Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies In

The Gospel of Mark: People Responding to Jesus

Lesson One

John the Baptist: Preparing for Jesus

Focal Text
Mark 1:1-11

Background
Mark 1:1-15; 6:14-29; 11:27-33

Main Idea
John the Baptist proclaimed the message of preparing for Jesus’ coming by repenting of sin, seeking God’s forgiveness.

Question to Explore
In what ways do we need to prepare the way for Jesus?

Quick Read
We are called to lead people to Christ as our highest priority and privilege.

Commentary
The number of atheists and agnostics in America has doubled in the last twenty years. In addition, today we have ignostics, people who are ignorant of basic biblical truths. Fewer than half of Americans can identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible; only one third know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount; only one half can name even one of the Gospels.¹

We have apatheists, those who are apathetic about spirituality. Some 46 percent of Americans say they never wonder whether they will go to heaven; 44 percent spend no
time seeking *eternal wisdom*. And we have *exitists*—almost 60 percent of young people ages 15-29 have left active church involvement. If their children follow their example, what will happen to American Christianity? This decline is not only among mainline denominations: Southern Baptist Convention membership will fall nearly 50 percent by 2050 if current trends continue.

Clearly, God’s people need to take Christ to our culture more effectively. What does this challenge mean to you? How does God intend you and your class to communicate his love to those you know? How can you be a John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ to come to your community?

**Meet John the Baptist**

As we will see shortly, John the Baptist was the first preacher and *apostle* of the New Testament, and the critical forerunner of the Messiah. We will study his ministry and baptism of Jesus in more detail, but let’s begin by setting out the essential biblical facts concerning this fascinating figure.

We know that he was related to Jesus, possibly as cousins (Luke 1:36). His birth was announced by an angel and surrounded by divine circumstances such as Zechariah’s muteness (Luke 1:11-20). His parents set him apart as a Nazarite at the behest of the angel who announced his birth (Luke 1:15). He then grew up in the desert (Luke 1:80), perhaps close to the wilderness where he began his ministry.

John identified Jesus as the Christ (John 1:29-36), becoming the first to testify publicly to Jesus’ status as the Messiah. He baptized our Lord (Matthew 3:13-16), but later came to question whether Jesus was the Christ (Matt. 11:2-6).

John the Baptist was commonly identified with Elijah (Matt. 11:13-14); Jesus himself called him “the Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:14). Malachi predicted his coming as well: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

John the Baptist was imprisoned and ultimately beheaded by King Herod, although Herod was essentially tricked into giving his death order by his wife’s daughter (step-daughter?) because John had repeatedly spoken against Herod’s marriage to Herodias (Matt. 14:3-12). Jesus held him in high regard, saying that “among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).
Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, offers us the only extra-biblical account of John’s ministry when he described how some of the Jews believed the destruction of Herod’s army to be the result of his executing John the Baptist. He described John as calling people to live a more righteous life and mentioned his baptism ministry as well (Antiquities 18.5.2).4

John the Baptist was not only the first forerunner of the Messiah—John was also an example for all who would seek to lead people to Christ today. Let’s make his model our ministry.

**Hear the call of God (1:1-3)**

Mark may have written the earliest of our Gospels. Tradition identifies him as John Mark, the failed missionary companion of Paul (Acts 13:13), who was supported by Barnabas (Acts 15:36-39) and later affirmed by Peter (1 Peter 5:13). His Gospel has long been regarded as based on the testimony of Simon Peter and addressed to Christians in Rome. Their culture would focus much more on Jesus’ deeds than his teachings and would be more persuaded by Jesus’ miracles than by his claims to be Messiah.

So it is that Mark’s Gospel starts with the central affirmation that Romans needed to know and acknowledge: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). “Beginning” translates arche, which can also be rendered ruler. With relation to time or literature, it typically refers to commencement in history, the first thing to be recorded with others to follow. (Note that the Greek version of Genesis begins, en arche, or in the beginning.) It would be more accurate to end Mark 1:1 with a comma or colon, for Mark seems to have viewed John’s ministry as the “beginning” of the gospel.

