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ABOVE AND BEYOND Matthew 3

I recently read a true story about something that happened at a Macy's store in Sacramento. An obviously homeless man was in the store and was sitting in the shoe department. He only had one tattered, clearly worn out shoe and nothing on the other foot. The manager of the department began talking to him. He was a Vietnam vet, and did, indeed, need some shoes. The manager went into the back and came out with a brand new pair of Puma athletic shoes. She had him try them on. He said they fit and were very nice but he couldn't afford them. The woman said she would take care of it as a present to him. The writer of the story assumed the store had some sort of budget for things like that, or perhaps they were some shoes that had been returned and they couldn't sell. But when the man left with his new shoes the manager got in line at the cash register, took out a credit card and paid \$60 for the shoes herself. She definitely went above and beyond the call of duty. I would like us to think about that idea today.

Leading up to Christmas we looked at the first 2 chapters of the book of Matthew. Today I am going to pick up in Matthew 3 where we see the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In the coming weeks we are going to take a look at each chapter in the book of Matthew, focusing on one main aspect of each chapter as we take one chapter a week. So let's look at Matthew 3.

JOHN WAS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

Verse 1 tells us that John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Wait, there were Baptists back in the first century? Was he Southern Baptist or Conservative Baptist, or Reformed Baptist? John wasn't a member of a Baptist church, which didn't even exist back then. A more accurate translation of that term probably would be "Baptizer." He was known as the Baptizer because baptizing Jewish people was a bit unusual in his day. Verse 6 tells us that he was baptizing people in the Jordan River.

Quite a lot about John was unusual. Notice the description of him in verse 4. His "clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and honey." My dad once had a camel hair sport coat that was really classy. What John wore wasn't that. Back then there was some woven camel hair what was quite expensive. But there was also a material that was scratchy and coarse. This is what John had. He would not have worn it for its luxurious softness

and rich texture or for its chic stylishness, but because it was cheap and rugged. It was kind of the first century low end version of denim. It was working class attire at best. It was what you wore if you couldn't afford regular clothes.

He ate locusts and honey. Wait, he ate grasshoppers? Gross! I don't like pretty much any bugs, but grasshoppers are some of the worst. They've always freaked me out. Merely the thought of eating them makes me want to swear off eating altogether. This is something you would only do if you were in SERE school where they teach survival and evasion to military pilots. You're on the run, hiding from enemy forces in the woods, and you have to eat bugs to survive. It makes not surviving sound appealing.

Have you ever looked at a grasshopper? There is not a lot of meat on them. You're not going to see a grasshopper filet at the market or a grasshopper loin. How many of them would you have to eat to get even a fraction of a meal? Was this some kind of new diet plan? You'll be sure to shed pounds in a hurry following the Judean wilderness plan. For breakfast, roasted grasshopper with a dollop of honey. Skip lunch then for dinner sautéed grasshopper with a honey glaze. You'd shed pounds because you mostly would never get enough meat to keep weight on. Besides, again, there's no way I'm eating grasshopper.

Matthew wasn't giving us a comprehensive list of all the foods John ate. His point was that John was living off the land. These were the kinds of things he subsisted on because he was just eating whatever he could get his hands on. His clothes and his food were low cost items that could be harvested from the arid wasteland that he was living in.

Another unusual thing about him was where he was preaching. It was in the Judean wilderness. He was not in a population center, but in the dry terrain between Jerusalem and the Jordan River.

It is surprising is that crowds of people were flocking out to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. This was not like a big crusade such as evangelists today might have where they schedule events at a stadium or arena and advertise the dates and times so that people know when and where to come. John was out in the boondocks and people had to walk out there and look for him. They couldn't drive out there. John didn't have buses to bring people out and the fixed rail system there was terrible. Yet somehow large numbers of people were making the effort to trek out into that wilderness area, hoping to find him and maybe hanging around until he started preaching.

