



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“THE IDENTITY OF CHRIST”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: Matthew 11:2-6
Date: January 13, 1974

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

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This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on January 13, 1974. It was filed with a similarly themed sermon, "The Identity of Christ," that he preached on April 15, 1962.

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (Matthew 11:2-6).

The hymns were *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, I've Found a Friend*, and *Lord, Speak to Me*. You might wish to review the text of those hymns.

You might also want to consider that the Christian Life Seminars that week were *Theology and Popular Culture*, *Membership Inquiry Class*, *The Music of Bach*, *Family Values -- Our Gift to Children*, *Mental Retardation: Fact and Myth*, and *Builders Adult Bible Study Class*.

Another item to consider is this text, included in the weekly Bulletin.

"The Comet Kohoutek, first discovered in March of 1973, will be at its closest point to the earth this coming Tuesday. It will be 75 million miles away and traveling about 240,000 miles per hour. It is estimated that it will take some 80,000 years for it to complete its orbit and be seen again from the earth.

"The same careful preparation and balance that places a Kohoutek in the heavens has placed us upon this planet Earth. Our worship this morning picks up this sense of the oneness of all things and in relation to our common source -- God."

With all of that in mind, reflect on the chosen scripture and how you would "fill in" the remainder of the message from the chosen passage.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

I. John, The Baptist

A. John's career was approaching its end.

1. He had never been one to soften the truth.
2. To see evil was to rebuke it.
3. Now, Herod Antipas, Governor of Judea, had returned to the capitol, Rome. While there he seduced his brother's wife, Herodias. Upon return, he divorced his own wife, and brought Herodias to Judea.
 - a) *John publicly denounced the incest of the Governor, and was thrown into prison.*
4. Prison is dehumanizing for any person.
 - a) *But for John, the free spirit who had spent his life roaming the wilderness beyond Jordan, it was a cage that would kill his spirit, even if the sword of Herod did not.*

B. John's ministry had been dedicated to the proclamation of the coming of the King who would usher in God's Kingdom.

1. Daniel 2:44 -- In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms, and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever...
2. Matthew 3:7 -- When he saw many of the Pharisees and Saducees coming for baptism, he said to them "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'...Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." "He who is coming after me...will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, and gather the wheat in the granary, but the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire."
3. In John was a man of great moral earnestness.
 - a) *Upon knowing Jesus, he was confident that He was the one whom God had called to be the Messiah.*
 - b) *His baptism was anointing.*

- (1) As Samuel anointed the boy David, setting him apart to be King, so John anointed Jesus to Messiahship.
- (2) Messiah -- "Anointed One."

II. The Three Images of Jesus

A. John's image of Messiah

1. It was an apocalyptic age.
 - a) *To the Jew, the human situation could become no worse -- and only divine intervention would redeem it.*
 - b) *The Dead Sea Scrolls depict the communities that lived for the coming of the hosts of angels from heaven who would put to route the legions of Rome.*
 - c) *For 500 years, the Jews had fought those who would make them subservient.*
 - d) *"Wait until Messiah comes...", they might mutter as the legions passed.*
2. John saw corruption of society -- the ten Greek cities to the North, with their pagan games and drama, their temples to Zeus and Venus.
 - a) *From Herod on down, society was corrupt.*
 - b) *But "Wait until Messiah comes..."*
3. "Righteous Wrath"

B. The public image of Jesus.

1. Now in prison, his disciples were bringing back rumors about Jesus.
2. What Jesus preached:
 - a) *Matthew 6:24 -- "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."*
 - b) *Matthew 7:1 -- "Judge not, lest you be judged. For with the judgment you pronounce will you be judged..."*
 - c) *Matthew 7:7 -- "Ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."*
3. What Jesus did
 - a) *He went into the towns, like Capernaum, that vacation resort in Galilee.*
 - b) *He made a name for himself when at a wedding, he provided the best wine.*
 - c) *He was known to be seen with Roman soldiers, street walkers, and even a tax collector.*
4. One could hardly expect John's disciples to place the best interpretation on what they heard.
 - a) *Jesus and some of his core followers had originally been followers of John.*
 - b) *There was a jealousy between the followers of Jesus and John.*
 - (1) Watergate has shown us how a misplaced loyalty can twist the character of good men.
 - c) *What a cruel blow to John -- facing execution -- to face the fact that he had evidently anointed the wrong man.*
5. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus.
 - a) *John always took the direct approach.*
 - b) *Deviousness was never a characteristic of John.*

C. Jesus' self image

1. John must have sensed the torment of spirit that lay behind this question.

- a) *He did not try to explain his approach to Messiahship.*
- b) *He did not suggest references -- nor the number of converts.*
- c) *He did not send a committee in turn.*

2. "Tell him what you see."

The blind receive their sight
The lame walk
Lepers are cleansed
The deaf hear
The dead are raised up
And the poor have good news.

