

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 1 - I Cannot Entitle This Chapter

Who is Jesus? That's our big question this semester, and one we'll be using the book of John to answer. Do you know who Jesus is? How have you gathered that knowledge? Have you been reading the Bible? Does your knowledge of Jesus come from Vacation Bible School as a kid? Did you watch Veggie Tales growing up?

I would guess there is a wide range in our knowledge of Jesus and the Bible. Statistics and studies show that our culture is getting more and more ignorant as to basic Christian knowledge. People can't put major books of the Bible in the correct order. People don't know a thing about Paul. People couldn't name one or two of the great reformers of the church, or anyone in church history for that matter. People think "God helps those who help themselves" is a verse from the Bible.

So we have the group of people who know something about Jesus, but it's fuzzy. Maybe they walked the aisle at Falls Creek Baptist Church Camp. Maybe they went through confirmation camp and had to sign off on a few doctrines. But they don't *know* Jesus. They got bored. They stopped paying attention. They're not sure if church or the Bible will be much a part of their lives in college.

There's another type of person. I met my wife Julie when we were sophomores in college at the University of Missouri. She didn't grow up going to church. I asked her one day if she knew who Jesus was. She said, "I don't know – he's God's son or something like that isn't he?" Well, she was right. But she didn't know Jesus at all, not even really the basics. She knew she didn't know. I was amazed an 18-year-old young woman could grow up in our culture and not know about Easter, about Jesus. But that's where she was. Some of you are in this group. You didn't grow up going to church. You are interested in checking out Jesus, and know you don't know him. It's an important and worthy pursuit, and I commend you for it.

John helps us out. He gives eyewitness testimony to Jesus and his life. He was one of Jesus' best friends by the end of Jesus' life. He wrote out this account of Jesus, not in a day by day journal entry format, but with certain themes in view so he could explain to you about Jesus and why he matters. I'm thinking we'll find that Jesus isn't quite what we expected. And that will be good for us.

John comes from an upper-middle class background. He is a businessman, and his father was one as well. They owned and operated fishing boats. Although not quite as dramatic and rugged as Captain Sid Hansen in The Discovery Channel's *The Deadliest Catch*, you could think of John's family as the ones who owned and ran the boats. John was an educated man (like many of you or what you're trying to be in college), and he knew his Bible (he refers to the Old Testament all the time, and you've got to pay attention to that). John could speak three languages – Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. I'm not sure if he were a National Merit Scholar, but he would have applied to and been accepted in the J.C. Penny Leadership school at the University of Oklahoma. He's like many of you and also what many of you want to be. He's smart, successful, passionate, articulate, and he lives a long time.

Scholars debate when John wrote this, but I think it was most likely before 70 A.D., which would put this book within a generation of Jesus' life and death. In 70 A.D. something huge happened. The Romans desecrated and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The impact on the life and thinking of any Jewish person would have been staggering. If that had happened before John wrote this gospel, then why would he not have even mentioned it? Realize that not all scholars agree with this dating.² Most liberal scholars want to date this book much, much later, and they reject the Apostle John as the author. But even they have been forced to earlier and earlier dates because of archaeological findings.

The book of John is dense. It's filled with stories, information, lessons, Old Testament allusions, and dearly-loved verses. The commentary set I have by James Montgomery Boice has 25 sermons on the first chapter alone. But we're going for a big-picture view, trying to cover a whole chapter at a time (and even then we'll have to skip a few to get finished). That means we won't bore down into every detail, and there will be things we'll have to gloss over. That will get us frustrated at times, but then you can always check out and buy Boice, and you'll get the details you're craving.

Let's start. We're going to work our way backwards from the end of John 1. Follow. Forgiveness. Forever.

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For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Conservative scholar and commentator D.A. Carson tentatively dates John at 80-85 A.D. He thinks it's after the destruction of the temple, but far enough after so that information is assumed and in the past. It's not much after 85 because he believes the apostle John wrote the book.

Follow

Have you ever started following a group of people, only to find out they weren't going where you wanted to go? I'll often just figure that other people know where the entrance is, or the best way to get somewhere or a cool shortcut. So instead of taking the energy to figure it out on my own, I take off after them. That doesn't always work out. Have you had that happen to you?

