

John 3:22-36

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[0 : 00] Good morning, it's delightful to be with you all. I'm happy to see you're on plastic, uncomfortable chairs.! It'll help keep you alert this morning. I want to encourage you to turn with me back to the passage we read, where if you remember, a scene was set in verses 22 to 26, and then a commitment about Jesus was explained in verses 27 to 30, and then the reason for that commitment was found in the final paragraph of the half chapter that we read.

Well, after a nighttime meeting with a man named Nicodemus, Jesus left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside, ending up in the same neighborhood as his cousin John.

And John needed a steady supply of water for what he was doing, for the immense crowds that came to him for baptism, whether he was baptizing by immersion or sprinkling or pouring.

Anon near Salem was a place with lots of springs, lots of water, and served well enough for the task. And what we see in verses 22 to 24 is Jesus confirming and continuing John's groundbreaking work for the kingdom of God.

The shift between the ministry of John and that of Jesus, between an old age and a new age, an age of promise, an age of fulfillment, was not a neat line.

[1 : 39] It was a kind of wrinkly area of transition, a lot like my shirt this morning, which is why I'm covering that with a jumper. It wasn't a neat, tidy line.

A Dutch scholar, a Dutch New Testament scholar, mentions that Jesus and the disciples who followed him did not immediately abandon the pattern of John's preaching of an approaching kingdom, of a baptism of repentance that went with it.

Jesus, when he preached, was bringing clearer teaching. He was continuing to fulfill Old Testament promises, but it didn't happen all at once.

There were planned transitions. Older theologians said that Jesus was ushering in his kingdom. It's a good word, I think. He was ushering in his kingdom. When we have ushers at a wedding, bringing people into the sanctuary or the fellowship hall for the wedding, they don't pull people down the aisle and push them into seats.

They usher them. They do this with purpose and dignity and care. They treat people with respect. Well, that's how Jesus was treating John. He was doing something new.

[3 : 01] He was ushering in his kingdom, but doing it carefully, thoughtfully. He wasn't in a hurry. He encouraged John's message. He encouraged John's ministry, even as he was adding to John's message.

Now, while Jesus' introduction of his teaching, while Jesus' ushering in of his kingdom was gradual, but it was also noticeable.

People could see the difference between what John did and what Jesus did. People spotted a real change between these two ministries, between the forerunner and the one himself, Jesus himself.

While John's, let me put it this way. There was enough of a difference between the two that there ended up being arguments between their followers.

And that's what we overhear in verses 25 and 26. It's hard to know exactly what happened. Did the man who met John's disciples get baptized by Jesus' disciples?

[4 : 18] Did this fellow mentioned here get in a discussion about the meaning of John's baptism or Jesus' baptism or different Jewish baptisms of the time, both the ones found in the Old Testament and ones that people had made up since?

I don't really know. But whatever went on at first, a conflict about a symbol became a conflict about the substance. An argument about baptism ended up being an argument about Jesus himself.

John's disciples were unhappy. They were unhappy. And so they went to their leader to tell him that Jesus was pulling in the crowds. And listen to the way in which they talked.

First, the Baptist's disciples spoke of John with respect, calling him Rabbi. But Jesus, they don't even mention by name. He's just the one to whom John bore witness.

As if John was doing Jesus some kind of a favor. The way that we talk about people shows what we think about them. The way they talked about Jesus suggests they might not have thought enough about Jesus yet.

[5 : 31] Second, they exaggerate what's happening. They say, all are going to him. And we all know why we exaggerate. We usually exaggerate when we're trying to justify our complaining spirits or something like that.

Or to tell a good story. But here they're not telling a good story. The fact is, Jesus had hardly put John out of business. Or even out of busyness. Even if Jesus did attract large crowds, there were still lots of people going to John.

John would continue to have so much popularity that King Herod would long to meet him. Now I want you to see that this conversation is really important.

John's disciples are coming to him at a very important and very interesting moment in time.

His ministry was enjoying success like no other prophetic ministry before him.

