

HE MUST BECOME GREATER; I MUST BECOME LESS

John 3:22-36, Key Verse: 3:30

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“He must become greater; I must become less.”

Chapter three began with Jesus telling Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” Nicodemus was the epitome of a successful man. However, without the kingdom of God, all people are under the power of sin and death. They are sorrowful and miserable. Becoming a great success does not change this. Jesus taught us how to see the kingdom of God. It is to be born again by the work of the Holy Spirit. May God help you to see the kingdom of God through Jesus, even from a young age. May God help you to live as a missionary for the glory of God.

Today we study the second part of chapter three. In this passage there is a transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Jesus. In times of transition, people are sensitive and vulnerable. Many fail. But the transition from John’s ministry to Jesus’ ministry was most successful. It is because John had one word in his heart, “He must become greater; I must become less.” This word contains the secret of happiness and success in doing God’s work. May God help us to say, “Jesus must become greater; I must become less.”

First, “everyone is going to him.”

Look at verse 22. “After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.” Jesus and his disciples had experienced a lively time in Jerusalem. Now Jesus took them away from the city and out into the Judean countryside. There Jesus spent quality time with his disciples. They were away from the watching eyes and demanding crowd. They were surrounded by beautiful mountains. They could walk among the trees and splash their feet in the cool river water. It was a quiet time with Jesus. In the course of raising disciples, Jesus made such quiet times with them. Jesus wants to spend time with us through prayer and meditation on his word. Though Jesus’ disciples were young, Jesus entrusted them with the task of baptizing people (Jn 4:2). For Jesus’ disciples, it was a great privilege. They were succeeding John’s ministry.

Look at verses 23-24. “Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized. (This was before John was put in prison.)” John was somewhat north of Jesus, on another part of the Jordan. John was also baptizing and people were constantly coming. These must have been the late-comers. Maybe they had been hesitating and struggling hard; finally they made a decision and came to be baptized. Last year, one young man asked to be baptized. But when the time to baptize him came, he was not there. He struggled hard for over a year. This year, at the time of his marriage, he was baptized with sincere repentance. Maybe there were many people like that young man coming to John. John’s work was still meaningful, but his ministry was winding down.

Look at verse 25. “An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.” The once fervent activity of John’s ministry was now giving way to a theological dispute about ceremonial washing. Most likely, John’s disciples had confidently engaged a certain Jew in an argument, only to be soundly defeated by him. He used words they did not understand and quoted parts of the Torah and Mishnah that they had never read. Soon, John’s disciples began to feel, once again, like ignorant country boys. When John’s ministry was booming, they felt spiritually high. But after losing an argument, and then seeing their numbers decreasing, they began to be depressed. So they went to talk to John.

Look at verse 26. “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—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.’” The problem that was really on their hearts had to do with Jesus. Jesus’ ministry was growing and John’s ministry was getting smaller.

This was hard for the disciples to accept. They wanted to be the main characters in the work of God. But they felt they would soon be obsolete. Many of us can understand them. However, they had a spiritual problem.

John's disciples heard his testimony that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Some of them accepted it and followed Jesus. But others had not. So they did not know who Jesus was. When John pointed to Jesus, they, instead of looking at Jesus, looked at John's finger. Then they looked at John's arm and began to admire his posture, gesture and facial expression. Maybe they began to draw paintings of John and practiced how to imitate his way of pointing.

John's disciples loved and respected him. But when they did not come to Jesus through his testimony they missed the point. Now they were depressed. They thought their problem was an argumentative religious leader and decreasing numbers. But the real problem was that they did not accept the word of God through John. So they were full of sinful human thoughts. It is important to accept the word of God in our hearts. If we see the work of God from a human point of view, we will become miserable. Many who endeavor to do God's work spend much time comparing themselves with others. They become victims of jealousy and fall into the devil's trap. There was a preacher in America in the 19th century who saw the work of God growing in another church. So he began to compete to have more church attendants at his church. But the more he felt competitive, the more people began to leave his ministry; some went to the other church. Many servants of God have stumbled by comparing numbers with others. Then they say, "everyone is going to him." How did John help his disciples?

Second, he must become greater; I must become less (27-30).

