

June 22, 2014
Community Baptist Church
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
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Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 3:22-36.

1. Describe the motivation behind the question John's disciples asked him.
2. How broad in application is John's statement that no one can receive anything unless it comes from heaven?
3. How does the truth, "He must increase but I must decrease" apply to your life?
4. Compare the wording in verse 36 where John wrote, "Whoever **believes** in the Son has eternal life; whoever does **not obey** the Son shall not see life."

UNDERSTANDING THE PLAN GOD GAVE John 3:22-36

God's plan for this age should be obvious in the Church. Sadly, the visible church and the true Church are not similar in too many ways. If the visible church scattered across the world is the manifestation of God's plan, He has established a very human-oriented plan. Is God's plan for individual servants to be worshiped like rock stars? Is God's plan for organizations, called churches, to compete with other organizations putting to use the methods and schemes of Wall Street and Broadway? Is God's plan for people to shout and dance and say religious things just because it makes **them** feel good?

Actually God's plan is for all servants and organizations to decrease while Jesus Christ increases. In other words, when people are growing to be more like Jesus Christ, their fellow servants and ministries pale more and more compared to Jesus. John the Baptist understood this truth. He taught his disciples that this is the way it **must** be.

John's Situation (vv.22-26).

John was still doing ministry (vv.22-24). And now, so was Jesus. He, like John, was also baptizing. *After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing (John 3:22).* The opening word of this verse means that after the events of Jesus turning water into wine in Cana (2:1-12), and cleansing the temple during Passover in Jerusalem (2:13-18), and conversing with Nicodemus (presumably in Jerusalem also) (3:1-21)—after those things, Jesus and the disciples went out into the Judean countryside. Their destination could have been in any number of places. However, Jesus' ministry at that point involved people and baptizing. This means that wherever Jesus and His disciples were, there were people and there was water.

The history lesson at this point reveals that where ever this was, Jesus was remaining there and baptizing. That statement attracts our attention because an overview of Jesus' ministry proves that He seldom remained any place very long. Also rare is the statement here that Jesus was baptizing. If that is true, what about the statement that *(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples) (John 4:2)?* Putting it all together, we conclude that Jesus Himself did not baptize but the disciples did. That is a good reminder that the servant of Christ carries the authority of Christ. That is what Jesus told the disciples when He introduced the new revelation that He was going to build His Church for His glory. He said, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 16:19). And probably the disciples were baptizing people on the basis of repentance of sins, as John had been doing, and presumably continued to do. This was still before the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (i.e. the finished work of Christ). In

contrast, members of the Body of Christ today are baptized in recognition of identifying with the finished work of Christ.

While Jesus Christ was with His followers preaching and baptizing some place in the Judean countryside, John was preaching and baptizing in a different place. *John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (v.23)*. We are not able to locate the precise location of John's ministry at this time, but it was somewhere in the vicinity of this beautiful valley. We can be quite sure that he was east of Mt. Gilboa and just on the west side of the Jordan River.

We do know from the text that John was ministering in a place where there was plenty of water. Also, a simple assessment of the comment indicates that John was still doing what he had been doing since before Jesus came on the scene. We read that he had not been put in prison yet (v.24). The statement, *for John had not yet been put in prison*, serves somewhat like a time marker. Because John wrote in the early 90's, all of these events involving Jesus and John were well known. Anyone who had read Mark's, Luke's, or Matthew's Gospel account (all written 50's-early 60's; 35 years before John's) would have known the John in Herod's prison story. So there was John still doing the work that God had promised his father Zechariah that He (God) created John to do. Which was? God planned for John to be Christ's forerunner, to prepare the way for Messiah, and to continue to declare "the Kingdom of God is at hand." Good for John.

But for how long did God plan for him to do this? That seems to be the question on the minds of John's disciples. It all started from the fact that there was a debate (vv.25-26). Wherever there is proclamation of truth, there must also be debate. This discussion centered on something about purification. *Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification (v.25)*. What was that all about?

Some scholars claim that John was part of the Essene sect. The Essenes came on the scene in about 100 BC and disappeared at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. They were somewhat like Pharisees but more characterized by sincere devotion to God. They were most known for their community at Qumran (writers of the Dead Sea scrolls). There are some similarities between John and this group, especially in things regarding the desert setting, a strict

lifestyle, and emphasis on purity. At the same time, there were serious differences in that John was not reclusive like they were, and they generally did not receive Jesus as the Messiah.

We say all of that to say that ceremonial washing and purity was a common thread between John and the Essenes. Now a certain Jew showed up in John's camp and was investigating what John's disciples believed and practiced regarding ceremonial purification. Given John's background, that would not be surprising topic at all. But, somehow the discussion led to the topic of John losing popularity (v.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" (v.26)*. Apparently, Jesus and His ministry got pulled into the conversation.

