

LEARNING TO DECREASE, part 1
John 3:22-30

4 May 2014

[Note: Preaching is a live event where God meets with His people, and that cannot be reproduced or duplicated. It is unique every time, and indispensable in the life of the Christian and the church. This is not a complete transcript; it is typically about 80% of the actual sermon. Some common abbreviations in these notes are: “NB” = *nota bene*, “note well” / “+” = an illustration / “☒” = an application / “BTW” = By the way / “Cf.” = cross-reference / “i.e.” = In other words / “b/c” = because / “E.G.” = for example.]

Turn back to John, chp. 3, one of most famous chps in all the Bible, and for good reason....

Today’s text is the last appearance in John’s Gospel of the man whom Jesus said was “the greatest man that ever lived”, John the Baptist. – Matt. 11:11, “Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!”

How would you & I handle such compliments? – The Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, saying that about you? – Think it might go to your head? – Today we’ll see how John handled this great temptation of pride.

~ C.S. Lewis: “Well, now, we have come to the center. According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is **pride**. Unchastity, anger, grief, drunkenness and all that are mere flea bites in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every vice. It is a complete anti-God state of mind.”

~ Thomas Watson, the puritan: “Pride is a spiritual drunkenness; it flies up like wine into the brain and intoxicates it. It is idolatry; a proud man is a self-worshipper.”

~ “Pride is the mother of hell.” (Chrysostom)

~ “The Lord detests all the proud in heart. Be sure of this: they will not go unpunished.... Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Solomon, Prov. 16:5, 18)

~ “I hate pride and arrogance...” (Wisdom speaking, Prov. 8:13)

[+ Kids, imagine this: ‘Pride is so foolish – that when Jesus made his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, pride could even convince the donkey carrying Jesus that all the celebration was about him, the donkey!']

~ “The world’s smallest package is a man wrapped up in himself.” (Swindoll)

Stand, Read text (vv. 22-30) & Pray:

Before getting into our text, let’s first set the stage & get the setting in vv. 22-26...

v. 22 – As NIV puts it, “out into the Judean countryside”... See 4:2...

So Jesus was overseeing the work of His disciples, who were carrying on the legacy of John the Baptist:

Performing a baptism of repentance for the Jewish people who wanted to be cleansed of their sin & hypocrisy (as a nation that had fallen far from their Lord).

vv. 23-24 – Meanwhile, John the Baptist was still up to his waist in water too, just in another part of Judea. –

People still flocked to this bold, fiery prophet, this hair-coated, locust-eating, Elijah-like preacher who confronted dead religion in God’s name....

v. 25 – Perhaps they were comparing the value of John’s baptism versus Jesus (from a Jew now following Jesus, in light of next verse, v. 26):

‘Which baptism is more effective, more purifying?’, ‘I got baptised by John.’, ‘Oh yeah, well I got baptised by Jesus Himself.’, ‘Well I did both, beat that!?!’... (And the Church has been fighting over baptism ever since.)

v. 26 – “He is baptising and... ‘we are thrilled to see Christ exalted! Master John, we rejoice that what you preached is now happening, the One greater than you has arrived, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’

‘We’re delighted the prophesied Messiah is here and the masses are flocking to Him as they ought! It’s what we’ve been waiting for all along, just as you taught us!’ –

Is that what they say?...

NB the tone, not even referring to Jesus by name (though John gets a title, “Rabbi!”): v. 26...

☒ BEWARE: Look how resentment & jealousy blur our vision. – Look how *envy leads to exaggeration*: v. 26, “all, everyone” is flocking to Him. – Yet v. 23 just told us otherwise....

But *jealousy blinds us to the facts* right in front of us. – Why? – Because we’re looking through the dark lens of our own selfish ambition.

Turn to Jam. 3:13-17a – NB, selfish ambition clouds our judgment, like drunkenness (cf. Jn. 3:26). – But humility makes us reasonable, sensible, sober-minded, clear-headed....