*The gospel*

“Gospel” (euangeliou) means good news. In Greek culture the term was used for news of victory. In the Emperor Cult (the enforced worship of Caesar as divine) the first euangelion was news of the emperor’s birth, then his coming of age, and finally his accession to the throne. Ultimately, both Christ and Caesar claimed to be the euangelion.

The noun is found seven times in Mark, only four times in Matthew, and nowhere in Luke or John. Outside Mark 1:1, it appears in Mark’s Gospel only in the sayings of Jesus. It implies a messenger and proclamation, news that is to be shared with others. It comes from God and is about him, the “good news of God” (Mark 1:14). In Jesus’ ministry it was “the good news about the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14).

In time, the word came to refer to God’s offer and plan of salvation: “This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Romans 2:16). As a result, Paul could refer to “the gospel of God’s grace”
(Acts 20:24). Those who work to advance the Kingdom are thus “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

The “gospel” is the good news of God’s love in Christ. After around AD 150, the “Gospels” came to be a title for the written records of the Savior’s life and work. For the disciples, the good news implied disclosure of the messianic secret. Jesus proclaimed the gospel and is the gospel.

As a result, the good news is about “Jesus Christ,” Hebrew words that mean Yahweh saves and Messiah. Jesus’ given name was “Jesus” (Matthew 1:21, 25). It was a common name in the day (Colossians 4:11); Josephus referred to around twenty people with this name.

Jesus’ title was “Christ,” so that he was “Jesus, who is called Christ” (Matt. 1:16). In the Old Testament, Christou (from chrio, meaning to anoint) referred to those anointed with holy oil, especially the high priest (Leviticus 4:5, 16), prophets (1 Kings 19:16), and kings (1 Samuel 10:1). It refers to the anointed one, the Messiah who would liberate God’s people (Mark 15:32).

Mark identifies him as “the Son of God,” a title reserved in Roman culture for the emperor himself. By contrast, Jesus is the one and only, true, divine Son of God. This distinction and fact is the central assertion of Mark’s Gospel, the point Mark wished to persuade his readers to accept. As a result, it is present at the every beginning of his narrative.

The messenger
Our text continues: “It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’” (Mark 1:2). “It is written” (gegraptai, meaning it is recorded or observed) was used to introduce laws or legal declarations in the Roman Empire. In the Old Testament the term describes a message from God through his written word or prophet.

What follows comes from three prophetic statements. (This is the only time Mark quotes Old Testament prophecy.) “I will send my messenger ahead of you” is found in Exodus 23:20, where it describes God’s angel sent to lead the children of Israel: “I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.” It is also found in Malachi 3:1, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” (Note that in the Greek version of Exodus 23:20, the word translated “messenger” is angelon, the same word translated “messenger” in Mark 1:1.) There is no exact Old Testament equivalent for “who will prepare your way.”
The Malachi reference identifies Elijah as the one who would come as a forerunner of the Messiah (Mal. 4:5-6). As Elijah did not die (2 Kings 2:11), many Jews expected him to return before the Messiah came. Jesus identified John the Baptist as fulfilling this expectation: “If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:14).

“I am sending” translates apostello, meaning one sent with the authority of another. “Apostle” comes from this Greek word. In this sense, John was the first Christian apostle. “My messenger” translates angelon, or envoy, meaning one who is sent. “My” indicates that John came directly from God.

John the Baptist would go “ahead of you,” arriving before Jesus to prepare the way for him. He would “prepare,” (kataleuasei, meaning to make ready, to build, construct, create, furnish, equip) “your way” (hodon, or road, journey). Physically, the phrase referred to one who would prepare a road for a monarch to come. Metaphorically, it would be a person who prepared for the way of life that would be taught by the one to come.

The message
Here would be John’s message: “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Mark 1:3). This statement comes directly from Isaiah 40:3. All four Gospels use this verse to explain the coming of John the Baptist (see Matt. 3:3; Luke 1:76; John 1:23). Since Isaiah was considered the greatest writing prophet, it was customary to give him first position when describing prophecies that came from him as well as other prophets.

