

AND WE BEHELD HIS GLORY - Studies in John's Gospel - Part fifteen
Sunday, July 2nd, 2023, 10 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

“HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE”

John 3:22-36 - “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. [23] John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized [24] (for John had not yet been put in prison). [25] Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. [26] And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." [27] John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. [28] You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' [29] The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. [30] He must increase, but I must decrease." [31] He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. [32] He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. [33] Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. [34] For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. [35] The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. [36] Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

The Apostle John tells us nothing whatsoever about the imprisonment of John the Baptist. All he gives us is the nondescript half sentence in **verse 24** - “...for John had not yet been put in prison.” For historic accounts of the Baptist’s imprisonment we have to rely on the details each of the synoptic gospel writers supply in **Matthew 14, Mark 6, and Luke 3.**

And yet it *is* of interest that John gives us details in today’s text that none of the other gospel writers includes. John’s gospel is the only account that tells us something important happened **between** the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and the arrest of John the Baptist. The Apostle tells us there was a brief time where the ministries of John and Jesus overlapped. We would never know this from reading Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

And this is where we land in today’s text. We get to listen in on the **reaction** of some of John’s disciples to the apparent success of Jesus’ ministry with those who had once followed the Baptist. People were **leaving** John and **going** to Jesus. There’s **jealousy** in today’s text.

Here is the order of our study today. The text divides itself into two main parts. **First** we have the glorious attitude of John and all faithful servants of Christ that Jesus must get glory and gain prominence while all who merely **point** to Him must fade into a humble background of point and proclaim. John the Baptist attaches people to **Jesus**, not to **himself**. From his example we learn there is no room for ego in pointers to Christ. They are happy to fade. They don't crave applause. Applause cravers are fake messengers.

I said there were **two** main sections in today's text. The **second** part unpacks the **reason** Jesus must increase and John must decrease. It's not just politeness that forces that word "**must**" out of John's mouth two times in one sentence - **John 3:30** - "**He must increase, but I must decrease.**" Everything **hinges** on these two "musts." Neither one can be left out. For reasons we'll study today everything about our faith and our eternal safety hinges on understanding why Jesus must **increase** and John must **decrease**. Remember, it's not **just** that Jesus must increase. It's equally important that John must decrease. We need to dig into that.

So **first**, there is the question brought to John the Baptist by his own disciples and John's humble response. Then, **second**, the Apostle John gives the deep reasons for the Baptist's joy in receding into the background.

1) HOW ARE SINNERS MADE CLEAN AND WHO NEEDS TO REPENT?

IPAD TEXT - John 3:22-25 - "After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. [23] John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized [24] (for John had not yet been put in prison). [25] Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification."

The issue on the board was **purification** And this discussion was more than just an interesting theological debate. The Apostle John is careful to point out that it was a **Jew** - a faithful follower of the covenant God had made with Abraham - who had made approach to the Baptist's disciples. **Gentiles** were baptized as an act of repentance. **Jews**, who were already God's chosen people, weren't. They were kept pure by obedience to the Old Testament commands and when they failed they relied on the Old Testament sacrificial system for atonement.

So it was of some concern to this Jew - and the Baptist's disciples were obviously confused over this issue as well - that both John the Baptist and Jesus came on the scene proclaiming a **message of repentance** and a **baptism of repentance** for both Jew and Gentile alike.

So clearly there is a great redemptive shake-up taking place. With the coming of Jesus the Messiah God's Lamb was made flesh to take away the sin of the **whole world** (Jew and Gentile alike). A huge corner had been turned that effected everyone. We're going to look at the **nature** of that change in just a minute. But the point here is simply that not everyone was ready to receive this radical news.

2) **THE ONLY ATTITUDE THAT PRESERVES FAITHFUL, FRUITFUL
MINISTRY FOR CHRIST**

IPAD TEXT - John 3:26-30 - “And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” [27] John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. [28] *You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’* [29] The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. *Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.* [30] *He must increase, but I must decrease.*”

One small detail. We know that Jesus Himself didn't do the actual baptizing. John explains this detail in the very next chapter - **John 4:1-2 - “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and *baptizing* more disciples than John [2] (although *Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples*)....” - IPAD TEXT.**

So, while John says Jesus was baptizing, he means people were being baptized by Jesus' disciples, which amounted to the same thing.