So John’s disciples here are saying, ‘Master John, Master John, Competition Alert, Threat Detected! Jesus’ ratings on the rise, John’s are headed south, fast.’ –

Indignant, irate that Jesus could so blatantly steal disciples away from their beloved John. –

‘Who does this Jesus think He is?!’ – Therein lay their problem. – They obviously missed the whole point, the whole theme of John the Baptist’s ministry, to prepare the way and point away from himself to Christ the Messiah.

~ “A leader often suffers more from his zealous disciples than from his critics!” (Wiersbe)

☒ Could we ever overstate the damage that envy & jealousy have done in the world, and worst of all, in the Church?!

Eccl. 4:4, “I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.”

Turn to: Gal. 5:15 (the ‘other’ one another we must despise, not desire)...; 5:19-21...

Eternity is at stake in this fight against our fleshly envy & jealousy. – God forbid that we act like this!...

☒ O the petty jealousies and cliques among Christians that destroy the work of God!...

+ John the Baptist wasn’t the first to face this temptation. – Three other key incidents in Scripture tackle this same problem:

(1) Moses, Num. 11: God’s Spirit falls upon the 70, and esp. Eldad & Medad prophesying, so jealous Joshua says, “Moses, my lord, restrain them!” –

To which Moses replies, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!”

(2) Jesus, Mark 9, his disciples say, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us.” –

But Jesus said, “Do not hinder him, for there is no one will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is FOR us.”

(3) Later, after John the Baptist, comes Paul – Php. 1 – ‘What then, I rejoice, only if Christ is preached, yes, and I will rejoice!’...

☒ What do we want more: church growth, or gospel growth & kingdom growth? – Jesus didn’t say He would build “my” church, but “HIS” church. – Part of why we pray for other churches each Sunday...

☒ BUT see how sovereign our God is! – He uses an envious, selfish remark from John’s disciples to set the stage for some of the best teaching in all the Bible on humility!

What a test this would’ve been any man, knowing how competitive men can be. –

Sure, all the right things were said about John, and by John, early on in his ministry:

1:6-8, 15, 20, 23, 27, 29-30, 34-36...

What a crucial role John had played at the outset of Jesus’ ministry.

BUT NOW, that was all being put to the test. – Would John stay the course, would he stay humble, or would pride win in the end? –

Would John keep himself out of the way, or would envy rear its ugly head at last? – Knowing my own selfish heart as I do, O what a test this must’ve been!...

Over next 2 Sundays...

***A series of NINE CONTRASTS that should humble us and show that we are inferior and Christ is superior:**

Stated in 1st person, for the sake of application, that we might personalize John's humble example....

1. v. 27, I receive, but God decides.

v. 27 – Strikes me as a softer version of Jesus' rebuke to Peter (Mk. 8), "Get thee behind Me. You are not thinking of God's things, but man's things." –

I.e., 'Gentlemen, did you think I applied for this job or lobbied for this position? Do you think I have the option of stealing glory from the very Son of God? Are you recommending that I protest against Jesus' popularity or try and abort Jesus' mission? Never, not in a million years, as if that would be possible anyway!'

'My mission, and Jesus' mission, were not achieved. They were received. We didn't volunteer, we were summoned, we were sent. We come not in our own name, but in God's name. Ask my Mom, Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother, Mary: The angels announced to them God's plan for both of us *before* Jesus and I were even born.' – Repeat: v. 27...

+ God has a 'No Returns' policy on all His gifts. – Who am I to complain about God's gift or ask for a refund or an exchange? – Who am I to chafe at His providence, to resent His dealings with me, to frown at His calling on my life?

Imagine if I got what I deserved? – I'd be gnashing my teeth in outer darkness in the Lake of Fire? – As the Puritans would say, 'Our receivings are not our deservings!' –

How am I doing? – *Far better* than I deserve.

Is my cup half full or half empty? – Neither! Ps. 23, "My cup runneth over!", because Jesus drank the full cup of God's wrath for me at Calvary. –

How dare I grumble or complain, or grow discontented, for one moment!...