John would be “calling” (boontos, meaning to shout, cry out, roar). The word was used for crying out in joy (Galatians 4:27), terror (Mark 15:34), or as a command (Matt. 3:3). The tense indicates continued, repetitious action, or continuing to shout vehemently.

John would do so in the “desert” (eremo, or isolated place, wilderness, forsaken area, uninhabited region). The word refers to the southeastern part of Judea, from the Jordan River along the Dead Sea. This rocky, arid area was largely uninhabited, and is the locale made famous by the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was some twenty miles from Jerusalem.

John’s message was not confined to this area, for he “went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). John tells us that he “also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized” (John 3:23). This site would be some twenty-five miles south of the spot where people are baptized in the Jordan today.
John’s call was to “prepare” (hetoimastate, or keep in readiness, a different word from the one used in 1:2). The term was used for making ready the road on which a king would travel. In ancient times, kings would send a messenger to prepare the way for their visit to a part of their realm. They were to prepare for the “Lord” (kyriou, or owner, master, ruler). The Roman emperors took this title for themselves; John used it for Jesus.

To prepare the Lord’s way, they were to “make” (poieite, or manufacture, produce, cause to come about) “straight” (eutheias, or upright, proper, right) the path. The phrase refers to the custom of making roads level and straight for a king—removing boulders and other obstacles, cleaning the road and clearing the way. Metaphorically, it means to make the heart “right before God” (Acts 8:21).

This preparation was to be done “for him,” showing that the emphasis was on Jesus, not John. In the same way, our work is the prepare the way for Jesus to come through our words and deeds to the world.

As God called John to prepare the way for Jesus, so he calls us today to do the same. Each of us has been endowed with spiritual gifts that are to be used in this work. Our leaders are to equip us for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). There is no clergy/laity distinction in Scripture—every believer has a Kingdom assignment.

Tragically, most churches today affirm the ministry only of those who are vocational ministers. Imagine a hospital where only the CEO spoke to patients, or a city where only the mayor met the needs of citizens, or a football team where only the coach touched the ball. When every believer seeks and fulfills his or her role in preparing Jesus’ way, his gospel will be known and received with greater power and result.

What did you do last week to prepare the way for Jesus? What will you do next week?

Respond to the call of God (1:4-8)
John heard this call from God and responded to it: “And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

Going public
John the Baptist “came” (egeneto, or appeared, arose). Mark gives us none of John’s background (see Luke 1:5-25), but ushers him immediately onto the stage of his narrative. John came “baptizing” (baptizon, meaning to wash, plunge, dip, put under water, purify); the word in this context means to immerse for a religious purpose. It is clear that Jesus was immersed, as he “was coming up out of the water” (Mark 1:10). By baptizing in the Jordan River, John evoked the miraculous crossing of the people from
slavery into their Promised Land. In the same way, those who passed through these waters with John would enter the spiritual land God intended for them. As the first Joshua led their nation, so the second Joshua would lead them now.

The Jews required Gentiles to submit to proselyte baptism if they wished to convert to Judaism. However, never in recorded history was a person who was already part of the Jewish nation made to perform this act. By using this symbol, John showed the Jewish people that they were pagans in the eyes of God, in need of conversion. It was not enough to be born into Judaism—everyone must come to God in personal repentance and faith.

John was “preaching” (kerysson, meaning to proclaim, to announce, to pronounce aloud) this baptism. This is the typical word for “preaching,” making John the first preacher of the New Testament area.

Calling for repentance
John was preaching a baptism of “repentance” (metanoias, meaning to repent, to change the mind and life, to convert). Baptism was the result of their repentance, not its replacement. Those baptized by John had already repented of their sins and then made their choice public through baptism.

Metanoias is the Greek word for the Hebrew sub, meaning to turn back or to turn away from. The idea was not only that one would acknowledge a wrong but take necessary steps to get back on the right path.

Repentance is the gift of God: “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:31); “God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). At the same time, we must choose to accept this gift, for God “is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Clearly, not all come to repentance: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).

Repentance is proven not by baptism but by changed lives: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8); “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). Such repentance was for the “forgiveness” (aphesin, meaning release, pardon, cancellation) of “sins” (hamartion, or guilt, sinfulness).