All of us follow something. Even the best leaders among us follow. What will you follow? You might decide to follow fame and fortune, career and success. You want to achieve. You want to be seen as a big shot. You want to make a pile of money, drive a perfect car, sit by the pool at the country club and run in the best social circles. You're following.

You may want to follow love, or something like love. You want to get married, have kids and settle down. Or you may want to follow independence and power. You will use someone before he uses you. You're hooking up with someone to get your needs met, and there are no strings attached. You're following.

I'm not sure what you're following. Science. The latest fads. Academic accolades. Being a fun, hang out person. Winning at Puerto Rico all the time. The next rush of adrenaline. The guy you met at Camp Crimson. You're following something.

Jesus wants us to follow him. Here in the first chapter of John, he starts to call people to give their lives to him. Several groups are interested in Jesus. He intrigues them. They want to know more about him. They hear people talking about Jesus, and they go up to talk to him, asking him where he's staying, presumably so they can hang out with him more. Jesus answers them with, "Come and you will see." He invites them to follow him.

One of them is Andrew. Andrew is excited. He thinks he's found something special, something amazing. He's found the Messiah. He's found the hero of the people, the one who will come and save them and set things right again, the one "people have been talking about and waiting for." (The Jewish word or term or title for this is Messiah. The Greek word for the same thing is Christ.) So he goes and tells his brother, Simon.

Simon apparently believes his brother, and he also goes to find Jesus. Jesus' first words to him are: "You are Simon? I'm changing your name to Peter." That would be a strange thing to do to someone within the first seconds of your meeting. We have several nicknames around here, but most of them develop over time, and none of them are complete, wholesale name changes. I call Cody by the name of Brody, just to throw people off. I sometimes call Becky by the name of Rebecca, because that is not actually her proper name and it makes her slightly miffed.

But Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter. You know him as Peter, a nickname that means "Rocky." Jesus is showing he has authority over people's lives. He changes people, even their names, when they follow him.

The next and last section of the end of John 1 shows another meeting with Jesus.

Jesus meets some other men, who wonder what he is. A guy named Philip says, "We found him! The one Moses and the Prophets have been talking about! He's here. His name is Jesus from Nazareth." Nathanel, his buddy, isn't so sure. Nazareth isn't an impressive town. It's like saying the Hero of the World came from Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Right. I doubt it.

But Nathanael is willing to take a look, and he finds out Jesus had already known him. He had seen him before. Strange. Creepy maybe. But he knew Nathanael before Nathanael knew him. We don't know what Nathanael had been doing underneath that tree when Jesus saw him, and we may never know. But Jesus sees his people. It may be in class. It may be in your dorm room. It may be in her room the morning after. It may be at a party, or sitting in the cafeteria, or on a weekend away. It may be in your worst moment, or in some idyllic scene. Jesus will see you, and he'll call you.

Just this week, our RUF group went to two fairs where all the freshmen could see what OU and Norman had to offer. Businesses were there handing out coupons, food, pens and knickknacks. Campus groups were there to see if you might want to join them in ultimate Frisbee, the college Democrats, the economics club. We passed out cups, FreezePops and flyers, telling people about RUF and where and when we'd be meeting.

They're all looking for followers, for disciples. You can put a condom in your pocket, or a mug in your cupboard, but they really want you to join them, to believe in them and to follow them. What will you follow while you're in college and for the rest of your life? Will it be compelling enough to hold your attention for that long?

Forgiveness

I'm suggesting that Jesus is big enough to be worth following. Just think, this man named Jesus starts walking up to people and has no trouble at all asking them to follow him around. What is so interesting about him that would make people think that was a good idea?

Aside from Jesus' commanding personality, and superpower-like seeing through space and time, he has another amazing quality. He forgives sins. That's what John the Baptist thinks and exclaims. We get this story from the middle of John 1.

John the Baptist is the last Old Testament prophet, but we find him in the opening pages of the New Testament. He is telling people about the coming Messiah/Christ, and baptizing them in a ritual that symbolizes full life commitment.

You can see from these few verses that people were on the lookout for the Messiah. Anyone who could possibly fit the bill was intensely scrutinized and interviewed.

