

He Must Increase!

John 3:22-36

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

There it is, three characteristic sins of all mankind. That’s true, isn’t it? In a certain sense, all sin can be put into those three categories—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Our focus this morning is upon the third one, the pride of life.

The NIV translates that phrase, “the boasting of what he has and does.” That’s a good translation, since boasting is the emphasis of the phrase. It is the boastful arrogance with which a man exalts himself in his own position. And such boasting is sin, as we read in,

James 4:16 “But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”

That was a common problem among Jesus’ disciples, for even after Jesus announced to his disciples that he would be “betrayed into the hands of men,” and crucified, those disciples would argue about who would be the greatest! And Jesus gave them a very helpful correction.

Luke 9:46 “Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. 47 And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, 48 and said to them, “Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who

is least among you all will be great.”

Likewise, we read of the mother of James and John requesting the positions of greatness for her sons,

Mat. 20:20 “Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”

The pursuit of greatness! It is a horrible sin, and one which afflicts us in so many ways. And therefore we ought to study John the Baptist very carefully, for he appears to be entirely free from this deadly affliction. So actually, our focus today is not upon the sin of pride, but just the opposite. The virtue of humility. There seems to be nothing in John that would give any appearance of such boastful pride. Instead, his humility shows forth, for he knew his place. He understood his own identity. He understood Jesus’ identity. And he understood the relationship between the two. That’s my outline, beginning with the point that,

I. JOHN UNDERSTOOD HIS OWN IDENTITY.

He knew who he was. He knew what God had called him to do. He came to prepare the way for Jesus, by a baptism of repentance. His message was clear,

Mat. 3:2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

And those who repented were baptized, the sign of their turning away from sin.

v.23-24

But Jesus was also baptizing,

v.22

So guess what happened? Competition. Competition fueled by pride. An argument. As we read in the New King James, v.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!”

What petty, foolish men they were! But what typical men. John had been attracting great crowds, and so his disciples thought of themselves pretty highly. There was a dispute about Jewish laws of purification. It is entirely possible that these followers of John had broken away from a sect associated with the Essenes, the group who preserved the writings that are now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Those Essenes, a group of Jews, highly emphasized many traditions for purification, even beyond those prescribed in the OT. But John's disciples would have attributed to John's baptism superior or even exclusive purifying efficacy. That is, they would argue that their master's baptism was superior to any other. And they would therefore become very jealous of Jesus' growing popularity.

“He's more popular than you!” That's an appeal to pride, isn't it? An occasion for boasting. But John didn't care. He understood himself. His answer is so helpful as an example for every one of us. If you can honestly and sincerely say these things about yourself, then you are doing very, very well.

v.27

What do those words really mean? John understood that there was nothing special about him. Nothing about himself that could be the basis of any boasting. Nothing in himself that could be ground for pride. Because he knew that he was a recipient of God's grace. Nothing more.

His fame, his glory, if you can call it that, was nothing but the result of receiving a gift and calling from God. He had nothing in himself, nothing of himself, nothing by himself. Instead, everything he had was given to him by God. “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.”

That's so crucial, so beneficial for all of us to recognize. And it is true universally.

A. A human being is only a recipient of God's grace, therefore unable to boast in himself.

John got that! And you and I need to get it, too!

It is what Paul writes to the Corinthians.

2 Cor. 10:17 “But “he who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”
18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.”

“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Jeremiah expands on that theme a little bit,

Jeremiah 9:23 “Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; 24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,” says the Lord.”

Dear friends, there is no place in the Christian life for boasting. None. Nowhere. There is no place for competition, or the pursuit of a competitive advantage, in which I make myself look superior to you. There is no place to exercise divisions and factions based upon the competitive leadership of men, though it happens all the time.

Instead, there must be humility, the humility to recognize that whatever you have that might give you a reason to boast, is actually nothing but a gift that God has given you. Whatever you have, whatever glory you might possess, whatever might give you reason to boast, the reality is that you are nothing but a recipient of God's grace!

Paul has the same thought when he writes to the Romans, Rom. 12:3 "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."

Paul applies his own words quite personally, Rom. 12:6 "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

So whatever God enables you to do, do it! Because you have received a measure of faith, because you are a recipient of God's grace. You are an instrument, a tool. God is the one who gets all the praise.

