

12. More of God, less of self

November 28, 2010

At the beginning of our study of the Book of John, we came across John the Baptist who was rather an eccentric and unconventional preacher of Israel during Jesus' earthly ministry. He was a cousin of Jesus in physical relationship, but he was the forerunner of the Lord in spiritual relationship.

John the Baptist had three distinctive functions as the forerunner of Jesus:

1) To clear the way: To remove any obstacles from the minds and hearts of people so they would be ready for the Messiah Jesus

2) To prepare the way: To promote repentance on the part of the nation of Israel so that the Messiah would be accepted

3) To get out of the way: To step aside once the Messiah had been introduced.

We had watched John the Baptist faithfully perform the first two functions previously, and now we will see him performing the toughest job for any human with self image in one's heart. It means that this morning's lesson applies to all of us, not just preachers.

A. THE BACK DROP

John 3:22-24 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. 24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison.

Apostle John quickly gives us the back drop of the next incident. Jesus' ministry had been in Galilee up to this time. Now He moves into John the Baptist's neck of the wood.

Territorial creatures that we are, mere geographical proximity could create conflict. Yesterday morning, I was walking with my wife Karen before I had breakfast, I saw a dog was running around smelling the bushes and fire hydrants and marking its territory. We have a similar concept when it comes to territorial issue.

John the Baptist didn't have a problem with Jesus moving into his area, but his disciples did. They've noticed that Jesus' ministry is getting stronger and far more popular than their master John the Baptist's. They thought that they have to do something about this. If their master John goes down, it means that their positions as his disciples will become nothing as well. After all, it is all about themselves, not necessarily John the Baptist or the kingdom of God.

B. DO SOMETHING

John 3:25-26 Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified-- behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"

The matter of purification was important to the Jews during that time. Under the Old Testament Law, it was necessary for them to keep themselves ceremonially clean if they were to serve God and please Him. Unfortunately, the Pharisees added so

many extra traditions to the Law that the observing of it became a burden far beyond what the Lord asked them to do.

John the Baptist's disciples came to him and told him that he was losing his congregation, "Yo Preacher, you gotta do something! Attendance is way low and offering is down. We are losing a lot of members to that new church down the street!" It sounds like one of the 21st Century church leaders' conversations, don't you think?

These disciples were making an emotional exaggeration. Not everybody was going to Jesus. Without realizing it, John's disciples were putting him into a situation of competing against the Lord Jesus.

There is a story about Dr. C. I. Scofield, the man who was responsible for The Scofield Reference Bible which some of you might have on your laps. He had been invited to speak in a church in North Carolina. Because it was a rainy night, about twenty-five people came to the meeting. The young preacher leaned over and apologized to Dr. Scofield for the small number who had come to hear his preaching and teaching. Dr. Scofield replied, "Young man, my Lord had only twelve men in His school and in His congregation most of the time. If He had only twelve, who is C. I. Scofield to be concerned about a big crowd?"

People sometimes speak as if humility and meekness would rob us of what is noble and bold and manlike.

Ephesians 4:1-2 Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.

In classical Greek, the word for "humility" is a derogatory term suggesting low-mindedness and groveling servanthood. The Greeks had no place in their language or beliefs for humility. It was looked upon as a bad thing. That is even true in our culture, as evidenced by attitudes that say, "Look out for number-one" and "What's in it for me?"

Contrary to conventional wisdom of today, the Bible tells us to put the needs of others above ourselves and to be humble. It also tells us to function in meekness.

Meekness is sometimes perceived as weakness. But that is not what the Bible is saying. The word "meekness" as used in the Bible means "power under constraint." A meek person may have the ability to hurt you, but chooses not to. That is power under constraint.

Jesus was described as meek and mild. That doesn't mean He was weak. He was far from it. He was strong. He did not return insult for insult. He did not strike back. He gave us the example to follow in humility and meekness; and to deal with others in gentleness.

This means humbling ourselves. Sometimes, it means going to a person and saying, "I don't know if I have done something to harm you or if you think I have done something, but let's try to work it out," even if you think you are right and that person is wrong. That is where humility and meekness come in.

We need to get rid of any “me-first, what’s-in-it-for-me” attitudes and start thinking biblically. And we need to be asking, “What can I do to help others? How can I learn to resolve conflicts?” It can change your life and bring a great testimony of Jesus Christ to others.

C. HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE

John 3:27-30 John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

Instead of inventing some glitzy gimmick to recapture the thinning congregation, John pulls a different strategy out of his camel hair sleeve.

To begin with, John the Baptist stated a conviction: All ministry and blessing come from God, so there should not be competition among the believers of Jesus. Apostle Paul would have quickly agreed with his comment here.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building.

Our gifts and opportunities come from God, and He alone must get the glory. We are living in a competitive society and it effects even the believers of Christ. Everyone in ministry ought to study this portion of the Book of John because it is so real.

John the Baptist’s response incorporates four ideas:

- 1) **God is in charge, not man.** – v27
- 2) **All work is significant – but only God’s work is preeminent.** – v28
- 3) **Joy comes from being obedient to the Lord, not from getting glory.** – v29
- 4) **Humility calls attention to Christ, not to oneself.** – v30

John used an excellent and familiar illustration to the Jews from the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea, to get his points across. He compared Jesus to the bridegroom and himself only to the friend of the bridegroom, the ancient equivalent of the best man.

Once the bridegroom and bride had been brought together, the work of the best man was completed. What a foolish thing it would be for the best man to try to replace the bridegroom with himself! John’s joy was to hear the voice of the Bridegroom and know that He had claimed His bride.

If anyone could boast about his popularity before Jesus came into the picture at that time in Israel, it would have been John the Baptist. But he understood who he was and who he was not. He was not looking for a lime light. He was perfectly content to fade into the backstage so that Jesus could step into the light that people may see Him. He was the one preacher who didn't mind losing his congregation for the sake of God's glory.

Whenever we have a vision of who Jesus really is, it will always give us a realistic perspective of who we really are, as well. We fail to see the truth about ourselves until we see ourselves in His light. Seeing ourselves in His light always brings convictions.

Charles Spurgeon, a Great Britain preacher from yesteryear, had put this in such a concise manner: "Humility is the proper estimate of oneself."

Humility is the most beautiful and delicate flower in Christianity. Because as soon as it shows its exquisite beauty to others, it disappears immediately. You see, the true humble man of God never says that he is humble, or never looks down on others over his nose because they are not spiritual like him. I have never seen anyone who thinks that he is humble, who is actually mature in the Lord. As a matter of fact, it is the evidence of spiritual immaturity of that person.

Some of you may know that I used to organize and execute a nationwide Calvary Chapel pastors and leaders conference from 2001 till 2007. While I was doing that I've learned some ugly facts about some of the conference speakers' spiritual conditions.

Every year, I used to design a conference brochure that included individual speaker's brief bios. One particular year, a speaker who was a pastor of a rather big size Calvary Chapel called me late one night and demanded that I reprint the brochures altogether. I asked him why. He told me that the number of the radio stations that were carrying his program was incorrect in the brochures, because it was a higher number than that. I couldn't believe what I was hearing and I was thinking, "Nobody cares except YOU, certainly not God."

In another occasion, I was contacting some of the speakers for the upcoming conference. Of course, I had to go through the gatekeepers, their executive assistants. One of the speakers' assistants told me, over the phone, that this pastor wanted to know how many people would attend this conference. I was thinking, "You've gotta be kiddin' me. If there is not enough people, you wouldn't come, because you are too important?" I also was thinking of something not very nice for a pastor to do to that man. I had to repent and asked the Lord to forgive me.

Speaking of repentance, from time to time, I had to ask the Lord to forgive me for my pride in this particular issue. In my shortcoming and stupidity, I've complained and whined about the size of our church in comparison with other big Calvary Chapels. Whenever I do that, the Holy Spirit reminds me what I prayed for at the beginning of our church: I prayed for the depth of our congregation's spiritual maturity over the size of our church.

True greatness does not lie with those who strive for worldly fame, rather it lies with those who choose to serve in Jesus' name.

A famous college basketball coach, late John Wooden said it eloquently:
Talent is God-given; be humble.
Fame is man-given; be thankful.
Conceit is self-given; be careful.

This lesson not only applies to leaders of churches, but also to all the followers of Jesus Christ. Though we might say that we want God to get the glory, but deep inside of our hearts, sometimes, our pride raises its ugly head and prompts us to step in and take glory away from the Lord.

Sisters and brothers in the Lord Jesus, what John the Baptist said to his disciples: "He must increase, but I must decrease," this should be the motto of every Christian. Jesus should become greater and more visible, and the servant should become less and less visible.

D. APPLICATION

More of God, less of self.