



He Must Increase But I Must Decrease

Series: John – That You May Believe

John 3:22-36

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This morning, beloved, we are going to close out the third chapter of John. By my rough calculations that means that, God willing and if Christ does not return first, we have about a year or so left in the Gospel of John. And I am glad about that. I really love this Gospel and the rich picture that it gives us of Jesus. It is deep and wide and has been for me, soul-nourishing, faith-strengthening and it has been deepening my love for Christ. I trust it has been the same for you.

The text that we are looking at this morning is arranged in the same predictable pattern as we saw earlier in this chapter with the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus. We have before us the Apostle John's account of John the Baptist's interaction with his disciples and then a commentary and summation by the Apostle John of that interaction and, really, the whole of this chapter. It is both beautiful and challenging. Today we are going to see and even fuller expression of faith in Christ as we hear JTB's response to the concerns of his disciples and then yet another testimony to the greatness and glory and to the utter indispensability of Jesus Christ for our salvation and spiritual well-being. But the first thing we see is

A Change of Scenery (22-24)

There is a transition that takes place in this text, a change of scenery, if you will. Jesus, you remember, has been active in Jerusalem. Remember that He came up to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover feast, that feast that marked God's rescue of the nation of Israel out of the bondage of the Egypt, one of the great annual feasts of the people that pointed them to the grace of God in their deliverance from oppression and slavery to the be the people of God. It was in that context that Jesus shockingly and powerfully cleansed the

Temple, after which He continued to perform signs that pointed unmistakable to anyone who had eyes to see and a heart to believe that He was indeed the Messiah sent from God. That occasioned the visit of Nicodemus, the teacher in Israel, the religious paragon of virtue, to meet with Jesus at night. Whatever his motives for coming, Jesus made clear to Nicodemus that, for all of his religion, he was a spiritually dead man like the rest of mankind. It was in the context of that conversation that we came face to face with some foundational biblical truth. Mankind, every one of us, is born in state of spiritual death, because of our sinfulness, and in order for anyone to see the Kingdom of God, in order for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God, we must be born again. God must make us, by His power and by His gracious will, to be born from above, to have our dead hearts made alive to God, to have our blinded eyes open to the truth about God and about ourselves, to have our will freed from the bondage of sin and spiritual death in order to believe in Jesus Christ and have eternal life.

Jesus spoke of God's eternal plan, born of His love, to forgive sinners and still uphold justice by sending Him, the Son of Man, into this world to die on the cross and suffer the wrath of God in the place of everyone that would believe in Him and place their trust in Jesus alone as Savior and as Lord -- John, in his commentary, making clear that whoever believes will have eternal life and that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it but to save it. The world is already under condemnation because it naturally loves sin and loves darkness and hates the light that is in Jesus. Only those who have been born again by the grace of God will come to the light of Christ and in coming to faith in Christ, prove that they have been made alive by the power of God. This is all basic, foundational gospel truth.

The text we are reading today picks up after Jesus had left Jerusalem and went into the surrounding Judean countryside. Look at it, starting in verse 22, ***“After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).”*** (John 3:22–24, ESV) So here's the scene. Jesus and His disciples had gone out into the countryside where Jesus was preaching and teaching. People were coming out to hear Him preach and they were responding to His preaching by undergoing a baptism of repentance, a baptism of confession of sin, a baptism that confessed God's holiness and their sinfulness and their need to be spiritually cleansed in order to have fellowship with and forgiveness from God. As John tells us later, in chapter 4:2, Jesus was not baptizing; His disciples were. Still Jesus

was making disciples and those disciples were undergoing a baptism not much different from that of John the Baptist's.

John was also continuing in his ministry of pointing to Jesus and baptizing people as a sign of repentance. This was before he had been put in prison. The Apostle John wants us to know that this is early in Jesus' ministry. So you have these two ministries going on simultaneously in different places. And that gives rise to a display of

Spiritual Ignorance and Envy (25-26)

The Apostle John gives us the lowdown starting in verse 25, ***“Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 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.””*** (John 3:25–26, ESV) John tells us nothing of the particulars of the dispute that arose between John's disciples and this Jew. Probably it had something to do with how John's baptism related to all of the ritual washings that the Jews observed during this time and why his baptism was superior to theirs, but in the course of the conversation, John's disciples learned of Jesus' ministry across the Jordan and they were not happy about it. They find out that Jesus is baptizing and making disciples and they are bothered. The way that they bring this information to John just drips with ignorance, envy, jealousy, and bitterness.

