

He Must Increase, I Must Decrease: John 3:22-36
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One of my favorite C. S. Lewis quotes is this insight about humility. He writes, “To even get near [humility], even for a moment, is like a drink of cold water to a man in a desert. . . . Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call “humble” nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody [a kind of insincere groveling]. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.” (Mere Christianity)

This is going to be a sermon mainly about humility, as we see a great example of it in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. It is summed up so well in that short statement of his in verse 30. John the Baptist is speaking of Jesus and says, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” What a great life mission that is. Wouldn’t it be great if each one of us, each and every day, woke up preaching this to ourselves. Jesus Christ must increase. He will increase. He is being glorified, and will be lifted up in exaltation for all eternity. And for that to happen more and more in my life, I need to get out of the way. I must decrease. It can’t be about me. My business today is not to get attention for myself, but to point people to Jesus. He must increase. I must decrease.

We’ve already learned quite a bit about John the Baptist back in chapter 1. So I’m going to start today by quickly reviewing some of the main points we looked at in chapter 1. Secondly, from our verses for this morning there’s a bit more I want to say about baptism, specifically the mode of baptism. And about the timeline of the events that are being recorded here.

Then we’ll spend the rest of our time observing John the Baptist’s humility and recognizing some of the truths which fostered that humility.

Identity and Mission

We hear quite a bit about John the Baptist in chapters 1 and 3 of this Gospel. Right away in the beginning of the prologue there are 3 verses devoted to making a clear distinction between John the Baptist and the Messiah, the Messiah spoken of as the Word and the Light. “*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the*

light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” (John 1:6–8, ESV)

Just notice the purpose of John’s ministry, at the end of verse 7, “that all might believe through him (referring to the light, Jesus Christ).” John the Gospel-writer (don’t confuse these guys—John the Baptist and John the guy who wrote the book of John) . . . John the Gospel-writer has the same purpose in writing this. In John 20:31, he says that “these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John the Baptist was not the light, but he was a witness to the light, pointing people to believe and be saved through Jesus.

Then in another parenthetical statement toward the end of the prologue, in verse 15, we have this quotation from John the Baptist, and we see John’s humility, “*(John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”)*” (John 1:15, ESV)

This is interesting because John the Baptist was born before Jesus. His ministry began before Jesus’ ministry began. But make no mistake, Jesus is taking center stage. He’s not one of John’s students or assistants, just following after him. No, it’s the other way around. John has been a witness to the light, to the Word. And now that the Word is coming on the scene, John’s going to get out of the way.

It sounds odd to say it, but even though Jesus is coming along after John, Jesus existed before John. This points to the eternality of the Word. He existed long before He was born in Bethlehem. He is the eternal Word. John recognized that even though Jesus is coming after me, He ranks before me because He existed before me. He is far more important than I am. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. John has a very humble posture in recognizing his own role as related to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Messiah. John is a pointer.

His identity and mission are further clarified just a few verses later in chapter 1 (v. 19) when a delegation of Jews from Jerusalem come to ask John who he is. He tells them plainly, “I am not the Christ.” They ask, “Are you Elijah?” No. “Are you the Prophet?” No. What he does say is this, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” John, in his role, was fulfilling Old Testament prophecies.

We see John’s humility again in his next comments. As these folks continue to question him, John says, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to

untie.” John shows here in a profound way his humble role in the drama of redemption. He played such a significant role, and it was a very humble role.

His message was to declare that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! That’s recorded in John 1:29. As John saw Jesus coming toward him, John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

John had the unique privilege of baptizing Jesus. Matthew records that John would have prevented this, saying “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” His humility is seen again in that statement. He was not presuming upon this privilege. In fact, he was reluctant to do it, because he understood his own identity, and he understood Jesus’ identity. He was very hesitant to put himself in a position that might appear as though he had some authority over Jesus. But when Jesus insisted that John baptize Him, John submitted.

