

Exalting Jesus Christ

"He must increase, but I must decrease"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. I think everyone likes to hear someone pay them a compliment.
 - A. It's always nice receiving some recognition for something we've done.
 1. But just imagine what it would be like to hear Jesus tell others how great you are.
 - a. That would be the ultimate in compliments.
 2. And yet, that's exactly what Jesus did for a man we've already met briefly. His name is John – more commonly known as John the Baptist.
 3. **Matthew 11:11a** – *"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist. . ."*
 - a. That accolade sounds like one the Lord might have given Moses; a man hand-picked by God to lead the children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery.
 - b. Or perhaps David; the boy who slew the giant Goliath only to become the most renowned king in Israel's history.

- c. Or perhaps Daniel; the man who encouraged his captive Jewish brethren in Babylon to remain faithful to the Lord – even if it meant facing death in a lion's den.
 4. And yet, those words of praise were given to an unsung hero named John.
- B. To describe John the Baptist as unconventional would be an understatement.
 1. He was an eccentric hermit living in the wilderness of Judea who preached an uncompromising message of repentance to prepare the people's heart for the Messiah.
 2. Clothed in camel hair and a leather belt, he was hardly dressed for success.
 - a. His Spartan diet of locust and honey would have never sparked a new fad diet.
 - b. And with his somewhat abrasive rhetoric, John would have never been chosen as "Mr. Congeniality."
 - c. And yet, Jesus picked this man to represent Him as His forerunner – the man who would prepare the way for the Lord.
 3. John's mission was actually three-fold in nature:
 - a. He cleared the way for Jesus by removing the obstacles in the minds and hearts of the people so they would be ready to receive the Messiah.

- b. He prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance – telling an entire nation they needed to get on their knees before God and ask for forgiveness – so that the mission of Jesus would be easier.
 - c. And he got out of the way – he stepped aside – when the time came for Jesus to step into the spotlight as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.
- II. As we continue in our journey through the gospel of John we've entitled "Exalting Jesus Christ," we're going to see John step aside to give all the attention and glory to Jesus Christ.
- A. *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* will be John's message to his disciples, as he steps into the shadows.
 - 1. It would be a bitter-sweet moment for this courageous prophet of God.
 - a. His job was about to be completed, and his voice would soon be silenced.
 - b. His trusted disciples who had been with him from the moment he began preaching and baptizing would not be told to follow Jesus.
 - c. And yet, John's parting words praise and magnify Jesus Christ – the Son of God – whom John had been privileged to serve.

Body:

- I. As we turn to the last half of John chapter three, we find Jesus with His disciples in Judea.
 - A. If you recall, they had all come to Jerusalem during Passover.
 1. It was heard that Jesus did the unexpected – boldly driving out the money-changers and merchants who had turned the House of God into a den of thieves.
 2. It was also here that Jesus did a number of signs that caused many to believe in Him, including a man by the name of Nicodemus.
 - a. When this Pharisee and ruler of the Jews came to Jesus at night to find out more about this "man sent from God," he was told he must be "born again."
 - b. Nicodemus learned that entrance into the kingdom of God would require a new birth – being born of water and the Spirit – and that God had sent His Son into the world to save the world, not condemn it.
 - c. All the world needed to do was believe in Jesus Christ with an obedient faith that would lead them to be born of the waters of baptism and receive the Spirit's gift of spiritual salvation.

3. And so, John writes: **John 3:22** – *After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.*
 - a. We'll learn later: **John 4:1b-2** – . . .*the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John 2 (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples).* . . .
- B. Now the scene fades to an isolated spot on the Jordan River in Aenon near Salim.
 1. No one knows where this isolated spot on the Jordan river was located.
 - a. Most commentators believe Aenon near Salim was in Judea, probably not far from where Jesus and His disciples were baptizing at the time.
 - b. **Matthew 3:1** – *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.* . . .
 2. However, concerning the ministry of John the Baptist, we're told:
John 3:23 – *Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there.*
 - a. It seems there are two reasons why John chose this particular place.

- (1). He needed a place where there was much water because throngs of people were still coming to him to be baptized – a lot of people.
- (2). And he needed a place where there was much water because John immerse people in water – that's what the word baptize means (immersion, or submersion).
 - b. I seriously doubt John would have been amused at the modern-day practice of sprinkling or pouring water on someone and calling it baptism.
 - c. John performed these ceremonial cleansings in the same way Jews had always done ceremonial washings – by immersing the whole body in water.
 - d. By the way, Jews still practice immersion in water as a means of ceremonial cleansing.
3. We're also told why throngs of people were still coming to John:
John 3:23-24 – *And they came and were baptized. 24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison.*
 - a. They were still coming to John to be baptized, but all that would change in the days ahead.
 - b. Being the outspoken, uncompromising preacher of righteousness that he was, John would soon make an enemy

of Herod the Tetrarch by publically denouncing Herod for having committed adultery by marrying his own brother's wife.