How did that become a thing? Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book titled *The Tipping Point* in which he explored the question of how anything becomes a thing. How do the many fads that have come and gone like pet rocks and pogs catch on? How does something like the man bun become a thing? Whatever the answer to that is, John became a thing. Large crowds were going out in the wilderness to see him and listen to his message.

I sometimes wonder how that ministry ever got started. How did John start attracting attention out in the wilderness to begin with? Unfortunately we won't know because we have no record of it. Maybe some of it was his uniqueness. The whole wild man mystique maybe generated interest. Part of it was his message that contained an element that definitely appealed to the populace. Also the people back then didn't have a lot of entertainment options, so something different like John might have drawn attention. But I suspect the answer in this case was mostly the Spirit of God was working, drawing people out to this man and his message in that mysterious way that God works.

JOHN PREPARED PEOPLE FOR THE KING

John's message was "repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Specifically he said that one was coming who, according to verse 11, "is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." This was a reference to Messiah, who would baptize people either with the Holy Spirit or with the fire of judgment.

There was a sense around that time that Messiah was going to come. John confirmed that it was indeed about to happen. All knew that the ancient prophets said that Messiah would set up an eternal kingdom when he came, the kingdom of heaven on earth. Part of the reason people were flowing out to hear John was that this was an exciting message, one they all wanted to hear. They knew the promises of the ancient prophets that this would be a kingdom of peace, power, safety and abundance. They were thrilled with the message that the King had come near and the kingdom was at hand.

But John also proclaimed the need for them to change their ways. He said in verse 9 they needed to produce "fruit in keeping with repentance." He said they couldn't rely on being Abraham's descendants. The tendency was to think that they were God's chosen people merely because of their ethnic heritage, and that therefore the kingdom belonged to them. But John said there is a moral and spiritual aspect of the kingdom. They needed to straighten up their act, to change their ways because

most of them were outwardly religious to some degree but were mostly preoccupied with getting what they could for themselves.

John had people signify their desire to change their ways by being baptized. This was a unique feature of his ministry. Baptizing was not completely unknown prior to John. If a Gentile wished to convert to Judaism one part of the process involved being baptized. This symbolized the previous life as a Gentile and likely a pagan ending, and a new life as a Jew and a worshiper of the one true God, beginning.

So baptizing was known, but not all that common. Yes, it was part of the Gentile conversion process, but that didn't happen all that much. And it certainly had nothing to do with people who were already Jewish. What would they be converting to?

The Greek word for baptize was baptizo, and its basic meaning was to dip, dunk or immerse. It was used of dying cloth. Obviously if you are going to dye something the whole thing has to be dipped into the dye or it won't all take on the new color. In John 13:26 Jesus said, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." The word "dipped" was baptizo.

It is kind of interesting that somewhere along the line in church history a big part of the church began teaching that the correct mode of baptizing people was to sprinkle them. When people first began translating the New Testament into English they faced a problem. If they translated the word baptizo according to its normal meaning they would say a person was dipped or immersed, but this would cause a problem with the prevalent teaching of the church. So what they did was basically duck the problem and just turned the Greek word into a new English one. Instead of saying "Be immersed for forgiveness of your sins" they just said, "Be baptized." Problem avoided.

Except if you don't immerse you kind of miss the point. Verse 6 says the people were "confessing their sins" and "were baptized (dipped) by him in the Jordan River." They were admitting they had not been obeying God, were not loving him with all their heart, soul and strength. They confessed this and were dunked, which pictured life being lived like that ending, then they rose up out of the water to a new way of living that was ready for the King to come. The point here is not to get hung up on baptismal methodology, but to understand what John was preaching and how the people were responding.

JOHN BAPTIZED THE KING

In verse 13 things get a bit strange. John has been preaching that the kingdom of God had come near because the King, the coming Messiah, was already alive and about to show up. In verse 13 he arrives, and does the most curious thing. He asks John to baptize him! So let me get this straight. John is telling people they need to repent and be baptized to get ready for the King and his Kingdom. When the King shows up he asks to be baptized so, what, he can be ready for himself? This doesn't make any sense at all.

