

## “The G.O.A.T.” (part 2)

Luke 3:1-38

The measure of a truly great man or woman most certainly differs depending on who you ask. Some define greatness as a matter of talent and ability. Others define it strictly as a matter of what a person accomplishes in life. To be great in the world’s eyes is to be a person of means, charisma, and intellect.

Who is the **greatest of all time**? Given that he just won his sixth Super Bowl ring, I guess it is now safe to say that the mantle falls upon Tom Brady (a.k.a. Darth Vader), at least in the world of professional football. And I’m pretty sure that I saw him get a pep talk from this guy at halftime. (see pic)

Last week, I introduced to you the life of John the Baptist, someone who very well could be described as the greatest of all time. Jesus made a powerful statement about John’s life in Luke 7:28—*“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.”* Anyone that Jesus calls ‘great’ is someone whose life we need to pay close attention to.

Jesus had nothing but words of praise for John and the way that he lived his life. He was strange and far from the ordinary. His ministry and manner of life were so odd that it got the attention of his generation. Of course, this was by design, because God wanted to show people what they needed to do to receive Christ. John is the ‘introducer.’

There is much that we can learn from a careful look at the life of John the Baptist. His unique life pointed others to Christ, he explained to them the way of salvation, and all of us should desire the same thing. I want to pick up from where we left off last week here in Luke 3 as we simply considered:

## 1. The MAN that John was (3:1-3)

Luke establishes the context of John's life and ministry in the first verse of chapter three. He mentions at least seven proper names, starting with the most powerful ruler in the world at that time and then working his way down the list. As a careful historian, Luke is providing us with historical context. But beyond this, he is also telling us something important about John as a man.

Against the backdrop of the day, John's life stood out in stark contrast. If ever there was one, here was a man who truly went against the grain of his day. His ministry was during a time of political and social upheaval. Different groups were vying for power and influence. Even the priesthood had become corrupted by lust for money and control. From the halls of power to the religious elite in the temple, righteousness was nowhere to be found.

The faithful in Israel desperately wanted godly leadership but could not find it on the throne nor in the temple. So when a bold prophet like John appears on the scene with God's Word on his lips and not a hint of corruption in his life, people begin to take notice.

We considered three characteristics of John as a man:

- he fulfilled a specific promise
- he served a special role
- he lived a separated life

He was intentionally shocking. He didn't dress to impress. His life was tailor-made to provoke thought and stop people dead in their tracks, to get them thinking about spiritual matters. John was a billboard that pointed others to Jesus. The purpose of his life was not to point people to himself, not to draw

attention to himself. As the Lord's messenger, he lived his life for an audience of One. He willingly got out of the way so that Jesus could be in the spotlight. That is the secret of his greatness.

By this definition, then, true greatness isn't a matter of accomplishments, possessions, or your appearance. It's a matter of your heart and the posture that your life takes toward God. When you consider the motive of his life, you can begin to see why Jesus would call him 'the g.o.a.t.'

That's John the man. But we can't separate the man he was from the message he preached.

## **2. The MESSAGE that John preached (3:3-20)**

*"...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*

Three things stand out about John's message:

First, John's message was **compelling**

Luke uses a very important word to describe John's ministry here, the word is 'proclaiming' or 'preaching.'

**"Proclaiming"** — word is 'kerusso' and refers to the act of serving as a herald or public crier; means to widely publish a message; used some 62 times in the New Testament

John was a preacher. The act of preaching was what he was called by God to do. In this sense, John fulfilled the role of a prophet and was the last of a long line of Old Testament prophets who declared the Word of the Lord.

What is 'preaching?' Paul uses this same word in:

**2 Timothy 4:1-2—“I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”**

The word was originally a political term, not a religious one. It was a word that referred to the official function of a herald who would get the message of a king out to the king's subjects. In those days, the king couldn't call up a press conference or have a statement to put out to all the news media. So to get the word out, the king would dispatch his herald who would deliver his message to the people.

**H.B. Charles, Jr.** — *“When the herald arrived at a city, he would cry out his message in a grave, formal, and authoritative voice. When he spoke, the people did well to listen and take heed. To ignore the herald's message was to reject the king's authority. And the herald would be careful to proclaim the king's message with clarity and accuracy. To misrepresent the king's message was just as dangerous as rejecting it.”*

Preaching is central to corporate worship. That's why the pulpit is central in protestant churches. It is not kept to the peripheral. It is front and center because hearing the Word of God is our primary act of worship.

Let me tell you something. There ought to be a level of respect and profound worship when the Word of God is opened up in our worship gatherings. When the man of God stands to declare the Word of God, it is time for the people of God to hear the voice of God in Scripture. That's why you ought to be extremely careful how you hear.

One of the surest signs that a church has lost its way is the silence of a prophetic voice behind its pulpit. And often before that happens, there is an unwillingness and a laziness on the part of the people to hear God's message. May it never be said of us.

I've heard it said that there are really only three types of preachers: those you can listen to, those you can't listen to, and those you must listen to. I'll let you figure out which type of preacher John was. Clue? He was one that you must to listen to. His message was compelling.