To sin is to miss the mark, to refuse God’s word and will. Sin is against God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4). We could say that we commit crime against others but sin only against God. However, there is no
sin Jesus’ death cannot cleanse: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Biblical forgiveness is not excusing sin, or forgetting that it occurred, but choosing not to punish. As when a governor pardons a criminal, so God pardons us. This act is God’s decision of grace, in no sense the result of our works: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). At the same time, we must have faith to receive what grace intends to give: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Baptizing the people
In response to John’s message, “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (Mark 1:5). “Judean” translates Ioudaia, meaning to be a Jew or a Judean. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people after the Exile were called by two names: Israelite was the sacral term while Jew was the political term. Israelite was the preferred term for the people while Jew was used primarily by non-Israelites.

In pagan literature, Ioudaios might be used to describe those who follow Jewish religion, irrespective of nationality. Josephus used Ioudaios for every description of Jews after the Exile. He also used the term for proselytes to Judaism.

The term occurs rarely in the Synoptic Gospels. It is used in the national and geographical senses, but primarily in the religious sense. In the passion story and that of the Magi, Jesus is called “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2; 27:29); however, the leaders of the people mockingly called him “king of Israel” (Matt. 27:42). The “countryside” (chora, meaning land or district) was the larger area of Judea.

The people of “Jerusalem” also went out to John. Hierosolymitai means Jerusalemites. The name “Jerusalem” often served as a symbol for its inhabitants, as when people state that Washington decided . . . In Jesus’ day it was a large city, with a population exceeding 25,000. It was prosperous as a result of Herod’s building projects and was a pilgrimage site for the Jewish people as well. In Mark’s Gospel, Jerusalem was the residence of Jesus’ most bitter enemies.

They “went out to him” (exeporeueto, meaning to go out); the imperfect tense describes a steady stream of people who kept coming out to the baptism. They were “confessing” (exomologoumenoi, meaning to admit, acknowledge, agree) their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. Proselyte baptism did not necessarily occur in a river; later practice used a special bathhouse with well or spring water. The Jordan was a public area, where those confessing their sins would be seen by all.
Serving God
Our text continues: “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). John’s clothing was similar to Elijah’s “garment of hair” and leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). John’s food was basic fare harvested from the desert region. His diet and dress were vastly different from the religious elite in Jerusalem.

As was John’s proclamation: “And this was his message: ‘After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie’” (Mark 1:7). John’s message centered on the One whose coming he was sent to prepare. “After me will come” points to the coming one, the Messiah. He would be more “powerful” (ischyroteros, meaning strong, mighty) than John.

John would not be worthy to untie the “thongs” (himanta, or straps) of his “sandals” (hypodematon). It was the job of Gentile slaves in the first century to untie the sandals on their master’s feet; John was stating that he was not worthy even to be Jesus’ pagan slave. John was clear: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (1:8). In the Old Testament the Spirit came “on” individuals for a specific time and purpose; as a result of Jesus’ ministry, the Holy Spirit would come to reside in those who follow Christ (see Romans 8:9).

In all John did, he sought to magnify and serve Jesus. When Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth-century British Baptist pastor, was asked the secret of preaching, he recommended a similar commitment: “Take a text and make a bee-line for Jesus.” The pastor who baptized me kept on his pulpit the request of the Greeks to Philip: “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:21, KJV).

Human words cannot change human hearts. You and I cannot convict a single person of a single sin, or save a single soul. Only the Holy Spirit can do this work. When we magnify ourselves, our message falls short of the transformation God intends it to effect. But when we focus on Jesus in all we say and do, God uses us to advance his Kingdom.

How will your teaching ministry lead people to Christ this week?

Glorify the Son of God (1:9-11)
After John had done his work of preparation for the Messiah, “at that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9). This is the only reference to Nazareth in Mark’s Gospel, although there is an allusion to the town in Mark 6:1.
When the disciples were choosing an apostle to replace Judas, they sought one who had been with Jesus since his baptism, viewing this as the start of his public ministry (Acts 1:21-22). Our Lord did not come to be baptized because he had sin to confess, for he was sinless (Hebrews 4:15). Rather, Jesus came to identify with John’s ministry and with the sinners he had come to seek and to save (Luke 19:10).

