am? says John. I'll tell you. I'm a voice on a mission, and here's my mission. The King is coming to town, and it's my job to tell you that you need to get the road ready. As John MacArthur explains, "John and Isaiah liken the hearts of Messiah's people to a desolate wilderness, through which a smooth, level road needed to be prepared for His coming."^[6]

He's coming, says John. There's no doubt about that. And He's going to do a wonderful work when He gets here. But the reason I'm here is to urge you to make it easy for Him to find a place in your hearts and lives. Which means you need to get rid of the clutter and tear down the barriers and clean up the road so that when He comes, He'll have easy access to walk right into your life.

By the way, any clutter that needs to go in your life, my friend? Clutter keeps people from enjoying the Lord. If our hearts are full of other things, there's no room for Him.

That's the identity question. Who are you? The identity question leads to a second question.

II. The implications question: Why are you doing what you are doing? (24-28)

Let me illustrate the relationship between these two questions. Ladies, suppose you walk into your house one evening after being gone all day and see a stranger preparing a meal in your kitchen. After the initial shock wears off and it's apparent the person means no harm, you quickly ask two questions. Who are you? And why are you doing what you are doing in my kitchen? You ask that because the two questions go together. If he says, "I'm a chef that your husband hired, and he hired me to cook dinner for you tonight because it's your anniversary." You say, "Okay, thanks! Go right ahead." Once his identity is established you understand the implications of his actions.

Another example. You see your teenage son cleaning his room without being asked and you pose the same questions. Whoa! Who are you (must be an intruder who just *looks* like my son!)? And why are you doing what you are doing (i.e. when my son cleans his room, there's got to be some reason for it!)?

That's sort of what the inspection committee is doing with John. First, who are you? And then, why are you doing what you're doing? That's verses 24-25, "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?'"

Notice two things regarding why John did what he did. First...

A. John did what he did even though it raised questions (24-25). In this case the question, *why are you baptizing?*

That's interesting. It wasn't John's preaching that upset the establishment. It was his baptizing. Remember there are priests on this committee. Not just anybody in Israel could administer rites of purification. That was the priests' job. And these priests want to know what John is doing baptizing people without their authorization.^[7]

Okay, John. If you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, then why are you baptizing people without our say-so?

But there's something else that's bugging them. It wasn't just that John was sort of a maverick that bothered them. It was *who* he was baptizing.

Think of it this way. What did baptism mean for first century Jews anyway? In the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel foretold that cleansing people was something the Messiah would do. He said in Ezekiel 37:23, "They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God."

What is baptism? In short, in the first century as for us today, baptism communicates two things.

1. *Baptism shows you are turning from living your way. And...*
2. *Baptism shows you want to live God's way.*

That's what John was doing. But with whom? That's the issue.

You see, baptism wasn't new. The Jews regularly baptized people. It's who John was baptizing that was eye-catching. For the Jews, baptism "was the regular rite in the admission of converts from other religions," points out Leon Morris.^[8] So the Jews baptized non-Jews who wanted to get right with the true and living God of Israel. But John baptized all kinds of people, including *Jews*! And that was simply shocking and even offensive. Good people don't need to get baptized, and especially *God's* people, do they?

Morris remarks, "All Jews were prepared to accept the view that Gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing. But to put *Jews* in the same class was horrifying. The Jews were God's people already."^[9]

Or were they? The question is this. Is a person a child of God simply because his or her parents were? Or because he or she is part of their religious community? Or because they say they believe in the same Lord that others in the community profess?

John didn't think so. He preached to his own people and told them, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (Matt. 3:2)." And when pious and religious Jews came to hear him preach he told them (in Matt. 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9), "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

It wasn't popular, but it's the message John preached. There are no good people, only sinners who need to repent. And what a sinner needs a religious system can't provide, even Judaism. Only Christ can.

I'm convinced that one of the great mission fields in America today is right inside the church. I'm talking about the millions of unregenerate church members who fill church rolls.

A few years ago Jim Elliff wrote a little pamphlet entitled, "*Revival and the Unregenerate Church Member*."^[10] He mentions that out of the nearly 16 million church members on the rolls of Southern Baptist churches in America, only 30% come on a given Sunday morning. So a church with 6,000 on the rolls has 2,000 on a typical Sunday.

Elliff remarks, "Why we are not beside ourselves with grief over this kind of scenario eludes me. If there ever was a revival issue before us it is this one. There should be no satisfaction until more come to our churches than are on the rolls, a standard met and kept by our forbears and by many churches in other parts of the world."

Is Elliff overstating the matter? Is it really a problem when church members don't go to church, and should their lack of participation in church life be reason to suggest they may be unregenerate? Listen to

Elliff again, "If you believe I am too abrupt with this view, and think that coming to church is not specifically given in Scripture as a mark of the Christian, consider what failure to attend indicates. It tells us that the professed believer does not love the brethren, need the preaching of the Word, relish the corporate worship of God, or acknowledge any submission to God-ordained leadership. In general, the one who does not come says that the environment of believers is not his preferred environment and he is more satisfied with the world."^[11]

I wonder what John the Baptist would say to us if we were preaching today. We need not wonder. In John's day there were many people inside Judaism who viewed themselves as God's people, but he challenged their membership status, told them they were no better off than lost pagan Gentiles, and called on them to repent.

Why are you doing what you're doing? Here's why...

B. John did what he did because he lived to exalt the Savior (26-28). "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."

I love what that response reveals about John. Three things...

1. *He saw himself as unworthy.* "I am not worthy to untie His shoes," says John.

2. *He saw Jesus alone as worthy.* "All I'm doing is administering the sign (water). Only the Messiah can accomplish what the sign signifies (the cleansing of a sin-stained heart)."^[12] So I'm not worthy of your attention, but He is.

3. *His view of Jesus affected everything in his life.* And I mean, *everything*. It's why he called the Pharisees vipers, and why he confronted Herod about his adultery. And, yes, why he was baptizing "good" Jewish people. Because there is no such thing as a "good" Jewish person, or a "good" Gentile for that matter. There are only sinners, and every sinner needs to repent and open the road to let Jesus come in.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself some personal questions...four questions...

1. *How do you view yourself?*

2. *How do you view Christ?*

3. *Is what you say about yourself and Christ consistent with the evidence of your life?*

4. *What change most needs to occur today to show that Christ is supreme?*

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

^[1] Lincoln Nelson, *At the Other End of the Stethoscope*, pp. 60-61.

^[2] According to William Hendriksen, p. 93.

^[3] Observation by William Hendriksen, p. 93.

^[4] John talked about his own identity in verses 19-28, then about Jesus' identity in verses 29-34.

^[5] <http://www.project2010.co.za/>

^[6] John MacArthur, p. 53.

^[7] At this time, the Sadducees, were in control of the temple and were the majority party in the Sanhedrin. The high priest and the chief priests were Sadducees.

^[8] Leon Morris, p. 140.

^[9] Leon Morris, p. 140.

^[10]

Jim Eliff, quote found at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ref-rev/08-2/8-2_elliff.pdf

[\[1\]](#) Jim Eliff, quote found at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ref-rev/08-2/8-2_elliff.pdf

[\[12\]](#) William Hendriksen, p. 96.