

### John 3:22-36 – He Must Become Greater.

The last couple weeks we spoke on Jesus' wonderful sermon to Nicodemus; how God shows his grace to the world, despite the world's rejection of him, through the gift of his Son. Now having been born again, given new eternal desires for God, we join in his eternal love and also his eternal life.

We didn't get a chance to look at the last couple verses from Jesus' sermon to Nicodemus, but he says to the one who came to him at night, "people loved darkness instead of light...whoever lives by the truth comes into the light..." From Jesus' response to Nicodemus, we know how God wants us to respond to the grace he offers, not cowering in the dark and coming to him at night, but living in the light.

John the gospel writer places this story of John the Baptist directly beside the story of Nicodemus for us to contrast them. John does the opposite of Nicodemus; rather than coming at night with confusion, John openly proclaims his allegiance to Christ no matter the consequences. He does this even when it costs him his own followers. John humbly accepts his place as a preparation for Jesus, and in doing so gives us a model for discipleship, "he must become greater; I must become less." Coming into the light means recognizing who we are before Almighty God.

Let's look at John 3:22-36:

"After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. <sup>23</sup> Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. <sup>24</sup> (This was before John was put in prison.) <sup>25</sup> An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. <sup>26</sup> They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

<sup>27</sup> To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' <sup>29</sup> The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must become greater; I must become less."

<sup>31</sup> The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

<sup>32</sup> He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. <sup>33</sup> Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. <sup>34</sup> For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves the Son and has

placed everything in his hands. <sup>36</sup>Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

This is the Word of the Lord.

A friend of mine, one of the pastors of the church in Maple Ridge we came from, would always finish his prayer before the sermon with the line, "He must become greater, I must become less." I've never forgotten the way he would do that. He was a real proponent for discipleship in our church, "disciples who make disciples," he would say. I think he would repeat John the Baptist's famous line to try and drill it into our heads (I guess it worked!). In many ways John's famous line could be a mantra for a disciple of Christ, instilling an always necessary humility.

### **Slide 8**

We have spoken about Jesus' cousin John the Baptist a couple of times in the past few months. First, we saw how John prepares the way for Jesus in his own rejection from the Jewish leaders, as John was showing the Jewish leaders that their salvation was not based on their status as Israelites, but it is a gift of God. Next, we looked at John's first testimony about Jesus, and how he is there to prepare the way for Jesus by pointing to how he fulfills Old Testament prophecy. In his preparation for Jesus, John shows ultimate humility. Despite being the one Jesus calls, "the greatest person born of a woman" (Mt.11:11), John does nothing but point to his Lord.

### **Slide 9**

Today we will return to that theme of John's humility, this time recognizing it as the centre of discipleship. John's humility is especially evident in his second recorded testimony about Jesus in John's gospel. I think John the gospel writer records this story about John the Baptist to show us that humility is an absolute core virtue of any disciple of Jesus. If "the greatest person born of a woman" has it, maybe the likes of us should have it too.

### **Slide 10**

We also can often have a wrong view of humility. It doesn't mean being a punching bag. We can think of it as simply having a low view of ourselves, but humility is better understood as having an appropriate view of ourselves. A good definition of humility is "a downward disposition of a Godward self-perception."

### **Slide 11**

It is a downward disposition because it recognizes the sinful nature we all have, not in a self-obsessed shame-dwelling kind of way, but in an appropriate recognition of how scripture describes human nature.

### **Slide 12**

Most importantly, this disposition is formed by a “Godward self-perception.” The more we see ourselves in the light of who God is, the better we understand ourselves. Calvin opens his *Institutes* saying, “Man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.” Yes, we are made in God’s image, but we are not God.

This definition of humility is seen in our mantra for this morning, our downward disposition is our becoming lesser. Our Godward self-perception is him being greater.

Of course, when we say Christ must become greater, we know that God cannot become greater than he is. He is complete perfection. He becomes greater in the sense that we can recognize him to be so in our lives, and so as we are humbled in our lives we make God greater for us. God shows his greatness in his mercy toward us, and we show our humility in our confession.

