

He Must Become Greater

John 3:22-36

Warm-up Question: When you think of great men in history, who comes to mind? What do you think it was that motivated them?

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." ²⁷ To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less. ³¹ "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. ³³ The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. ³⁴ For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:22-36).

The Aim is First to Be with Him.

The first thing we learn about Jesus from this passage is His desire to be with His disciples. The Greek phrase that is translated as "spent some time with them" (Verse 22), means "to rub hard" or "rub through." The thought is of close intimate fellowship where they rubbed shoulders with Him. The gospel writer Mark also mentions this desire of Jesus to be with His people. He writes, "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—

that they might be with Him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14 emphasis mine). His intent was to win their hearts through close intimate fellowship and impart His character to them. Through simply living life with Jesus, He "rubbed off" on them. What a privilege they had, to walk and talk with Jesus here on earth! Have you ever thought of what that must have been like? Today, Jesus would invite us to do the same. The more time you spend drawing near to Christ in reading the Word of God and through prayer, the more His character can "rub off" on you! One can affect a person from a distance, but if you want to impact and bring about change in someone's life, it has to be through close relationship. Jesus said, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well (John 14:7). How encouraging to know that God loves to just be with His people, and to spend time with them. In fact, when you look at all four gospels, one cannot escape the conclusion that there were two main missions for Christ while He was on Earth. 1) To satisfy the Father by paying the price for the sin of mankind through death on the cross. 2) To create a Small Group of men to whom He could model what it was to live life to the fullest on Earth, and send them forth with His message of salvation through what He had accomplished.

We are told in the passage we are studying that Jesus' group was also baptizing just as John the Baptist had been, although later on in his gospel (4:2) John tells us that Jesus himself had not been doing the baptizing:

¹ The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, ² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples (John 4:1-2).

The passage also tells us that John was baptizing at Aenon near Salim. Aenon is a Hebrew word meaning "springs" and that they were baptizing at that location because there was plenty of water there (verse 23). This sentence gives us an indication of how baptism was performed in the days of John and Jesus. They were at that place because there was enough water at the springs to baptize a person by immersion. We do not read anywhere in the scriptures of anyone being bap-

tized by sprinkling. Aenon was chosen as a place of baptism only because it had plenty of water to immerse a person completely.

While John was still baptizing, there arose a concern amongst his disciples.

What were the concerns of John the Baptist's disciples in this passage?

The concern of John's disciples came about because of an argument that they had with an unnamed Jew (verse 25). We don't know the content of that argument, but it was probably a question over whose baptism was superior, John's or Jesus' baptism. Who should people be going to now to be baptized? John had already told some of his disciples that Jesus was the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, and encouraged them to follow Him (John 1:35-37). If you had been a loyal disciple or follower of John watching more and more people going elsewhere, wouldn't it have concerned you? They said:

²⁶ "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (verse 26).

The ministry of John the Baptist was now on a decline. There was something new in town and people were leaving and following Jesus. They were concerned that people were leaving and going elsewhere, perhaps wondering what strategy they could put in place to draw them back.

While in England, I remember hearing of a minister that was faced with something similar in his church. People were leaving and going to another church. His strategy was to put on a mask like a famous comedian of the time and tickle people under the arms with his "tickling stick." He hoped to draw people back, mimicking Ken Dodd, who did something similar in his comedy routine. While Ken Dodd made people laugh, this misguided minister made many shake their heads in amazement. How can we bring a compelling message to others about the love of Christ if we have no message that burns in our hearts? Unfortunately, there is a competitive spirit among many churches. This reveals a motive that is misguided, and therefore, the ministry is misguided as well. Many times as I have attended Pastor's conferences, I have noticed that within a few minutes

of sitting down conversing with one another, pastors will often say, "How big is your church?" The unspoken question behind the question is; "are you worthy of my time?", or "in what way will I be able to profit by spending time with you?" This is obviously the wrong attitude to have. John had no such ambition or false motive for ministry. His desire was to point men to Jesus. He was secure in what he was called to do. There is a reason why Jesus said of John the Baptist:

¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:11).

What was so remarkable about John that Jesus would say such things about him?

John's Message, Mission and Motivation

There were three tasks that God gave John the Baptist:

1) **He was to clear the way.** His job was to move obstacles from the minds and hearts of those who would receive the Messiah (Luke 3:1-20).

2) **To prepare the way.** His preaching was to bring about a true repentance in those who would desire to walk with God.

3) **To get out of the way.** He was to become small enough that people would see the Christ and not John. This third task was before him now. His response to his disciples was to abhor such small soul longings to gather people to himself. The people that were hungry for God did not belong to him. He said:

²⁷ "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven" (verse 27).

He wanted to be faithful to what he had been called to do, and now having cleared the way and prepared the way, it was time to get out of the way. The humility of John shines through this saying. In essence he was saying that his gifting from God could only get the people so far. John was unwilling to draw people to himself; he was called to help men find the Savior. His ministry was to point the way to Christ. This is also the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, those who can equip others and then get out of the way so that the people of God can fulfill their calling (Ephesians 4:11-12). We are to point men and women to Jesus Christ and get out of the way. We can only succeed in ministry when the people of God are growing in their

love for Christ. We can be successful in bringing people to church, but are they being pointed to Jesus? This is the ministry of every one of those that are in Christ: to point the way for others to fall in love with the Savior. Too often people in the church are not functioning in their gifting and God given calling. These people gifts of God, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, those individuals that are called, trained and equipped by God to be people gifts to His church, are not to do the ministry just by themselves, they are to model, train and equip others to minister like them. It is in the heart of Jesus to give the ministry away. Unfulfilled potential is all too common in church, as it is in the business arena. Small Groups are a great place where people's gifts and talents should be seen, exercised, promoted and released, just as Jesus did with His small group, but even then, we can only receive what we are given from heaven. May the gifts of God arise within us to point the way for men and women around the world to see Jesus.

