

Let's Get it Straight

"...we should admit it: John was weird. Any man who preached like this, lived in the desert, wore funny clothes and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey was just plain weird. Praise God that Jesus didn't have a "slick" advance man with a thousand dollar suit and a two-hundred dollar haircut; praise God that He uses weird people." – David Guzik

But can you identify with John? Do you WANT to identify with John?? Admittedly, my own lack of style in fashion and a diabetic diet (are grasshoppers high in carbs?) lead me to identify a little bit with him in the 'weird' category. But we should all identify with his mission. You see, John understood that he was preparing the way before his Lord. He understood his need to point others to Him. And he understood his need to decrease as Jesus increased.

This notion of preparing the way is fascinating! That's because no one prepares the way for someone they don't absolutely expect to come. John knew the first coming of the Messiah was at hand. He said, *"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worth to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy spirit and fire."* (Mat 3:11) Now, he may have suspected that it was Jesus of whom he spoke for when Christ came to be baptized, John told Him, *"I need to be baptized by You..."* (Mat 3:14) but he testified that he only knew for sure when he later saw the heavens

opened and the Holy Spirit descending upon Christ. He said, *"I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."* (John 1:33-35)

In like manner, we have been given a sign preceding the second coming of the Messiah (recall, this is not the same thing as the rapture but follows it) – the budding of the "fig tree". (See Mat 24:32-34) After describing in detail the events of the last days and tribulation period, Jesus told his disciples, *"Now learn this parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near – at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."* Now the fig tree has been a type and 'figure' of the nation of Israel in scripture and many if not most conservative Bible scholars agree that the rebirth of the nation Israel in 1948 is clearly its re-budding so to speak after a long dormancy. What is not clear is how long a generation is from a prophetic stand-point.

One well known author proposed in the 1970's that it was possibly 40 years - most likely based upon the fact that it took 40 years for the older generation in the wilderness to pass away before the children of Israel could take the promised land. If the 40 years began in 1948 (and that's not an insignificant 'if') then the conclusion of the period would have been in 1988 – oops. Now, that suggestion was certainly not made to lead anyone astray but in honest

expectation. It was also not made as a prediction though some took it as such.

Personally, I'm inclined to believe that the prophetic number for a generation is 70 years based upon Isa 23:15, Psa 90:10 and the first mention of 70 years in Gen 5:12 separating two generations. I cannot be dogmatic on that however. Other Bible teachers are leaning toward other numbers or are simply unsure. Whatever the case, we have been given a sign as well (see 1 Thes 5:1-9) and should be committed to preparing the way before our Lord. That's because, the lack of this expectation can lead to a life-style unworthy of our Savior. Jesus said, *"But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Mat 24:48-51)

So how do we prepare the way? All four gospels record the answer (Mat 3:3, Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4,5, Jn 1:23) – straightness. In both the Greek and Hebrew, it means making a way that is straight, true, upright and implies a way that is pleasing. John did this by preaching an uncompromising message of repentance. His behavior may have seemed strange but his message was plain and undiluted. What exactly did he say?

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mat 3:2) He did not toy around with a 'social gospel' or play to the 'seeker' crowd with an entertaining friendly message. The time was at hand. Many today claim that we are too sophisticated for this kind of message – that it is simply a 'turn-off' and will never win souls to the

kingdom. They say we need a 'kinder, gentler' gospel to borrow a contemporary phrase. Hey, the gospel is kind and gentle to the repentant but it is tough on the rebellious and self-satisfied.

To the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism John said, *"Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

I'll suggest that some teachers are not giving people 'all the facts' such as their absolute need to forsake sin and humble themselves before God. It may be because they are more afraid of the reactions of their audience than they are of their Lord. The religious leaders of John's time tied their righteous standing before God to their association with Abraham. This led to the assumption that the fruit of their lives was immaterial – a delusion John clearly dashed to pieces. Some folks today are using their 'association' with Jesus in the same way. Now, those of you who have followed our writings know that we who are saved are unshakably covered in grace by the atoning blood of Christ. That's not the issue – bearing fruit in keeping with that salvation is the issue. That's the straightness our King is looking for – the straight path individually within your heart and corporately within the church.