Look at verse 27. "To this John replied, 'A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.'" Here John explains that man's mission comes from heaven as God's blessing and gift. Each man must look up to heaven and see what God has given him. When he receives what God has given him, he can be truly content. John also teaches us that God is the sovereign ruler of his world redemptive history. God chooses and uses his servants according to his own plan. God gave John the glorious mission as forerunner of the Messiah. This demanded John's devotion and commitment. God's heavenly mission elevates man from an ordinary creature to a child of God and a steward of the world. As the holy mission comes from God, the limits of that mission are set by God. Nothing more can be added by human ambition. So we must find our mission from God. We all have a mission from heaven. Paul said in Romans 1:5, "Through him and for his name's sake we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." We must receive this mission from God and treasure it from our hearts.

Not everyone can be John the Baptist. But whether our mission seems great or small, if we receive it from God we can find true satisfaction in doing it. A happy psalmist said, "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (Ps 84:10). One missionary has been serving God for more than 20 years. Recently, he was asked to become a building manager since the need was great and he was well-trained by Dr. Samuel Lee. Many would have turned up their noses at the job. But after prayer, this man accepted it willingly and has given his heart to it. God has blessed his stewardship and used him very precious at a crucial time in God's work. The real beauty of his life is not the practical benefit of his work, but his love for God and deep acceptance of the mission from God. A truly happy man is one who is content with the precise mission God has given him.

Look at verse 28. "You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'" John had been very clear about his identity as the forerunner. He never invaded Christ's place in God's salvation work. He clearly proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ of God. His disciples had heard his testimony. John hoped that by reminding them of it again, they would open their spiritual eyes to see Jesus.

Then John explained how God was working in history through the analogy of a wedding. Look at verses 28-29. "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." Here, the bride refers to those who would believe in Jesus; later being the church (Rev 19:7-8). The bridegroom is Jesus. John says, "The bride belongs to the bridegroom." Jesus' people belong to Jesus. They belong to Jesus because Jesus is the Creator

God. They belong to Jesus because Jesus is the Lamb of God who shed his blood for their sins. John knew who Jesus was. John respected the sacred nature of people's relationship to Jesus. John was like the friend of the bridegroom, or possibly like a matchmaker. His job was to prepare the bride to meet the bridegroom. He had been waiting and listening for Jesus and preparing people to meet Jesus. As they met Jesus one by one, there was a shout of joy in heaven. God rejoiced and angels sang a mighty hallelujah chorus. John shared this joy with Jesus, like the friend of the bridegroom rejoices at his wedding. This is pure and complete joy. This joy surpasses any worldly joy.

How was it that John could be so fruitful and so joyful in doing the work of God? He had a life principle. Look at verse 30. "He must become greater; I must become less." John's life purpose was to glorify Jesus. If he could glorify Jesus, he did not mind sacrificing himself. We can be joyful and fruitful when we have a life principle to glorify Jesus.

This life principle must affect our thought world. One's thought world is well-revealed in his testimony writing. A spiritually healthy person will write 70% about the word of God, with a central focus on Jesus, 20% about others and 10% about himself, with a repentant heart. But some people write more than 50% about themselves with only vague references to Bible verses. Some people's Bible testimonies always sound like autobiographies. We must examine our thought world. Those who think only about themselves are miserable, even in the midst of Jesus' work and history. We can be happy in Jesus when we have a life principle: "Jesus must become greater; I must become less."

This life principle must affect our speech. When we have Jesus in our hearts, we are eager to talk about Jesus. John the Baptist testified about Jesus in many ways and at many times. He was always ready to talk about Jesus. Some people are always ready to talk about money. Others are always ready to talk about sports. Others are always ready to talk about their enemies. But we must talk about Jesus. Jesus must become greater and we must become less.

This life principle must affect our lifestyle. The image of Christ must grow more and more clearly, and our sinful nature must disappear completely. Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." We must sacrifice our ego on the altar each day. We must learn to love as Jesus loved, pray as Jesus prayed, serve as Jesus served, and become like Jesus in every way. When Jesus is revealed through us, others can come to know him and to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. God blesses those who exalt Christ with overflowing joy and abundant spiritual fruit. Let's pray that we may follow the life principle, "Jesus must become greater; I must become less," so that we may be richly blessed by God.

Third, whoever believes the Son has eternal life (31-36).

In this part, John explains what happens when we let Jesus become greater in our hearts and lives. Look at verses 35-36. "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." Jesus gives us eternal life. Those who have eternal life do not fear death. They are not anxious about the condition of the world. Instead, they see God's love and Jesus' grace. But those who reject the Son of God remain under God's wrath. They groan day and night under the power of death.

In this passage we learned that Jesus is God from heaven. Jesus is the one who gives eternal life to man. To the degree that Jesus becomes greater in our hearts, we are truly happy. Let's live with the principle, "Jesus must become greater; I must become less."