

The Son Above All

John 3:31-36

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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. – John 3:31-36, ESV

Introduction: What is the Measure of True Greatness?

What makes someone great? If I ask you to think of the greatest people in the world, who do you think of and why? Is it some significant accomplishment -like being elected president or winning a Super Bowl? Is it having lots of money or fame or status? Is it being an outspoken moral voice to the world?

Time's list of the 100 Most Influential People in the World is divided into categories: Pioneers, Titans, Artists, Leaders and Icons. Their list is as diverse as Steph Curry and Pope Francis, Tim Cook and Adele, Ted Cruz, Paul Ryan and Vladimir Putin, Usain Bolt and Jordan Spieth, Dwayne Johnson, Katie Ledecky and Donald Trump. Overall, the list reflects the reality that our culture and our world seem to be centered around celebrities, politicians, athletes and business moguls. The "power-people" in our world run countries or corporations or simply run faster than anyone else ever has or sell more music or star in more movies than anyone else.

As far as we know, the greatest man who ever lived was none of these things: He was not a great athlete or an entertainer. He was not a politician; in fact, He repeatedly walked away from offers of political power. He did not break world records or entertain people, but He did draw large crowds. Sadly, it seems that He drew as large a crowd that wanted Him dead as the crowd that wanted to make Him king.

When He left this world, Jesus had approximately 120 followers who were willing to be identified as such, and most of them were in hiding, afraid to publicly identify with Him. Within months, thousands had come to follow Him and acclaim Him. Today, His followers number around 2.2 billion, approximately 1/3 of the world's population.

Besides the numerical growth in followers, this man has had the most profound impact on culture and charity in the world, inspiring the establishment of the world's first hospitals, the first free schools for public education, the first orphanages, the first universities, the first and most influential global charities. His teachings also inspired the development of the concept of universal human rights, the establishment of guidelines for declaring and fighting wars in a more just, moral and humane manner and the abolition of slavery.

So, why has this man been of such enduring influence in the world, across centuries and cultures, among rich and poor, educated and uneducated, in every corner of the world? Well, here at the close of the third chapter of John's Gospel, we have a summary statement of the greatness of Jesus, the Son of God, the One who comes from heaven and who is above all.

I should clarify before we dig into this passage that the speaker of these verses, like verses 16-21, is uncertain. These words could be a continuation of John the Baptist's testimony in verses 27-30 or they could be the Apostle John's own reflection on John the Baptist's testimony, as a summary of the major themes of John 3 and, indeed, of his whole Gospel so far. I lean toward the Apostle John as the author these words, like I do in verses 16-21, but I'm not really sure one way or the other. And, as we said when we looked at verses 16-21, we can know for certain that these are the words of God either way.

A. The Origin and Position of the Son (v. 31)

The first thing that John says here about Jesus is focused on His origin and His position: *"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."*

Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived for one key reason: He came from heaven and so He is above all. This contrasts Jesus with every earthly human being who has ever lived. John the Baptist himself, as great as he was as a prophet and forerunner, was a man from the earth belonging to the earth and who spoke in an earthly way. In other words, John the Baptist could call people to repent of their sin and seek forgiveness, but he could not promise to give people salvation or to give them the Holy Spirit. Real cleansing and power from on high had to come from the one who comes from above, from heaven.

These words would be fitting to be spoken by John the Baptist, as a reflection of his humility. They are certainly an explanation as to why God had ordained that John the Baptist must decrease and Jesus must increase. John the Baptist's message was a necessary and good one. It was the message God had given him. But because he was a mere human being, he was limited in what he could tell people. Jesus is the eternal Son of God whose origin is from heaven and not from the earth. Thus, His words are the most important for us to hear, because of His unique origin and His unique position.

B. The Witness of the Son (vv. 32-34a)

Next John tells us about the witness of Jesus as the man from heaven.

"He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God . . ."

