

7. He Must Become Greater

John 3:22-36

The Gospel According to John

After the Lord's conversation with Nicodemus, John the Gospel writer now takes us from Jerusalem to the Judean countryside, where we see Jesus mentoring His disciples:

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized (John 3:22).

Our Goal is to Know Christ.

The first thing we learn about Jesus from this passage is Messiah's desire to be with His disciples. The Greek phrase that is translated as "spent some time with them" (v. 22), means "to rub hard" or "rub through." The thought is of close intimate fellowship. In English, we use the phrase that they "rubbed shoulders." 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, i.e. 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 real change in someone's life, the best way is through close relationship. We are to grow in our intimacy with God. Jesus said, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (John 14:7). God loves people, and wants to be with those who will love Him. 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 and to send them forth to spread the Gospel and advance the Kingdom of God.

After verse 22, the Apostle John focuses our attention again on John the Baptist:

²³Now 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.) ²⁵An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶They 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." ²⁷To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him' (John 3:23-28).

We are told in verse 23, that Jesus' group was also baptizing just as John the Baptist had been, although in the next chapter (4:2), John tells us that Jesus Himself had not been doing the baptizing:

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

Jesus and His disciples were baptizing, but John the Baptist was *also* baptizing at Aenon near Salim, just in different places. Aenon is the Greek word for fountain. John the Apostle tells us that they were baptizing at that location because there was plenty of water there (v. 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 baptized by sprinkling. Aenon was chosen as a place of baptism only because it had plenty of water to immerse a person completely. The Greek word that is translated into English with the word *baptism*, means to submerge, saturate, and dip.

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

Question 1) In verse 26, what were the concerns of John the Baptist's disciples? Were they right to be concerned? What is the danger of such concerns today?

There were probably two concerns going on in the minds of John's disciples. The first may have been because of an argument that they had with an unnamed Jew (verse 25). We don't know the content of that argument, but it might have been a question over whose baptism was superior, John's or Jesus' baptism. Who should people be going to in order 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). They said to John:

"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" (v. 26).

The second concern was that the ministry of John the Baptist was now on a decline. If you had been a loyal disciple or follower of John watching more and more people going elsewhere, wouldn't it have concerned you? John did not stop his ministry of preaching and baptizing, even though people were gravitating more and more to the object of His preaching, Christ. He is a great example to those who have a small ministry, i.e. to carry on even though the majority of people are going elsewhere. He could have decided to stop preaching now that there was someone new in town, but we don't find him discouraged. His humility shines through his words. Also, we are not to become weary in our labor for the Lord. Paul the Apostle wrote, **"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9)**. John kept on plodding on with what God had given him to do. His followers were fearful and envious that their "church" was losing their members to another church, and they wanted John to put together a strategy to draw them back. Unfortunately, this envious attitude still prevails between churches today. Envy is a strategy our enemy, the devil, employs to dangerous effect:

There is a fable that Satan's agents were failing in their various attempts to draw into sin a holy man who lived as a hermit in the desert of northern Africa. Every attempt had met with failure; so, Satan, angered with the incompetence of his subordinates, became personally involved in the case. He said, "The reason you have failed is that your methods are too crude for one such as this. Watch this." He then approached the holy man with great care and whispered softly in his ear, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria." Instantly the holy man's face showed that Satan had been successful: a great scowl formed over his mouth and his eyes tightened up. "Envy," said Satan, "is often our best weapon against those who seek holiness."

While pastoring in England, I remember hearing of a minister that was faced with people leaving his church for another. His strategy was to put on a mask like a famous comedian of the time and tickle people under the arms with his furniture duster that he called his "tickling stick." He hoped to draw people back by making them laugh, mimicking an English comedian, Ken Dodd, who did something similar in his comedy routine. While Ken Dodd did make people laugh, this misguided minister had many people shake their heads in disappointment. He thought that the

misguided minister had many people shake their heads in disappointment. He thought that the Christian message had to have some theatre and showmanship to give it drawing appeal. How can we bring a compelling message to others about the love of Christ if we have no message that burns in our hearts? If it hasn't affected God's ministers, how can the message affect those that come to that church? Unfortunately, there is a competitive spirit among many churches. This reveals a motive that is misguided.

Over the years, as I have attended pastor's conferences, I have noticed that, sometimes, within a few minutes of sitting down and conversing with other pastors, often the question will arise, "How many members do you have in your church?" The unspoken thoughts behind the question are these: "Are you worthy of my time?" or "In what way will I profit by my 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:

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).

John's Message, Mission and Motivation

There were three tasks that God gave John the Baptist:

- 1) **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 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: "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven" (Luke 3:27).

John 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. In essence, he was saying that his gifting from God could only get the people so far. His ministry was to point the way to Christ. This is also the New Testament 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:

"And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service**, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Those who are called to equip are to point men and women to Jesus Christ and to put tools in the hands of the body so that the body of Christ can be involved in works of service (v. 12) and then get out of the way. We can only succeed in ministry when the people of God are growing and being equipped in their love for Christ. We can be successful in bringing people to church, but each of us is to point others to Messiah, both through our words and through our character.