- c. Herod would have John arrested, and the prophet and forerunner of Christ would spend his final days in a prison cell in Jerusalem where he would be beheaded.
- d. But for now, John was still boldly preaching and doing his work of preparing the way for Jesus, the Messiah.

II. As I mentioned earlier, it seems John and Jesus were both preaching to crowds near the Jordan River -- probably not far from one another.

A. That close proximity may have sparked the following controversy.

1. It started as a disagreement between John's disciples and some of the Jews who had come to John.

a. **John 3:25** – *Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification.*

2. The word "*dispute*" (translated "*discussion*" in other versions) comes from the same Greek word from which we get the English "*diatribe*" -- meaning "a prolonged discourse; a bitter and abusive speech."

a. In other words, a heated argument broke out between John's disciples and others -- most likely over who had the right to administer a baptism of purification.

- b. John had long been recognized as a prophet sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.
- B. But now, word had reached the camp of John's disciples that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing.
- 1. **John 3:26** – *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!"*
 - a. John's disciples were apparently upset over the fact that Jesus and his disciples were stealing crowds away from John.
 - b. They didn't fully understand who Jesus really was. So, in their minds this just didn't seem fair.
 - c. John was the one of whom Isaiah had prophesied: **Isaiah 40:3** – *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*
 - d. John was the one of whom God had prophesied: **Malachi 3:1** – *"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. . ."*
 - e. So, why was Jesus and His disciples trying to take center stage? As far as the disciples of John were concerned, the stage belonged to their teacher.

2. It's not all that uncommon for people to flock to their favorite teachers and preachers – to elevate these men to positions of prominence and hold them in high esteem.
3. There are, however, several real dangers in doing that.
 - a. First, it tends to glorify the messenger rather than the message. People lose sight of what is being preached and focus more on the dynamic style of the preacher.
 - b. Second, it causes people to stop thinking for themselves – they just assume everything the teacher or preacher says is true.
 - c. Third, it tends to inflate the ego of the teacher or preacher into believing they are someone great and worthy of praise. It's easy for those of us who preach to allow compliments and praise to go to our heads – which is why we must constantly guard against this.
 - d. Fourth, it encourages the teacher or preacher to gather a following of his own – his own group of supporters and disciples. That loyal band of followers who will always agree with him whenever there is any disagreement.
 - e. And finally, it lays the groundwork for division in the body of Christ. When people start lining up behind their favorite teacher or preacher, division is only a disagreement away.

4. John's disciples were feeling the crunch of competition, and they didn't like it.
5. Here was the perfect time and place for John to fire up his disciples and take steps to recapture his dwindling following, but he doesn't do that.

III. John immediately defuses a potential explosive situation.

- A. Rather than side with his disciples who felt he needed to be on center-stage, John shows great humility in explaining to his disciples that the stages was never his in the first place.

1. **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."*

2. There are four specific things John tells his disciples here.
 - a. First, God is in charge. He is the one who opens doors of opportunity for men to preach the gospel, and He alone is the one to close those doors.

(1). *"A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven."* **(John 3:27)**

- b. Second, all work is significant, but only one work is preeminent. While John's work led many to repent of their sins and be baptized, his greatest work was to prepare the way for Christ. The entire focus of John's ministry was to glorify Jesus Christ -- not himself.

(1). *"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'"* **(John 3:28)**

- c. Third, real joy comes from being obedient, not from getting glory. John simply saw himself as *"the friend of the bridegroom"* – the *"best man"* as we would say. Even though it's a position of honor to be *"the friend of the bridegroom,"* the glory goes to the *"bridegroom"* – he's the one who stands at center-stage.

(1). *"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."* **(John 3:29)**

- d. And finally, genuine humility always points to Christ, and never to self. John never talked about himself, praised himself,

extolled himself, elevated himself, or bragged about himself. Instead, John understood his fame must fade as the fame of Jesus increases.

(1). *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* **(John 3:30)**

3. This is similar to the response of Moses as he dealt with the competitive spirit that arose among his followers over two young, upstart prophets.