Yet there is a great life lesson here. For all who would point others to Christ **envy** and **competition** are the great enemies to fruitfulness. This is especially true when one has already had a measure of success in carrying out God's will. That's because Satan knows our **egos** are more easily tripped up than our **theology**. One doesn't have to **deny** anything about who Jesus is or why He came to **resent** others who have more outward success proclaiming the same message. While both errors are very deadly, **pride** is more common than **heresy**. And it's much harder to root out of our hearts. Sound teaching can correct heresy. Only a forced humility can cleanse pride.

In this text we see that John the Baptist's humility comes from his contentment in ministry. Let me explain. There is great **protection** from the root sin of pride when we constantly remind ourselves of our role in serving Christ in this world. And we don't **automatically** remember our role as servants. Pride grows cancerously even in our service to Christ.

This is what the Baptist is getting at in **John 3:27-28 - "John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. [28] You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'" - IPAD TEXT**

John is telling his jealous disciples that if they had been listening they would have witnessed his repeated efforts to **stay on message**. What did John's disciples **think** he meant when he told them over and over again that **he was not the Christ?** What did they **think** John meant when he quoted Isaiah and told them he was just a voice crying in the wilderness **preparing the way of the Lord?** And the answer is, they obviously hadn't thought through the **consequences** of those pronouncements at all. They **heard** those remarks over and over without **considering** them.

And so we learn we can save ourselves much confusion and error merely by **thinking through to the bottom what we've already heard**. We're **careless** more often than we're totally **ignorant**. Always hear the Holy Spirit **patiently**. Let Him teach you basic truths over and over. We're rarely as ready as we think to move on from the basics when dealing with personal growth and Christlike character.

3) SERVANTS OF CHRIST ARE THE BEST MAN, NEVER THE GROOM

IPAD TEXT - John 3:29 - "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete."

There is so much here. John clearly sees himself as the **best man** and sees Jesus as the **bridegroom**. And there is one thing that keeps them distinct. Everyone knows that the primary difference between the two is the **bride** belongs to the **bridegroom**, not the **best man**.

And the never-to-be-forgotten principle here is the church is meant more for Christ than for any of Christ's servants. She is **His** bride. She doesn't exist for the best man. Not ever.

And here's the irony in this truth. It is in remembering that we are only **friends** of the bridegroom that servants of Christ find their greatest joy. And that seems all backwards to us. We live in a culture of power that would lead us to believe that the more ownership we take, the greater our joy will be. But in the church of Christ this isn't so.

Forgetting our place turns us into the kind of whiny disciples who brought their bruised egos to John the Baptist at the beginning of this text. Friends who think the bride belongs to **them** manufacture all of the greed, pride, competition, and pettiness that accompanies that lie of ownership. The church is shot through with this kind of confusion in our day.

4) WHY IT MATTERS THAT JESUS INCREASED AND JOHN DECREASED

IPAD TEXT - John 3:30 - "He must increase, but I must decrease."

I said earlier this was more than just an issue of politeness. This isn't like those two chipmunks on Bugs Bunny - "After you." "No, after you." "No after you!" That's not what's going on here.

John the Baptist recognizes he represents a whole religious system that was designed by God to get the world ready for Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, Son of God, Word made flesh, and only Redeemer of the whole world. So when John says John "**must decrease**" he is saying the only way for Jesus to take center stage is for the preparation system of which John was the final representative to pass away and fade off the scene.

In other words, John must decrease because he represents something which, if persisted in, would **prevent** the very introduction is was designed to **publish**. The preparatory old covenant would become **idolatrous** if it were ever treated as the **goal** rather than the **passing introduction**.

So truly, very truly, John the Baptist knew of what he spoke when he said he ***must - absolutely must*** - decrease. And in our world today the same lesson holds. It is not that we say there are no good things said or done in other religious systems. But, now as then, anything that doesn't allow for the increasing greatness of Jesus Christ becomes the enemy of salvation and eternal hope for mankind. ***Christian exclusivism*** is the only true demonstration of Father God's compassion for the world.