+ This past Sunday night: *Rob Tittle, who worked at the Little Rock, Arkansas-based FamilyLife Ministry, was killed Sunday night along with two his daughters, Tori, 20, and Rebekah, 14. Tittle, 48, left behind his wife, Kerry, and seven of the couple's other children.*

In the aftermath of the storm, the Tittles' 19-year-old daughter wrote on Facebook that "my mom, and my six brothers/sisters are alright. We have lost three of our family. ... Dad, Tori and Rebekah, prayers would be appreciated. The house is gone, stripped from the foundation. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

John the Baptist could've grown bitter (like his disciples) at what God was taking away from him – as Jesus outshined him and John's ministry shrank.

Repeat: v. 27...

Or as Paul puts it, 1 Cor. 4:7...

☒ What a truth here for us all! – So wide-reaching and all-embracing:

Starting with your salvation: 1 Cor. 15:10; Jn. 1:13...

NOT for a minute can we take an ounce of credit. – Eph. 2:8-10...

How this should humble us to the dust & put us flat on our faces before the Giver of every good gift. – How this should melt our hearts with gratitude to our God, the Fountain of all good, the Source of everything we have – in salvation, and in everything:

Jam. 1:17...

True of your spiritual gifts as well: 1 Pet. 4:10-11...

☒ BEWARE: Any time you start to think you are the source of any good thing, rather than a recipient, you are in a precarious position. Pride has snuck into your heart, and is plotting your downfall....

Repeat: v. 27...

+ As David said when the people gave generously their offerings for the building of the temple: 1 Chron. 29:14, “But whom am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You.”

☒ O God, we can never outgive You. – You are a debtor to no man. – We give, because You first gave to us.

☒ O that we would learn to see God’s sovereign hand behind all things – that nothing happens apart from Him. – Rom. 11:36...

This is the secret to contentment, to preventing envy and jealous, and a thousand other sins....

+ F.B. Meyer preached in London in days of Spurgeon, but was far less popular – would literally have to stand at door of his church, while greetings his flock on a Sunday, yet watching the masses flocking past to hear Spurgeon instead. – Yet Meyer’s writings are still in print today a century later and have spread around the world bearing great fruit. – He comments on our text in John 3:

What a blessing it would be if we could enshrine in our hearts this immortal maxim: v. 27, “A man can receive nothing except it have been given him from heaven”! What we have is God’s gift; let us hold it reverently. What another person has is God’s gift to him; we have no right to find fault with His dealings with another of His servants. Our orbits are distinct; all we have to do is to shine our brightest where He has placed us, confident that He knows best.

2. v. 28, I represent Christ, I don't replace Him.

v. 28 – ‘Men, don't put the chariot before the mule! I'm just the mule, pulling the golden chariot with Jesus inside. He's the point and focus, the real hero in this show, not me!

‘That's what I've been telling you all along, it's nothing new. You heard it with your own ears. You ought to know better.’

‘Don't make me a rival to the one I came to represent. I refuse to compete with the One I came to promote. I will not advance my own reputation, when I exist to make Jesus famous.

☒ Look at how hideous our pride can be! – Shudder the thought, to think for one moment that I am the Christ? – How insane! – Think just of John 1 and all the titles we learned there about our Saviour:

‘Am I the eternal Word, who became flesh; the only begotten Son of God, from the bosom of the Father, 2nd member of the Triune Godhead; the one perfectly full of grace & truth, in completion?’

‘Since when did I ever qualify to be: Life & Light of the world; Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; the One who has God's Spirit without measure, King of Israel, the Christ/Messiah, et. al.?!’

☒ O that this would our witness to all who know us best – that our life is all about Christ, not about me. – O that all around us would not just know who we are, but who we are not. It's easy to think, ‘But he/she doesn't really know me, who I really am.’ – Let's also think, ‘I hope he/she also knows who I am NOT’, so that the focus is on Christ, not us.

+ Pastor in Melbourne, introducing Hudson Taylor with many superlatives. – Taylor then stepped to the pulpit quietly and said, “Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.” – To which John the Baptist would've said, ‘Hallelujah!’

3. v. 29, I'm only best man, not the Groom.

v. 29 – John uses here a vivid illustration that translates across into most cultures. – Imagine the scene: It's your wedding day. – Finally, it has come. – All the years you've known your fiancé. – All the hopes & dreams for your future. – All the preparations that have gone into this day, all the expense, all the effort, all the family & friends that have helped.