One more thing to remember in John chapter 1, something that will connect with the things we’re going to look at in chapter 3. In John 1:35 and following we’re told of 2 disciples of John the Baptist who then go and follow Jesus. This is really a wonderful and tangible display of the effect of John’s ministry. This is what he was all about. Pointing people to Jesus. So when John is saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” 2 of John’s disciples heed that word by departing from John in order to follow Jesus. Someone watching might worry, “Isn’t that going to hurt John’s feelings?” Won’t he be lonely? Won’t he feel unappreciated after all he invested in those men? Won’t John’s ministry suffer now that these guys aren’t part of his team anymore?

All of those questions would be likely concerns in many cases similar to this. But not in this case. Why? Because of John’s clear understanding of his own role and Jesus’ role, and because of John’s humility that arose from that clear understanding of his own role and Jesus’ role.

If a reporter would have run up to John right after those disciples departed from him, and if the reporter asked some of those questions . . . “Are you disappointed? Are you frustrated? Bitter? Jealous?” John would have smiled and said, “Not at all. Because this is exactly the point of my ministry! When folks who are my followers become followers of Jesus, that’s not a loss. It’s the opposite of loss. That’s all gain. I couldn’t be happier!”

And that’s precisely what we’re going to see in our passage in chapter 3. Some of his own disciples are going to express concern about the growing popularity of Jesus. And John is going to say, That’s exactly the point! He must increase, but I must decrease.

Now, before we look further into the theme of humility in this passage, I want to make a couple observations from verses 22-24.

The Mode of Baptism

From verse 23 I want to make a point about the mode of baptism. You may think this coming completely out of nowhere. But I think this is a significant matter, and I believe this verse has some bearing on our answer to the question, “How should baptism be done?”

In some churches, the water is sprinkled over the person. In other churches, water is poured over the person. But what I hope you’ll recognize in the Bible is that immersion is the proper mode of baptism. When we baptize individuals, we ought to get them in the water and immerse them. There are a few reasons for this.

First of all, the Greek word *baptizō* means “to plunge, dip, immerse.” This meaning is evident both in the Bible and in Greek literature outside of the Bible. In addition to this, immersion in water makes the most sense of the way the New Testament describes the baptism of various individuals. And this is where our passage comes in, where verse 23 makes a point pertaining to the mode of baptism.

Why was John baptizing at Aenon near Salim? Because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being dipped, immersed, plunged into the water. You don’t need a lot of water to sprinkle or pour. But you do need a lot of water to immerse. And apparently immersion was important enough to John that he went to a place where there was a lot of water.

Other texts point to immersion as well. For instance, Mark 1:5 describes those who were going out to John the Baptist, and it says they “were being baptized by him IN the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” A few verses later we read of Jesus’ baptism, and it says, “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” The point being, he came up OUT OF the water, implying that He had been IN the water.

Another example is when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In Acts 8:36, the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Then the next verse says, “they both went DOWN into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came UP OUT of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away . . .” If they thought sprinkling or pouring would be sufficient, they wouldn’t have needed to wait until they came upon a body of water. And

the going down into the water and coming up out of the water strongly implies that Philip fully immersed this man in the water.

Baptism by immersion is consistent with the meaning of the word, and it is also the mode which was practiced in the New Testament. A final reason for baptizing by immersion is the fact that it best symbolizes our death with Christ and our resurrection to new life, which is what Romans 6 explains to us. That's a further discussion we can have at another time, and an important one. But since we had this mention of baptism and plentiful water, I wanted to make this point brief point about the biblical mode of baptism—immersion.

Timeline

And then just a quick word about the timeline of the events being recorded here in the Gospel of John. In verse 24 John the Gospel-writer makes this brief mention of John the Baptist's imprisonment. He doesn't tell us the whole story. In fact, he doesn't tell us any part of the story. You can read that in Mark 6. What we realize here in John 3:24 is that there was a period of time when the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus overlapped. We wouldn't know this by reading Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each of those gospels begin telling us about Jesus' public ministry from the point of John's arrest onward. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) go from Jesus' temptation right into His Galilean ministry (Matt 4:12; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:14).