It's like when OU hadn't yet hired Bob Stoops. After the legacies of Bud Wilkinson and Barry Switzer, there were some lean, falling off years. Would Gary Gibbs keep it going? No. John Blake? He didn't work out. So they hired Howard Schnellenberger, who had won national championships at Miami. He was a disaster. Every new candidate was put through the wringer, and expectations were nervously high.³

John the Baptist is facing that same sort of pressure. But he knows who he is. He's not the Messiah. In fact, he says he's not even close. He's just a servant preparing the way for the one who is going to come.

Little does he know that that one *had* come. And then he met him.

It's strange when someone knows you before you know him or her. We recently had Anna McDowell come through the process to move to Norman to work with RUF as an intern here at OU. When we found out she had been placed here, I sent a message to all of the OURUF students to befriend her on facebook. So when Anna came to Summer Conference in May and met our group, everyone knew her. They had looked at her pictures. They knew her interests. They had "stalked" her online (in a good way, I'm told the term for this is "creeping"). She had the same thing happen when she moved to Norman and came to church the first week. Everyone had heard about her, and we'd prepared them for her coming. "You're the new intern!" they said.

But that's nothing compared to John's exclamation when he sees and meets Jesus for the first time. He doesn't say, "I heard about you!" or "We know the same people" or "So glad to meet you." Or " You look bigger in person" or "I've been facebook stalking you!" No – he goes way over the top and says something crazy, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John saw him as the anointed Messiah, blessed with the Holy Spirit as the one sent by God, the one whom everyone had been waiting for.

What do you think about that? Do you think you need forgiveness? Most people do. Most of us will admit we're not perfect, we're not everything we should be. We'd be right, though the actual condition is much, much worse than you thought.

Have you already experienced it this weekend? Did you go to that party that was wilder than any you'd been to before in high school? Maybe you took your shirt off, or went farther than that. Statistics would say that practically none of you will be virgins by the time you're done with college, though most of you aren't starting with that status.

Have you stood someone else up yet, choosing something more fun and cooler when the opportunity arose? Do you think you'll cheat this semester? Did you go to church last Sunday, or did you take the chance to sleep in after staying up way too late the night before?

I could go on and on. We have problems, and I'm merely scratching the surface. If you are aware at all, you know you need forgiveness because things aren't right with you, things aren't right in the world.

Amazingly, Jesus offers forgiveness. The Messianic King of the Universe doesn't write you off when you fail. He forgives you. He removes the stain. That crushing weight of guilt you have? Jesus heals you.

John the Baptist recognizes it and falls down in worshipping Jesus because of it. The lamb of God was a picture and symbol of forgiveness in the Old Testament. The priests would sacrifice the spotless lamb to show the forgiveness of God. Now here was The Lamb of God.

Jesus' discipleship entails forgiveness. The one who leads you also loves you.

This should change you, friends. Here at OU many of you suffer under the weight of expectations. You either think you are amazing and awesome because you're an achiever. Or you think you're terrible and worthless because you don't measure up. You can think both things in one day. You may feel terrible about your physical appearance, but then go and feel great about your intellectual prowess. Or vice versa. You're trapped.

John the Baptist shows us another way. He was important. He was a BMOC. He mattered. People followed him, listened to him and cared about him. He was a star.

But he gave it all up for someone else. He realized someone greater than he was here. He stooped down to the very point of a slave. He gave his voice to announce the Good News. He knew he couldn't do for the people what they truly wanted and needed. So he gave his life away.

He led, *and* he served. It's a foretaste of what Jesus did, and it's something that can transform you. If you can live by faith, you can be released from the bondage of these other masters – looks, grades, status, Greek house, etc – and you can experience freedom from guilt and shame, walking in light and forgiveness.

Forever

We've landed back at the beginning of John 1. Not only does Jesus call us to follow; not only does Jesus offer us forgiveness. But John goes all the way back to the beginning of forever to establish Jesus as God himself.

This is truly amazing language. John doesn't give the normal birth narratives of Matthew, Mark and Luke. He doesn't set Jesus through the genealogies or as being the son of Mary. He zooms past that.

He says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God." We are immediately to think of the Genesis 1, "In the beginning, God created." He created by his words. He spoke and it happened. His words has power. The word (the *logos*) is also a big idea, a concept, and overarching principle.

³ (and are again with Stoops' last four BCS bowl losses...)