5) **WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE WANT TO HEAR THE WORDS OF GOD HIMSELF?**

IPAD TEXT - John 3:31-34 - "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. [32] *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. [33] Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. [34] For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure."*

If you read these verses carefully you will notice something very strange. First, read **verse 32** - “....**He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.**” Now read **verse 26** - “**And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him."**”

Do you see it? “....***no one receives his testimony,***” and “....***all are going to him.***” Which is it? How can both of those statements be true? And we’re immediately reminded of the words of the Apostle John at the close of chapter two - **John 2:23-24** - “**Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people....” - IPAD TEXT**

This is the difference between ***thoughtlessly*** mingling with Jesus and ***deeply believing*** in Jesus. There’s a ***blind religious*** attachment to Jesus and there’s a ***life-dominating trust*** in Jesus. And a big part of the difference is found in the text we’re studying under this fifth point.

Who do you hear speaking when Jesus speaks in His Word or by the Holy Spirit in your heart? Do you listen to Jesus as one of many options? Do you think you can follow Jesus and still find a more realistic, workable approach to life that fits in better with your own tastes and agenda?

Here's why that will never work - **John 3:34 - "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure."** - IPAD TEXT. You can no more have a Christian faith on your terms than you can draw a square circle. God never *debates or offers advice*.

And John's point surely goes even deeper. You can rely on the words of Jesus to be *life changing* for you because they are the words of the One who created your whole life in the first place. And John is quick to remind us all that we can trust the words of Jesus to be life-giving and life-changing because, like no other words you will ever read or hear, they are words empowered and generated by the Holy Spirit - **John 3:34 - "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure."** And what John means by that is these words, if you will commit yourself to them, carry *inward power*.

6) **THE KIND OF LIFE WHERE GOD'S WRATH NEVER GOES AWAY**

IPAD TEXT - John 3:35-36 - "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. [36] Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

When John says the "***Father loves the Son***" he means more than the obvious truth that the Son is the object of the Father's affection. The context of these two verses show John's point. The love of the Father is channeled ***through*** the Son in a way so exclusive that there is nothing ***outside*** the Son left but wrath. If one chooses to play lightly with devotion to the Son there is nothing reaching that person from the Father but wrath.

This is why John doesn't say that outside the Son God's wrath is poured out. He simply says it ***remains*** - **John 3:36** - "**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.**"

This is not some sudden, surprising temper tantrum on the part of a ticked off deity. God's love comes through Christ just like warmth comes through the sun. There is nothing left from the Father ***other than*** wrath if we reject His love in the Son on the cross.

We need to consider that word “**remains**” - the wrath of God **remains** on him. We find it hard to wrap our minds around this. We are creatures of time. We fluctuate and vacillate in everything we do. In fact, we find it almost impossible **not** to change in our affections and emotions and convictions.

We are creatures of **change**. There is a good side to this for us. The pain that came from things that once broke our hearts can gradually heal and fade. Most of the things we regret in moments of failure don't sting forever. Some of the things we once felt were important can lose their urgency with the passing of years.

And when we sin we can almost forget about great failures as the years roll by. And that can be a great **false** source of comfort for people like us. What happens to habits of compromise that once felt glaringly wicked but now don't hurt anymore? Our **sense of guilt** can fade, leaving us almost comfortable with transgressions. Because they no longer **feel** bad, they can't **be** that bad.

Is this what John addresses when he tells us, in spite of the careless conditioning of our conscience, that this moral cooling never happens with our eternal God? Is this what he means when he pleads for a sharp sense of obedience because the wrath of God **remains** even though we've long convinced ourselves that it doesn't?

Outside of obedience to Christ God's wrath *remains*. And, just in closing, please notice the way John substitutes *obeying* Jesus for *believing* in Jesus in that last verse in our text - **John 3:36 -**

“Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life; whoever does *not obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” - IPAD TEXT

And apparently the Apostle John doesn't think it's a bad idea to end his “*belief sermon*” reminding us of God's wrath. So this must be a good place to quit.