You're the groom. – The music is playing, the final guests are being seated. – Next to you on your left stand your groomsmen: Your three closest, long-time friends, including your younger brother, plus your best man, who holds the rings for the wedding. –

It was an easy choice: You've known your best man since Grade 0. – You grew up together, he just lived 2 streets over; you rode bikes, went to the same school, got in trouble together, played the same sports, etc.. – You were inseparable mates.

There you stand at your wedding, shoulder to shoulder with your best man and the other groomsmen, awaiting that climactic moment when your bride arrives. – The

bridesmaids all glide in. – The music changes. – The wedding march begins. – All rise and stand, their eyes fixed back on the bride.

Her dad's eyes begin to moisten as he escorts her down the aisle. – You and your bride cannot take your eyes off of one another, as you gaze at her in all her glory. –

BUT THEN, something strange, something horrible, begins to happen. – Your best man moves from his position, towards the centre aisle, towards...*your* bride. –

He rushes for your bride, and pushes her father aside. – He lifts your bride's veil, lands a big kiss on her lips, and then grabs her arm in his. – He swings her around and they march out of the sanctuary, while all the onlookers stand aghast, in utter disbelief.

THAT is what John the Baptist's disciples were asking John to do to Jesus. – They didn't want Jesus to be the Groom on centre stage, they wanted it to be John. – They wanted John to stop rejoicing over the Groom and instead *replace* the Groom.

WHO then is the Bride in John's illustration? – Like any devout Jew, John would've known all the OT texts that call Israel the LORD's bride (Isa. 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; Hos. 2:16-20). – John probably also knew that the NT would portray the Church as Jesus' Bride (Eph. 5:25-27; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2,9; 22:17).

John the Baptist then is saying, 'Don't you see? In this Jesus, the Son of God, God is betrothing His people to Himself. God has come to save and to be joined to His people through Christ, the God-man & Redeemer.'

'Neither John the Baptist, nor any other preacher or pastor or Christian, could ever accomplish this. Only Messiah Jesus could ever achieve this salvation. Only Christ could die & rise to redeem lost sinners and wed them to Himself forever!'

So John is saying to his over-zealous, jealous disciples: 'Don't you see? You've got me & Jesus badly mixed up. It's not MY day, it's HIS day!'

'NOTHING would bring me greater sorrow and agony than to confuse my role with His, to steal the show from Him. That would be a criminal violation of my calling as "friend of the bridegroom", as 'best man'.'

'Don't you understand where my joy comes from? Even from that time in my mother's womb when we met Mary with Jesus in her womb and I rejoiced (Lk. 1:44) – and ever since then, I've been finding my joy, my all, my life in Christ, not in myself.'

'What offends you most is what delights me most! I get no joy out of being noticed or recognised. I find no pleasure in my own popularity. Oh no, my entire joy is found here – in cheering on Jesus, in seeing Him united to His bride, His people.'

NB, key emphasis on joy: v. 29bc...

☒NB: We're not just best man, or maid of honor, or attendants at the wedding – we are the BRIDE!!...He died for us, and will return for us, and we will feast with Him forever at the marriage supper of the Lamb!

☒ Do you know this Husband? – Are you engaged to Christ, or still lost? – Give GOSPEL...

John then perfectly sums up his point with these now famous words:

4. v. 30, I must decrease, Christ must increase.

v. 30 – Here is a best man who knows his role and fulfils it. – Here he puts all of us in our place. –

John says, 'I am just the servant, He is the Master. I am the ambassador, He is the King. I want to get smaller, and I want Jesus to get bigger & bigger in people's eyes. That's it, that's all it takes for me to be happy.'

'Christ must become greater and greater; I must become less and less. My little twinkling star must soon be eclipsed and disappear, in the light of the mighty rising sun of Jesus, Son of God.'

NB, doesn't say, "He should increase", or 'He needs to increase', or 'He might increase'. – No, Christ "MUST" increase. – It is a divine necessity, and also a divine certainty. –

'You competitive disciples of John, you think Jesus is increasing now. You just wait! One day Jesus will be so famous you'll forget John the Baptist name altogether!'

