

**SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew**

**SERMON: *Messiah's Strange Advance Team***

**SCRIPTURE: Matthew 3:1-12**

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A few years ago there was an hour-long expose of faith healer and televangelist Benny Hinn on Dateline NBC. I personally don't trust network investigators much further than I can throw them, but even after adjusting for the media's obvious bias against Christians in general and televangelists in particular, I am still amazed at the gullibility of vast crowds of people who come to watch a flamboyant entertainer like Benny Hinn, accept his claim that he is a prophet from God, ignore his doctrinal heresies, and pour over \$100 million into his organization's coffers every year. It seems to me that his new \$3.5 million dollar home with its ten car garage, his collection of Mercedes and other sports cars, his designer suits, and his \$1,000-a-night hotel suites (all paid for by his ministry), ought to raise at least some tiny red flags in the minds of his followers, even if his false teaching escapes their notice.

What a stark contrast he presents to the main character in our Scripture text today, John the Baptist (or as the Greek literally reads, John the Baptizer). The Bible presents him as not only a true prophet of God but also as the Way Preparer for Jesus, who is about to begin his public ministry. Please listen to God's Word as found in Matthew 3:1-12:

*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:*

*"A voice of one calling in the desert,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"*

*John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "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.*

*"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

Whenever a celebrity makes an appearance—whether it be a politician, a famous musician, a

Hollywood star, or a televangelist—there is almost always an advance team that arrives first to rent the venue, hire the production people, arrange for hotels, limousines, and security, ramp up the publicity, and accomplish everything else needed to make the visit a success. The more important the person, the more extensive the advance team. This was true even in the first century, especially when the celebrity was a king. John MacArthur writes,

*In ancient times it was common for a herald to precede the arrival of the monarch, to announce his coming and to prepare for his safe and proper travel. With a coterie of servants, the herald would make sure that the roadway was as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. As the group traveled along and worked, the herald would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered. His twofold duty was to proclaim and to prepare.<sup>1</sup>*

When God was ready to present His great King, Jesus Christ, to His people, He too sent an advance team to proclaim and prepare for His arrival, but it was a strange team—just one person, and a weird one at that.

By the way, have you ever wondered why we hear so little about Jesus' life between His infancy and His ministry? Why this 30-year gap between the last verse of Matthew 2 and the first verse of Matthew 3? Why doesn't the Bible tell us more about Jesus' early life, other than the brief account of him being in the Temple at age 12? Wouldn't it be helpful to young children to know how He played with His friends? Wouldn't it be helpful for teenagers to know how He handled the pressures of hormones, schoolwork, and relationships with the opposite sex? Wouldn't it be helpful for businessmen to see how He handled unhappy customers in his carpentry business?

Sure, we'd all like to know those things, but for some reason God didn't choose to share them with us. His first thirty years are summarized in just one simple sentence: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). The entire focus of the Gospel writers (following the birth narratives) is on His 3 ½ years of ministry, which culminated in His death and resurrection.

Interestingly Matthew is also silent about John the Baptizer's childhood and early life, though we learn from Luke that he was Jesus' cousin, older by six months, conceived when his childless parents were already old, and filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born. The first 30 years of John's life are also summarized in one sentence in Luke 1:80: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."

It had been over 400 years since a prophet of God had spoken to Israel. But the deafening silence of Heaven is about to be broken: "In those days John the Baptist came. . . ." This morning I want to focus on the character of John the Baptist and tell you why I think he would probably not be successful as a Christian leader today, but also why he *was* successful in God's eyes. My goal is to help all of us think through the basic qualities and characteristics that make any person a spiritual success—leader or follower. While much of our Christian culture today is pursuing the shallow, the flashy, and the temporary, God wants us to go for the deep, the profound, and the

permanent. That's what John did. He cared nothing about the conventions of his day. Working the crowd was not in his repertoire. He went straight for the spiritual jugular.

At the same time I do not want to suggest that John the Baptist would have made an ideal pastor for a suburban church like ours (or any church, for that matter!). He was a prophet, and prophets rarely make good pastors. But at the same time there are some important things pastors can learn from him; so can everyone else.

