

The Living Word: A Study of the Gospel of John
Part Two: Religion Meets Christ
Pastor Jason K. Boothe

Introduction

This section of chapter one introduces us more fully to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. We pick up this account a few days after Christ was baptized by John the Baptist. Christ had been baptized and was in the wilderness being tempted by the Evil One. It was during this time that the religious and political leadership of Israel sent a delegation from Jerusalem to question John the Baptist and his ministry practices.

John the Baptist was becoming very popular among the people. It was rumored that he was the promised Messiah. The religious leaders wanted answers. However, the answer they received from John the Baptist was that they were ignorant of their own Savior, without knowledge of Him. They did not know Christ.

This passage chronicles one of the first encounters between dead religion and Christ Jesus.

V. 19 And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?

- A. The Apostle John records the witness of John the Baptist's dealings with the priests and Levites regarding the Messiah.
- B. John the Baptist was a Levite by birth, born into a priestly family. His ministry began at about the age of 29 or 30. He preached a message of repentance in preparation of Messiah's coming.
- C. The priest and Levites from Jerusalem mentioned in this text were probably from the Sanhedrin, the main ruling authority over Israel.
- D. The priests and the Levites question John the Baptist as to his true identity. Many believed him to be the Messiah or Isaiah.
- E. John the Baptist would use this opportunity to introduce religion to Christ.

V. 20 And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

- A. Many thought John the Baptist was the promised Messiah, or Christ, the Savior of Israel.
- B. While dead religion and those who practice it are swift to take the credit and the spotlight, John the Baptist was a follower of Christ, not willing to rob God of any glory.
- C. However, John the Baptist was quick to openly confess that he was not the Christ.

V. 21 And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that

Prophet? And he answered, No.

- A. The priests and Levites asked him if he were Elijah. Many Jews thought, incorrectly, that Elijah would return physically before the great and dreadful day of the Lord.
- B. John the Baptist, knowing their flawed understanding of Malachi's text, tells them that he is not Elijah.
- C. He has, according to Luke 1:17, "gone before Christ in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."
- D. The priests also inquired if John the Baptist was the Prophet.
 - 1. Deuteronomy 18:15 states:
The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken;
 - 2. Many Jews thought this to be another forerunner who would come before Messiah. Others correctly interpreted the passage to speak directly of Messiah Himself.
- E. John the Baptist denies being the Prophet with a simply, yet effective "No."

V. 22 Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

- A. Since he openly confessed to being neither Messiah, Elijah, nor the Prophet, the priests and Levites finally ask John to explain himself.
- B. The priests and Levites seemed desperate for an answer. John the Baptist was evidently making quite a stir of things in Jerusalem for this delegation to come and question him.

V. 23 He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah.

- A. John testifies to being the forerunner of Christ, whose task it was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people to receive the coming Messiah.
- B. John MacArthur points out that John the Baptist refers to himself simply as a "voice," not the person of Isaiah. This allowed him to take no credit for the work of God. John the Baptist's delight was to serve simply as the mouthpiece through which God wrought His intentions.

V. 24,25 And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. 25 And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elijah, neither that prophet?

- A. Since John referred to himself as simply a "voice," the Pharisees inquired as to his authority to perform baptisms.

- B. John's baptismal practice was evidently different enough from the other rites and washings of the Jews that the Pharisees thought he was introducing a new ordinance into the Jewish faith.

V. 26,27 John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; 27 He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

- A. John never defends his authority to baptize. He immediately turns all attention to the Messiah.
- B. Notice the humility of John the Baptist. On several occasions he has had the opportunity to take credit or to glory in himself. Instead, John the Baptist turns all attention to Christ.
- C. "whom ye know not" - Perhaps John the Baptist's most sobering statement to the religious leaders of Israel is that they do not know their own Savior! Within their shielding of religiosity and ritual, these spiritually dead people assumed that they would be secure from the wrath of God. They thought wrong. The prophet of God John the Baptist, looked them each one in the eye and declared unto them, "you do not know the Messiah!"
- D. John the Baptist humbles himself under the authority and preeminence of Christ by stating that he was not even worthy to unlatch the Messiah's sandals, a slave's routine duty for his master.

V. 28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

- A. John, following the questioning session by the religious and political leadership, returns to faithfully perform his duties as directed by God.
- B. The Apostle John is sure to record the exact place this scene took place.

Conclusion

Apart from the enabling Holy Spirit, you could walk right beside Jesus Christ and still not know him. You are trusting in your religiosity or good works to inherit eternal life? Do not be as the religious leaders were in this passage of Scripture. Dead works and dead religion cannot save your soul. You need Jesus Christ and His righteousness for salvation!

Do you know Him today? The message remains the same: Repent and Believe in Jesus Christ for the salvation of your soul. Do it today as the Spirit leads and guides you. - Amen.