But here in the Gospel of John we see that there was a Judean ministry that happened as well (note v. 22)—a Judean ministry that was overlapping with the ministry of John the Baptist prior to John's arrest. We can keep that in mind as we think about piecing together the events recorded in each of the 4 gospels. And this also helps us to see that what we're reading here in John 3 is unique. We're getting a piece of the story here that Matthew, Mark and Luke don't include. There is this potential for competitiveness, for rivalry, for jealousy, during this time when John's ministry is nearing its end and Jesus' ministry is beginning.

This is the situation that highlights, on the one hand, the jealousy felt by some of John's disciples, and on the other hand, in contrast, shows us John's humility – a humility that dispels any hint of competitiveness.

Observing John's Humility

First, notice a couple things about the way John's disciples convey this to John. Somehow this arose from a discussion about purification. We're not told exactly what the connection is, and I'm not going to speculate.

But when John's disciples come to him, we first notice their great respect for John, calling him Rabbi. And then we notice that they intentionally avoid naming Jesus. Instead they refer to "he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness." Maybe that was part of their jealousy. They didn't even want to acknowledge Jesus directly. They weren't rejoicing in Jesus' ministry, because they saw it as a threat to their own ministry. So they make this nameless reference to Him, and one that emphasizes John's role in pointing people to Him.

It seems it was a tough pill to swallow for these disciples of John to think that their Rabbi, John the Baptist, had paved the way for this Jesus, and now Jesus is setting out on His own. Does He even have a right to do that? And Jesus is gaining a greater popularity than John! It doesn't seem right to them.

And then they exaggerate what was happening. At the end of verse 26, "look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." It's almost unbearable for them. Their ministry with John had been the biggest thing going up until recently. But now Jesus' ministry is quickly emerging as a far more powerful movement. In the eyes of these disciples of John, everyone was now going to Jesus, while John's numbers were on a downward trend.

That gives us a sense of their attitude about things. How is John's attitude different? Well, it's different in every way. It's fundamentally different. Look at John's response. And here we'll see a couple key truths which fostered this great humility we see evidenced in his life.

God's Sovereign Provision

He begins with a general statement about the utter dependence of humanity upon God. Verse 27. We have nothing. That's a good place to start in learning humility. We are sinners who deserve God's eternal wrath. We deserve not gifts, but punishment. But God, being so gracious as He is, sent His own Son to die for sinners. As we read just several verses earlier in this chapter, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We read it again at the very end of this chapter, "Whoever believes [notice, you don't work for this salvation. You simply believe in Him, rest in Him, rely on the work He has done for you, the sacrifice Jesus made for you on the cross] 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." There is wrath which we all deserve because of our sin. But there is also grace that saves and transforms.

I had the opportunity to explain this to the dental hygienist Wed morning in between having my teeth cleaned. She asked my,

“So what is the difference between Catholics and Baptists?” One of the things I shared is that the Bible teaches we are saved by faith alone, not by doing good deeds. Our lives will change once we’re saved, but our good works don’t play any role in getting us into a right relationship with God.

There is favor from God that comes to us through the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. For whoever believes, Jesus’ death pays the penalty for our sin, and His perfect life is credited to us as our righteousness. AND we’re given spiritual gifts, kingdom assignments that are unique to each believer. This is part of what John is referring to in verse 27. Whatever good we receive, including our specific role in the work of the kingdom, is a gift from God.

We have nothing but what God gives. We’re completely dependent. God has everything. He is completely independent. And it’s entirely His prerogative to distribute gifts and roles however He pleases. In this way John the Baptist rightly understood his important and humble place in the drama of redemption. He recognized that the ministry he had was not his own. It was a gift that was given to him from heaven. God had graciously allowed John to be involved in this exciting time of preparing for the Messiah. Seeing it this way helped John not to begrudge the fading nature of his own ministry.