Just look at it. They don't use Jesus' name, rather referring to Him in the third person – he who was with you, to whom you bore witness, he is baptizing – that guy. They point out how, from their perspective, John had borne witness to Him, almost like he had done Jesus a favor. And they exaggerate to make their point – all are going out to Him. That's clearly an overstatement, but it does open a window to their hearts. They are resentful and obviously jealous of their perceived success of Jesus' ministry. They do not rejoice that man and women are flocking to the Messiah, coming to the only One who can save their souls. Instead they are indignant, jealous and envious for John and no doubt for themselves as well. They felt deflated somewhat. John had risen to prominence as the forerunner of the Messiah. His ministry had been powerful and wide-reaching, but now the handwriting was

on the wall. John had been eclipsed by Jesus and they wanted John to hold center-stage for a little while longer. This just didn't sit well with them at all.

All of this begs the question, "What are they still doing with John anyway?" Shouldn't they be with Jesus? If they really understood John's message and John's ministry, his calling from God, shouldn't they have followed the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World. It could be that they were serving as John's assistants somehow, serving his ministry in some capacity, but the point remains – they were ignorant, perhaps willfully, of the message and purpose of John's ministry. This could have caused a real storm in the kingdom of God, threatened to become a major issue, but John handles his disciples graciously and with

A Confession of Authentic and Humble Faith (27-30) Look what he does here. Don't miss the importance of this confession because it is a beautiful thing. ***"John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." (John 3:27, ESV)*** This is an axiomatic statement of fact, a ready acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. ***A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.*** The Apostle Paul would later say to the prideful and quarrel-prone Corinthians, ***"For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7, ESV)***

The obvious point that John is making is that as far as the reach, the scope, and the power of his ministry and the ministry of Jesus was concerned, that was God's business. But that is not all that John is saying as is made evident by what follows. John is testifying here to his contentment born of his faith in God. He doesn't get all stirred up. There is no tension and no rivalry in his heart because He is content in the providence of God in his life. He is content with what God made him to be, with the calling and the gifts that God had given to him, with the life that God had fashioned for him. John is content in God. He doesn't feel as if God has ripped him off, or that God was somehow holding out on him, or that God dealt him a lousy hand, or that God was somehow unfair.

Now listen, that's big deal. Contentment in God's providence and contentment in His grace is an incredible blessing and it is the mark of a maturing and authentic faith. Contentment is a rare thing in these days. Real contentment, real satisfaction, true soul rest – and the

manifold blessings that come from it -- is one of the most elusive and rarest of the Christian graces, even among those who have been in Christ for the longest. And it's opposite -- discontent -- is one of the most pervasive, destructive, and disabling sins among professing believers that there is. It is a seed for all sorts of iniquity and sin, like the jealousy, envy and bitterness we see in John's disciples.

Discontent is rampant in our society. If we aren't discontent with what we have, we are discontent with how we look. If we aren't discontent with who we're married to, it's our lot in life, or where we live, or the experiences that we haven't had. We compare ourselves to others and how easy they seem to have it, or all that they have, or all that they get to do, and we are discontent. This discontentment is reflected in a lot of ways. Our consumer debt in this country is out of control. It shows up in our high rate of mobility, always looking for something bigger and better. It's reflected in our "victimism" and the sense that we "never get a fair shake." Our obsession with changing our faces and bodies. The "grass is always greener" mentality. Epidemic of complaining and grumbling. Robert Reayburn says: **"Certainly no one can deny that true contentment is not the fortune of many in our day and time. It is a scarce commodity in the world. Our world is fueled by discontent. It runs the engines of government, economy, and society. Everyone wants more than he has or wants something else than she has. They want to be happier, wealthier, prettier, whatever. Enormous amounts of time, energy and money are devoted to seeking this elusive contentment and for its sake sacrifices are made, families are divided, the law is broken, great risks are undertaken, pleasures hotly pursued, even coaches are fired. Long ago the prophet Habakkuk described today's man or woman to a "T." "He is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied." [2:5] But, alas, what is true in the world is too often true in the kingdom of God. There may be more true contentment to be found among Christians -- there certainly is -- but there is not nearly as much as there ought to be."**

Don't miss that last part. Discontentment is not just a "them" problem, it's an issue in the church as well. You see it in the jealousy and frustration that all too often raises its head in the church, where people lose sight of Christ and His glory and see their worship and service as matter of their preeminence, position and personal fulfillment. When they see things in terms of themselves only. People like that soon grow a sour, bitter, strife-causing, fractious and vinegary disposition. And that disposition, that orientation, is born of a heart that sees God's grace as an entitlement, as something deserved, that seeks to use Christ for personal gain and that has lost sight of the real and desperate need that has been answered and supplied in Christ's death and resurrection -- mainly forgiveness, salvation, peace and

fellowship with God – and has become dissatisfied with its lot in life. We are not “owed” anything but hell and death. God has graciously given us life in Christ, if we are believers, which is amazing grace and **anything else** above that, which, in His perfect wisdom He may give to us, is grace upon grace. We need to learn and believe that. Jeremiah Burroughs, said: **“Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”** He could have been writing those words about John the Baptist. He had a contentment that was born of authentic faith in God and in His Christ. He got it. He knew that it wasn’t all about him.