I have often said that that experience was the great delight I had when I first came here last year. I recognized that I as recipient of God's grace. My ministry was well received by you. It was helpful and profitable to the church in many ways that were very encouraging to me. And all the time I realized that I just

showed up, and in a number of significant ways, God used me. God did the work. That continues, and I'm thankful. And I'm very glad to be here. Because I see God's hand at work. And this sense of identity is established in me quite deeply. "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven."

So I have enjoyed the blessing of being an instrument that God would use. And that sense of God's hand at work is what gives me energy, and encouragement. And stirs me to be all the more diligent. And always compels me to be humble. If and when I boast, I will boast of what the Lord is doing! When I boast, I will boast about the Lord's hand at work in all of you.

That's what John is saying about himself. He understood that he was only a recipient of God's grace, therefore there was no ground upon which he could boast or take pride in himself. And John knew something else about himself, too. Again, to put it in very general and universal terms,

B. A human being is only a creature, therefore not equal with God.

Again, the point is humility. God is God. I am not. I am a creature. And that perspective, of course, makes us all equal. We are all creatures. As John puts it, we are "of the earth." And that's it, "of the earth." Flesh and blood. Mortal and corruptible.

v.31

Such a healthy reminder of the call to humility. Such a necessary constraint on any and every temptation to human pride. We are of the earth. We are creatures, made from the elements of this earth.

The Bible has a particularly pointed way of putting this. We as human beings, we as creatures are frequently called "worms."

Is. 41:13 “For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’ 14 “Fear not, you worm Jacob, You men of Israel! I will help you,” says the Lord And your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

Or to use another image from the world of disrespected animals, grasshoppers.

Is. 40:17 “All nations before Him are as nothing, And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless. 18 To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? 19 The workman molds an image, The goldsmith overspreads it with gold, And the silversmith casts silver chains. 20 Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution Chooses a tree that will not rot; He seeks for himself a skillful workman To prepare a carved image that will not totter. 21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.”

Same idea, earlier in that same chapter,

Is. 40:6 The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.”

We’re creatures. Grasshoppers. Worms. Just grass. We wither and fades. And it is God who stands forever. I propose to you that that is a healthy and holy perspective on life. We are only creatures. And the contrast, for us and for John, is with Jesus.

II. JOHN UNDERSTOOD JESUS’ IDENTITY.

John knew was from the earth. But he also knew that,

A. Jesus is from heaven.

Such a contrast, an ultimate contrast.

v.31

What does that mean? To be simple, it means that Jesus is eternal. It means that Jesus is God, eternally God. And so we read,

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.”

There are implications of that, namely that, as God, Jesus is also the creator of the world.

John 1:3 “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

So everything about the divinity and glory of Jesus would be included in this description, that he was from heaven. He is “above all,” as you read twice in verse 31. It’s all about him! It’s all about his glory!

And as the one who is from heaven, he speaks from heaven. In other words, he speaks from God. He speaks as God. And God is truth. So he speaks truth! He is truth. Even if those on earth won’t believe it.

v.32-34

That last verse refers to the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing truth. Jesus had the Holy Spirit without “measure,” without restraint. We as creatures receive a portion of the power of the

Holy Spirit, a measure. Jesus has it all, for they are co-equal persons in the Trinity. When Jesus came, the Spirit was poured out upon him without measure. That is, in its fullness. There was a perfect indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Jesus, a full and complete revelation.

B. Jesus reveals the truth from heaven.

And therefore, we rightly say that Jesus spoke the full and complete revelation of his father. And there is no more to come, no more revelation. What we have is complete. We have the complete revelation of God, the words of the father given to the son, who is the word of God made flesh. The word of God incarnate. Jesus the word of God. And Jesus is the truth. He came to earth to speak, to reveal, the words of the father. And so his words, this word, is the word of God. Not the word of man. It is the word of God, true. Without error. Incapable of error, because it is the word of God.

And he brings life.

C. Jesus brings eternal life from heaven.

v.35-36

John knows that. And he proclaims it. He, John, was not the source of eternal life. Jesus was. Believing in John would not bring eternal life. Nor will believing in the church. Believing in reformed theology won't bring eternal life, nor will believing in the OPC. And certainly not believing in me.