"A large part of the church at the present day have the same spirit, and every effort to open the eyes of the

church, and to make Christians see that they live so low, so worldly, so much like hypocrites, that it is impossible the work of the Lord should go on, only excites ill will and occasions reproach. "O," they say, "what a bad spirit he shows, so censorious, and so unkind, surely that is any thing but the meek, and kind, and loving spirit of the Son of God." They forget how Jesus Christ poured out his anathemas, enough to make the hills of Judea shake, against those that had the reputation of being the most pious people in that day. Just as if Jesus Christ never said any thing severe to any body, but just fawned over them, and soothed them into his kingdom. Who does not know that it was the hypocritical spirit exhibited by professors of religion, that roused his soul and moved his indignation, and called forth his burning torrents of denunciation. He was always complaining of the very people who were set up as patterns of piety, and called them hypocrites, and thundered over their heads the terrible words, 'HOW CAN YE ESCAPE THE DAMNATION OF HELL!'" – Charles Finney

Whoa! Finney didn't pull any punches, did he? He would add, "And let me say to the impenitent sinners present--You see what it is to be a Christian. It is to be governed by the authority of God in all things, and not by public sentiment, to live not by hopes and fears, but by supreme consecration of yourself unto God. You see that if you mean to be religious, you must count the cost. I will not flatter you. I will never try to coax you to become religious, by keeping back the truth. If you mean to be Christians, you must give yourselves wholly up to Christ. You cannot float along to heaven on the

waves of public sentiment. I will not deceive you on this point."

Now, we should revel in the awesomeness of grace – the grace poured out upon us who believe by our immeasurably loving Father. But, too many of us today, including yours truly, can subtly slip into the attitude that since so-and-so has this or that going on in their life and I know they're a sincere Christian, that it must not be so bad that I'm playing with this sin or that lack of devotion.

Four preachers met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one preacher said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the same. Confession is good for the soul." In due time all agreed. One confessed he liked to gamble and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed his struggle with lust and the third one confessed to materialism. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?" Finally he answered, "It is gossiping and I can hardly wait to get out of here."

Please hear me on this, neither your pastor nor your elder nor your Christian brother are your standard. There is certainly comfort in understanding that we are all prone to human weakness. However, their fruit or the lack of it is NOT your measure or justification. Jesus is our standard – He is the one we are to aspire to follow.

John appreciated that. He knew the standard and reflected it when he said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the

Holy Spirit and fire." It was also evident when Christ came to him at the Jordan and he said, "'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?'" (Mat 3:15)

Do you believe He's coming? Really? If so, you'll be very much in tune with 'preparing His way'. Personally, you'll be concerned that you're pleasing to Him – like a bride preparing for her bridegroom. One of the greatest thrills in performing weddings is to see up close the bridegroom's amazement as his bride approaches. Do you want to see that look on Christ's face? For the bride, to hear her bridegroom actually utter the words, "I do" makes her heart leap. Do you realize that someday soon He will say that to you? Wow! You know, by dieing on the cross, he said exactly that – "I do!" And in heaven, His "I do!" will fill eternity with bliss. The scripture says, "And every man that hath this hope in him (of Christ's appearance) purifies himself, even as He is pure." (1Jn 3:3) Even as "a friend" of the Bridegroom, John rejoiced to hear His voice. "He that has the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled." (Jn 3:29)

As a part of the larger body of Christ, 'straightness' means you'll 'behave as you believe', doing what you know to be pleasing to Him – as a servant. With all your heart, you'll live in a way that reflects a compelling desire to hear, "Well, done!" from Him. "Some think that "readiness" for Jesus' return is a rather mystical thing; it really isn't - it is a matter of being about our business for the Lord ... we must ask ourselves: what have we done with our knowledge? Our time? Our money? Our abilities? The sins of omission

often seem to be more damning than the sins of commission." – David Guzik

Finally, not only is preparing the way a matter of personal repentance but of accepting others' repentance as well. "You see, so many have "unpardonable sins" for others. This is usually the result of a person's inability to deal with their own guilt. They develop a certain attitude toward people who have committed "that" sin. Maybe it's adultery, or divorce, or homosexuality. And even though they repent, they are never quite good enough. That sin is always kept over their heads. Perhaps, in their opinion, it's all right for a non-Christian to have fallen; but if a Christian falls, then it's all over. "How could a Christian have done that?" "How could a Christian have fallen into adultery?" "How could a Christian have ever been involved in a divorce?" "How could a Christian have fallen into a homosexual encounter?" Let me answer that. I don't know how. But I do know that some have and some do. And I also know that if they turn to God in sincere faith and repentance, that He forgives them. And I know something else. He restores them. That is the point of the prodigal son. He was restored. God forgives and forgets. And if he forgives, who are you to do any less? You may say, "But God hates that sin." Yes, He does. But does God hate the sinner? You may say, "Well, God may forgive them, but they'll never be the same." No, not if you have anything to say about it, they won't. Don't you see? This is the very place where God desires for us to be like Him. God forgives. Let Him. God forgives. Be like Him. – J. David Hoke

Oh dear friends in Christ, prepare the way before Him! He's coming. He's coming at last! He's even at the

door. Make straight paths for our
King!