

Series: John the Baptist #1698

Title: John 1; Matthew 3

Giving An Unpopular Message

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. We return to our biography of the Baptist, he is John the Baptist. Thus far we have been reading the Bible to discover certain strong and godly character traits in this man and while there are more than eight, I have prayerfully decided to share eight of these with you. We have covered the first six and we can remember these as follows: John the Baptist is a God sent prophet! Once the greatest man who ever lived until Jesus, John exalted Jesus by humbling himself. He tells the truth about Jesus and other people.

I'll add to this and repeat it later on after we get to these last two elements in the man. The sixth and seventh elements go together. Last time we said: John tells the *truth* about Jesus and he tells the truth about other people. Therefore, seventh, John is not popular with the Jewish religious leaders. This is what I want to talk about today and we will reference Matthew chapter 3. So if you have your Bible, open it to Matthew 3.

Now, do not get me wrong. I am aware that as John's ministry began out in the desert wilderness he was initially popular with certain Jews. For example, back in Matthew chapter 3 and verses 5 and 6 the text says, **"Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; ⁶and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins."** Absolutely, these Jews who saw within themselves their need for repentance from sin; those who understood their wretched state of unrighteousness before God – no matter how many sacrifices they made at the temple – these streamed out to John the Baptist. He was popular among true and genuine converts to the truth. *But*, when it came to the Jewish religious leaders, John was toast! As they would with Jesus, they hated and despised John!

Remember, here is a guy that's been living out in the deserts. Listen to Matthew describe his clothing and diet. Matthew chapter 3 and verse 4. **"Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey."** That's some fashion statement and meal plan! As we would predict, for a man living in the desert, John was not exactly wearing clothes worthy of your favorite fashion designer, nor was his food what you had for dinner last night or breakfast this morning. Well, maybe part of it was if you are into honey (in your tea, perhaps). Some people put honey in coffee.

It is insightful to learn that John's dress was the opposite of what the Jewish religious rulers, back in the cities, wore. The Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Priests made a big deal of their ornamental, their well decorated, clothing. That told the Jews something about them – always drawing attention to themselves. With John, his clothing too sent a message, the opposite message: this was a man totally committed to God. His outfit spoke to the humility that comes with promoting Jesus over oneself.

Theophylact, an 11th century Bible commentator said this: "Even John's appearance called men to repentance." Even his appearance called men to repentance. I like that.

There was just something about John that drew the crowds to him. The garment of camel's hair was a coarse cloth made by weaving together camel's hair. And he wore a leather belt around his waist to hold up his garment, especially when he walked or ran. Again with the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Scribes and Priests, these were often showy. Not John's. His dress was rude and crude, like Elijah's had been. 2 Kings 1, verse 8 describes Elijah, **"He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins."** Again, how much like Elijah was John.

And his sustenance came from locusts. They are insects, high in protein. The *Talmud*, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism, goes into lengthy detail about how "clean locusts" can be eaten under the Jewish Law. To this day they are eaten in the Middle East. Remove the head, legs, and wings. Enjoy them roasted, stewed, or boiled with butter. There's a dinner idea!

John combined locusts with wild honey. This was abundant where he lived, the wild bees making hives under rocks and in trees. The Bible is full of references to honey. 1 Samuel 14, verse 25, "**All the people of the land entered the forest, and there was honey on the ground.**" Psalm 81.16, a promise from God, "**But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.**"

And now when John encounters the religious elite listen to what he says to them. Not exactly endearing. Again Matthew's Gospel and this time chapter 3 and verses 7-8. "**But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance...'**"

The Pharisees and Sadducees certainly expected the Messiah to bring down God's wrath on the *Gentiles* but John boldly states that God's wrath – God's justified anger against sinners – is coming on all God's enemies. In the Greek language, "who intimated to you," or "who suggested to you" that you would escape the coming wrath?

He calls them a "brood of vipers." That's interesting! A viper is a highly poisonous desert snake. John was familiar with them. You might remember the Apostle Paul accidentally picked one of these up, mistaking it for a piece of wood, in Malta (Acts 28). That's because vipers, to the naked eye, looked like dead tree branches. And the viper reminded John of the serpent, that is Satan, from the Garden in Eden. So he is saying, "You are like snakes, vipers, serpents, the offspring of Satan – your interpretation of who God is will be venomous to the truth." Furthermore, he says they are the brood (the children) of vipers. Craig Keener has an intriguing historical nugget for us.

"Children of vipers carries the insult further...Matthew may allude to a fairly widespread ancient view that vipers were mother killers. In the fifth century BC [the ancient historian] Herodotus declared that new born Arabian vipers chewed their way out of their mother's wombs, killing their mothers in the process. Herodotus believed that they did so to avenge their fathers, who were slain by the mothers during procreation." This is a lovely image, isn't it? Hey, I just teach the text.

Keener continues, "Calling his hearers vipers may have been an insult, but calling them 'offspring of vipers' accused them of killing their own mothers, indicating the utmost moral depravity. The image of vipers fleeing the wrath may derive from serpents fleeing the stubble set on fire to ready the fields for winter sowing. [Farmers burned out the viper snakes this way.] Or a tree-serpent fleeing those who will destroy the forest (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 122-123)." End quote. An integral part of John's message is that King Jesus will bring God's judgment on *everyone* who rejects the Messiah.

As we continue to look at Matthew chapter 3, here is how verse 8 begins. This is John the Baptist's message: "**Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance...**" We talked about what repentance means last time. The Pharisees and Sadducees knew about repentance. This was a foundational doctrine in Judaism. It is all throughout the Hebrew Bible. But they did not like the way John was defining it and applying it (to them)! John is one master preacher and prophet: he tells it directly as it is, but he therefore becomes wildly *unpopular* with these corrupt, sinful leaders who thought only they knew the way to God's approval.

This is the type of preaching that gets a man in big trouble *quickly*! It also reveals something really telling of John's character, like all prophets he is going to tell it honest without any fear of the consequences, because he knows that his message of repentance is what they most need to hear in advance of the public ministry of Jesus in which Christ will tell them the *exact same thing*!

For another example of the lack of popularity for John, come with me back to John's Gospel chapter 1 and verse 19. I am reading John chapter 1 and verse 19. "**This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'**" You know what the tone is there? It's "Who are you?" In other words, who do *you* think *you* are? Disdain, distaste, and disgust for John the Baptist. Therefore, my seventh point, he is *not* popular with the Jewish leaders!

Many of us can relate to this. We are commanded to speak the truth, *in love*, to others. We are commanded to exalt Jesus before others by telling them about Him. And sometimes this gets us into a lot of trouble. We find resistance. Or outright indignation that we would dare do this. The spirit of the age is to go along with everyone just to get along. You live your life however you want, I do the same with my life, we do not criticize each other and then we'll have one big, happy church. And I say "church," because remember the context: the Baptist is speaking to religious leaders! Likewise, today we have many religious leaders and followers who need to be told to repent of their sin. The gospel confronts people in their sin and demands repentance. And this is the message John had and we have and often people do not want to hear it.

Well, next time we will see what happens to John the Baptist. A reality that very well might also happen to us. Join us then because God Is.

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