John gets it right away. He tells Jesus he has it backwards. If there's any baptizing that's going to be done then Jesus ought to baptize him, not the other way around. When Toby was in high school I coached his high school hockey team. Sometimes in practice this presented me with a problem. I needed to teach the kids how to do things that I wasn't very good at myself. I was a poor hockey player, and if all the players on my team played at the level I played at, our team would have been terrible. For instance, I had to teach them how to do a slapshot. The problem for me was that I knew the theoretical principles of how to do a slapshot, I just didn't want to demonstrate it because I had a laughably bad slapshot. If I was the example to follow the kids would end up thinking, "great, if we do what coach says we can have a slapshot like his. A shot that is so weak and goes so slow that flies can land on the puck on its way to the goal." I could tell them the basics, but then I'd have to have one of the kids who had a good shot show them how to do it.

So let's imagine that one day I'm at practice with the team and Wayne Gretzky, the greatest hockey player of all time, somehow showed up at practice and said, "Coach Rick, I could use some help. Could you teach me how to shoot?" What do you think I would say? "Are you kidding? I can't teach you anything. I could only make you worse. If there's any teaching that's going to take place here I need you to teach me." That's just what John felt. He wanted no part of baptizing Jesus. That was completely backwards.

Jesus had nothing to confess. He had nothing to repent of. He didn't need to put away his old way of living and put on a new way of life, so why in the world would he want to be baptized? He told John to nevertheless permit it and baptize him in order to "fulfill all righteousness." That's a bit cryptic. What did it mean?

This would be easy to understand if there was some command in the Law or in the Old Testament somewhere that said if you want to be right with God and do his will you have to be baptized. The New Testament commands us to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, but at that time there was no such command. There was

no expectation that a person would have to be baptized to be right with God, or, in other words, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

So what did Jesus mean? I believe there were a couple of aspects to this. One is that Jesus had a sense that this was an important first step for him to take in beginning his mission to rescue the world. By submitting to John’s baptism what Jesus was really doing was saying to the Father, “I now take on the public role of being Messiah. I am ready for the kingdom and what it is going to take to begin it on earth. I accept this mission you have given me and am now committing to carrying it out. I am ready to publicly fulfill the role of Messiah and suffer what that requires.” By taking that step Jesus was fulfilling righteousness, beginning to do what the Father willed.

Being baptized by John was a first step because in doing so he was endorsing John’s ministry. A big part of this ministry was preparing people for Messiah, then telling them that Jesus was the one he had been talking about. By endorsing John Jesus was saying, “Listen to him when he tells you to follow me.”

But there is one other aspect of this fulfilling righteousness thing. Jesus had no sin to confess, no need to signify that he was turning from it by the image of going into the water and coming up a new person. But in going into that water he was identifying himself with all the people who did need it. Even though he had no sin he would end up being executed as though he was the worst of sinners. He would take all of our sin upon himself. In so doing he identified with us and took upon himself what we all deserve. That made it possible for us to be declared righteous by God, so Jesus did indeed fulfill righteousness.

THE KING GOT AN “ATTABOY”

When Jesus came up out of the water he saw the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove according to verse 16. Some people get confused here. They think the Holy Spirit looked like a dove. Matthew says the Holy Spirit came down on him the way a dove might fly down and land on something. It’s not the look of the dove but the manner of floating down that is the point. So what did the Spirit look like to Jesus? We don’t know. All we know is that Jesus saw him glide down and land on him.

But wait, wasn’t Jesus divine? Didn’t that mean he already had the Spirit of God in him? Yes, it does mean that. What was happening here was the Father was giving Jesus a visible reminder of the truth. He depicted the Spirit landing on him to remind him that the Spirit was in him to strengthen him for the mission that he had

just committed himself to. It was an affirmation and a helpful picture for him to keep in his mind in the coming difficult years.