After the death of the great Old Testament prophets centuries before, the people came to believe that God had stopped speaking to people. As a result, the baptism of Jesus re-inaugurated the return of the Holy Spirit.

What follows fulfilled the beginning of God’s eschatological kingdom according to Jewish tradition: “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1:10-11). “As” renders euthys, or immediately. In the moment that Jesus came up from the Jordan river, these miracles occurred.

First, “he saw heaven being torn open.” “Heaven” (ouranous, meaning the heavens) is the biblical abode of God. This region was “torn open” (schizomenous, meaning to split, divide), fulfilling Isaiah 64:1, where the prophet prayed for the coming of Messiah: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.” The phrase is used for cataclysmic events like the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21) and the splitting of the Mount of Olives on the Day of the Lord (Zechariah 14:4). The only other time this phrase appears in Mark’s Gospel is when the centurion confessed that Jesus is God’s Son (Mark 15:38-39).

Second, Jesus saw “the Spirit descending on him as a dove.” “Descending” (katabainon, meaning to climb down, to go down) calls to mind the promise that “the Lord himself will come down from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 4:16), as well as the arrival of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10).

The “dove” (peristeran, meaning pigeon, dove) was considered in antiquity to be a bird from the gods. It was often viewed as a divine messenger and was sometimes considered the bird of the soul. In poetry and proverbs, it stood for chastity, faithfulness, affection, gentleness, and guilelessness. In the Hebrew Bible, the dove was the only bird offered as a sacrifice. Early Christians viewed the dove as a symbol both of the Spirit and of Christ himself.

Third, “a voice came from heaven.” In antiquity, the divine voice was often seen as a directing force behind the creation of law. In the Old Testament, God’s voice was heard but not seen (with the exception of Moses’ experience). Qol, the Hebrew word for voice,
refers to God in 50 of the 560 times it is used. It is also a symbol for God’s wisdom (Proverbs 1:20; 8:1). Except for the Transfiguration, this episode is the only time we find a discourse between the Father and the Son in the New Testament.

This voice declared, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). “Son” translates huois, the typical word for a biological descendant. Gnostics, an early heretical movement, often viewed this event as the moment when what they referred to as the heavenly Christ descended on the earthly Jesus and adopted him as the Son of God. However, If Mark had wanted to indicate that Jesus was the adopted Son of God, he would have used huiotthesia. The Father made it clear that he loved his Son, with whom he is “well pleased” (eudokesa, meaning to take delight).

Jesus’ first act of public ministry was to identify with John’s baptism and thus with the humanity Jesus had come to save. In so doing, his Father glorified him in public, certifying him as the Son of God. This was the kind of exaltation for which John had been commissioned. Everything he did was intended to honor Jesus, that others might do the same.

Now it is our turn. As John the Baptist and God the Father used Jesus’ baptism to honor him, so we are to use our witness and ministry for the same purpose. The first question to ask in every decision is, What will most glorify Christ? When we teach others, our purpose should not be to impress them with ourselves, but to lead them to honor Jesus. As John said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

How will you magnify Jesus this week?

Conclusion
In a society that is becoming more post-Christian than ever before, it is vital that believers take Christ to our culture. When we hear and heed God’s call to glorify Christ in all we do, we continue the ministry of John the Baptist today. As others follow us to our Lord, we extend the kingdom of God around the world.

One of my favorite stories about Charles Spurgeon, the greatest of Baptist preachers, concerns the Sunday morning when a visitor came late to the Metropolitan Tabernacle. In those days worshipers needed tickets to gain admission, for crowds were always larger than space available. This visitor had no such ticket and was sorely disappointed to miss the service.

An usher, seeing the man’s plight, gave him the ticket he had received earlier that morning. The visitor was grateful as he made his way into the sanctuary. When the service concluded, the usher was standing at the same door when the visitor passed by.
He asked the man what he thought of his preacher. The guest said, “I didn’t see a preacher. I only saw a Savior.”

What will others say of your teaching this Sunday? of your life this week?

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