In fact, look at what he says next. **“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ 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.”** (John 3:28–29, ESV) Do you hear what he is saying? John knew who Christ was and He knew who he was in relation to Him and John knew that his role, his remarkable and humbling calling, was to make Christ preeminent, not to promote himself, his ministry, or his disciples. He uses an illustration to make his point – the difference between the friend of the bridegroom and the bridegroom, himself, and he is not confused as to his role at all.

John was the friend of the bridegroom, the best man if you will. The friend of the bridegroom, in those days, had a very important function. It was his job to be the liaison between the bride and the groom and their families. He arranged the wedding, delivered the invitations, presided at the wedding feast, brought the bride and the bridegroom together. It was his duty to guard the bridal chamber and allow no false lover to enter. When he heard the voice of the bridegroom, he would let him in and went away rejoicing because his mission was complete. That is just what John had done. He was not the bridegroom. He was simply the friend of the groom – a great honor and responsibility – but the bride belongs to the bridegroom. John’s disciples needed to see that.

So, far from resenting Jesus’ coming or His ministry, John rejoiced at the light of salvation shining in the world. His only desire was to point to that light, to hail and promote Jesus as Savior, to be faithful to his calling and to lead the bride into the arms of Jesus. It was not John, but Jesus who, in the words of the Apostle John, **“loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the**

word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:25–27, ESV)

John had been given a remarkable calling, an immense honor, to be the forerunner of Christ, to announce Him as the Lamb of God, as Savior and Lord. The crowds leaving John and going after Jesus was just the beginning. It would continue. It must continue until everyone was with Jesus and no one was left with John. Then, and only then, would John know the supreme satisfaction of complete joy. That’s why he says what he does in verse 30.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”” (John 3:30, ESV) These are the last recorded words of John in this gospel and what a powerful truth is found in them. John is saying to his disciples, in essence, “Jesus must increase, I must decrease because He is the Son of God and I am not; He is the Savior of sinners, my Savior, and I am not; He is the Messiah and I am not; He can baptize with the Holy Spirit and make dead souls live and I cannot.”

Again, this is a statement of maturing and authentic Christian faith that is true not only of John but of everyone who is a true follower of Jesus Christ. This is at the very heart of Christian faith. He must increase and I must decrease. It is not about me; it is all about Jesus. That is what it means to confess truly that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord. This is what discipleship and following Christ looks like – making little of ourselves and making much of Christ. What things would fall away – both sins and things that in themselves are not sinful but which take up too much of our time without really advancing Christ’s honor, our love for Him, His interests and pleasure in our lives if we took these words seriously? Conversely, what things would become the staples of our lives, what Christian virtues, what practices, what commitments, what fruit, would become the fabric of our lives if we really embraced that mindset of John. **He must increase, but I must decrease.** That statement is the essence of real humility before God. How many of us can say that and mean it, not as a slogan but as truth? Jesus, you must increase and I must decrease. You must become more important and I must become less important. More of you and less of me. I want to disappear in You the way I was intended to.

AW Tozer said, **“The humble man accepts the truth about himself. He believes that in his fallen nature dwells no good thing. He acknowledges that apart from God he is nothing,**

has nothing, knows nothing and can do nothing. But this knowledge does not discourage him, for he knows also that in Christ he is somebody. He knows that he is dearer to God than the apple of His eye and that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him; that is, he can do all that lies within the will of God for him to do... The truly humble man does not expect to find virtue in himself, and when he finds none he is not disappointed. He knows that any good deed he may do is the result of God's working in him, and if it is his own work he knows that it is not good, however good it may appear to be. When this belief becomes so much a part of a man that it operates as a kind of unconscious reflex... the emphasis of his life shifts from self to Christ, where it should have been in the first place, and he is thus set free to serve his generation by the will of God without the thousand hindrances he knew before.” Beloved, John makes a statement that must be true of all of us – ***He must increase, but I must decrease.*** Jesus must increase; He must be everything. And that leads us to

The Apostle John’s Summation of Chapter 3 (31-36)

As John comes to the close of this chapter and offers this summation of everything that has preceded it, it is as if he is saying, “Here is what you must see. Here is what you must believe. Here is what John understood and that to which Nicodemus and John’s disciples were still blind.” The Apostle says, ***“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) These are powerful words, words that speak to us clearly