3. Jesus was not merely providing a laundry list of good works, but pointing up fulfillment of other prophecy.

- a) *Isaiah 35:5 -- "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped."*
- b) *Isaiah 61:1 -- "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, to bring good tidings to the afflicted. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound."*

III. The Rediscovery of Jesus

A. Jesus might have resented the question.

- 1. Jesus might expect disbelief from Romans -- or from those who authority he challenged.
- 2. He would scarcely expect disbelief from him who had anointed him in the first place.

B. John's view of Messiah was limited by his personal spirit.

1. He had an unquestioned sincerity and commitment to God -- yet he seemed to have little compassion for people.

"Among those born of women, there has risen no greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

C. As a culture, men and women are asking "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

1. The church is doubted by her own followers.
2. Our image of Christ and His Church changes from generation to generation.
3. A week ago I sat on a committee to nominate a director for the National Center in Washington, D.C. along with William Thompson, Oscar McCloud and others.
 - a) *A very alert young minister was interviewed.*
 - b) *"He is living in the sixties-- still has the social activist image of the church. He hasn't moved into the seventies."*

D. John was right about Messiah -- but he saw only a part of him.

1. The day we stop growing in our understanding of Christ, we have an idol.

IV. Conclusion

Jesus calls us to the bifocal view -- of Scripture and experience.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading: Matthew 11:2-6

Matthew 11:2-3 says: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

- For this passage, imagine that you are John in the context of the time. You wouldn't know all that you know now. What would you have needed to know to accept that Jesus was the expected one?
- Would you have been as proactive as John was in reaching out with such hope?

Matthew 11:4-5 says: "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.'"

- Jesus understood that facts could have to reinforce faith. He spoke of specific acts that had taken place. We all pray for healing for those we know and love. How do you think you would react if you actually saw it for yourself in the instant way that Jesus healed?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

I.A.4.a. Dr. Galbreath talks about why prison was particularly difficult for John. In what locations and setting could God place you that would be particularly troubling to you? What would you use to help you cope in accepting His will?

I.B. 1 and 2 What does it say to you to see how consistent the Bible is in specific messages through various generations and individuals?

I. B. 3. b. Dr. Galbreath originally had "His coronation was baptism." He changed that to "His baptism was anointing." Why do you think he made that change?

II.A. If John lived today, what might influence his image of Messiah?

II.B. Think about living in Jesus' time. Think about the stories people would have heard about him. What would your image of him have been from hearing those stories? How would seeing him and listening to him have changed that image?

II.B. 4. Groups often splinter and find themselves at odds with former friends and colleagues. How would you have reacted if you had been one of John's followers and saw others moving away from him?

II.B. 4. b. 1. This sermon was preached several months before President Nixon resigned. Dr. Galbreath references Watergate to represent misplaced loyalty. If this sermon was preached today, what examples might be used to represent that kind of action?

II.B. 4. c. What does it say about the nature of faith and doubt that even John wondered if he had been wrong? How does that make you feel if you find yourself questioning your faith?

II.C. Often people talk about Jesus as a man of caring and compassion. What does it tell you about Jesus that his self image is one of a man of action?

III.A. John was both related to Jesus and the one who had anointed him. Which do you think made these questions more troubling for Jesus?

III.B. John is described as having little compassion for people. What role do you think that played in leading some of his followers to gravitate to Jesus instead?

III.C. Dr. Galbreath notes that our image of Christ and His Church changes from generation to generation. How has it changed since this sermon was preached in 1974? How has it changed in your lifetime?

There were additional small, handwritten notes with the sermon. Think about them in the context of this message.

I am what I do. I am what I confess.

Agnosticism doesn't exist. We choose by our action regardless what our head says or cannot say.

Quoting someone else: We have a story to tell and to live. What the church is all about is the old story that spans Exodus to Easter. This gives us our confidence for the future.

Security robs us of humanity. To be at peace in the church is to be an idolater. We must grapple with the angel to give the blessing and may have a lasting scar. "When you became Christians, you knew you were getting into trouble"
Paul

Quoting Sydney Harris: "The trouble with Polonius' sententious advice 'To thine own self be true,' is that even a Hitler could live by it; our human task is not just to be who we are, but first to become what we ought to be, which takes far more doing than simply obeying our native impulses."

The Bible is the story of God among men not among heavenly beings.

The uniqueness of our faith -- p. 155 -- Fox

God reveals Himself -- historical actions as a person with a purpose. We reveal what we are likely what we do. What we do will be determined by what we are like. The might act of God -- in Exodus -- is the focus of the nature of God in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the incarnation -- birth, death, resurrection of Christ was the might act of the New Testament.

All scripture must be judged against the ultimate revelation of God -- Christ.

Religion -- in theology and ethics -- must be this worldly. This is where God revealed Himself. The world as it is is the stage of God's action.

The Word of God is always revealed in action, Bible study, revealing his actions in past history, indicates what God would indicate God's will. The present situation.

We are called to interpret current events theologically.