[6 : 38] Moses, Elijah, Elisha. In some sense, not a one of them came close to John.

There were prophets who would get visits from people who wanted answers. There were prophets who taught other prophets. There were prophets sent to give important messages to the people. But John is the first prophet who's wildly popular. I mean, we are told that crowds came to him. Rich and poor.

Jews and Romans. Leaders and followers. From Israel and beyond. They were all coming to hear John. John had become a, I don't know, like a kind of movable pilgrimage site.

Like a tourist destination. If you were writing a travel guide to Jordan, you'd have to add in something about John. You know, the guy with the funny clothes and the pot of honey and the pile of locusts on a rock or something like that.

[7 : 41] John was the thing. There are entrepreneurial possibilities with John. Frankly, lots of people were going to him. Not everybody was going to Jesus.

Remember, John and his disciples had no idea. No idea at that moment what was about to happen. They didn't know that he was going to be put in prison. They didn't know he was going to lose his head. We are told that as we read the passage. But they don't know that. So this is what we call a real ministry temptation.

An RMT. RMT. You know, this is a moment when it's really easy to make it all about yourself. And it's possible to do that. It's easy to turn a ministry that's supposed to be about Jesus into something that's really about me.

And it would have been so easy for John to do that here. I mean, can you see that? Everybody's coming to him. And then someone begins to pull away the crowds.

[8 : 45] And he has his loyal fan club. He has his team. And they're saying, we've got to stop this. Do you see what's happening, John? So these grievances offered by his friends present a real test of his integrity.

Maybe a bigger test than any of us will ever experience. Because I doubt any of us will ever be quite that popular. And to his credit, John saw the problem. In the way in which his supporters talked and thought.

And he met it head on. He met it head on. Verses 22 to 26 tell us all this. And in doing so, they set the scene. Now, in response to the disciples' complaint.

John explains his commitment to Jesus by issuing a maxim. A pithy statement. By issuing a maxim and then offering a parable.

Those are the two things he does. John wanted his followers, at the very least, to recognize that a person cannot receive one thing unless it's given him from heaven.

[9 : 56] With this maxim, he's making a basic point about the providence of God, isn't he? He's saying something about God. Jesus was who he was.

And he was a whole lot more than John was. Because more had been given him from heaven. John was who he was. And he was a whole lot less than Jesus was. Because less had been given him from heaven.

Now, think about what John's saying. Because I think it has some relevance for all of us. According to recent sightings, jealousy is still raising its ugly head.

It's still peering over the parapet in the military. We see it peeking over the walls of cubicles in the office. We can even spot it in the kitchen. We can find it in conversations between close friends. Jealousy still exists. Including this kind of professional jealousy. And when we see it, we need to give it a good knock about the head with John 3, verse 27.

[10:57] Because John is explaining to his disciples, really helpfully, that we should not be jealous. In fact, we should not fault people who are very successful in their callings.

Maybe way more successful than we are. Now, if that's true in general, and I think it is, it's more obviously true when it comes to Christian service, Christian ministry, which is what John's talking about here.

Surely we need to see that if God gives someone real gifts, good content, effective ministry, maybe an unusual acceptance with other people, then we need to give God glory.

More was given them from heaven than we have ourselves, perhaps. And we need to be thankful for what they're doing. That's the spirit of John the Baptist, isn't it? Right here in this passage.

Speaking for myself, we who are sort of small-time pastors or aspiring preachers, we just need to thank God. We need to learn to be thankful for the leadership and example or maybe the astonishing preaching ministry of other people.

[12:09] Maybe a Philip Riken or a Dick Lewis or a Sinclair Ferguson or an Ian Hamilton or an Alistair Begg or a Paul Levy or whatever, you know, celebrity preacher you have in mind.

Pastors don't need to find their security in being able to critique better preachers or in pretending that we're their pals.

You know, and the same goes for artists and students and plumbers and lawyers and of course for anyone doing service in Christ's church. May God help us to be big without pride or small without shame.

