**Humility (as the Bible describes it) is a grateful awareness of our total dependence on God’s goodness, that creates within our hearts a sincere desire to obey and serve Him.**

Humility continually opposes pride’s longing for self-sufficiency, self-will, and self-exaltation.

It disdains the self-centered pursuit of status, security, and success, asking only for an opportunity to serve God faithfully.

It is the key to personal greatness among Jesus’ followers.

He said=> “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mk 10: 43-45).

Jesus Himself is the greatest possible example of humility.

When He stooped down to wash His disciples’ feet, He was fulfilling the service of the lowliest of slaves.

It wasn’t just an ostentatious/theatrical display to make His disciples feel guilty about their own proud attitudes;

He was living out the Kingdom principle of inversion, in which the greatest is least, and the last is first.

**In Mt 11:11, Jesus said John the Baptist was a great man=>**

In fact, He said=> “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”
That’s (in part) because John the Baptist was an extremely humble man.

He desired nothing for himself but the opportunity to draw people’s attention to Jesus, the Son of God, & the Messiah.

**Today we will see a group of Jewish leaders challenge John, asking him questions meant to intimidate him and make him defend himself/his-ministry.**

John had no interest in defending (or ever talking about) himself. He wanted only to bring glory/honor to Jesus, so that people would believe in Him, and glorify Him.

As last week’s text said=> “*John bore witness of Him* [the eternal/living Word, who is full of grace/truth], *and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’’*”

John brought glory to X by describing himself as utterly unimportant, by comparison w/ Him.

The lower John made himself appear in other people’s eyes, the higher he raised his Lord in their estimation. This is humility such as each of us as who are believers should aspire to, and seek to emulate.

**In today’s text, Jewish leaders will ask John 3 questions about himself, & each of his answers will humbly divert their attention away from himself, back towards Jesus.**
Q #1: Who are you? (multiple choice)

[John 1:19]=&gt; “And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’”

A delegation of Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem was sent out to question John and determine exactly who he was.

These men could hardly have been very opened-minded about this issue.
This was a time when expectations were running high among the Jews that Messiah would soon appear, and a lot of frauds were ready/willing to oblige those expectant people.
False-Christs/false-prophets were showing up everywhere, and it was the duty of the Sanhedrin (the Jews’ central religious authority) to check them out.
Lk 3:15 says many wondered if John might be the Messiah himself.
From the leaders’ perspective, John would prob. have been just one more crackpot needing to be brought under control.
But John posed a special problem for the Sanhedrin because so many people were going out to hear him preach.
This involved mass movements/gatherings of people, which always made the Romans uneasy, that it might be a sign of rebellion w/i their empire.
They relied on the Sanhedrin to keep a lid on things among the Jews, but if they couldn’t, Rome would send in an army, crush what they perceived to be a potential revolution, and take away all the Sanhedrin’s political power.

**The question this delegation asked John was “Who are you?”**

But the only question John was really interested in answering was “Who is the Messiah,” esp. in view of the fact that they (Israel’s religious leaders) didn’t know who He was—as John will tell them in verse 26.

They, the spiritual leaders, should be 1st to ID the Messiah, so they could bring Israel to His feet in adoration, love, and loyal allegiance to His throne.

John wanted to tell them who He was, if they’d just ask the right questions, & stop asking him about himself.

He was uncomfortable with their questions that put the spotlight on him, who only wanted to talk about X.

**If John had desired, he could have answered their questions with a blast of impressive facts, that would have set them back on their heals.**

So, you want to know who am I, do you?

* I am the son of a Levite priest named Zacharias.

Not all the Levites questioning him had the status of priests, only those who were direct descendants of Aaron.
John was one of those.

* I was miraculously conceived in a barren woman’s womb when she was long past her age for childbearing.

* Before my birth, an angel appeared to my father, telling him about me=> “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him [Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17).

* 3 months before my birth, I was filled w/ the Spirit and leaped in my mother’s womb while she was being visited by the mother of Messiah.

* Lk 3:2 says=> “The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.”

That’s the traditional Jewish formula for God’s indicating a man was to be a prophet.

It was said of Elijah/Jeremiah/Isaiah/Ezekiel/others.

Jn 1 says John was “sent from God” (1:6).

He was the 1st man to be called as a prophet of God in Israel for 400 years.

If the delegation was looking for credentials, John had them in spades—credentials to match those of any prophet who had ever arisen w/i Israel, even the most preeminent.

But he was humble & had no desire to talk about himself, so he didn’t say any of that.
In between verses 19 & 20, the delegation must have asked John if he claimed to be the Messiah.