Jesus speaks of what He has seen and heard. Who better understands heaven and heavenly realities than Jesus, who came from heaven? Who better to disclose to us the heart of God than the Son of God, sent from the Father's heart? Many people are happy to give you their opinion about everything and everywhere. If you ask me, I'm sure I could tell you what I think of life in Alaska. But you might want to ask me if I've ever lived in Alaska before you take my opinion too seriously.

None of us has ever been to heaven. None of us has ever seen God. None of us truly knows the heart of God, unless it is revealed to us. This is why Jesus said in Matthew 11:27, *"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*

Sadly, even though Jesus is both knowledgeable and faithful as a witness of heavenly things, “no one receives his testimony.” This reminds us of something we heard in John 1:9-11: “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

And earlier in John 3, we learned why it is that no one receives His testimony and why His own people did not receive Him: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.” (John 3:19-20, ESV)

But then, against the background of this universal rejection of Jesus by the world, we have the good news that some do, in fact, receive Jesus’ testimony. In John 1, right after the bad news of verses 9-11, verses 12-13 tell us: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” And then, right after the bad news of John 3:19-20, the good news of verse 21 comes: “But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Following the same pattern as these earlier passages, verses 33-34 follow the rejection stated in verse 32 by saying, “Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God” Notice the pattern that highlights the true source of the contrast in all three of these passages:

1. The ones who receive Him have been born of God in John 1:13.
2. The ones who comes to the light do so because their works have been done in God in John 3:21.
3. The ones who receive Jesus’ testimony testify that God is true, in John 3:33.

The implication of the contrast is clear: If we are left on our own and not born of God, we then do what the rest of the world does – reject Jesus. If our works are done in our flesh and not done in God – if they are not God’s works – then we remain in the darkness. If we do not recognize that God is true and that Jesus is speaking the words of God as the One sent from God, then we reject the testimony of Jesus like the rest of the world.

What John tells us three different times is something we see very clearly all the time: Many people have heard about Jesus. They may have read the Gospels. They may know what the Bible says about Jesus as the Son of God. But, in the end, they just don’t get it. They aren’t born of God. They remain in the dark. They reject the testimony of Jesus about God the Father and about Himself. It’s a sad reality, but we see it all the time, don’t we?

C. The Spirit and the Son (v. 34b)

From this statement of contrast between those who reject the testimony of Jesus vs. those who accept His testimony, John then goes on to highlight the unique greatness of Jesus in terms of the Holy Spirit.

“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.”

The meaning of this verse is not entirely clear. It could mean either that Jesus speaks the words of God because God gives Jesus the anointing of the Holy Spirit without measure. Or it could mean that Jesus gives the Spirit without measure. In the context, since John is focused on the unique superiority of Jesus, I think the meaning is probably that God the Father has given Jesus the Spirit without measure. This contrasts Jesus with everyone else who has ever been called and anointed by God to proclaim His word.

John the Baptist himself saw Jesus anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. When Peter was proclaiming Jesus to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, he said, “*you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.*” (Acts 10:37-39)

Jesus is the Messiah, which means “the Anointed One,” meaning that He was anointed by God the Father to be Lord and Savior, Prophet, Priest and King. Everyone who has been called by God to be a prophet and speak the truth of God to the people of God has been anointed by the Holy Spirit for that calling. All of God’s High Priests who have served over the Tabernacle or Temple in the worship of God as the mediator between God and His people have been anointed by the Holy Spirit for that calling. Every faithful king, called by God to lead, rule, defend and protect God’s people has been anointed by the Holy Spirit for that calling.

However, each of the mere men who held these individual offices had the anointing of the Holy Spirit by measure, to a limited degree. None of them was given the Holy Spirit without measure. Jesus alone was called by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit to fulfill all three offices – to be the Great Prophet speaking God’s truth to God’s people, to be the Great High Priest as the one Mediator between God and human beings and to be the Eternal King of kings and Lord of lords to protect, defend and govern God’s kingdom and people. And Jesus alone received the anointing of the Holy Spirit in absolute fullness, without measure.

