

Cousin John

[Luke 3:1-18](#)

Jesus' Extended Family

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When the President of the United States speaks about issues of national security, we stop and listen. We may disagree with his conclusions or debate his actions; that is our right as citizens in a free society. But there can be no doubt that he has sources of information that go far beyond our sources, the internet, the network news, and the morning newspaper. So when the President speaks, we listen. By contrast, we wouldn't waste our time on a soapbox orator down on the Mall. What could he possibly know that we don't know about conditions in the world?

Occasionally, however, someone totally unknown bursts on the scene, and when they speak, it is with authority and prophetic power. Think of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. They began a movement that would issue in the 19th amendment to our Constitution, giving women the right to vote. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr., a hitherto unknown Baptist preacher whose impressive mind and passionate eloquence propelled him to the forefront of civil rights. Think of Billy Graham, the twenty-something leader of Youth for Christ, who in the late 40s opened his Bible, pointed his finger at the mushrooming crowds, and, for fifty years, has served as the spokesman for evangelical Christianity around the world. These and many like them are the unlikely leaders of civilization. They had no political clout, no corporate funding, no inherited claim to authority, yet when God tapped them on the shoulder, they responded, and the world is a better place because they did.

John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, was as unlikely a candidate for global influence as anyone you can imagine. All the likely people, the important and powerful people, the people in office in government and the church, all of them are listed at the top of chapter three: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." There they are, the "Who's Who" of AD 30, the movers and shakers of the mightiest empire the world had ever seen. And then Luke drops the bomb shell: "The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." Not to Tiberius? No, to John. And if not to the Emperor, then to one of his subordinates in the region? No, to John. Well then, if not to a political figure, surely to the high priest? No, to John. Talk about an unknown! John was the ultimate outsider. His wardrobe consisted of a hair shirt and his diet of locusts and wild honey. Yet it is to this man, shabbily dressed though he may be, that God speaks. It is to John, with his counterculture eating habits, that God gives the greatest scoop of all time: the Messiah is at hand.

If you had been in the crowd that day, what would you expect John to say? Or to be more accurate, what would you expect God to say through John? No doubt something ambitious! Because the Messiah is coming, eradicate poverty, exterminate prejudice, eliminate war.

But when the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers, ask what they should do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, John issues no heroic call to arms. He demands instead simple, down-to-earth, concrete acts of love, compassion, and ethical behavior. "You out there in the crowd," he says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." And you tax collectors, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And you soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Here is John, with a golden opportunity to rally the nation, and he settles instead for simple things. The crowds are in the palm of his hand. He could ask them to do anything and they would do it. So why not go for broke? Why not do something huge? But instead John issues a call for simple, ordinary changes in our personal behavior.

Why? Because John knows that evil starts within each one of us, when we transgress God's laws. Yes, there are enormous evils in the world, race hatred, terrorism, and war, but to some degree these are reflections of the malice and prejudice, the indifference and apathy within us, only magnified many times over. So John begins with basics. Get your own life in order, he says. Repent of your aberrant behavior. Make sure your priorities are right.

Two weeks ago Darrell Green played his last football game after twenty seasons with the Washington Redskins. In the locker room after the game he told his teammates, "As you are on your way to stardom and fame, don't forget to produce a life that is more than just football." "My goal," Green told the fans, "is not only to end a career but to be launched into a future that ... carries out the purpose of God. Something in my heart has always said, 'CEIs that it?' You have given me a platform and a great community to do what I believe, to change the world for all that is good, right, and Godly." Had John the Baptist been in the stadium that Sunday, he would have led the cheering, because Darrell Green personifies all that John called for, concrete, down-to-earth acts of love, compassion, and ethical behavior.

We can't all be All-Pro corner backs like Darrell Green. We can't all establish youth ministry foundations as Darrell Green has done. But then, John the Baptist doesn't lay on us any kind of heroic expectations. Instead, do the simple things. Share your clothing and your food, be honest in your business practices, don't tell lies, and be content with your lifestyle. The heroic acts may come later. First, master the simple things. First, learn to be caring, to be honest, to be true. Remember that great palaces are built on solid foundations. The foundations are out of sight, far below the ground. Tourists don't waste film on the foundations, but without them there would be no lofty turrets to photograph, no majestic walls to sketch, no distinctive beauty to celebrate.

Mohandas Gandhi used simple things to alter the destiny of India. What could be more simple than owning three rough cloths, two for his wardrobe and one for his bed? Show me a diet more simple than nuts and rice, fruit and milk? And then show me any other person in the twentieth century who did more for his own people, than Mohandas Gandhi. He did simple things, but those simple things brought the British Empire to its knees. Gandhi never used the name of Christ, yet he read no fewer than eighty books on Christianity during his first year in law school. He said of the Sermon on the Mount, "It went straight to my heart on the first reading."

And what is contained in the Sermon on the Mount? Simple things: integrity and purity. Simple things: forgiveness and love for enemies. Simple things: trust in God and respect for one's neighbor. Yet what document has had more influence, one might even say revolutionary influence, on human society than the simple Sermon on the Mount?

So for now do the simple thing. Do what lies close at hand. And if God someday calls you to pursue the impossible dream, it will not seem so formidable, because you will have built a sturdy foundation out of ordinary things.