We surmise that, based on the fervency of John’s answer=>

[Verse 20]=> “And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

John’s answer to the delegation’s first question was to tell them who he was not.

In the original language, the pronoun “I” is strongly emphasized=> “I am not the Christ.”

I.e., Don’t entertain that foolish thought for even a moment!

In his humility, John was naturally inclined to inform people that he was no one, of any importance/consequence at all.

So when the priests/Levites suggested he might consider himself to be the Messiah, he reacted w/ heated fervency (if not agitation).

The delegation prob. viewed John as either a fraud/fanatic/fool.

For some time he had been living in the desert, dressed in clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, & eating locusts/honey.

According to the prophet Zechariah (13:14), some false prophets had dressed like that to make themselves look like Elijah, trying to gain a following to themselves that way under false pretenses.
In addition, John had never had a haircut, being under a lifelong Nazirite vow. He was wild-looking, & the Jewish leaders may have suspected it was all just a ploy to gain attention to himself. John had never attended their rabbinical schools, & prob. as far as they were concerned, he was a religious outsider/fraud.

**Having heard John’s denial that he was Messiah, the Jewish leaders gave him 2 more options (in this multiple choice series of questions).**

[Verse 21]—> “And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ And he said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’”

You get the feeling from John’s answers that he was becoming increasingly impatient with them & their questions.

Notice how they keep getting shorter=>

“I am not the Christ”; “I am not”; “No!”

**It’s interesting that John denied being Elijah.**

Jesus told His disciples later on=> “If you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come” (Mt 11:14).

In Mt 17, He said=> “Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him” (17:12). The next verse adds=> “The disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist” (17:13).

Why would anyone think John was Elijah, and why would the angel Gabriel predict that John would come in the spirit/power of Elijah?
Because of a prophecy in Mal 4:5=> “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD” (Mal 4:5).

John was not Elijah having returned to earth from heaven. He was simply like Elijah in terms of the spirit/power of his ministry.

That’s prob. why, in his growing impatience with the delegation, he simply answered their question with the words, “I am not,” refusing to explain any further.

Will Elijah ever actually return to earth? Yes.

When? Just as Malachi had said=> “Before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD [X’s return to earth, & the Battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation].

Some believe, in fact, that Elijah will be one of the “two witnesses” mentioned in Rev 11:3.

I.e., John’s coming in the spirit/power of Elijah did not exhaust the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy.

* Q #2: Who are you? (fill in the blank)

[Verse 22]=> “They said then [therefore] to him, ‘Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?’”

At this point, the delegation was getting frustrated.

They were under pressure from the Sanhedrin to provide some answers regarding John’s true identity, and whatever
danger he posed to their comfortable status quo within Israel.

Their allowing him to give 1-word denials to their multiple-choice guesses about who he might be, had gotten them nowhere.

So now they demanded that he just fill in the blank, & tell them outright who he was—or at least, who he thought he was.

But still, from John’s p.o.v. they were asking the wrong question.

Who he was didn’t really matter, apart from his being the herald of the Messiah’s coming.

Who the One was whom he had come to herald was the only thing that did;

That was the all-important question.

Either to Israel as a whole (whom this delegation represented), or to them as individuals.

**John did answer their question, but in a way that highlighted the Lord, for whom he was the forerunner.**

And he did it in a very clever way.


The humility of John was such that he viewed himself as nothing more than a voice, and a voice shouting out into the emptiness/barrenness of a desert.

This was a quotation from Isa 40:3.
700 years earlier, that OT prophet Isaiah had warned the people of Judah that they were about to be taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

It hadn’t happened yet when Isaiah declared that prophecy, but he went on to look even farther into the future, adding Messiah would ultimately bring them back to their homeland.

He would also comfort them w/ the revelation of His glory through His coming as the Messiah.

Therefore, they should get ready & prepare their hearts for His coming, by repenting of their sins.

John now quoted that OT prophecy, indicating that Messiah was indeed about to appear in his own time.

The Babylonian Exile was long since over, and now Messiah was about to appear as Isaiah had promised, although His appearing in glory won’t occur until His Second Coming.

That meant John was the voice Isaiah had said would shout in the wilderness, proclaiming Messiah’s arrival.

**God was using John to appeal to the religious leadership of Israel, to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, so they could lead their people to receive/embrace Him.**
But their hearts were as dry/barren as a desert—unwilling to repent of their sin, or to prepare themselves to receive Jesus as their Messiah/Savior/King. These leaders would oppose X at every turn in His 3½ year ministry, eventually orchestrating His execution. Then afterward, they would lie to the people, telling them Jesus’ disciples had stolen His body, & that their claim He had been resurrected, was false. To this day, most Jews reject their Messiah because of what those leaders in the Sanhedrin told them, & it all began right here with their rejection of John’s proclamation of X’s coming.