May He help us to remember that none of us has anything unless something is given to us from heaven. John encouraged thankfulness for Jesus in this maxim in this little statement.

He then showed his true loyalty to Jesus in a kind of parable. In a kind of parable. He puts a metaphor to work in verses 27 to 30 employing the idea of a bridegroom and his best friend in order to show his devotion.

[13:23] You see, John knew that he himself was not the Christ. The promised one of Israel. And he says so. He says so here.

Now, let's just stop for a moment and just think what a comment that is to make. I've never had to explain to people that I'm not the Savior of the world. It just tends not to come up in conversation. I don't need to explain this.

But John did. I mean, that's a measure of popularity, isn't he? He had such prominence, such power, such authority, that on more than one occasion he had to say, I'm not the Savior.

I'm just the one being sent before him. He's like the one who goes ahead to get ready for the meeting. Like the meeting we're having this morning. He's the one who has to get ready for the meeting so that people won't be distracted, so that everything will run smoothly.

Harry likens himself to the best friend of the bridegroom before a wedding who just wants things to run well. He's not trying to win anyone over to himself.

[14:29] He's not trying to steal the limelight. He's the best friend making sure everything's okay, waiting at everyone's disposal, willing to do anything to make his friend's day, his friend's marriage, a success.

In those days, the bridegroom's friend also had a more specific duty. And not just in those days. I don't know if you've ever read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but Alexander Dumas tells this story well. Adele sings this in all of her songs. There's people who are sometimes around a wedding service or a relationship who think that they ought to be the ones holding hands.

They ought to be the ones exchanging the promises. There are sometimes bitter or disappointed people around a wedding. And in those days, the job of the best, one of the jobs of the best man was to kind of fend off people making last-ditch efforts on the bride.

I mean, just to make sure that disappointed suitors kept their distance. John's doing something like that here. Whatever the specific task, the friend of the bridegroom is happiest when?

[15:47] He's happiest when the wedding starts. He's happiest, as John says, when he hears the voice of the bridegroom. Oh, thankfully, he's coming down the hallway. My job's almost done.

The marriage is about to begin. He rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice, John says. His joy is complete. Now, just stop for a minute and think about what that means. For what would we think, as Augustine of Hippo once asked long ago, of a best man who kept the bride from all other men so that he could keep her for himself?

What kind of friend would we count that man to be if he tried to capture the affections of the bride? What would we think in John Calvin's gritty phrase of a best man who made the bride a prostitute? I think we could agree that he wouldn't be a very, he wouldn't be a best man. Not a good man. Not a best friend either. And yet, as the theologian John Murray explains, that's exactly what John's disciples were tempting him to do.

Incongruous or odd as it seems in the sphere of social life, it's exactly what they were suggesting in the spiritual and heavenly sphere. They wanted John to keep his hold on the people of Israel.

[17:10] To win their affections for himself. To keep their attentions on him. Prophet John grew up in the home of a priest. He could not have been ignorant of passages and the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hosea that called Israel or the believers within Israel the bride of the Messiah.

He could not have been ignorant of this idea that there's a body, there's someone promised to the Messiah. But whether he was thinking about that here or not, surely we need to see the importance of what this last great prophet was teaching.

No one is to stand between Jesus and his people. No one is to try and win the first affections of the church for himself or herself.

No minister is to teach or preach or counsel or do anything with the intention of winning the hearts of God's people to himself.

Not only are we not to do this unintentionally, we're to intentionally guard against this because we know what our own hearts are like. We're to avoid any attempt to seek the admiration of the Christian church.

[18:29] So look for that kind of pleasure ourselves as Christian workers, Christian preachers, would be to make the bride of Christ unfaithful. Do you see that?

Do you see how dangerous it is? John knew this. And he wasn't resigned to being second place. He wasn't sad about this. He rejoices, he says. He rejoices to play second fiddle. It is in that spirit that you could issue the motto about Jesus that no member of the church and certainly no minister of the church should ever forget.

You see it in your Bibles. He must increase, but I must decrease. That's the spirit of a true friend and servant of Jesus.