Within the Body of Christ (universal), what changes would you expect to see if everyone started exercising their God given gifts and abilities as God intends? How would this impact the world, and the spread of the message of Christ?

(For established small groups of people who know each other well):

What gifts and talents from heaven have you observed in the others around you in the room?

The Bride belongs to the Bridegroom

John then uses an illustration to indicate how he saw himself:

²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete (verse 29).

He saw himself as a friend of the bridegroom, someone today we would call the best man at the wedding. Commentator William Barclay has some interesting insight on the "friend who attends the bridegroom."

The "friend of the bridegroom," the shoshben, had a unique place at a Jewish wedding. He acted as the liaison between the bride and the bridegroom; he arranged

the wedding; he took out the invitations; he presided at the wedding feast. He brought the bride and the bridegroom together. And he had one special duty. It was his duty to guard the bridal chamber and to let no false lover in. He would only open the door when in the dark he heard the bridegroom's voice and recognized it. When he heard the bridegroom's voice he was glad and he let him in, and he went away rejoicing, for his task was completed. ¹

One wonders if such a job for a close friend, or best man of the bridegroom was needed after Jacob was deceived by his father in law, Laban. Laban and Jacob had agreed that Jacob would work for Laban for seven years for his daughter Rachel's hand in marriage. After seven years work, during the night of the bridal party, Rachel was switched in the darkness for her sister Leah. Only in the morning did Jacob realize that the girl he had slept with was not his beloved Rachel. Laban had deceived him, forcing him to stay and work another seven years for Rachel (Genesis 29:15-28). Jacob had certainly needed a shoshben!

What truth was John trying to get across to his jealous disciple's by saying, "The bride belongs to the bridegroom" (verse 29)?

The New Living Translation (NLT) translates these words as: "The bride will go where the bridegroom is." We must never think of people in the church as "our people." It is never "our church." The church belongs to Jesus and we are but under shepherds, those of us who pastor the flock of God. When people flock elsewhere our attitude should never be one of competitiveness. We must be all that we can be in God and realize that we can only take people so far according to the gifts we have been given. The bride will go where the bridegroom is! To each of us is given the ministry of building one another up and introducing them to the bridegroom, Jesus the Messiah. The more they see of Christ and fall in love with Him, the more we have become like John the Baptist in pointing them to Christ. Like John, each of us that have labored to that end will have great joy before the Father to see precious people that we have influenced be received into the Bridegroom's arms and being told, "well done, my good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:23). Not only will it be pure joy and glorious to hear those words ourselves, but to hear it said to others that we have influenced—how wonder-

¹ The Daily Study Bible, William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Page 143.

ful that will be!

Dying to Self

John the Baptist then goes on to make another profound statement: ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less (verse 30).

What is John saying here? How would you reword it to explain it to an eight year old child in Sunday school?

It is a spiritual truth that the more we fall in love with the person of Christ; the more we lose sight of self, self-interest and self-satisfaction. This is something that is a product of the Spirit's work in us. As we grow in maturity, the more we are concerned for others and less about self. The Christian life is a life of dying to ourselves that we may be fully alive in every sense of the word. A selfish person that has been a Christian for some time is deceived—he has not experienced a changed life (John 3:3). William Carey, the great missionary from England, on his death bed said to those gathered about him, “When I am gone, don't talk about William Carey; talk about William Carey's Savior. I desire that Christ alone might be magnified.”² A person in love with the Savior loses sight of self. Time and opportunity is redeemed for what really counts in life—people that Jesus died to save.

How does the Spirit accomplish this work of making Christ in us to become greater?

The Spirit, as soon as He takes up residence in our hearts when we come to Christ, will begin His transformative change, shaping us to be like Christ as He puts His finger on areas of our lives that are not compatible with the character of Christ. Just as John the Baptist said, we are to become less and less. We no longer live

for ourselves; in fact, we have given up ownership of self. Paul the Apostle wrote: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). When you gave your life to Christ, He came and took His seat in the throne room of the temple of your life. Paul, in another place, put this truth in a different way, saying:

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.** The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

² **Set your minds on things above**, not on earthly things.

³ **For you died**, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:2-4 emphasis mine).

John the Baptist's response focuses on the pre-eminence of Christ. He lived to make Christ known and then got out of the way. How about you? Have you given Him first place in your life? If you have, how has your life changed since then? What do you struggle over when you think of releasing control of your life to Christ?

What sentence stands out to you the most from what you have studied tonight? What prayer can you pray based on those words?

Prayer: In closing, pray the words of this song:

“Jesus, take me as I am, I can come no other way, Take me deeper into You, Make my flesh life melt away. Make me like a precious stone, crystal clear and finely honed. Light of Jesus shining through, giving glory back to You.” Amen.

(words by Dave Bryant.)

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² R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word Series, The Book of John, Crossway Publishers, Page 94.