We easily forget that Jesus was fully human. He was going to do battle with the human condition in terrible ways in the next couple of years, and he had to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit just like we do. So let me ask you a question. Do you think it would help you if when you put your faith in Jesus you had seen a vision of the Holy Spirit coming and landing on you? I'm pretty sure I'd never forget that, and it would be an extremely helpful memory for me in tough times, as well as a reminder to look to the Holy Spirit for strength continually.

Toby is basically done with his medical school work. He has a couple of minor things to do in the first three months this year, but he has all the training as a doctor that he needs before he starts his first shift in a hospital emergency department next summer. In June he will officially graduate from medical school. At that time as part of that ceremony they will put a long white doctor's coat on him. The funny thing about that is he will never wear one. In the emergency department he will typically just wear scrubs. He doesn't need the coat. Having it won't make him any more prepared or any more of a doctor than he already is. So why give him one? It is a moment that will declare for him that he is now prepared to be a doctor. The coat is a reminder of who he is and what he is about to do. Seeing the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus was kind of like that for him.

That message was emphasized by what accompanied it. Jesus heard the voice of the Father booming out from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." In other words, "That's my Boy!" God was telling his son, "I'm really proud of you." Jesus took his first step on the road to the cross, declaring his commitment to carry out his role as Messiah, and the Father gave him two big thumbs up. "Way to go, Son, I'm with you all the way."

IMPLICATIONS

That's sort of interesting I guess, but what does it have to do with us? There are some things we can learn from this passage that are important for us to live by.

LIVE IN THE HUMILITY OF JESUS

There is something John and Jesus display in common in this passage. John looked like some kind of wild man. He lived out in a wilderness area with basically no creature comforts whatsoever. He could count on the fact that he was going to be misunderstood and misjudged by some, maybe many, people. In fact, there were going to be some who would see him as a fanatic at best and a lunatic at worst. He didn't care what people thought. He just did what God wanted him to do.

To go even a step farther, consider what John's whole ministry was about. It was to tell people to prepare for the coming Messiah. When that Messiah arrived what was next for John? In John 3 some people came to John and said, "Hey, that guy you baptized is starting to draw your crowds away. Everyone is going to hear him. You need to up your game to compete with him." In verse 30 John said, "He must become greater, I must become less." In other words, he's the guy that should be in the spotlight, and it's time for me to just fade away.

That shows some considerable humility. John was famous! He was a big deal. People were walking miles out into the desert to hear him preach. And now he accepted that it was time for him to just fade into obscurity. He was fine with that because he was focused not on promoting himself, but on carrying out whatever mission God had for him to do.

We can also see amazing humility in Jesus in this passage. When he was baptized no one gave an explanation of why that was happening. So to everyone except John and Jesus himself, Jesus appeared to be doing exactly what everybody else was doing. He was admitting sins and committing to turn over a new leaf and live a new way. In other words, he looked just like everybody else.

The truth is that was true of Jesus' whole life. He looked like just a normal human being. To this day there are a lot of people who claim Jesus was just a human like anyone else. To accomplish his mission Jesus had to put himself in the position where people could think he was like everyone else, or worse. He had to not care about that, but only care about what the Father thought. That was part of why it was so important for him to get the "attaboy" that we see in this incident.

When Jesus committed to being baptized he had to think, "I don't care how I look or what anyone thinks. I only know that this is what the Father wants me to do, and that's all that matters. So how I look to anyone else doesn't matter at all." John had to give up caring if he looked bizarre or crazy to some people, he had to give up caring about having some big impact, having notoriety or fame and be willing to accept totally fading out of the picture. Jesus had to do something that would make people think things about him that weren't true. Both of them didn't care about any of that stuff. They cared only about what the Father told them to do. All that mattered was doing his will.

Romans 8:29 says God has predestined us who are believers in Jesus to become conformed to the image of his Son. In other words, he is working to make us like

him. 1 Peter 2:21 says that Jesus has given us an example “that you should follow in his steps.” We are to be like Jesus! We are to have the same kind of humility that Jesus displayed. That means we need to grow to the place where just like him we don’t care how we look to other people. We don’t care what people think of us. Instead, what we care about is doing the Father’s will, and nothing else matters.