Why did John shout his message in the wilderness, rather than the Temple in Jerusalem?
Because God had abandoned that Temple, leaving formal Judaism a hollow/bankrupt religion. To find the truth for which Judaism had once stood, a Jew had to humble his heart, come out of his old empty religious traditions, and meet God in the wilderness of his own personal sinfulness, w/ a repentant heart. God had sent them John, a prophet outside the Jewish religious system, to enable them to do that. John would meet the Jewish people in the wilderness, confront their spiritual barrenness, & lead them to X, the Lamb of God who would take away their sin.
That’s where Jesus meets anyone who is ready to really deal honestly w/ his sin, through repentance/faith in God’s grace.

Heb 13=> “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. / Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb 13:13).

Salvation is only possible when a person stops relying on a religious system, and trusts in X alone, forming a personal relationship w/ Him.

John’s whole purpose in answering the questions of this group from Jerusalem, was to get them to do that.

* Q #3: Why do you baptize?

[Verses 24-25]=> “Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. / And they asked him, and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’”

The Pharisees in this delegation would have been much more concerned than the Sadducees, w/ theological issues.

So they wanted to know by what authority John was baptizing people as a sign of repentance.

If he wasn’t Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet like Moses God had promised in Deut 18:15 to send, by whose authority was he introducing this new religious rite?

The Jews did practice baptism, but only for Gentiles who were newly converted to the Jewish faith.
And the Jewish Qumran sect practiced daily baptism, as a sign of their spiritual purity.
But in both cases, the person always baptized himself.
Who did John think he was, baptizing other Jews, & attaching the notion of personal repentance to his baptism?
That implied a Jew’s family connection to Abraham, was no better than a Gentile.
That it wasn’t enough for inclusion in the Abrahamic Covenant, even if reinforced by his keeping all the religious regulations that the Pharisees taught.
That was John’s whole point—it wasn’t enough.
Unless a person, being convicted of his sin and drawn to X by the H.S., takes it upon himself to repent of his sins in the power of the Spirit, seek X’s forgiveness, and believe in Him, he cannot become saved.
Any false hope, in any religious system, to which he holds, will only hinder him from doing so.
It will interfere w/ his dealing w/ the real spiritual issues of his heart.
In Ezek 36:25, God had told them=> “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”
This spiritual cleansing was symbolized by John’s literally baptizing people in water as a sign of their repentance, in preparation for the entrance of X into
their hearts, to truly cleanse/forgive them of their sins.

In Jn 1:31, John will say=> “In order that He [X] might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.”

Once again, John turned his listeners’ focus on Jesus, as he answered their question, about his baptism.

[Verse 26]=> “John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know.’”

Instead of wasting time defending his baptisms, John acknowledged that he baptized people, then he added in essence, That’s not the important issue.

What’s important is that One stands among you whom you don’t know, and He is the same One described in Isaiah’s prophecy as “the Lord”—God incarnate in a man’s body.

Actually, neither baptism/repentance saves a person’s soul.

John’s baptism was only preparatory, for what X would ultimately do in men’s hearts, that would save them.

But John’s baptism of repentance did force people to examine the spiritual corruption in their hearts, & to reject it, leaving a spiritual vacuum that only X could fill.

It helped make them aware of their need for a Savior. Jesus is that One whom the unbeliever doesn’t know & who alone can forgive his sin, cleanse his heart, and give him eternal life.
Unless he places his faith in Jesus, forming a personal, saving relationship w/ Him, the Lord must say to him, “I never knew you,” & he will be lost forever.

Now we see the utter humility of John’s character, which was part of his being the greatest man who had ever lived.

[Verse 27] (John)=> “It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

John could think of no better way to express how infinitely high and exalted Jesus was, above himself.

Students in that society were expected to do for their teachers whatever the teacher asked of them.

But there was one exception=> taking off their shoes.

Keep in mind this was a time when animals roamed the streets, leaving their droppings everywhere.

People stepped in them and had to clean off their sandals, a/w/a their feet.

That was considered so lowly a task, that only the lowest slaves were required to do it.

That’s why Peter protested so vehemently when Jesus came to take off his sandals, and wash his feet.

It seemed absurd to him=> The Lord of the universe humbling Himself to do the work of a slave.