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 Son of God, Himself God in the flesh. You, me, John, Nicodemus – we are of the earth and earthly as a result. He is above all, above you and me. He is above all and demands the fullness of devotion and surrender. To honor Him as the One above all means to follow Him, to serve Him, to worship Him, to put Him first in heart, mind, speech and actions, to put Him first above all in your life. Some people think that is radical or crazy or unrealistic or impractical or over the top. It

doesn't matter what they think or feel. That is Christianity according to Christ. Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"** (Matthew 16:24–26, ESV) That is about as plain as it gets. Jesus is above all.

Moreover, **He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.** Jesus testifies to the truth – the truth about God, the truth about our human condition, the truth about salvation, the truth of the new birth, the truth of our sinfulness and our need to be forgiven, the truth of the cross, the truth about eternal life – because He bears witness to what He has both seen and heard, to the truths that are established in heaven. He is not merely philosophizing or speculating; He is speaking the very words of God. Later we will hear Jesus say, **"My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."** (John 7:16, ESV) And then, **"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me."** (John 8:28, ESV) His witness is completely reliable.

But as the Apostle John tells us, **no one receives his testimony.** Now obviously, we know that John is not being literal here. He will tell us in the very next sentence that there are some who will receive the truth from Jesus, right? His point is that in comparison to the number of people who went out to Jesus or who hear His gospel truth today, very few receive Him and His truth. His message is generally rejected by the world because people have worldly ideas and attitudes, opinions and feelings that clash with Jesus' teaching so that they reject Him. But you cannot judge the truthfulness of Jesus' testimony by taking a poll. When you are confronted with the clear teaching of the Bible, with the clear words of Christ, you will find it conflicting with and contradicting many things you have always assumed and believed. And you are faced with a choice – bow in humility to the truth of God or be eternally crushed and judged by it. Christ's words will stand forever.

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. John is unequivocating in his position that Jesus speaks the words of God, because Jesus has been endowed by God with the fullness of the Spirit. Unlike the prophets before Him, Jesus did not receive a measure of the Spirit, a measure of God's revelation – As God's final messenger, He has

received both in full. Those who receive His testimony sets his seal to the truthfulness of God and who Jesus claimed to be. Whoever receives His testimony, sets his seal to the truth that God is true. In the ancient world, people had signet rings that they would use to mark something they owned or to authenticate a document they had written with a wax seal. By setting your seal to this, what John is saying is that you fix your soul with certain conviction in your mind and heart that Jesus is the promised Redeemer, your personal Savior and Lord. Even if everyone else rejects Him, even if everyone else forsakes Him, you will be faithful unto death.

And that is wise because, ***The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.*** In other words, God has given to Jesus the authority to declare God's Word and to send the Spirit into the hearts of His own so that they receive it in faith. God testified to John the Baptist, ***“He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”*** John likewise testified, ***“I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”*** (John 1:33–34, ESV)

Then finally, John sums up everything that has been said in John 3 with these words, ***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 the bottom line truth. What do you make of Jesus Christ? How you respond determines nothing less than your eternal destiny. The testimony of God's Word is that there are only two options. You either receive by faith the Savior, the Son of God, Jesus, who reveals the truth from heaven, who opened the way of salvation by the shedding of His own blood, by His own sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God in the sinners' place and you receive eternal life. Or you refuse Christ's testimony, you refuse to believe His truth, His gospel, you rebel against His command to repent and believe the gospel – you disobey Jesus – and the wrath of God, which is already upon you for your sin, remains forever. Believe in Jesus and have eternal life or do not obey Jesus and be under God's perpetual wrath. Both options are present realities that extend into eternity. Whatever state you are in when you die continues forever after you die. Our eternal destiny hinges on believing in and receiving Christ or disobeying Him.

Look, all religious leaders are not basically the same -- Jesus, Buddha, Muhammed, Joseph Smith. Jesus alone is the very Son of God who came from heaven with ultimate truth, who died and rose from the dead. No other religion even claims to have such a leader, such a Savior, such a Lord. All religions – Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism,

Mormonism, Christianity – are not basically the same. The gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone stands alone. Jesus Christ stands alone.

I want to close with these words from JC Ryle because they are so excellent and I cannot improve on them. He says, **“We can never make too much of Christ... We can never have too high thoughts about Christ, can never love Him too much, trust Him too implicitly, lay too much weight upon Him, and speak too highly in His praise. He is worthy of all the honor that we can give Him. He will be all in heaven. Let us see to it, that He is all in our hearts on earth.”**

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