He must increase, I must decrease. As John Aerosmith, a member of the Westminster Assembly, once put it, true ministers set up Christ in their ministry. They are content themselves to stand in the crowd, to lift up Christ upon their shoulders, content not to be seen themselves, so Christ be exalted.

[19:46] Maybe no one ever exalted Christ as much as John did at that very moment with such a temptation. Well, I think every Christian instinctively admires the spirit of John the Baptist.

We know he's right, don't we? He must increase, we must decrease. At our worst moments, to be fair, we sometimes get that reversed. We boast about ourselves, we talk about our gifts instead of Christ's gifts, we advertise what's good in us.

At our worst moments, Jesus decreases so that we can increase. Or at least we hope that as Jesus increases, we'll increase along with him. I think that's where I am. I wouldn't possibly want Jesus to decrease, but I'm hoping as he increases that I'm going to be right up there with him.

That's still too positive of a spin on myself, honestly. That's where we are in our worst moments, our wobbly moments. But at our best moments, when the work of the Holy Spirit's not being resisted in our lives, when we're thinking straight, we can come up with any number of reasons why Jesus must increase and we must decrease.

If you know yourself, if I know myself, you can think of all kinds of reasons why I could decrease, why Jesus should increase. Here's the good news, if you're short on sleep or caffeine this morning, you don't need to do that hard thinking yourself, because John provides three reasons for us right here in this passage.

[21:13] So all you need to do is read and listen, you don't even need to think. In verses 31 to 36, Scripture offers us John's reasons about Jesus. Three perfect reasons why we too should agree that Jesus should increase and we should decrease.

The first cause for the increase of Jesus, in our estimation, is his authority. He's the one who comes. So if you like three-point sermons, I have three points. Here they are.

The first reason why Jesus should increase is because of his authority. He's the one who comes from above. And so he's above all. The fact that Jesus is above all is mentioned twice in verse 31. And the simple meaning of this statement is that he holds a rule and authority above all others. No one can approach his greatness. We who are earthly, we who are from below, we who are people of Adam and belong to this world, our thoughts, our words, we're limited in so many ways.

As Calvin puts it, he speaks from the throne, we just speak from the footstool. The preachers of the word do have a real authority from Jesus, but the point is that even the commanding presence and preaching of someone like John pales in authority between the ultimate presence and authority of the one who came from above.

[22 : 36] So it's because of his matchless authority that he must increase and we must decrease. John lifts up the authority of Jesus, he also in verses 32 to 34 exalts the testimony of Jesus.

The one who came from above brings with him a reliable testimony. He knows things, he's heard things, he's seen things. Much that was known to Jesus could never be shared.

But he bore witness to what he's seen and heard that we need to know, that we need to hear. The sad irony is that his teaching was accredited by the agency of heaven and yet no one receives his testimony.

All are going to him, John's disciples complained. Ah, but no one receives his testimony, John replies. They thought too much was given to Jesus.

John says no, not enough. Never enough. It wasn't enough for the crowds to hear about Jesus. It's not enough to hear that testimony. testimony. Jesus is only honored when people receive that testimony.

[23 : 45] When they accept the message. Only when someone receives that testimony do they put their seal to this statement. God is true and true in his son.

And anyone who says anything less is really calling God a liar. In sending us his son, God sends us the one who is truth. And to reject the person of his son is to reject the truth of God too.

Jesus spoke the words of God because he was from heaven. He also did this as verse 34 explains. Because along with the son, the father is sending his spirit.

So Jesus, he gave the Holy Spirit without measure. Jesus is, among other things, the heaven sent, spirit filled truth of God.

Read the first part of all the four gospels and you'll hear that testimony. Read the last part of each gospel and you'll see that testimony. Because he spoke more in his death and in the resurrection than he did in all of his sermons.

[24 : 48] It's because of this unrivaled testimony that he must increase and we must decrease. The final reason that the gospel gives for the elevation of Jesus is the gift of Jesus.