He saw God’s sovereign plan in what was happening. He saw the assignment God had given him, and he wasn’t vying for a different assignment. He was faithfully serving in the role God had given him, grateful and content.

He likens his role to that of a best man in a wedding. See verse 29. The friend of the bridegroom is what we would think of as the best man. The best man plays an important role, a very meaningful role in helping everyone to celebrate what is happening. But the celebration is not about the best man. It’s about the bride and groom. What if you went to a wedding reception and the best man stood up to give a toast, and all he talked about was himself. If he didn’t say anything to honor the bride and groom but just used that opportunity to toot his own horn. That would just feel totally wrong.

The best man has a very significant job, and he will be the focus of attention at certain points. But even when he is the focus of everyone’s attention, his purpose is to help people appreciate someone other than himself. That’s what John’s whole ministry was about. And that’s what our ministries are to be about as well.

Our Joy

In this there is much joy. I hope you realize that you don’t have to be the center of world’s attention in order to be happy.

Some people seem to act as if that were the case. They seem to be pleased only if everyone is looking at them, listening to them, applauding them in some way. I imagine we're all like that to some extent. What we have to realize is that joy comes not from getting a bunch of praise for ourselves. Joy comes from giving praise to the only One who truly deserves it.

That's what John is testifying to in verse 29. As the friend of the bridegroom, John is not jealous of the bridegroom. He's not unsettled inside of himself with thoughts of jealousy and competitiveness. Not in the least. He is so enthralled with who Jesus is and what Jesus' ministry is all about. His joy tank is not draining due to the punctures of pride and rivalry. No, his joy tank is full to overflowing because he's looking outside of himself. He's praising the One who is worthy of praise. His joy doesn't rise or fall on how much attention he gets for himself. His joy is solidly rooted in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Above All

Verses 31-36 continue to unfold themes of the greatness of Jesus and the blindness of humanity, themes we've looked at in previous passages. And whether these are to be read as John the Baptist's words or the comments of John the Gospel-writer, these verses should reinforce in our minds this sense of Jesus being high and lifted up, above all, loved by the Father, having divine authority. All the more reason to be looking up to Him rather than looking to our own popularity, or lack thereof. It makes no sense to be fretting about our own personal "following," and whether that following is increasing or decreasing. It makes no sense to be wrapped up in such silliness when Jesus is the One who is from above, who utters the words of God. If our attention is riveted on Him, if our hearts are delighting in Him and what He is accomplishing, there won't be much room for prideful rivalry.

So the truths of God's sovereign provision and our joy in Him, and Jesus being above all . . . these are things that will foster in us a humility like we see in John the Baptist.

I want to tie this in with an exhortation from Romans 12. I know the situation in John 3 has to do with a comparison between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. I doubt many of us are tempted to be jealous of Jesus or competitive with Jesus. But this is so applicable to our relationships with other believers, because we're certainly tempted toward pride and jealousy and competitiveness in those relationships. Here are some things we should bear in mind in these horizontal relationship.

Romans 12:3-8

You can hear the emphasis on right thinking here. Don't *think* of yourself more highly than you ought to *think*, but *think*

with sober *thinking*. This is the renewed thinking that happens as we are being transformed by the renewal of our minds. It's a new way of thinking. It's not a self-centered, puffed up, arrogant way of thinking that is part of the sinful nature. This is something new, something God-given. It is a way of thinking that recognizes I'm not the center of the universe.

Self-perception can be way off. We will often think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. And that's dangerous. We need to think of ourselves accurately. We need to honestly acknowledge our sins and our deficiencies and our dependence upon God and upon others.

Pastor Kent Hughes writes, "There is an unhappy human tendency to play down the successes of others and to uplift our own. If someone is doing well, we attribute it to a 'golden spoon' or being at the right place at the right time. But if we happen to be particularly successful, it is because of our own prowess, intelligence, and hard work!" (John, page 96) How we can skew things!