Jesus is the author of life. And the message of the gospel cannot be stated any more plainly than it is in verse 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."

John repeats that same message in,

1 John 5:11 "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

That is the message I preach to you today. The words of truth. Absolute truth. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." This is the gospel, this is the truth,

Rom. 10:9 "...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

One more point this morning. Not only does John understand his own identity as well as Jesus' identity,

III. JOHN UNDERSTOOD HIS RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS.

That stands to reason. When you consider yourself as a mere creature, standing in the presence of your creator God, that defines your relationship with him, doesn't it? When you see yourself only as the recipient of God's grace and mercy, not having anything worthy or praiseworthy in and of yourself, that defines your relationship with him, too, doesn't it? When you determine that all you will boast about, the only source or ground of your pride is that which God accomplishes in you, or is the work of his hand, your relationship with God is accurately defined.

It is a relationship in which you are characterized by humility. Not personal glory. The only glory that you seek is the glory which belongs to God, glory which you are glad to give to God alone!

John's gospel gives us a really good illustration of that. The example of a wedding. At the wedding, of course, there is the bridegroom. And there is the friend of the bridegroom. The best

man, as we would call him today.

v.29

Do you see the point? The glory of the best man is the joy he gains in the presence of the bridegroom!

I've never had the pleasure of being a best man in someone else's wedding. Maybe I will someday. Maybe not. But I certainly know and understand the job of the best man. It's an enjoyable job. We could say the same for the maid of honor. For the best man and the maid of honor enjoy themselves as attendants! Attending to the one who is getting married! It's not their wedding. It's the wedding of their friend, and on that day, the best man as well as the maid of honor find their joy in someone else's experiences.

To put that very broadly,

A. The joy of a servant is in the glory of the master.

If you are going to experience real joy in this world, you have to understand this idea. The joy of a servant is in the glory of the master. And you are the servant. Jesus is the master. So your joy is not rooted in your own experiences at all, but in the experiences of seeing Jesus be honored!

John is so genuine. His humility is so authentic. And his joy is sincere.

v.29 "...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's joy was in the presence of Jesus with him! John's joy came because he was the one chosen to introduce Jesus.

John 1:29 "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him,

and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"

People of God, that's what humility is all about. It's all about the glory of the master, the glory of Jesus. Humility comes when you are able to earnestly, honestly seek his glory. For,

B. The purpose of a servant is to exalt the glory of the master

Here is a practical definition of humility,
v.30 "He must increase, but I must decrease."

That is the demonstration of godliness, the evidence of true faith. "He must increase, but I must decrease." It's all about him, it's all about Jesus. And there isn't much room left to promote the pride of your own glory. "He must increase, but I must decrease."

One commentator writes that "the last words of John to be recorded in this Gospel form surely one of the greatest utterances that ever fell from human lips." "He must increase, but I must decrease."

John wasn't afflicted with a low self-esteem. There was no psychological malady that afflicted him. Instead, he knew his place. He rightly understood his position, his purpose. He was the bondservant of Jesus, and his place was to exalt the glory of his master.

And you must always know your place as well. There is no room for pride. No room for self-advancement. No room for competitive attempts to make yourself the greatest.

There is no glory for us. The glory is all for Jesus. Because,

Col. 1:15 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Beloved, let me urge this upon you very strenuously. This is where we must all live, always. Understand yourself, that you have, in yourself, nothing to boast about. Everything you have is from God. And understand Jesus, that he is indeed God in the flesh.

Then live out your life with the commitment, “that in all things He may have the preeminence.” “He must increase.” Are you willing to live with that commitment? That purpose? It is the call of the gospel, it must define your life. It must define your life as a husband, as you seek to love your wife. It must define your life as a wife, as you seek to honor your husband. It must define your life as a child, and you grow and start making your own decisions. Children, teenagers, young adults especially, I want you to learn to think in these terms. “He must increase, [Jesus must increase] but I must decrease.”

If you are a Christian, then this must be your song, the theme song of your life,

Rom. 11:34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?” 35 “Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?” 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.”

v.30 “He must increase, but I must decrease.”