### **Why John the Baptizer would probably not be successful as a Christian leader today:**

**1. He targeted the rural areas instead of the population centers.**<sup>ii</sup> John was in the desert when the word of God came to him, and he continued to preach in the Desert of Judea, the area from Massada to Jericho. If you've been to Israel you know that this is extremely desolate country. This is where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, and if you've seen pictures of those caves, you know why the area is called "the wilderness." On our recent trip to Israel we spend quite a lot of time in the Arabah, the Wilderness of Paran, and the Wilderness of Zin. These areas are unbelievably desolate and barren. It's where the Children of Israel spent nearly 40 years, waiting for the privilege of entering the Promised Land. It's where John the Baptist had his headquarters. Verse 5 indicates that the people had to "go out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region" in order to hear John. Wouldn't he have reached more people if he had gone to Herod's temple in Jerusalem to preach?

Church growth experts today are urging churches to target Generations X and Y in the cities and suburbs. Many renowned missiologists (a fancy name for experts in global outreach) are urging the church to pour its resources into reaching the great cities of the world. "Go where the results are greatest," is a slogan one hears a lot today. One even hears contempt expressed for the effort and expense that Wycliffe Bible Translators expends to make the Bible available to small, isolated language groups of only a few thousand people.

I agree that targeting the great cities makes sense (in fact, it's essentially what the Apostle Paul did), but I don't think it's an exclusive biblical mandate. There is also an emphasis in the NT on the Gospel being shared in out-of-the-way places, where people are very resistant to the truth and where persecution is inevitable.

The biblical principle found in the Great Commission is "Go and make disciples of *all* nations." God will lead different people to different locations. In 1955 five young men took the Gospel to a stone-age tribe in Ecuador. They were murdered before a single Auca Indian was converted to faith in Christ. Eventually, however, through the faithful ministry of their widows and other missionaries, many Aucas became Christians. But does the sacrifice of five lives for a few hundred Indians make sense when they could have spent a whole life-time winning tens of thousands in one of the world's great cities? Yes, it makes sense *if* that's where God called them.

God led John to preach in the desert.

**2. His lifestyle was definitely out of the mainstream.** We learn this from verse 4: "John's

clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." This is not only unusual dress and diet in our day; it was unusual in *that* day. That's why Matthew goes out of his way to mention it. I remember being told in seminary that pastors should be inconspicuous in their lifestyles. If they live above the average of their congregation they will create envy. If they live below the average, they create guilt. John couldn't care less about such niceties. In fact, I think he may have lived like a desert rat in order to serve as a symbol of the spiritual desert that Israel had become. His lifestyle was itself a rebuke to the self-satisfied and self-indulgent religious leaders of Israel.

**3. He was intolerant and unconcerned about "political correctness."** Look at verse 7: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned *you* to flee from the coming wrath. '" Now I can understand why John might have preached that way to desert folks known for their wild, lawless ways, but these are muckety-mucks from Jerusalem who have come out of curiosity to hear him preach! Wouldn't it be smart to tone things down a bit, soften the sin thing, and try to get some of these guys on his Board of Reference? This doesn't seem like any way for a Christian leader to win friends, influence people, and get a good pay raise.

Frankly, in many seminaries today, instead of taking Greek and Hebrew, future pastors take all kinds of courses on how to get along with difficult people, how to run an effective Board meeting, and how to build consensus. Don't get me wrong. All of these are fine skills to have. After all, if you make your parishioners mad, they won't give. And if they don't give, you won't eat. But John didn't have to worry about that. There are always plenty of locusts in the desert, and wild honey is free! If the religious and political leaders are acting like snakes, he's going to call them snakes!

I think many of us are clueless about how deeply political correctness has affected our universities, our culture, even our churches to the point that many pastors are afraid to say anything controversial. Calvin Miller, one of the fine evangelical pastors of our day, wrote an article entitled, "*The Politically Correct Pulpit*," in *Leadership* magazine a few years ago (and things have gotten a lot worse since he wrote it). He complained,

*“. . . the process of preaching is growing more and more nerve-racking. Political correctness is . . . as broad as all the ethnic, economic, and academic sub-groups that compose our congregations. . .*

*In my former church, virtually every time I preached on a mildly controversial topic, someone walked out in disagreement. If I preached my pro-life convictions, at least one pro-choice person would leave. If I mentioned (as I once did) that not every person should home school, a home schooler walked out. If I mentioned the need for parental involvement in the public school system, a public school teacher would leave (thinking I had slurred his or her profession).*

*Our television (ministry's) editor once deleted a sermon illustration in which I described a "fat service-station attendant in a Co-op ball cap." The editor informed me I should have said, "overweight attendant" and should not have mentioned the Co-op ball cap at all, since there were many "agri-career persons" in our viewing area.*