We need to think rightly about ourselves and others. Whatever gifts we do have, we need to recognize them as gifts . . . as gifts from God. Like John the Baptist recognized. He didn't have anything except what was given him from heaven. And Paul recognized it too, as he mentions at the beginning of Romans 12:3, "by the grace given to me . . ."

That's what each and every one of us needs to recognize, as the last part of verse 3 says, "each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." God has given each believer the faith to exercise particular spiritual gifts. Verse 6 says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . ."

It is irrational (but very common) to be puffed up because of a gift given to you. It's irrational because we didn't do anything to deserve the gift. The very fact that it's a gift should be humbling. There should be a joyful, grateful humility about receiving a gift and using that gift productively to be a blessing to others.

So we should be humbled by the fact that these spiritual gifts are gifts. And we should be humbled by the fact that God has assigned the faith and the grace to each one of us to serve a unique function in the body of Christ. None of us should be prideful, thinking that more people should be like me. More people should have my gift, and then we'd all be better off. No, God has given various gifts.

The other side of that, which can be very encouraging, is that I don't have to be like someone else. The fact that God has a unique grace and unique gifts for each of us means that we don't have to try to replicate someone else's gifts. Isn't this a temptation

in the church? We look at others, in the church, or who we read about on blogs, or in books, who are exceptionally gifted in something or another. And then we beat ourselves up because we don't have that gift.

But God has given me a particular set of gifts. And God has given you certain gifts. He has not called me or you to be someone other than who we are, other than who He made us to be. There may be a Christian man or woman you admire very much, but that doesn't mean God has given you the same gifts as that person. So it would be foolish of you to try to emulate that person's life in the specifics of their unique gifting. Emulate their godliness. But not necessarily their unique gifts and roles in ministry.

Don't be discouraged just because you don't have another person's gifts. Instead, be encouraged and inspired by what God is doing in the lives of others. And then rejoice in the unique gifts God has given you. But don't compare. Comparison can steal so much joy. Comparison breeds jealousy and bitterness and discouragement and division.

But humility will do the opposite. Humility will breed unity and fruitful teamwork and joy and encouragement for all of us.

In closing and summary, here are 3 brief, very practical ways you can pursue the humility we've been considering today.

- 1) Recognize the ways that God has gifted you. He has an assignment for you that is something you can only receive from heaven. It is a gracious gift. Receive it from him, cherish it. Use the gifts He's given you for His glory and the good of His people. And recognize that the assignment He's given you is different than the assignment He has given to others. Stop grumbling about not having that person's assignment, and get busy with the things He has put in front of you to do, what He's equipped you to do. Fight against self-pity, knowing that you have meaningful work to do, which God has gifted you to do. Also fight against pride, reminding yourself that the gifts you have are just that . . . they are gifts, and therefore not something you can take credit for.
- 2) Recognize ways that God has gifted others and learn to rejoice in that. Observe evidences of God's grace in the lives of others. When you see someone being hospitable, give praise to God for that. When you see someone who is particularly fruitful in evangelism, or someone who builds new relationships very easily and can help newcomers feel welcome in the church family, or someone who is very organized and can coordinate ministry efforts, or someone who is consistently patient or wise or kind, or someone who is good at teaching or

discipleship or mercy ministries or counseling, praise God that He has granted these unique gifts to different individuals in order to build up the body and reach the lost.

- 3) When you're tempted to be envious of a particular person because of some gift they have, pray for that person and look for ways to speak well of them. William Law, who lived in the 1700s, encourages us in this way, "If . . . someone is leaving you behind, and you are becoming jealous and embittered, keep praying that he may have success in the very matter where he is awakening your envy; and whether he is helped or not, one thing is sure, that your own soul will be cleansed and ennobled, that you will grow a little nearer to that stature of the Baptist." (quoted by Kent Hughes, John, page 100). And we can add . . . nearer to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, who humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:3-11).