Don’t you hate that feeling of being concerned about what people think about you? It’s called self consciousness, and it is a curse. It’s a miserable feeling. I hate it when I’ve spilled something on my shirt and I have to walk around thinking people are looking at me like I must be a total slob. Most people do not like being conspicuous. That’s self consciousness. One of the worst things is when we know people are thinking negative things about us that aren’t true. We desperately want to set the record straight.

Years ago our family was away on vacation. Our first night we went to a grocery store to buy some food. I went to the dairy section to get some yogurt for us and while I was doing that a man I’ve never seen before started yelling at me and telling me what a terrible person I am. I was stunned, and finally said, “Are you talking to me?” I couldn’t imagine why this person who was a total stranger was talking like that to me. But when I spoke to him it seemed to infuriate him even more. He began using foul language and hurling even more angry insults at me. He finally began walking away, yelling at me as he went. I looked around and there were a number of people looking at me, clearly all wondering what I had done to that man. I seriously wanted to defend myself and explain the situation to them. All I could do was say, “I’ve never seen that guy before in my life. He must be crazy.” Man I hate that feeling of knowing people think bad things about me that just aren’t true.

One of the best ways for us to get past that is to care about something way more than we care about how we look or what people think of us. Especially that means caring so passionately about doing whatever the Father wants us to do that what people might think of us is of no interest to us whatsoever.

A few years ago I used to run sprints as part of my work out regimen. I have quit doing that because I kept hurting myself. But I would do these 50 yard sprints up and down our street. I remember a time when there was a new neighbor out in her front yard when I went out to do my sprints. I kind of stalled, loosening up, hoping she’d go back in her house. But she wasn’t going anywhere. So I finally just started doing my work. I could see her looking at me like I was some nut case. Why is that old man running up and down the street like that? He’s awfully slow. What exactly

does he think he's going to accomplish? I figured out rather quickly if I focused on what that woman must think of me I was going to stop fairly quickly. But if I focused on what mattered, trying to keep myself in the best possible physical condition, then whatever she thought was irrelevant. Let her think whatever she will.

As it turns out this is a principle that is key for doing anything important in life. This week I had to have a medical test done. They claim it was a necessary test, but in my estimation it was much more like an enhanced interrogation technique. Oddly I don't have any vital information or secrets, and they didn't try to get any out of me. If they had I would have spilled my guts. Anything to get them to stop. But before they started the torture they had to prepare me. A young woman nurse came into the room and explained what she was going to do. Without committing an egregious TMI infraction I will just tell you that it involved her invading my personal space in an humiliating way. The only way to do the important thing, which was to get the test done, was for me to be focused on what mattered, not on how I might look or what anyone thought. By the way, the test showed no serious problems.

There's great freedom in being so focused on something that what people think doesn't matter. In the end that's the key to true humility. When we are so focused on doing what God wants us to do that what people think is irrelevant, then we are going to experience real humility, and real freedom.

MAX OUT LIKE JESUS

There was nothing in the Law of Moses about Jesus needing to be baptized to "fulfill all righteousness." Looking at it from the outside his being baptized by any human being was ludicrous. Yet if this was what the Father wanted him to do, then he would do it. The thing that struck me as amazing was his willingness to do whatever it took to do the Father's will, even when from my perspective it made no sense.

Wouldn't it be powerful if we, too, had the attitude that Jesus had? That we would do the Father's will no matter what it takes, even if it seems ludicrous, foolish, costly, difficult, outlandish or crazy.

Quite a few years ago in a different ministry there was a guy on the church staff team I served on whom I had considered a friend. However, over a period of a couple of years several people, one of them not even a part of that church, warned me about him. They told me he was striving to undermine me and get me fired.

