

“A Shocking Job Description”

Introduction: “In those days John the Baptist came . . .” Matthew begins his third chapter with this rather vague remark. In what days? Much to our frustration, the gospel writers give us very little information about the first thirty of Jesus’ life. After he and his parents return from Egypt, following their flight from the murderous intent of king Herod, sometime before Jesus turned two, the holy family settled in Nazareth. Luke tells us that this family went to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Festival of Passover, but that’s it. The lack of any additional information has led some to call this thirty-year period (Lk. 3:23) the “hidden years.” Although frustrating, it’s a good reminder that the gospel accounts are not intended to be biographies, as we know them. Rather, they are the story of God with us, revealing, and calling us to, the life that is truly life. As John puts it at the end of his gospel,

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (Jn. 20:30f).

The gospel writers, in other words, give us what we need to know to be drawn into and live within the kingdom of God.

I. John’s Shocking Job Description

A. Now, the action starts to heat up with the account of the baptism of Jesus. As we hear this account notice that we’re not the only ones with questions. John the Baptist had a rather huge question for Jesus. Preaching out in the wilderness, calling people to repent so that they might be prepared for the arrival of the Lord, and baptizing them as an outward symbol of their repentance, John must have been shocked when he looked up and recognized the next person in line, awaiting baptism, was Jesus; it was the Lord himself! “I need to be baptized by you,” John stammered.

B. John was dressed in the prophetic garb that made people remember the prophet Elijah, who the prophet Malachi declared would return in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah (4:5-6). Malachi’s work followed the return of God’s people from exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, but since that 5th c. B.C. prophecy, God hadn’t said a whole lot. With the Roman Empire dominating the world scene, Israel still a rather small insignificant nation, and her rebuilt Temple a far cry from its former glory, it seemed to many that Israel was still rather in exile, even though she was home again.

C. So the arrival of John the Baptist got people thinking about the Elijah who was to come, and in fact Jesus would later affirm that John had been he (Ma. 11:14). But especially if that was the case, and if repentance was the proper response to get one ready for the Messiah, what was this Jesus, who was without sin and had nothing to repent of, doing in that line?

Imagine, perhaps, that you are one of our deacons, standing in front of the church, serving communion on the first Sunday of the month. You’re offering the bread, or offering the cup, greeting each person by name, and then you see Jesus standing in front of you. What would you say? “Jesus, the body of Christ broken for you?!” No, you’d probably say, “Well this certainly wasn’t in the deacon training manual! What do I do?”

D. Frankly, I'd imagine that John must have been horrified! Baptizing Jesus was not in his job description. He knows that Jesus is way more powerful than he, having said that he's not even worthy to be a servant of this Jesus, even to untie his sandal, as he once explained (Jn. 1:27). Further, John, like many others, expected the Messiah, when he came, to come in judgment, to come with an ax and chop down all the unrighteous "trees" that weren't producing good fruit and throw them into a fire (Ma. 3:7-10). To John, it was all backwards. Here was this Jesus, not identifying with the God who would sweep all the chaff away in judgment but instead standing knee deep in the waters of repentance and identifying with the people who are themselves facing judgment. "Let it be so now," Jesus explained to John; "it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." As Paul parses this out for the congregation in Corinth, "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

II. Jesus' Shocking Job Description

A. Jesus, we see, had his own shocking job description. It was to take the judgment due us upon himself, taking away our unrighteousness and clothing us in his righteousness. To do so, he needed to identify with our humanity, which he was declaring his willingness to do by receiving John's baptism.

Think for a moment, what this reveals about Jesus. Though he would face several temptations after his baptism when the Spirit led him into the wilderness, there was a temptation already present before his baptism. It was to act like the superior, more powerful being that he was and not go through the humility of setting aside his divinity and identifying with our humanity. Why on earth would he want to do that? But it was a willingness he'd already affirmed by being born as an infant, and we see it continue here at the river Jordan. He was willing to remove his own sandals and step into the waters with us. This is the leader, this is the savior, this is the servant who invites us to follow him and to fall in love with him. How could we not? What depth of love he has for us!

B. If we wonder how on earth he could do this, without faltering, growing weary or becoming discouraged, Matthew's full answer is: read the rest of the story! But we get a glimpse of the answer here, as well as how we become equipped to do God's will, as Jesus comes up out of the water. Two things happen:

1. First, something like a dove descended upon Jesus. Whatever else this looked like, one thing is sure – it was an anointing of God's empowering presence – the Holy Spirit. Such an anointing was anticipated by the prophets, as we heard earlier from Isaiah. In the first of four passages, or "songs" as they're sometimes called, we hear about this one called the servant, whom God will empower with his Spirit so that he may bring God's justice on earth without faltering or becoming discouraged (Isa. 42:1-4).

Peter, one of Jesus' traveling companions, explains the result of this anointing to a centurion named Cornelius (Ac. 10:37-38):

You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

How did Jesus carry out his job description? The power of God would be working through him.

2. Second, a voice came from heaven declaring, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Jesus would minister not only out of being empowered by the Spirit, but also out of being loved by the Father. Noteworthy here is that Jesus hadn’t done a thing yet except step into the water, but the Father affirmed that he loved his Son in any case. Jesus learned from the start that he wouldn’t have to earn his Father’s love but simply live and minister from it.

Is that so significant, we might ask? Consider the various ways we might try to carve out an identity. We can seek to do so through the affirmation of another, such as a spouse, child, or parent. Or, we can seek to find our identity in achieving success of some kind, at work, or on the athletic field or stage, or in the classroom. Or we can try to find our identity through diminishing others in some way, thinking of them as bad so that we can look good. But all of these will fall short. Those who say they love us will do so imperfectly. The need to succeed will leave us vulnerable to our failures or wear us out by the pressure to perform. Diminishing others as bad ignores the love God calls us to show our neighbor, and even our enemies, to which Jesus calls us in order to live a fully human life. The only identity that will totally sustain and fulfill us and not be subject to what we, or others, think of us, comes through faith in the one who stood in the waters of baptism with us and loves us not based on what we have done or think of ourselves but on what he has done and thinks of us. That is a leader, a savior, a servant who I want to follow.

C. And as we follow, living out our job description of continuing the mission of Jesus as his body, loving God and loving our neighbor, seeking justice and righteousness for all nations, declaring that Jesus is Lord and on the cross has defeated sin and evil and death, and through his resurrection has begun a new creation, that we do all of this with the same “equipment” – the power of the Spirit and the love of the Father.

How do these gifts come to us? Notice one little but significant item that Luke mentions in his account. He records that after Jesus’ baptism, “as he was praying,” heaven was opened, the Spirit descended, and the Father’s voice was heard (Lk. 3:21-22).

It reminds me of Paul’s prayer for power and love for the congregation in Ephesus (3:16-19, likely a circular letter):

I pray that out of his glorious riches [the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The power of the Spirit and the love of the Father come to us as we walk with the Son by faith, and open ourselves to the presence of God through spiritual practices, such as prayer. May we do so that we not falter or be discouraged as we carry out the ministry of Jesus in this place.