*I once illustrated a sermon by saying that Juan Valdez with one little burro could not personally pick enough Columbian coffee, one bean at a time, for the entire Western world. “Think of the coffee pots in Chicago alone,” I said. “His burro would be frazzled and neurotic.” . . . One member became irate because she had personally seen the poor of South America picking beans one at a time. “You are sociologically insensitive!” she said.<sup>iii</sup>*

Well, John was as sociologically insensitive as he could be. He chided the Pharisees and Sadducees for thinking that their Jewishness could save them: “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” (Matt. 3:9). Physical and racial pedigrees are worthless in the kingdom of God—only those who humble themselves and receive Jesus as Messiah and Savior will be adopted into God’s family.

Is it possible that someone here this morning is thinking to himself or herself, “I’ve got it made in the shade; I’m a Free Church member, I tithe my income, and I sing in the choir.” Friends, a relationship with God is not achieved through those things but only through giving our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ.

**4. He focused his preaching on sin, judgment, and the need for repentance.** Starting in verse 8 John challenges the religious leaders, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance . . . 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.” And verse 12 adds, “His (i.e. Messiah’s) winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Not many growing churches today are characterized by that kind of preaching. Some Christian leaders intentionally avoid the subject of sin and its consequences. I’m reminded of a book written by one well-known pastor and mailed to every pastor in the United States about fifteen years ago. It essentially said that the pastor’s message must be positive and encouraging, and sin should never be the focus of our preaching. What do you think John would have said to him? But, then, what did John know? He didn’t have a multi-staff church or book sales in the millions. I guess it depends on how you measure success.<sup>iv</sup>

**5. He failed to promote himself when he had the chance.** Luke tells us, “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.” (Luke 3:15). Now John knew he wasn’t the Messiah, but if he was smart he could have gotten a little mileage out of this case of mistaken identity. He could at least have said, “No, I’m not the Messiah, but I know who he is, and if you stay with me I’ll get you a ringside seat. I’m pretty tight with him. In fact, I’m his cousin, his *older* cousin.”

And then if you’ll look ahead at Mathew 3:13, 14, you find an even more amazing example of John’s lack of self-promotion: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to

me?” Can you imagine how valuable it would be on your resume to be able to claim, “I baptized Jesus.” Can you imagine any televangelist turning that one down?

Frankly, self-promotion is almost the norm in the Christian ministry today. Everybody and his brother is sporting a doctor’s degree, whether earned or not. Seminars are proliferating, with successful pastors eager to tell all the rest of us how they grew a mega-church from nothing to thousands in five years. Contrast that to what John said when the people wondered if he might be the Christ: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry” (Matt. 3:11). That’s not a very effective way to market oneself.

**6. He risked confronting the rich and powerful.** In Luke 3:19 we read, “But when John rebuked Herod the Tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.” There is a lot of uneasiness in the evangelical church whenever a pastor begins to address political issues. Even issues that are primarily moral issues and only secondarily political issues—like abortion, euthanasia, cloning, homosexuality, and scandals in Washington and in the corporate world—are too hot to handle for many pastors, for fear that people will criticize them for stepping out of their assigned area of expertise.

Well, John would have none of that. He rebuked the top man in government for adultery, with the result that he got himself thrown into prison. And from what we know of John, I doubt if he lost any sleep over it. After all, the board and room in prison was no worse than he was used to in the desert.

I have shared with you six reasons why I believe John would probably not be successful in the church today. And I think if you’re honest, you would have to admit that some of these characteristics might even make him unwelcome by many of us here at First Free. But a far more important consideration is this: what did *God* think of the Way Preparer, the one-man advance team for His coming King? Well, listen to Jesus’ own evaluation of John, as found in Matthew 11:11: “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women (that includes most of us) there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”

**Why John was successful as a Christian leader in *God’s* eyes.**

**1. He was available when God called him.** After Luke tells us, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert,” the very next words are, “he went.” When God spoke, John acted. What does that say to you and me? When God tells us to do something, do we take that as an obligation or an option? Are we even at a point where we know when God is speaking to us? The only way to be sure is to be in regular communication with Him—through reading His Word and talking to Him in prayer. Do some of us need to make some major improvements during this coming year in our communication with God?

