

13. He must increase, I must decrease

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A few studies ago, we met a rather eccentric and unconventional preacher of the first-century Israel, John the Baptist. In physical relationship, he was a cousin of Jesus the Savior, but in spiritual relationship, he was far more than that. Jesus had the highest compliment for him in the Book of Luke:

Luke 7:28a For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist

John the Baptist had three distinctive functions as the forerunner of Jesus and he did them very well:

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. ARE YOU TERRITORIAL?

John 3:22-26 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. 25 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!"

Apostle John quickly gives us the backdrop 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.

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 bigger 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.

These disciples came to him and told him that he was losing his congregation, "Yo Preacher, you've 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?

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?"

In ancient Greek culture, the word for "humility" is a derogatory term suggesting low-mindedness and shameful servanthood. The ancient 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, "Looking out for number-one" or "What's in it for me?" Contrary to the conventional motto 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.

Now 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 the 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 enough to start to carry a 80 pound cross beam after being tortured throughout the night. He did not return insult for insult. He did not strike back because He had to endure all that for us. Jesus gave us the example to follow in humility and meekness; and to deal with others in gentleness.

Sometimes, it means humbling ourselves and 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" or "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.

B. 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.

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 3:1-5 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?

Our gifts and opportunities come from God, and He alone must get the glory. We are living in a competitive society and it affects 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 ministry 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 the Baptist 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 the 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 what sinners we are without Him, 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 yester-year, had put this in such a concise manner: "Humility is the proper estimate of oneself."

Speaking of humility, in my utter stupidity and shortcoming, at the beginning of our church, I've complained and whined to the Lord about the size of our church in comparison to other big Calvary Chapels. The Lord spoke to me very clearly in my heart, "If there is more than one, it is more than you deserve." My whining stopped there.

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

The late John Wooden, as head coach at UCLA, he won ten NCAA national championships in a 12-year period, including an unprecedented seven in a row, 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.

C. CHRIST ABOVE ALL

John 3:31-35 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. 33 He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. 34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. 35 The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.

I asked you to notice the phrase "He who comes from above." He, that is Jesus, was not simply called from heaven, nor was he empowered by heaven. He came from heaven. It was this claim that the Jews disputed, because they understood that according to what Jesus said, He claimed to be God. John the Baptist was not 'from above', nor did he ever claim to be. No earthly messenger of God came from 'above'. Only Jesus Christ can make that claim and prove it to be true.

In the court of law, the witness must have first hand experience to testify – no hearsay, or personal opinion. Jesus gives us the pure truth from the very Throne of God. Every time Jesus speaks to us through the Bible, what He says agrees with what the Father said in the OT.

Have you ever talked to somebody who says, "I believe in God, but I'm not sure about Jesus." Many say that they believe in God, but they won't accept Jesus Christ for who He is. Since Jesus came from heaven, He represents the Father God. Anyone who rejects Jesus, rejects the Father in heaven, thus they seal their own eternal fate.

In the mid-1800s, an American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson became a leader in a philosophical movement known as "transcendentalism," which says that truth comes from personal insight. Emerson wrote, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius."

Men can come up with whatever the ideologies, methods, or their versions of the truths within their own intelligence which is not much. But they can not overcome the truth of God which is written in the Bible. Only God, the creator of all things, deserves to be called transcendent – that is, above and beyond all things. Contrary to what Emerson concluded, truth comes from above, not from within. No man is a genius who ignores his Creator.

D. THE WRATH OF GOD

John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

The opposite of eternal life is eternal death through the wrath of God. A person does not have to die and go to hell to be under the wrath of God. The verdict has

already been given, but the sentence has not yet been executed. Why? Because God is patient and long-suffering, and continues to call sinners to repentance.

John 3:18 He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already,

The wrath of God abides in this world, because there is no statute of limitations on sin. It also abides in the next world, because those who reject Jesus cannot offer their version of a perfect sacrifice that is acceptable to God. The wrath of God abides until it is satisfied by receiving the perfect payment Jesus made on the cross.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) More of God, less of self.

2) Jesus must be the first priority and have preeminence in our lives.

No human's desire – riches, fame, even our own families – should replace Jesus in our hearts.