For us this morning, I want to consider what it means to practice humility, practice saying, “he must become greater, I must become less” in our lives. As God grows in greatness in our hearts and minds, our own greatness to ourselves diminishes.

### **Slide 13**

You might not think that humility is something that can be practiced, its either something you have, or you don’t, but I don’t think that’s true. Humility is a virtue like any other, and in the way we see John the Baptist respond, we are given a great lesson on how we should view ourselves. Reiterating John’s words to ourselves, God must become greater, and we be less can train our hearts in humility.

While Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in his pride to try and save face among the other Jewish leaders, John the Baptist on the other hand doesn’t care one bit about saving face. He cares so little about saving face that one day his face will be removed from his body! John shows us rather a courageous humility.

The story in our passage tells of John the Baptist’s disciples getting into a spat over a matter of “ceremonial washing” with a “certain Jew.” They don’t say what specifically they were arguing about or who they were arguing with, but it likely has to do with something about who Jesus is, and why he is now baptizing. They point out that those who were once coming

to John to be baptized are now going to Jesus. John's disciples are jealous for their teacher's reputation, nobody wants to follow the has-been prophet.

#### **Slide 14**

John can't be bothered by this, as he knows that his station is one of preparation for Jesus. John the Baptist says repeatedly, "I am not the Messiah." In doing this, he was simply stating this again because some might have misunderstood him to be the Messiah, but on a deeper level he was denying the original sin of humanity. The original sin of humanity is wanting to be like God. To take from God his rightful place as lawgiver in his creation. Had John fallen into the squabble of his disciples, he might not have forthrightly said he was the Christ, but he would be improperly taking that which belonged to Christ, rather than receiving his place of preparation. But to this, John says, "a person can only receive what is given to him from heaven."

Because John can freely admit that he is not Christ, he doesn't care that his ministry is shrinking, God is in charge. He gets what is given to him. John admits that all he has is sent to him from heaven. John demonstrates a wonderfully receptive attitude to what God gives, arms outstretched, willing to receive what God gives regardless of what that means for his reputation. This is an image of humility to us in an age where we want to assert our will over God and his creation whenever it suits us.

#### **Slide 15**

To John's jealous disciples, he refers himself the best man, showing his place of servitude to Jesus, the groom. The bride here is the people of God, and the groom is the Lord. John is the "friend of the bridegroom," or in our current terminology, the best man. Like a best man at a wedding, John rejoices in seeing the bride come to the groom. What kind of best man would relish in taking the bride away from the groom? That would be utterly shameful in any society, and in this culture even illegal. John delights in this union as a real friend should, it brings him joy to be a minister to it.

#### **Slide 16**

John says that his ministerial position is to wait and listen, "The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him..." John knows that the word of God brings life, and his place is to wait and listen. He also knows what is in his heart, and how he is unable to do what the Lord has come to do. He might not know everything that Jesus will do, or what change he is bringing to God's people, but he knows that his position as a minister to Jesus is to wait and listen to God. Similarly, for us, we have some idea of what God is doing in the world, but we don't have a total vision, our place is to humbly wait and listen to his word.

A humble person is one that can listen really well. As Christians we first listen to God, and then we listen well to our neighbours. If we are called to do this with God most of all, we can also do it with our neighbours. This doesn't mean that we agree with everything our neighbours say, but we should not stop listening to them until we adequately represent their position in a way they would be satisfied with before we retort with our own opinions. I would sometimes tease my employees when I was siding by saying, I'll practice humility by listening to how you want to do something before I tell you the right way. Of course it's a joke, but it is actually a good practice. To recognize your own limitations and learn from all around you.

### **Slide 17**

This receptive/humble attitude is absolutely 100% essential to the Christian life, and there is no room to budge. As Paul and Jeremiah both say, "let the one who boast, boast in the Lord" (1Cor.1:31, Jer.9:23-24). The reformer Johannes Oecolampadius says, "if you attribute even the smallest thing to your works or powers, then you want to increase and it is necessary for Christ to diminish."