John's disciples pointed out various observations regarding Jesus. They admitted that Jesus (though unnamed) was in association with John on some level at a place on the other side of the Jordan River. They knew that John had testified that Jesus was the promised Messiah—and even more, He was the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (2:29). But now this Jesus was engaged in the same kind of ministry John had been engaged in for some time. And over the past intervening months John was losing followers to Jesus.

We do well to pay close attention to this story because the picture is so expressive of human nature which reveals some rather wrong views on the idea of God-ordained ministry. For example, natural human wisdom concludes that ministry is competitive. We naturally think that ministry success is gauged by the number of followers. Too often the individual leading the ministry is the significant issue. Therefore, if an individual minister is not as popular as another individual minister, there is a problem. That kind of thinking will lead to the error that we need to become creative to attract more followers so that we can become popular so that others will claim that we are a success in ministry.

All that flies in the face of the very definition of ministry. Ministry is service. The first and most important point in service is the truth that ministry is not about me! Ministry is about exalting Jesus Christ. Therefore, as we minister to others, our goal is to help others become like Jesus Christ, by which He is exalted. John

explained all of this to his followers who were as mixed up as most modern religious Americans are.

John's Sermon (vv.27-36).

The foundational argument lies in these words, *John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (v.27)*. The foundational argument is that God gives ministries. Mere humans are great at building religious organizations, creating religious icons, shaping religious "rock stars," and constructing religious monuments (edifices)—some of which are very impressive. But true ministries are gifts from God.

James pointed out, *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17)*. This means that God chooses to create a particular individual to serve as His servant. That is obviously the case based on Bible evidence for servants like Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, the Apostles, Paul, and many others. God revealed that He chooses servants like this even while they are in their mother's womb. As adults, God draws them to Himself and sets them aside for His service.

Because people like this are servants God has chosen, it is not surprising that in time ministries grow up around these individuals. Such was the case for John the Baptist. The same was true for Paul. We have good biblical evidence that the success of such ministries was due to God's choosing. But what about real people—not the kind who are in the Bible? Now listing other mere human servants not named and described in the Bible can be dangerous, but here are a few: William Tyndale, John Knox, John Huss, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, Hudson Taylor, William Carey, Adonirum Judson, Charles Spurgeon. It is always best to include only dead men in such lists because they cannot fail any more.

These were men of God's choosing and God built their ministries for His own glory. Though it is indisputable that God did use the individuals, but where are their ministries today? Some of their work continues through the generations. But Luthernism has never known another Martin Luther. Peter Masters, the pastor of

Metropolitan Tabernacle, is a true man of God and a very capable preacher. But he will be the first to remind us that he is not of Charles Spurgeon grandeur.

The fact is that God changes ministries. Ministries rise and ministries fall. Wait! Didn't James say in the context of God giving gifts that *there is no variation or shadow due to change*? How do we explain that apparent contradiction? The fact that all good gifts come from God will never change. The fact that God determines the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of those gifts is also certain. But, as He does with whole nations, God raises up leaders to use for His purposes and then puts them down for His own glory.

John the Baptist understood this work of God. He illustrated for us six very important principles about how and why Jesus must increase as we decrease. The last several verses of our text lay out John's application of the truth as it relates to John and Jesus (vv.28-36).

First, John understood the ministry God gave him to do. He answered the inquiring disciples, *You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'* (v.28). That was quite public knowledge. John clearly informed everyone who asked, not just his disciples, that he was not the promised Christ. The leaders from Jerusalem had wondered, but John straightened them out (1:24-28). Surely John's followers had heard this claim repeatedly.

As it was for John, so it is for all of us. "The Christ" is the issue in ministry. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the only way to be reconciled to our Creator. He, therefore, is the only guarantee of eternal life. Eternal life really is the most important issue in life. In this brief, fleeting time called life, we will either receive the promise of eternal life through faith in the Christ or we will reject the Christ and seal our doom in eternal damnation. Christ is always the central issue for all ministry.

John understood that God's plan for him was to be the messenger sent before the Christ to pave the way for Him. No doubt his father told him the angel's message. "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready

for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16-17). The forerunner of the Messiah is not the competitor of the Messiah. No evangelist, missionary, pastor/teacher, or Christian man or woman in the church is above Christ. Ministry is not about us—it is about Jesus.

Second, John understood the relationship God gave him with Jesus. He told his followers, *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* (v.29). He was explaining that God’s chosen servant is always subservient to the Master.

John illustrated this point with the familiar picture of the bridegroom’s friend. The friend of the bridegroom is equivalent to our “best man” concept. He was responsible to oversee the wedding feast and make sure that everything was suitable to the bridegroom. He even escorted the bride to the bridegroom at the feast. And then his responsibility was over. From that moment on, the attention was on the bridegroom and his bride. In ancient middle eastern cultures, the friend of bridegroom was strictly forbidden to marry the bride even if the groom rejected her.