And once again, to understand why Jesus must increase we're directed heavenward. You see, it's not only true that the gift of Jesus is a gift from the father and sourced in the bottomless love of the father, it's also true that the father has given a gift to the son.

The father has given a gift to the son. A gift in measure for his love for his son. You see, that's what verse 35 means. The disciples of John looked at Jesus and worried that all are going to him.

The father looks at Jesus and gives everything he wants to him. Sometimes Christians wonder at the love of the son. John is telling us we can only begin to understand this love when we see the love of the father.

father. It's that love that the son is passing on and which by his Holy Spirit he continues to pass on today. The gift of Jesus to us began as a gift of us to Jesus.

[26 : 10] We'll see. We'll spend an eternity trying to figure out how we could be a gift to anyone. Knowing who we are, let alone a gift from the father to the son.

But John's words end on a different note. You can see that the very end of the chapter. He reminds us that God's gift of love to us comes in the form of life for us.

Whoever believes in the son has eternal life. Life with this spirit. With this son. With this father. Life that discovers this kind of love.

Life that does not meet an ultimate tragic end. Life that doesn't diminish in its glory. You see what Jesus is saying here.

This is not a life for those who have conquered their jealousies. This is not a life for people who aren't troubled with rivalries.

[27 : 13] This is not a life for those who haven't started or continued a foolish argument like John's disciples were doing here. This is not a life for those who have managed to put all their complaining behind them.

This is a life for all who believe in the son. That's what John says here. The truth before us if I can quote an Anglican bishop at a Presbyterian church is one of the most glorious privileges of the gospel.

There are no works to be done. No conditions to be fulfilled. No price to be paid. No wearing years of probation to be passed. Christ before a sinner can be accepted with God.

Let him only believe on Christ and he is at once forgiven. It is because of this priceless gift that he must increase and we must decrease.

It's this gospel that some of us are commissioned to preach. All of us are called to believe. But it's the happy privilege isn't it?

[28 : 17] It's the happy privilege of every Christian. To be able to say to our friends and our family and our neighbors if you trust in Jesus you will have life.

And you're not just offering a hope of life. You're not just talking about a later life or an afterlife although we'll have that too. You're offering life itself because whoever believes the son we're told has eternal life.

For those who believe in the son as jarring as brutal as death is for those who are left behind. It is for the one who dies a life that continues into life from one moment to the next.

But if given the opportunity for such a task of telling people about this life I guess we'll also want to note the opposite case.

God is the love for the son. And John mentions that too. Whoever does not believe the son does not see life. You see so great is the father's love for the son that to reject the son to ignore his testimony has very serious consequences too.

[29 : 38] when it comes to Jesus to refuse him is to offend our God. And no doubt it's because John had begun to understand just how much people needed Jesus.

That he quieted his disciples. That he issued his maxim. That he offered his parable. It's no doubt because he saw Jesus' matchless authority, his unrivaled testimony, and the priceless gift that he could say, I must increase.

I must decrease. He must increase. The fact is, as verse 36 says in his closing words, we need salvation. We are sinners.

Without Christ, the wrath of God is already upon us. Without Christ, it will remain on us. There's no hope in trying to avoid the wrath of God.

It's already there. It will be revealed in the last day. Psalm 75 tells us it's God who executes judgment. Putting down one, lifting up another.

[30 : 43] We just need to look around us. We're part of a broken world, a fallen race. We're already down. There's only one way up. God has provided that way from the one who came from above.

The one who set aside his full authority and bore with indignity. He sent his son who gave his testimony and watched it rejected.

He sent his son giving all things into his hands and then Christ put his life into the hands of sinful men who unwittingly offered him as a sacrifice for sinners on a cross.

He died. But of course no power could keep him dead. For the father put in an abiding and powerful life that no grave could resist. He sent his son didn't he?

He sent his son who declared that in some sense he would decrease so we could increase. May we all, those gathered here this morning, our friends elsewhere, believe in Christ and find eternal life and then may his name increase throughout all the ages.

[31 : 58] Let's pray. Let's pray.