John here says that the Word is a person and that person is God. This Word had a preexistence apart from creation. In fact, this Word created creation (see Proverbs 8). This Word is the second person in the Trinity. This Word is Jesus himself.

What do you make of that? It seems fabulous, fantastical even, doesn't it?

We don't have time to go through all of the arguments (I'd recommend Tim Keller's book *Reason for God* if you're interested in more), and realize that John doesn't go through them either. He asserts this view of the Deity of Jesus. He starts there.

If you're a Christian, have you thought recently on how much this matters? Have you grown tired of who Jesus is? Have you thought of his preexistence, his power and glory?

If you're not a Christian, what is your explanation for the world and why it's here? Are you really buying into "chance" as the creator of the universe? Perhaps you are, but realize that view, or any other view you might have takes faith to believe in as well. You cannot maintain a "neutral" position, so at least be honest enough to admit you have a view and know where it comes from and why.

In John's view, the Christian view, there is an explanation for the world, and also for why the world has rejected Jesus when he was here and even now. It's because there is light and darkness. God is light. Jesus is light. But the world did not know him. The world rejected him. This is similar to how Gotham City views and understands Batman, especially as portrayed in *The Dark Knight*. They want him, but they don't want him. He saves them, and they reject him. He's misunderstood.

John doesn't go with the Batman imagery quite like we'd want (Batman himself is the savior, but he's a dark one himself, hence the title of this film). John says there is good and evil without mix. Light and darkness. It's a form of dualism that John uses frequently in his writings. He pushes us toward an either or position. He doesn't like it when we fudge our categories. He is saying there is good and bad, good and evil, light and darkness.

We tend to be less sure of these distinctions. We would like to make things "grey-er" than John. That movie wasn't too bad. Doing that shouldn't be looked down on. I can wear that, and it won't matter. Don't push me into boxes. Sure, I'm a Christian but... I wear a cross around my neck, but you won't see me in Bible study.

We think Jesus is something we can just add to our schedules, like Pilates. We think he'll make us a better person. If I go to church or Bible study, if I read my Bible, if I try to walk with him, then he'll make my life better.

However, Jesus eschews this way of thinking. He pushes us, through the book of John, to think starkly. This is good or bad. Not kinda good or kinda bad. This is light. This is darkness. This is why people reject Jesus. Eventually, if they honestly read the Bible, they realize Jesus has a claim and hold on their whole lives, every aspect.

And it explains that there is real evil in the world. John describes it as darkness. You know there is. You were uneasy about The Joker in *The Dark Knight* movie. Why? He was dark, evil. Bad things happen in the dark, hidden away from the watching world, where people can't see and report. The Bible has an explanation for this darkness, this evil. Do you have one? Can you recognize the dark places in your own heart?

Thankfully, there is hope and forgiveness. Remember that Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world, and he resides in, in fact he creates the world of light. I'm guessing you need some forgiveness right now, and so do I. He forgives.

There's something else. Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us. This is from John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Again, this verse could be a whole sermon, but we'll try to restrain ourselves.

God became flesh. God became a man. The one who was dwelling from all time past entered into a mother's womb, was born as a baby, had a diaper, grew up as a boy, went through puberty, studied and worked, and became a man. This is staggering. No one could believe this if it hadn't happened. No other religion says anything like this.

Jesus dwelt among us. This is the incarnation, the amazing doctrine of God's closeness to us. The word "dwelt" is actually "tabernacled" which connects back to Moses and the tent they would construct for God's presence to show up in. The people knew that's where God was; they could see it, feel it, hear it. It was a tent like they had. Bigger and fancier (it was Yahweh's after all), but it was a tent nonetheless.

So Jesus came as a man and lived among us. He didn't pitch his tent far away somewhere.

Pastor Scott Sherman told a story in a sermon I listened to. A man went to his son's school for some meetings and training. He was a counselor, and they school asked him to come. During recess, he overheard his son talking with a few other boys. The first boy said, "My dad is a businessman. We're rich. We have a pool and a Hummer." Impressive. The second boy said, "Oh yeah? My dad is a lawyer. We're rich too. We have a pool and a Hummer and our own private jet. And whenever the President wants advice, he calls my dad and he goes to visit him." Whoa. The man's son was next. What was he going to say? "Oh yeah?" the man's son said. "Well, my dad's *here!*"

Other gods have some fairly impressive feats and attributes. But in Christianity, God *came*. Jesus is "here." He gave up everything and became a real, live, human person who ate and bled and got tired and cried and had parents and had to go to school and had a job – just like you.