What John is emphasizing here about Jesus is that the unlimited, unmeasured anointing of the Holy Spirit meant that Jesus spoke the very words of God all the time. Everything He spoke was directly from God. Prophets had prophetic oracles, but they also spoke a lot of their own words that weren’t from God when they weren’t speaking prophetic oracles. Jesus is categorically different: He alone was so filled with the Holy Spirit that when He opened His mouth, His words were always the Word of God.

You might think, “*Well, of course His words were the very words of God! After all, Jesus is God, right?*” But these verses are not focused on Jesus as God but on the man Christ Jesus. John’s focus is on what makes Jesus of Nazareth the greatest man who ever lived and the man who should have the greatest influence in our world and our lives.

D. The Father and the Son (v. 35)

From the fullness of the anointing of the Spirit, John now shifts his attention to the fullness of the love of the Father for the Son:

“*The Father loves the Son so much that He has given all things into His hand.*”

Again, this is a reference to the man Christ Jesus, the Messiah. He, as King of kings and Lord of lords, is given all things. He is the new Adam, given dominion over the whole world. He is the heir of all things.

This preeminence of Christ over all things is what Paul was communicating when he said, “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” in Colossians 1:15. And this is what Paul said in Ephesians 1:20-21, when he said that God “*seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*”

So Jesus has come from heaven and that origin and nature makes Him above all. But Jesus has also been given all things by the Father, and so this dominion, this enthronement, also makes Jesus superior over all things.

You do realize that you are included in the “all things,” right? You do realize that when we’re told that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation, that means He reigns over you, right? And you do realize that when Paul tells us that Jesus is seated “*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named,*” that includes you, too – that Jesus is above you, right?

The reason why that makes us uncomfortable is that we want to be in control of our own lives and destinies, don’t we? We want to run and rule our own lives. But think about it for a minute: Who would you rather have ruling over the affairs of the world, the competing self-interests of 7 billion deeply flawed and profoundly selfish human beings or Jesus, the Son of God, holy and loving, who has come from heaven to reveal God to us and to bring us back to God? Who do you think would do a better job of managing, directing and saving your life – you or Jesus? I know what a mess I am, how contradictory and confused, how selfish and petty, how easily deceived and tragically misled I can be. I trust Jesus to take my life and make more of it than I ever could.

E. Eternal Life in the Son (v. 36)

And now we come from the superiority of the Son of God to the reality confronting each of us personally this morning: “*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.*”

So, which whoever describes you right now? Are you one of those who believes in the Son of God and has eternal life? Or are you one of those who does not obey the Son – that is, who does not accept the testimony of the Son – and who shall not see life because the wrath of God remains on them?

Notice the language of those who reject the Son of God is that “*the wrath of God remains on them.*” We are all naturally under the wrath of God because we are all guilty of violating God’s law repeatedly and rebelling against His wise, just and loving rule. Like those who commit acts of treason against the United States, there is sure judgment from God against all cosmic insurrectionists who want to overthrow God from ruling their lives. And so the wrath of God remains on those who reject the Son.

But eternal life is given to all those who believe in the Son. The Son has eternal life in Himself and gives life to all who believe in Him. Though we deserve wrath like everyone, Jesus took the wrath of God on Himself so that the same loving regard which the Father has for the Son may abide on us.

Conclusion: What's the Measure of Your Life's Greatness?

We opened this morning by considering the question, "What makes someone great?" So, now as we close, let's consider this question: What would make your life great? Would your life count as great if you achieve something that wins the attention of the world? Would your life count as great if you could make Time's list of 100 Most Influential people?

What is the true value of any of the world's measures of greatness? How long does money last? Fame? Influence? Achievement?

In the end, what makes life truly great is reconciliation to God which brings eternal life. To know that our sins are forgiven, that we are deeply and truly loved by God, that we belong to the eternal and glorious kingdom of the Lord Jesus, that we will live forever with God in the perfect and glorious kingdom of Christ. In every way imaginable – in depth of joy and satisfaction, in length of lasting significance, in freedom and delight and sheer pleasure, this is the greatest life possible.

As David concluded Psalm 16:

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Is that the measure of greatness in your life?