

MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD

PASTOR NATHAN ELMS

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S LIFE LESSON ONE: IT'S OKAY TO BE DIFFERENT.

From Luke's gospel, it's clear that John was set aside for a divine purpose. He was meant to be different.

From the extraordinary events surrounding his conception and birth, we fast forward to the grown man, prowling the desert and howling at the injustice of his time. Because there were reasons to howl.

We can't overestimate the feelings of the Jewish people at the time and their expectation of this deliverer from Roman oppression. It inspired all sorts of sects and religious movements. Among the communities living in isolation close to where John was preaching and teaching were the Essenes. They were a strict religious community closed off from the outside world who through the pursuit of holiness sought to bring about their salvation.

John was different. He had no interest in retreating, his message was very much on the offensive while being disarmingly simple;

'and so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4).

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S LIFE LESSON TWO: CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO.

What attracted people to John was the fact he wasn't 'business as usual' and he was popular for it.

The temple authorities even got to hear of him, *Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was' (John 1:19). What's more Jewish historian Josephus, mentions John a number of times in his work, Antiquities, proving again he was well known in Israel.*

The big issue was that the religious, temple establishment faced opposition from more devoted followers of Jewish law.

They felt that everyday religious life was not hastening the rule of God and the overthrow of their oppressors. John's alternative message attracted those disaffected with religion as it was, those who were looking for something more.

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S LIFE LESSON THREE: BE GENUINE IN HUMILITY.

John had a following, he had disciples, he had a reputation.

The very things that would make people proud but John's perspective was never on earthly glory, it was always pointing to the greater glory of God.

This was a time when many people had it in their heads to lead rebellions, start movements and agitate against Rome. Reputations could be made or broken according to anyone's claim to carry divine favour.

But John clearly spent more time listening to God. Perhaps that's why he felt more at home in the desert. He was away from the distractions of towns and cities. There he could discern what God wanted through him for his people, Israel.

Being this close to God can only build in his character a deep sense of humility. He lived it out right down to his lifestyle, his clothes and his food! Living truthfully and in holiness expressed itself in humility.

It was simply, Repent. This is no mere academic change of mind, nor mere regret or remorse. John the Baptist spoke of repentance as a radical turning from sin that inevitably became manifest in the fruit of righteousness. The symbolism of John's baptism likely had its roots in OT purification rituals (Leviticus 15:13). Baptism had also long been administered to Gentile proselytes coming into Judaism. The baptism of John thus powerfully and dramatically symbolized repentance. Jews accepting John's baptism were admitting they had been as Gentiles and needed to become the people of God genuinely, inwardly (an amazing admission, given their hatred of Gentiles).

For us today, our faith needs to challenge the established form of religious expression. All traditions can get stale and lose its heart. But people today crave an authentic spirituality as much as they did two thousand years ago. Genuine seekers will go out into their own 'deserts', away from the 'business as usual', to find a more genuine way of living for God.

This is as much a challenge to our own religious comfort and conformity as it was in his own time.

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S LIFE LESSON FOUR: LEAD PEOPLE TO CHRIST.

John's life had a single purpose: to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah.

'I am the voice of the one calling in the wilderness, "make straight the way of the Lord."' (John 1:23).



John was a great prophet of God. You could say he was the last prophet of the Old Testament as he bridges the two covenants leading to Jesus. Yet he remained consistent in his calling, to prepare for the coming of someone greater.

However great or small we think our calling and ministry may be, it's irrelevant unless it's true purpose is to lead people to Christ. When human ambition gets in the way of fulfilling God's purposes we diminish our true identity in Christ. John's life is a challenge to holiness and living truthfully.

'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.' Mark 1:7.

How do we sum up the message of John: TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY

When we do, we are ready for Christ to be born in our hearts.