But he was God. The implication of this is that when we see Jesus, we are seeing God. Jesus is the glory of God, full of grace and truth. "Grace is found in God's coming and working despite the hostility and rejection of the world."⁴ "Truth is the self-disclosure that alone comes from God; truth is not just what is right, but what is divine *and this is right*."⁵

If you want to know God, you have to know Jesus. If you are knowing Jesus, you are knowing God.

Do you know God? Do you know Jesus? I want all of us to say this as we go through John: "I don't really understand Jesus." That is going to be our mantra. For Christians and non-Christians alike. For all of us. That will help us to reset ourselves from our familiarity, from our arrogance, from our proclivities. We can all be on the same footing, saying I don't really understand Jesus.

What can we apply from chapter 1?

First, there is a call to faith here. John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Are you experiencing the love of the Father?

All of us have been hurt by our fathers, even if we had great ones. We all wished our fathers would have been better or more than they are. My daughter Anna had to draw a picture of her hero for the first day of school. She drew me. That is awesome. But I will fail her. She'll be in counseling some day talking about how I didn't do this or that thing, how I didn't listen good enough. And she'll be right.

Some of you have had terrible fathers. Abusive, drunk ones. Ones that were absent. Ones that hurt your mothers, brothers and sisters. The father image for you is broken, but it's still there.

John says we can be adopted again into the family of God by a loving Father – through Jesus. Even in the midst of the fallenness, we can receive light. God doesn't ask us to clean ourselves up first, but he adopts us into his family as is, then changes us through his love. Believing in Jesus, faith in Jesus means giving your life over to him. That can happen today, right now. Some of you may even think you're Christians but you're not. You haven't truly given over to him. You should. He is worth it, and he forgives his people.

He's the one who came to his people to save them from their sins. He moved into the house to love you and be near you.

Second, because of what Jesus did, we also can "move in" to people's lives. We don't have to live out there in the margins and suburbs. We can live in the midst of campus, knowing people and their hearts. We can love them in a deep and incarnational way without losing ourselves and personhood. We can serve them, and truly be with them.

That sort of living would change our campus. That way of life would transform our world.⁶

Third, we need to learn about Jesus. As we follow him in discipleship, we are seeing we don't really know him after all, not like we thought we did. It's like reconnecting with someone you haven't seen in awhile, who you knew in high school but now it's six years later. I thought I knew you, but I was wrong. People had said things about you, but they were wrong. I had experienced you in a way that wasn't true and accurate. I'd like for our study to help in know Jesus in experiential and intellectual ways. That we would pursue a content and a personal knowledge.

Fourth, let's develop a Come and See approach. Jesus asks people to come and see, and so does Andrew. He invites his brother to come and see Jesus. You can do that. That's really what evangelism is all about. We could pass out tracts or Bibles or come up with a program or bring in a speaker. And that may work or it may seem to work.

I want us to do something different. To be involved in people's lives enough that we can know them. That we could share with them how God is transforming our lives, how forgiveness is at work in the gospel, how hope and grace and truth are meeting us in the depths of despair, brokenness and loneliness.

So we want others to know about it. Come and see Jesus. He can handle your questions and even your anger. Come and hear about Jesus and join us in our not-fully-understanding him. Come with your baggage, and we'll be a community together.

Jesus calls you to come. He may not be quite what you expected. He may change your name. He will change your agenda. He's not just something you add to your schedule. He's bigger than that. He's closer than that. Do you know him? May we see Jesus in grace and truth, see him as he really is.

*"Come," said Jesus' sacred voice "Come, and make My paths your choice
I will guide you to your home, Weary pilgrim, hither come.*

*"Hither come, for here is found Balm that flows for every wound
Peace that ever shall endure Rest eternal, sacred, sure, Rest eternal, sacred, sure.*

⁴ Burge, 59

⁵ Burge, 60

⁶ I'd recommend *A Thousand Resurrections* by Debbie Garriott; she tells her story of moving into the inner city of Baltimore.