Second, John's message was **confrontational**

He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Humanity's problem wasn't social, but rather it was spiritual. The solution was not reform, but rather it was repentance. Matthew's account says:

**Matthew 3:1-2—“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”**

This shows us that John's message was two-fold:

- he preached a message of repentance

**“Repent”** —*means to turn around; a change in direction; a change of heart that results in a change of behavior*

Where ever you find this Greek word used in the New Testament, the reference is always to changing the mind and the purpose from sin to holiness. The word 'repent' means to change one's mind and act on that change.

- he preached a message of readiness

Again, in Matthew 3:2, we're told the reason for urgency. John called on others to repent because the "kingdom of heaven" is at hand. In other words, the King is on His way.

**"Kingdom of Heaven"** — *other gospel writers use 'kingdom of God' which carries the same meaning; speaks of the rule and reign of God*

The nearness of God's kingdom points us to two realities:

- salvation is here
- judgment is near

There was a real sense of urgency in John's message. In Matthew's account, the word "repent" is used as a verb, a word that denotes action. It is in the present tense, active, imperative, and communicates urgency. It means that there was no time for hesitation or delay. It is a reminder to us of how we must always preach the gospel with a sense of urgency.

We're not doing anyone a favor when we minimize the call to repentance in the gospel message. True saving faith is repentant by nature. It is coming to God on His terms rather than our own. There can be no salvation apart from repentance. Jesus said:

**Luke 13:3— "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish."**

A faulty understanding of repentance can lead to a false assumption of salvation. We need to keep this in mind in a day where grace has been cheapened by those who hold forth a gospel without repentance. The irony is that a gospel of no repentance is no gospel at all. You can't be saved and still hold on to your sin at the same time. That's why the first word of the gospel is 'repent.'

John's message was a message of repentance by which he called on people to surrender their lives and turn to God, to have a change of heart, and to live a completely different life. It is a matter of lordship.

Listen to what Matthew said about John's ministry:

**Matthew 3:5-6—“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.”**

As people came to hear John preach, they would confess their sin and need for God's mercy and they would then demonstrate their repentance through being baptized.

This is where John got his name—John the Baptist. Literally, it means he was known as “John the Baptizer.”

**“Baptize”** — *word means to immerse or plunge*

Baptism wasn't really anything new in Jewish life, for the Jews baptized Gentile converts to Judaism who were ceremonially washed in water as they became adopted children of the covenant. John was baptizing Jews, which was unheard of, and his baptism required them to admit that they had forsaken their covenant with God and to approach Him as if for the very first time. And so by submitting to John's baptism, they were admitting that they were no better than Gentiles and needed a fresh start with God. Passing through the water symbolized both the cleansing away of sin as well as salvation from judgment. It called to mind Israel's salvation from Egypt and their passing through the waters of the Red Sea on their way into the land that God had promised. It is significant that John is baptizing people in the Jordan. As God brought the Israelites into blessing, it

involved crossing the Jordan. It was a symbol of how they had passed from a wilderness of disobedience into the Promised Land of faith.

So you have crowds of people who are coming to John in order to be baptized. His baptism is different than merely a ceremony. It was a baptism of repentance. And that helps to explain his fiery tone. (I mean he's not exactly Joel Osteen.) Notice in verse 7 at just how confrontational his message really is:

*"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

He's telling his generation to stop hiding behind the cloak of religion. He's saying, "Don't fool yourself into believing that just because you're a Jew and have been through the ritual that you're ok." He's confronting surface level religion.

Instead of being being concerned with things strictly at the surface, true repentance involves a change of heart. That is why he says 'the axe is laid to the root of the tree.' John says, "Don't rely on your pedigree! Don't think that just because you have Abraham, all is well." He is warning them against relying upon something, or retreating into something other than God's grace.

What do you rely on for salvation? What do you retreat into as the basis for a relationship with God?

- "I'm a good person!" (morality)

- “I’m a member of the church!” (religion)
- “I’m a pro-life republican!” (politics)

None of these are a sufficient refuge!

The only legitimate basis we have is the grace of God. In that sense, John shows us that there are two ways to be separated from God. One is by outright defiance of His law—the second is thinking you’re good enough to keep it.

*(illus. of Prodigal Son & Elder Brother in Luke 15)*

Look at how the people respond to John’s message in verse 10: “If we can’t rely upon our Jewishness to save us, then what do we do?” John says, “Repent!”

- The crowds ask, “What shall we do?” He said, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none.”
- The tax collectors ask, “What shall we do?” He said, “Collect no more than you are authorized to.”
- The soldiers ask, “What shall we do?” He said, “Don’t extort money from others and be content with your wages.”

The point is that repentance shows up in a life that has been changed. It is always visible and produces fruit. The fruit of repentance is unselfishness, honesty, or even gentleness. God gets to the root of our lives and is not impressed with any religious profession that does not truly produce fruit. Fruit is a matter of the root!

