

John the Baptist: A Consistent Brand Matt. 3:1-11 12/12/21

You may have read about personal and celebrity brands. A brand is what makes you stand out from others. Celebrities like Oprah, Martha Stewart, Taylor Swift, Rihanna, and George Clooney have carefully-crafted brands or images that they use to sell products and promote causes. It's very important to remain consistent to your brand, or it might blow up in your face as it did for Tiger Woods and Bill Cosby among many others. But brands are not just for celebrities. Ordinary individuals often carefully cultivate their brand by what they show and say on social media. So do organizations and even churches! Branding or public image is very important today.

The main character in this morning's passage from Matthew's gospel had a very distinctive brand. He didn't create his brand, nor did he worry about it! But he was very consistent with it. Listen as I read.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the

people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt. 3:1-11)

John’s brand begins with his very odd lifestyle! He lived and worked out in the wilderness of Judea- a largely uninhabited, rocky, desert region. He wore odd clothing- a camel’s hair garment with a leather belt. And he ate locusts and wild honey. A very simple, but strange diet. I don’t think it’s going to catch on as the latest diet fad! His lifestyle was one of radical simplicity and it called to mind the lifestyles of some Old Testament prophets, especially Elijah. John was on a mission from God and he didn’t

let anything else get in his way. And his simple lifestyle gave him credibility and authority.

What was his mission? Matthew writes, ³*This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* (Matt. 3:3) These words from Isa. 40 speak of someone who would come and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord to Israel. The image was that of grading a road for a conquering king to travel on.

That was John’s mission. He was sent by God to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. He didn’t choose this mission; it had been given to him from birth! Unlike celebrities (and some of us) today who carefully craft our image, John simply lived out his calling, preparing people’s hearts to receive the coming Messiah.

How did John prepare the people? By bringing them a very uncomfortable message! *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,* ²*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* (Matt. 3:1-2) He called people to repent. That’s a hard thing to do! It literally means to turn around. You are heading in one direction and you pivot and head in another one. Spiritually, it means to admit your sin and turn away from it. And then he told them to be baptized as a sign

of their repentance. That was a new use of baptism. In those days, only Gentiles were baptized, idol-worshippers who were converting to Judaism. In calling Jewish people to be baptized, John was saying that the change they needed to make was as great as a Gentile becoming a Jew. It was hard for them to imagine a greater change than that!

The odd thing is that so many people came out to hear him and responded! Clearly, there was a movement of the Spirit there, as there was during the Great Awakenings in this country when people flocked to hear fire and brimstone preachers like George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards. But what other factors led people to come and hear John? First, as we pointed out last week, the people were hungry for a word from the Lord, as there had been no prophets for several hundred years. Second, as hard as repentance is, it is actually good news!

I'm reminded of a train roaring down a track headed for a washed-out bridge. If it continues on that track, only bad things will happen to it. But there is a switch on the track. If the switch is thrown, the train can be routed onto a second set of tracks, so it can go safely to another destination. That's a little like repentance. If we continue as we are, living in sin, living in patterns of life that are out of God's design for human flourishing, nothing good will follow. But, leaving those bad things behind is difficult, because we've gotten used to them, and to some degree we trust

them to give us what we need. But if we take the new track, we discover that it leads us to lasting joy and fulfillment because it leads us to live as God created us to live.

Let's look at a couple examples. Maybe you are someone who tends to hold a grudge when you are wronged. Maybe you even look for things to feel wronged about! (Some people do that, you know.) Holding a grudge can give you a sense of self-righteousness and empowerment. After all, they're the ones who messed up! So, you feel that you no longer need to treat that other person with compassion, respect, or love because of what they have done to you, right? But the downside of failing to forgive is that the resentment becomes toxic and eats you up inside. Eventually, you will become a bitter, resentful person that no one wants to be around!

But you can choose instead to take the other track and practice forgiveness. It's not easy, but you can learn to let go of wrongs done to you, and to stop being bothered by minor slights. A great weight can be lifted from your shoulders, and the possibility of joyful living can become a reality. There is even the potential for restoring your relationship with the person who wronged you- not always, but often! It all begins with repentance- admitting that we have taken the wrong approach, and turning to God's new way of life.

Or how about stinginess? Some of us hold very tightly to the things that God has entrusted to our care. There's not much that can move us to share our material things with those in need, be they individuals or groups that help those in need. We depend on our things for a sense of security or for a sense of superiority over others. And things can give us a certain amount of security, but only a limited amount. Ultimately, we will all die no matter how much stuff we've accumulated! So much for security! The other downside of stinginess is that we can develop very hard hearts, hearts that are far-removed from what God intended for us, hearts that no longer reflect God's heart toward us. We become like Ebenezer Scrooge, hardened toward God and others.

However, if we choose to take another track and move toward a generous spirit, then we can let go of some of our stuff, trusting God to take care of us. And we can experience the joy- and it really is joy- of giving to others, be that giving to GPC or to local helping agencies or international causes. It begins with repentance, admitting our failure to be generous, and then taking a new track toward generosity.

Somehow, John was able to convince people that living in a new way, a way that trusts God to meet our needs, was Good News. And they responded en masse! And that's my final point. All kinds of people responded! Rural people and city folks from Jerusalem. Religious leaders,

like the Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as ordinary, not-so-religious folks. Everyone came to hear John's message and many saw their need to repent, whether they were very religious or not at all religious.

Now you may have grown up in the church and participated your whole life, but you know your life is headed down the wrong track, at least in some ways. You need to repent and get on the right track. Or, church may be very new to you, and while you may have tried to do the right thing, you know there are things that need to change. That might involve embracing forgiveness and generosity or saying no to addiction or lust or envy or anger or pride. Whatever thing God is pointing out to you right now.

So, I invite you to confess that thing and determine with God's help to turn away from it and head down a different track, trusting God to meet your deepest needs in legitimate ways that don't harm you or others.