But John was saying he wasn’t even worthy of doing that task for X, which was expected of no one, but the lowliest of slaves.
He was saying, I leave no room in my heart for exemptions or loopholes at all, & will happily serve my Lord however He desires.

I will gladly go outside the camp to Jesus if He’ll meet me there, joining Him outside the gate of public acceptance, and share His reproach, because He will sanctify my heart through His own blood.

It reminds me of a time I watched a young mentally handicapped man w/ Downs Syndrome wash out a urinal w/ a wet dish towel, not even wearing rubber gloves.

He didn’t consider himself humble.

In fact, he was proud that he had job—that someone had been willing to pay him to do something.

John was saying, “I’ll serve Him any way He asks, and do anything for Him because I’m so unworthy of doing anything for him in view of what He is going to do for me through His death.”

As I said at the beginning, humility is a grateful awareness of our total dependence on God’s goodness, that creates w/i our hearts a sincere desire to obey Him and to serve Him.

[Verse 28]⇒ “These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”

Bethany was a long way from Jerusalem.
This was a different Bethany from the one on the backside of the Mt. of Olives, where Mary/Martha/Lazarus lived.
It was east of the Jordan River ("beyond the Jordan").
John the Baptist seems to have begun his ministry closer to Jerusalem, then gradually moved northward, up the Jordan Valley.
Now he was prob. east or southeast of Galilee.
The masses of people who came to hear John & be baptized by him, were willing to come a long way, both geographically, and spiritually, from their old religious traditions.
They had to be people who were truly hungering/thirsting for righteousness, desiring to become pure in heart.
They had to be truly humble people who, like John, cared more about how God viewed them, than how other people did.
Jesus said=> “Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. / But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32-33).

Let’s look at ourselves in order to assess our own humility.
* Are we willing to confess Jesus before men, even when it costs us their good opinion?
* Have we gone outside the camp of public acceptability, to meet Jesus, looking to Him alone for our salvation, seeking a close/personal relationship with Him?
* Have we truly repented of our sins, rejecting them, to make room in our hearts for X to save/rule-over us?
* Do we seek the lowliest position, in order to lift up our Savior and glorify Him in the eyes of other people?
* Are we willing to do whatever He asks of us w/o exception?
“The Humility of Greatness”
January 13, 2013

Text: John 1:19-28

1. Humility is a grateful awareness of our total dependence on God’s goodness, that creates within our hearts a sincere desire to obey and serve Him.

Mk 10:43-45

2. In Matt 11:11 Jesus said John the Baptist was a great man; that’s (in part) because John was an extremely humble man.

Jn 1:15

3. In today’s text Jewish leaders will ask John three questions about himself, and each of his answers will humbly divert their attention away from himself, back towards Jesus...

* Q #1: Who are you? (multiple choice)
[John 1:19]

Lk 3:15

4. The question this delegation asked John was “Who are you?” The only question John was really interested in was “Who is the Messiah?”

Jn 1:26; Lk 1:17; 3:2; Jn 1:6

5. If the delegation was looking for credentials, John had them to match those of any prophet within Israel.

[Verse 20]

6. In his humility John was naturally inclined to inform people that he was no one of any importance or consequence.

Zech 13:14

[Verse 21]

Mt 11:14; 17:12, 13; Mal 4:5

7. John was not Elijah; he was simply like Elijah in terms of the spirit and power of his ministry.

Rev 11:3

* Q #2: Who are you? (fill in the blank)
[Verse 22]
8. John did answer their question, but in a way that highlighted the [10 Lord] for whom he was the forerunner.

   [Verse 23]
   Isa 40:3

9. God was using John to appeal to the religious leadership of Israel to recognize Jesus as their Messiah so they could lead their [14 people] to receive and embrace Him.

   Heb 13:13-14

10. Salvation is only possible when a person stops relying on a religious system and trusts in [14 Christ] alone.

   * Q #3: Why do you baptize?

   [Verses 24-25]
   Deut 18:15; Ezek 36:25

11. Spiritual cleansing was symbolized by John’s baptizing people in water as a sign of repentance in preparation for the entrance of [14 Christ] into their hearts to cleanse and forgive them of their sins.

   Jn 1:31

   [Verse 26]

12. Now we see the utter humility of John’s character, which was part of his being the [18 greatest] man who had ever lived.

   [Verses 27-28]

13. The masses of people who came to hear John and be baptized by him were willing to come a long way both geographically and spiritually from their old religious [22 traditions].

   Mt 10:32-33

14. Do we seek the lowliest position in order to lift up our Savior and [16 glorify] Him in the eyes of other people?