Too often, people in the church are not functioning in their gifting and God-given calling. These people are gifts of God, viz. the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. They are called, trained and equipped by God to be people gifts to His church. They are not to do the ministry by themselves; rather, they are to model, train and equip the Church to minister like them. The Greek word, *katartismos*, is the operative word that is translated into English with the

word “equip.” It is used in the Greek language to describe a fisherman mending the holes in his nets so that the net can be effective to catch fish. It is also used of a doctor who tends to a man whose arm is out of joint. He restores the arm back to the place where it will work effectively.

It is in the heart of Jesus to give the ministry away. This is the ministry of all believers: to point the way for others to fall in love with the Savior and to build up one another in Christ. Unfulfilled potential is all too common in the 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. John said that 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!

Question 2) Within the worldwide Body of Christ, what changes would you expect to see if everyone started exercising their God-given gifts and abilities as God intends?

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

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

The Bride Belongs to the Bridegroom

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

²⁹The 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. ³⁰He 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. ³²He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. ³³The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. ³⁴For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:29-36).

He saw himself as a friend of the bridegroom, i.e. 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.

One wonders if such a job for a close friend, or best man of the bridegroom, was needed when Jacob was deceived by his father-in-law, Laban. Laban and Jacob had agreed together 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*!

John speaks of his joy being complete at the arrival of the Bridegroom and that the bride was being drawn to Christ. The friend who attends the Bridegroom is one who waits (v. 29) and listens for the Bridegroom’s voice, and when He comes, then there will be utter joy at the service

listens for the Bridegroom's voice, and when He comes, then there will be utter joy at the service that the friend of the Bridegroom has done. Waiting and listening for the voice of the Bridegroom speaks of the focus being on the Bridegroom Himself, that is on Christ. When our main focus becomes other things, such as a particular ministry, church, or individual other than the Lord Jesus, we lose our mission, and often we lose our way. How many times have you heard of an individual falling away from fellowship with other believers due to disappointment and disillusionment? Others will fail us at some point; make no mistake. We must look to Christ first and foremost and encourage our fellow believers to do the same. "It is not to ourselves that we should try to attach people, it is to Jesus Christ. It is not for ourselves that we seek the loyalty of men; it is for Him."

Question 3) What truth was John trying to convey to his jealous disciples by saying, "The bride belongs to the bridegroom" (verse 29)?

The New Living Translation (NLT) translates these words as follows: "The bride will go where the bridegroom is." Leaders in the Church must never think of people in the congregation as "our people." It is never "our church." The church belongs to Jesus, and pastors and equippers are but under-shepherds, i.e. those who care for the flock of God. Christ is the One who is called the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). When people flock elsewhere, our attitude should never be one of competitiveness. John rejoiced in seeing others attracted to Christ. 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 people see of Christ and fall in love with Him, the more we have become like John the Baptist in pointing them to Christ. This is a sign of true Christian maturity when a person can rejoice in the accomplishments of others. Like John, each of us who have labored to that end will have great joy before the Father to see precious people whom we have influenced be received into the Bridegroom's arms and being told, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). To use a football/soccer analogy, you might not score the goal, but if you assist in the goal being accomplished, there will be great reward, and everyone shares in it. Not only will it be pure joy and glorious to hear those words ourselves, but also to hear it said to those that we have influenced, too—how wonderful that will be!

Dying to Self

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

Question 4) What is John saying here? How would you explain this concept to an eight-year-old child? How does the Spirit accomplish this work of making Christ in us to become greater?

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 a fruit of the Spirit's work in us. Growing in maturity will involve our being more concerned for others and less about self. The Christian life is a life of dying to ourselves so 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, for he has not experienced a changed life (John 3:3). John the Baptist was saying that, since the Bridegroom was on the scene, it was time for him to decrease or to become less. A.W. Pink, in his commentary on the book of John, writes:

The more I "decrease" [become less] the more I delight in standing and hearing the voice of that blessed One who is Altogether Lovely. And so conversely. The more I stand and hear His voice, the more will He "increase" before me, and the more shall I "decrease." I cannot be occupied with two objects at one and the same time. To "decrease" is, we take it, to be less and less occupied with ourselves. The more I am occupied with Christ, the less shall I be occupied with myself. Humility is not the product of direct cultivation,

rather it is a *by-product*. The more I try to be humble, the less shall I attain humility. But if I am truly occupied with the One who was “meek and lowly of heart,” if I am constantly beholding His glory in the mirror of God’s Word, then shall I be changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

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.” A person in love with the Savior loses sight of self. Time and opportunity is redeemed by the mature believer for what really counts in life, i.e. people that Jesus died to save.

When we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit enters and begins His transformative changes, shaping us to be like Christ as He puts His finger on areas of our lives 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; ²⁰you 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. In another place, Paul put this truth in a different way, saying:

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).

²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. **³For you died**, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. **⁴When 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? With what do you struggle when you think of releasing control of your life to Christ?

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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