**2. His ultimate goal was to help lost people find forgiveness.** Look at John’s message, as

recorded in Matthew 3:2: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Luke adds, “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). The result is that “confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (Matt. 3:6). John wasn’t out to put a damper on people’s fun. He just knew that forgiveness is the most basic need of the human heart and that repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness.

**3. He was absolutely honest and impossible to intimidate.** John told it like it was. One couldn’t intimidate him because he wasn’t beholden to anyone. He was unconcerned about salary, perks, popularity, or even his own life. Refreshing, you say. Yes, but would you tolerate a pastor like John? Possibly—so long as he focused on the sins of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the tax collectors. But what if he started talking about the sins of salesmen and accountants and housewives and students? What if he zeroed in on your secret sin?

**4. He was humble, accepting his role as Way Preparer for Messiah.** John knew who he was and who he wasn’t. There are an awful lot of people today who struggle with their identity. They want to be someone they’re not, and they spend so much emotional energy on that futile quest, they end up wasting the potential they *do* have. But John was perfectly secure in his calling and therefore he could humble himself before God and be who God appointed him to be.

**Conclusion:** As we conclude this morning, what principal application would God have us take away?<sup>v</sup> There are probably a number we could consider, but I would like to ask us to focus on the fact that God is more interested in our availability than our ability, in our character than our charisma, in our commitment than our conformity.

I think there are many Christians who fail to live up to their potential because they feel they are so different or so inadequate that they just can’t accomplish anything significant for God. John the Baptizer’s story tells me that God can use anyone—even the person who is weird by worldly standards, or the one who is a non-conformist by nature. Some non-conformists, of course, are really egotists trying to make a name for themselves by their bizarre behavior or dress. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the person who is different because he or she is just different. If God has made you in such a way that you stand out from all the cookie-cutter personalities around you, celebrate that uniqueness and make your self available for that unique ministry God has created just for you.

And one final thought—let’s not forget the principal message of this strange Advance Team of one: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). John’s obsession was to point people to Jesus. May that be ours as well.

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i. John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 30.

ii. If I had time, I would add a seventh point; in fact I would begin with this one: “He started his ministry at an inopportune time.” In the parallel passage in Luke we learn considerable detail about the political and religious scenery that serves as a backdrop for John’s ministry.

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. (Luke 3:1,2)*

I think of the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” That pretty well fits here. It is the best of times because John is about to introduce the Messiah, and Jesus is about to begin His great redemptive work. It is the worst of times, because these political and religious leaders Luke mentions all represent moral degeneration, political manipulation, foreign domination, and religious apostasy. I wonder how many church consultants might have told John, “The time is not ripe to start a new movement. Wait until there’s a change in the political atmosphere, or at least wait until there’s a new high priest. The few righteous souls are enduring enough persecution already; don’t stir the pot.”

Sometimes I think we spend more energy looking for the opportune time to launch ministries, plant churches, join a small group, begin to serve, or even share our faith than we do seeking God’s will in these matters. Time, you know, is like the papaya; it has a trick of going rotten before it is ripe. When God reveals His will, that’s all we need to know—it’s time to act whether the time seems opportune or not. The Word of God came to John, says Luke, and the next words are “he went.”

iii. Calvin Miller, “The Politically Correct Pulpit,” *Leadership*, Summer Quarter, 1992, pp. 68ff

iv. I quote again from Calvin Miller:

*“Sin is an omni-cultural problem. . . . We cannot respond to it by simply reclassifying it. It’s one thing to rename handicaps “physical challenges,” but to rename sin as “bad cultural conformity” or “ethical dysfunction” strikes at the heart of redemption theology.*

*So many things we used to regard as clear-cut sin seem to have been assigned to new categories. As we rename the sinful aspects of our humanity, however, we also tend to dismiss them and the seriousness of their consequences.”*

v. It’s easy to extrapolate from a story more than was intended. I don’t think the Holy Spirit is necessarily presenting John the Baptizer as the ideal Christian minister in all respects. Nor do I think God is saying that we should all pattern our lifestyles after his—by moving to Death Valley and eating insects.

But at the same time, I believe that much of the anemia we see in the church today is due to the fact that we have stifled true prophetic voices and substituted phony prophets like Benny Hinn, or worse. We are fascinated by the emotion and the excitement and the promises of health and wealth. We want to see God do signs and wonders, but we don’t want Him upsetting our lifestyles, making unreasonable demands on our priorities, or calling us to radical service.