Scripture *guarantees* that Jesus will increase and we will decrease:

Mark 4, 'Sow and sleep, the seed will grow, harvest will come. God's kingdom is like the tiny mustard seed, "yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under the shade." –

Rev. 11:15, *Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."* (Daniel's stone that will crush all other kingdoms and will endure forever, Daniel 2.)

Php. 2:9-11, *God has highly exalted Jesus, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

+ George Whitefield was perhaps the most popular preacher the UK has ever known. – He drew incredible crowds. – And in his journals, he often speaks of wrestling with this hideous sin of pride:

"Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified" . . . "Let my name die everywhere, let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus may be promoted" . . .

“But what is Calvin, or what is Luther? Let us look above names and parties; let Jesus be our all in all – So that He is preached I care not who is uppermost. I know my place . . . Even to be the servant of all” . . . (Dallimore, George Whitefield, 154).

☒ The flesh tells us, ‘You must increase, Jesus must decrease.’ – The world tells us, ‘You must shine, Jesus must fade.’ – Satan tells us, ‘You must be famous, Jesus must take a backseat.’ –

But that is not only a lie, it is also a cheap thrill, a fleeting pleasure, a shallow joy.

Here, John the Baptist (in unison with all of Scripture) calls us to *true joy*, lasting pleasure, great delight, as we lose ourselves in HIM:

Repeat: Jn. 3:30...

☒ Beloved, how we must GUARD against letting anyone or anything usurp Jesus’ place as the great & glorious groom. – Everything in life will tempt us to forget that we are but attendants at the wedding, NOT the groom! –

We are constantly prone to a celebrity mindset – to exalt ourselves, or our favourite church, preachers, authors, musicians, leaders, etc.

Because God indeed uses people as His instruments, and we need leaders. – But the job of those leaders is to keep pointing us away from themselves and up to Christ:

Repeat: John 3:30...

~ J.C. Ryle, ‘The church declines as it thinks more of the minister and less of Christ.’

+ What was it at Corinth, 1 Cor. 1-4, that was causing such division & strife & conflict, and stealing their joy? – They were boasting in men: ‘I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas’. – To which Paul replies, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” –

Their boasting in men was a denial of the entire gospel and the message of Christ crucified. – ‘Christ must increase, men must decrease.’

+ Last week, I shared with the elders at Faly & Haja’s church, after the loss of their beloved pastor of 42 years:

‘Now is the time for you to remember that this church was built, *not upon the messenger, but upon the message*. Our faith rests finally upon the truth of the gospel itself, not upon the voices that bring us this gospel. The Lord buries His workmen, but His work carries on.’

Repeat: John 3:30...

+ Little did John know this wish of his would be granted through imprisonment & martyrdom, losing his own head, that Christ might increase and be exalted (Mk. 6)....

+ As William Carey lay dying, he turned to a friend and said, “When I am gone, don’t talk about William Carey; talk about William Carey’s Savior. I desire that Christ alone might be magnified.”

☒ Sooner or later, we WILL all be eclipsed – ‘the grass withers, the flower fades’...

CONCL. – Restate 4 points...

No wonder Jesus said John was such a great man. – It’s been said, ‘Only a great man can accept his own demise with joy.’ – And, ‘There is no limit to what God can do through a man who cares not who gets the glory/credit.’

1 Pet. 5:5, “...clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that HE may exalt you at the proper time.’”

PRAY

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. How has God’s Word and John the Baptist’s example humbled you today?
2. What situations tempt you most to envy and become jealous? How can you learn to identify and mortify (kill, put off) those sinful attitudes?
3. What will it mean for you this week specifically to decrease that Christ might increase? (in your home, marriage, job, school, church, etc.)
4. What are some of the subtle (and not so subtle) ways that we try to make ourselves increase? What are some of the typical ways we try and replace Christ, instead of representing Him?
5. How can we practically appreciate our favourite preachers and spiritual leaders that God uses in our life, yet keeping Christ the focus and giving Him all the glory?
6. What are some of the things that we tend to think God owes us, or that we have a right to, instead of realising all is by grace and is a gift and we deserve nothing (but Hell)?