John called upon people to be baptized as a symbol of their repentance and faith, all while describing the outward evidence of a heart that has been transformed. As people heard John preach, they would be convicted of their sin,

confess their sin, and publicly be baptized by him which indicated their turning from sin.

**John MacArthur** — *“That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God’s chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation. It is that of which the baptism was a public witness...”*

Thus, baptism was the public confession of their personal repentance. From that point forward, they were identified not by their race, not by their culture, not by their religious pedigree, but by their repentance.

Notice what he says in verses 16-17:

*“I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

John’s baptism is merely symbolic of something that is much greater. When Christ comes, those who repent and come to Him in faith, He will baptize them in the Holy Spirit.

John’s baptism looked forward to the coming of the Savior, while baptism now looks back to His finished work.

When Paul came to Ephesus, Acts 19 says that he found a group of disciples who had been baptized by John. As he shared the gospel, he explained:

**Acts 19:4—“And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the One who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’”**

Now, baptism is an outward act of obedience whereby a believer publicly confesses his or her faith in Christ. It is a symbol their union with Him. It is a picture of His death, burial, and resurrection. When a sinner repents of sin and comes to faith in Jesus Christ, he or she is to be baptized as a public confession of their newfound faith in Him. It is a beautiful picture of the gospel. We are buried with Him in baptism, and raised to walk in the newness of life. Death to life! (What about you?)

### Third, John's message was **controversial**

The message that John preached was powerful, bold, and convicting, for he confronted people with their need of repentance and faith in the Savior to come. It should be understood that such a message is welcome to those who truly desire God, but it is unwelcome to those who love their sin. Look at how Herod responds to John's message in verses 19-20:

*"But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison." (see Matt. 14:1-12)*

John had openly rebuked Herod for committing adultery with his brother's wife, and Herod didn't take kindly to it.

Look at where John ends up. Not in a megachurch, not on TBN, not the head of his own savvy marketing group on how to be an effective leader. John's preaching lands him in jail.

Have you noticed how truth never is in step with the times?

There was a sense of urgency in John's message. No wonder he was strange. There was no time to waste! If we distill his message down to just one word, the word is this—“Repent! Believe the good news!”

It means that as people heard him preach, they became convicted of their sins and convinced of the truth, and they publicly acknowledged this through being baptized. Their baptism in water indicated their turning from sin. Such an act symbolized before the watching world that they realized their heritage could not save them. Their special privilege as Israelites could not save them. They had to repent, forsake their sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation.

John and Charles Wesley were two of nineteen children born to Samuel and Susannah Wesley. Samuel was an Anglican clergyman, while Susannah, ever the model Christian, was very influential in both the spiritual and academic life of her children.

Although they were different in temperament, John and Charles pursued similar academic and religious interests. Both entered Christ Church, one of Oxford's largest colleges; John began in 1720 and Charles in 1726.

Charles's first year at Oxford was uneventful, but by his second year he settled down to a more serious life. He and a number of friends formed a “Holy Club.” They covenanted with each other to live disciplined Christian lives given to serious study of the Bible, prayer, fasting, and good works. Charles was the first one of the group to be labeled a “Methodist” by fellow students, but his title became a badge of honor. John Wesley joined the club after an absence from Oxford to help his ailing father in the parish ministry, and he eventually became its leader.

In 1735, John Wesley sailed to Georgia, but even in this missionary service, doubts about his experience of salvation surfaced. John could not find assurance that he was indeed the child of God by grace. He returned to England believing his life and ministry was a failure. Wesley wrote of his experience in Georgia, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?"

On May 24, 1783, he had an experience that changed everything. He described it in his journal:

*"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

Through repentant faith, the religious John Wesley met Jesus Christ and his life was truly changed.

### **3. The MESSIAH that John introduced (3:21-38)**

#### Application:

What can we say about the life of John the Baptist? His life pointed other people to Jesus. His message was repent and be ready for Jesus. His ministry influenced the lives of multiplied thousands who turned from sin to God. He was great in God's eyes because he didn't seek to be great in people's eyes. He was simply faithful to proclaim God's Word and point others to faith in Christ. What about me? Ask yourself:

- *Have I genuinely ‘repented’ from sin and turned to Christ in faith and have I followed Him in baptism?*

The Bible says that you and I are not only sinners by choice; we are sinners by birth. In fact, because we are sinners by birth, we are sinners by choice. ‘Sins’ are the fruit; sin is the root. (illus. of a worm in an apple)

To be in Christ is to be saved from sin. Just as you were born a physical descendant of Adam, you have to be born again as a spiritual descendant of Christ. Only those who repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus are saved. Through baptism, believers profess faith in Jesus.

- *Is my life different because of my walk with God?*

Since Christ gets to the root of the problem—*my heart*—a transformed life will be different. The fruit of repentance will be visible.

- *Do I live my life now to point others to Jesus?*

Of all those born of women, Jesus said that none is greater than John. *But the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.* What does that mean?

John was greater than all the prophets who came before him because he saw with his own eyes what they wrote about. But all believers after the cross are greater still, because we participate in a full understanding of something John foresaw only in shadow—the full redemptive work of Christ.