After hearing it repeatedly I suspected there was truth in it, so I talked to him about it. He fervently denied it. But as time went on I realized that despite his protestations of innocence it was most certainly true. I had irrefutable evidence of it. I was faced with the question of what to do about it. The temptation was to fight fire with fire, to get in the trenches and do battle, to undermine him the way he was trying to undermine me. Beat him at his own game. But I was a pastor, so I figured as part of my deliberations I ought to at least consider what God might have to say about it. What would God want me to do? And the answer wasn't all that hard to figure out. Jesus commanded me in Matthew 5:44 to love my enemies. If this guy was indeed an enemy as he seemed to be, then the right response was to love him. Well that's a terrible idea. How can you win a battle like that by loving a guy? Nevertheless, that's what Jesus said I should do. So, though I felt the pull of the desire to protect myself, though it felt like I was foolishly leaving myself exposed, I determined to just try to love the guy. To the world that would be considered a bad decision. And honestly, I paid a price for it. It cost me. But I am more clear than ever to this day that it was what God commanded me to do.

Perhaps you saw the story a couple of years ago on both NBC, CBS and People magazine about a single mother in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, named Tricia Somers who was diagnosed with cancer. She learned that it was in her liver and it was terminal. The father of her 8 year old son, Wesley, was long gone and out of the picture. One day she asked her favorite oncology nurse, Tricia Seaman for a huge favor. She had no other surviving family, so she asked the nurse if she and her husband would raise Wesley after she died. Tricia Seaman was shocked, but said she would ask her husband, and they agreed to take Wesley. But they went beyond that. In the final months of her life they had Tricia Somers and her son come both live with them and their children until she died. Tricia Seaman said of their willingness to show such love, "God had this planned perfectly." When asked about why they were willing to do so much she said, "We want to do more than we're asked. Isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

In Philippians 2:17 Paul wrote, "Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you." He was talking about the possibility that he would be executed because of his ministry on the behalf of them and others. He said if that's what it takes to do God's will, then he rejoiced in it.

The example of Jesus in this passage calls on us to expend ourselves lavishly and ludicrously in our attempts to love and serve God, to put no limit on what we will do for him.

REMEMBER WHAT JESUS HAS DONE

Think of that act of being baptized. Jesus was identifying himself with us. What an astounding act that was. You know that I love sports. I am a real fan. But I am not a fanatic. I see those people at games on television with their faces painted in their team's colors or with some bizarre costume on, the worst being the Raiders fans with their skull masks, spikes and chains. I don't ever want to be anything like them. I don't want anyone to ever identify me as being one of them. Those people need to get a life. They've got things out of whack. I'm not like them. Well we are way more out of whack than I think those Raiders fans are. We are all desperately in need of a life. And the thing that astounds me is, Jesus was willing to be identified with us! He didn't say, "Hey, don't lump me in with those nut jobs." He jumped in with both feet and said, "I'm with them!"

Do you understand why he did this? He did this because he loves us that much. Being loved by Jesus is the basis, the starting point for security, self acceptance, worth and spiritual and emotional health. At our core all of us desperately need to be loved. To become secure and at peace in life we must start with this incredible truth. Jesus loves us. He loves you and me. He loves us so much he entered into our condition, our world, and identified himself with us, so that we might become free, so that we might have hope. The most important thing we can do is understand and be gripped in our souls by the fact the King Jesus loves us.

Jesus came here to connect us to God's unconditional, limitless love, and to take away any condemnation so we can be justified. Never, ever doubt that he has fully accomplished that task. When you fear that God doesn't love you, when you think he condemns you or does not approve of you, when you feel you have no worth, you are saying that Jesus did not accomplish his goal. He didn't finish the job. Jesus came for that purpose. He allowed himself to be baptized in order to achieve it, and he has fully accomplished that. Rest in that reality. Rejoice in it. And love him back with all your heart.

The engine of the Christian life, the power of it, comes from being convinced, relieved, and overwhelmed that Jesus identified with us so that we want to live as he did. Being as free and humble as he was, maxing out on doing God's will like he did, will only happen as we are filled with gratitude for him and love for him. That is what compels us to want to live for him.