What does that mean to us who live in twenty-first century America? We are not supposed to be winning people to ourselves or even to our “organization.” We are supposed to bring the Bride to the Bridegroom. How many so-called Christians are guilty of trying to come between the Bride (the Church) and the Bridegroom Jesus Christ? Like John, our joy in ministry is to hear the Bridegroom’s voice. Presently, that is in this life, we are to be like the ancient friend of the bridegroom and find our joy in hearing the Bridegroom’s voice. He speaks in clear terms to us from His Word. He tells us how to bring the Bride to Him and why we bring the Bride to Him. We rejoice to hear the Bridegroom say to the Bride, “Welcome.”

But in the future, hearing our Bridegroom’s voice will be critically important as well as a source of joy to us. We long to hear, “Well done good and faithful servant.” All that matters for eternity is that we can join the course of heaven praising the Lamb who was slain to redeem us from our sins.

Third, John understood the position God gave him relative to Jesus. In a most striking response, John told his followers regarding Jesus, *He must increase, but I must decrease. 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 (vv.30-31). That is the critical lesson for us modern servants of Christ. We must remind ourselves that Christ must increase while we decrease. This is because it is our tendency to want to increase. We naturally desire notoriety and attention. When we have worked hard, we love to have congratulations. Therefore, we must continually remind ourselves that ministry is not about us.

However, that is not the thrust of John’s statement. We will discover that Jesus increasing while we decrease is exactly what happens in God-ordained ministry. There is a reason for it. The word *must* is actually an expression of God’s determined will. In God’s plan for John, Jesus Christ had to increase while John decreased. That is still God’s plan. In all genuine ministry, Christ must increase. Therefore, there will be those obvious times when the servant is decreasing in importance.

It must be this way because Christ, having come from the presence of God the Creator, is everything (v.31). We who are confined to earth do the best we can to teach about and represent the eternal Master. But our experiences are bound and limited by earth and time. Because Christ is eternal, His person and teaching will continually outshine human ministry.

Fourth, John understood the reward God gives to those who receive the truth about Jesus. Jesus spoke what He knew and experienced first hand—eternal truth from the Father. *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony* (v.32). That is what Jesus told Nicodemus: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen*” (John 3:11). It is what Jesus said to the Pharisees: “*I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him*” (John 8:26). It was Jesus’ affirmation to disciples: “*I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you*” (John 15:15).

Though Jesus’ teaching came directly from God the Father, most people rejected the teaching. They admitted that He taught with special authority (Matt. 7:28-29). But there were other things about Jesus they liked better. They wanted the welfare as evidenced in

clamoring for free food. They wanted the free health care. They were real people, just like the people we know who love to receive blessings from God's hand that benefit them physically. But most people still do not want the teaching of Jesus that comes from the Father. That teaching has eternal ramifications, and people are most interested in the passing things of earth.

However, the people who do embrace Jesus' teaching receive great reward. John said that *Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true (v.33)*. When we receive Jesus' teaching, we are regenerated, born again. With that new heart, new way of thinking, new believing, God gives us the utmost confidence. John said that we "set our seal" which is to give whole-hearted assurance and approval. To what? To the fact that God is true! Yes, certainly, Jesus, the man from Nazareth, taught that which is true. But through faith, we are saying that Jesus from Nazareth represented the truth of the Creator, His and our Heavenly Father, perfectly. We are saying that Jesus is the exact expression of God.

Fifth, John understood the Son who God gave to declare His words. *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.* Ministry is all about conveying the message God speaks. That has always been God's plan for His servants. God spoke in the past through prophets and holy men who gave us His truth (Heb. 1:1). Now God continues to speak through Christ, the eternal Son (Heb. 1:2). The prophets spoke according to the measure of the Holy Spirit God gave. We minister according to the measure of faith God grants us through the Holy Spirit in giving of spiritual capacities for service (Rom. 12:3). But God the Father speaks perfectly through God the Son who has the Holy Spirit without measure. This is in keeping with the fact that the Father has committed all things into the hands of the Son.

Finally, John understood the ultimate reason for which God gave the Son. *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 (v.36)*. Because God sent the Son into the world, believers receive eternal life. That is why we tell the words that God has spoken through the Son. We desire for people to become like Christ.

They must know Christ's message to even begin that journey into Christ-likeness. In the process, Christ increases and we decrease.

Unbelievers do not obey the Son's message and are left with only the wrath of God. What kind of person is content to let God's wrath abide on others? And yet, even in the outpouring of wrath, Jesus Christ increases in magnificence. Compared to the wrath of God, what grace has been showered upon us through Jesus Christ!

That is God's plan for ministry as John explained it to his disciples who were a bit miffed that Jesus, the newcomer evangelist, was getting more attention than their guy was. John explained that God chooses His servants in eternity, that God sends His servants with the message of Christ, God the Son, in time and on earth. He explained that some people hear the message and believe. We rejoice because they too have heard the voice of the Bridegroom. They become like Christ as we are diminished more and more in comparison. And we say, "Praise God, that is the way it must be."