When we recognize everything we have comes from the Word speaking creation into existence, especially our salvation, then what does that tell us about our place in this world? What does this tell us but that our place is to listen and wait! Thankfully, we here now have in front of us the very words of God from the one sent to us by God, and through these words we receive the "Spirit without limit."

John says that if we want to receive the Spirit without limit it means being receptive to what God gives us. John says, "The Father loves the son and has placed everything in his hands." Note, everything is in the Son's hands, not John's, not ours.

### **Slide 18**

And this is joy to the Christian, as it is joy to John the Baptist, as he says he is "full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete." Jesus says that the eternal life that we have gives joy, that humbly accepting God's law as his will for your life makes our joy complete (Jn.15:11). This joy in this life might not always look like happiness or fulfillment to the world, but it is seen in the way that we as Christians can sit content with what God gives us, knowing it is ultimately for our good.

### **Slide 19**

Jesus not only teaches us that we need humility, but he demonstrates it in his own life. Even though he is God, "he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant..." Jesus

“humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil.2:6-8). Jesus models this receptive humility that we must imitate.

Jesus turns what the world desires on its head in his beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the humble. And these are not just trite phrases, many of us can tell stories of how God was especially near to us in times of pain and grief. Humility teaches the same lesson. Jesus did not take the form of a poor servant because he wanted to be less than others, he wanted to show that was the most fitting place for God to be! The place where humanity is closest to God.

### **Slide 20**

We know that Jesus in his incarnation exhibited this humility perfectly, but the Father and the Spirit also show this humility perfectly as well. Consider being that which uphold everything, and still allowing your creation to go on in constant rebellion. In so many places God invites us to send him our grief and sorrow, our insults and anger, and he willingly bears this upon himself, remaining hidden in creation to protect our freedom.

As we get a clearer vision of God’s greatness, of his perfection, we get a clearer vision of our own inadequacy. In this, our understanding of his grace grows. Paul says, he is the foremost of sinners. This is partly because he persecuted Christians before he came to faith in Christ, but also because in his clear vision of God he recognizes his sin. One sign that you are growing in spiritual vision, being able to see God clearer, is that you think less of your abilities.

### **Slide 21**

John finishes the statement, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” God’s wrath remains on those who do not believe because they share in the original sin of Adam and Eve, they too put themselves in the place of God, rather than humbly accepting Christ for who he is, and recognizing who you are before him.

But this is not what our sinful nature wants. Jesus says, we desire the darkness because our deeds are evil. We do not want to be exposed in the light for who we are, we do not want to feel the sting of humility, admitting our fallen nature. We would much rather think ourselves gods of our own worlds and remain in darkness. A sure sign of spiritual darkness is the pride in thinking that one knows better than God’s word. Desiring to take control that belongs to God from him for ourselves. To be like Adam and Eve in the garden, to take the place of Christ.

### **Slide 22**

I know that the loss of control can be a hard thing to accept for many (me too!). But it is also very freeing. To rest and allow God to be God means you don't have to! To accept his will for your life means you don't have to figure everything out! Of course, it isn't always easy to know how scripture applies to our lives, but resting in the fact that God will be God takes a huge burden off our shoulders, a burden we were never meant to carry.

This is why Jesus says his burden is easy and his yoke is light. Let us say with John the Baptist, he must become greater, we must be less. Our sin places a huge burden on us that we were never meant for, but our great Lord gives us the means to give it back to him. Don't think you're the Christ, accept your place before God, give him his own burden of being God, he is the only one who can bear it.

I encourage you to practice the humility we see in John the Baptist. Practice praying, "He must become greater, I must be less," not only with your words, but in your lives. Practice listening to God in his word, and to your neighbour, showing your love to them. Let go of your pride and proclaim Jesus in the light. Receive what God gives you with open arms. Take joy in knowing you do not need to bear the burden of being God to yourself, but he will take that from you as you recognize who he is and who you are in light of him.