- a. **Numbers 11:26-30** – *But two men had remained in the camp: the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them. Now they were among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle; yet they prophesied in the camp. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."*
- 28 So Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, one of his choice men, answered and said, "Moses my lord, forbid them!"*
- 29 Then Moses said to him, "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!" 30 And Moses returned to the camp, he and the elders of Israel.*

- b. Moses didn't care if God had also given others the power to speak in His name – as long as God was glorified, and the people were edified, Moses was content.
 - c. There was no competitive spirit in this leader of Israel.
 - d. Nor was there any in the heart of John the Baptist.
- B. The words "envy" and "jealousy" are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference.
- 1. Some have described "envy" as beginning with empty hands, and mourning over what we do not have – being envious over what others have that we don't.
 - 2. Jealousy, on the other hand, has been described as beginning with full hands, but feels threatened that it may lose what it has – trying to jealously protect what we feel we may be losing to someone else.
 - 3. John and Moses certainly knew how to cope with envy and jealousy, and so did the psalmist who wrote:
 - a. **Psalms 75:6-7** – *For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. 7 But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another.*
 - 4. Envy often rears its ugly head when one of your peers is promoted; or when a newcomer passes you on the way up the corporate

ladder; or when you're a senior and you're sitting on the bench while a sophomore is in the starting line-up.

5. Envy's evil twin, jealousy, tags along when loyalties shift; when close friends abandon us for others; when the fame and attention we once enjoyed is now being given to another.
 6. Someone once described envy and jealousy like seedy muggers in a dark alley who are waiting in the shadows to do us in – to rob us of our joy, to work us over, and leave our spiritual lives deeply wounded and scared.
 7. However, we don't have to walk down that dimly lit street. We can choose to walk down the brightly lit street of humility – a street that's not illuminated by our own light, but rather by the light of Him whose sandals we are not worthy to unloose.
- C. John took this opportunity to put the focus back on Jesus Christ.
1. **John 3:31-34** – *"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."*

- a. John wanted his disciples to understand that he was simply the messenger – the one to prepare the way for Him who *"comes from above"* and therefore *"is above all."*
 - b. Speaking of Jesus, John says He testifies about things which only one who came from heaven could possibly know.
 - c. And then, using what we call a hyperbole, John says, regrettably, *"no one receives His testimony"* – meaning only a few will truly accept what Jesus says.
 - d. John knew Jesus was speaking and teaching the truth and he wanted his disciples to know Jesus was sent from God.
 - e. John wanted his disciples to know that Jesus had been sent to speak the words of God by the Holy Spirit which was given to Jesus without measure.
 - f. John was merely a messenger. Jesus was the Word.
- D. And then, John gives one final reason why Jesus must increase while he decreases.
- 1. **John 3:35-36** – *"The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. 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."*

- a. John wanted his disciples to know Jesus was *"the Son"* whom the Father loved – He was the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah.
 - b. He alone has all power and all authority because it has been given to Him by the Father who *"has given all things into His hand."*
 - c. It's not John they should be following – it's Jesus.
 - d. The only way John's disciples can have everlasting life is to believe in the Son – to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.
 - e. Otherwise, they will not only be deprived of everlasting life, they will become the recipients of God's wrath.
2. And, that's the same message for you and me: *"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."* **(John 3:36)**

CONCLUSION:

- I. John the Baptist had been privileged to briefly enjoy the limelight on the stage he had set for Jesus Christ.
 - A. But now that Jesus was stepping onto the stage, it was time for John to quietly exit into the shadows – *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*
 1. His work of preparing the people for the coming of Jesus Christ was nearing its end.

2. Soon, Jesus would launch His own ministry and travel throughout Galilee and Judea teaching, and preaching, and proving beyond any doubt that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
 3. There was no envy or jealousy in the heart of John – he had come to simply play a minor part. And now that his role was nearing its end, he would be content with knowing he had the great honor of being chosen by God for this awesome task.
- B. How about you?
1. Can you be content with being the faceless, offstage voice announcing the star of the show?
 - a. Can you give Jesus center-stage while you step into the shadows to merely operate the curtains to unveil Him to the audience?
 - b. Can you turn the spotlight away from yourself and onto Him?
 2. You can if you become a person like John.
 - a. You can if you're willing to play a minor part without upstaging the lead and stealing the show for yourself.
 - b. That will be easy if Jesus is truly first in your life.
 - c. And you can tell whether He's first if you're happy to take second place, and surrender any spotlight to Him.

- C. Becoming a true follower of Jesus Christ involves believing on Him, repenting of your sins, and being baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins.
1. However, before any of that can take place – before you can take the first step toward becoming a follower of Jesus Christ – you must become like John and humble yourself.
 - a. He must increase, and you must decrease
 2. You must first empty yourself of all that foolish, useless pride and self-will, and not be afraid to put your complete faith and trust in Him.
 3. If you can do that, then you can come to Christ in obedience to the gospel.
 4. And if you can do that, then you can remain faithful to Jesus Christ as His disciple because you will always put Him first, and your wants and desires second.
 5. If you're ready to take that first step of genuine humility, then we invite you to come to Christ now.