

FBC Service January 7 2024 John 3:22-36 It's Never Easy to Let Go

The words we're focused on today are words spoken by John the Baptist who said:

Jesus must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:30

I've shopped in stores all over the world but have never seen a trinket or a bauble with these words on it. I've seen all types of bumper stickers on cars, from fish to "Honk if you love Jesus".

That's not to say there isn't something like that out there – but I've just not seen it.

I've never seen these words on a bumper sticker, engraved on a cup, but I have seen these words recently on a plaque beside a brother's home computer here in Petrolia. **It's very rare and I think I know why.**

In our world today we're taught from the cradle "you are special". **We're told on television shows "just be you"**. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries where the spotlight is on us. Every commercial on television is selling something that tells you, "YOU deserve this".

The concept that Jesus Christ must increase and we must decrease, is foreign to the thinking of many believers. **Yet it's the core of Christianity, the centre of our faith.**

The devil loves to whisper in Christians ears these words. "You know **YOU** have got other things **YOU** should be doing. Forget these words of John down and worry about them another day. After all, it's **YOU** that matters!"

The devil will do all he can to keep you from applying these powerful words to your life. Your phone will ring. A friend will drop by to visit. Someone will text you a smiley face. A child will stub its toe and cry. Your stomach will rumble. A bee will fly by your head.

To understand this wonderful statement, John 3:30, **{Jesus} must increase, but I must decrease**, we need to look at who was John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was – according to our Lord Jesus – the Greatest Prophet who ever lived. Jesus said of His cousin John in Matthew 11:11 ... *Among those that are born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.*

John had the greatest gift that God can give a man. He had the gift of knowing who he was, and who God is.

Heaven had given John the glorious duty of being Herald to the King of Kings. But now the King of Kings has come. John sent men to Jesus. **Now his crowds are growing smaller.** He had done as God gave him to do. John was not the Bridegroom, the Husband of the Church. This was Jesus' place.

As great as John was, and as great a number that came to him to be baptized, John knew that the very nature of His ministry was that he had to decrease. **Once the King has come, what need is there of the Herald.** John said of Jesus: **Quote John 3:30.**

We can begin with a simple question: What was John the Baptist thinking when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease"? I'm struck by the little word "must."

The lexicons tell us it means something like, “It’s necessary.”

The word was used in Matthew 16:21 when Jesus told his disciples that he “**must** go to Jerusalem” and offer himself on the cross and then be raised on the third day. Jesus must die! The word means something similar in this verse:

Jesus must increase. John the Baptist must decrease.

But what sort of “increase” is John talking about? Jesus was, is, and always will be the Son of God. He’s infinitely great, and his greatness fills every inch of space, from the tiniest particle to the farthest galaxy in the most distant corner of the universe.

When John the Baptist says, “He must increase,” he’s not speaking of the distinctive greatness of Jesus. **God cannot become greater than himself.** But the greatness of Jesus is not always seen on earth. Many deny him, attack him, insult him, and millions more ignore him.

He came to his own, and his own did not receive him (John 1:11). He came to his own people, and they rejected him. He came to the world he had made, and the world crucified him. He came to his own family, and many did not believe in him.

His greatness cannot increase, but the recognition of his greatness most certainly can. **Jesus must increase in his fame and in his influence.** He must increase as men and women from every nation follow him and confess him as Lord of their lives.

John the Baptist appears in the New Testament like a bright comet streaking across the sky. Coming out of the wilderness, he preaches a message of repentance, and vast crowds from across Israel come to hear him.

John was God’s man for that hour of history.

He denounced the religious professionals and called them to a baptism of repentance for their sins. Over time his fame spread, and a group of men began following him from place to place.

Then one day Jesus came to John, asking to be baptized. In that holy moment, the Father spoke from heaven, and a dove descended, representing the Holy Spirit coming in power on the Son of God.

Evidently John continued to preach and gather disciples while Jesus did the same thing. It was inevitable that questions would arise about the two competing movements. We read about it in John 3:25-26:

26 So they came to John and told him, “Rabbi, the one you testified about, and who was with you across the Jordan, is baptizing—and everyone is going to him.”

At moments like these, you find out the truth about yourself.

John was not interested in being the “top guy.” **He was interested in being the faithful guy!** He was willing to do whatever it was that God gave Him to do.

John was not concerned about the applause of men.

He didn't care whether other people remembered Him . . . his only concern and desire was for God to say, "Well Done, my good and faithful servant."

He is not there to exalt himself; he is there to effectively point to another.

He knows he's not the one who can save others. When Jesus received praise and honour it brought joy to John. His work was bearing fruit.

There's nothing a spiritual leader should desire more than to see someone **"get it,"** and grasp and hold more fully to the reality of God's mercy, love, and life changing grace.

John knew when it was time to get off the stage. He sums it up with these words.

He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

One of the most important lessons I've learned as a pastor is: it's not always about you. There are times when you need to let silence do its work, there are times when you need to let someone else lead, there are times when you need to let a group discuss things while you remain quiet.

There are times when you need to let someone share their hurt without trying to "fix it" or give advice. These are tough, but important lessons to learn.

It's hard to see your work eclipsed by another but that's what John had to do. He understood what his role was. **His job was to point people to Jesus and then get off the stage.**

In like manner, our job is to help the Kingdom of God to advance. But it cannot advance as long as we keep trying to turn the spotlight on ourselves.

There's good reason for us to get off the stage. Jesus is greater than anyone or anything else. Let's stop at that statement and hear it again: **Jesus is greater than anyone or anything else.** He and he alone should always be in the spotlight in our lives. Let's look at why.

The Bible says there's something better than the applause of the crowds.

There's something better than "being number one." That something, is pointing to, and honouring the Lord who alone is worthy of our worship. We must learn to desire to be faithful more than we desire to be noticed. **Our job is not to advance OUR cause but HIS.** We do that etc. John 3:30.

We spend way too much time ranking each other. We want to know who is more important, who carries the most influence. Even Christian magazines have issues devoted to the fastest growing churches in the world. It's all about status. We're missing the point!

It's easy for fame to go to your head. I'm reminded of Bill Gates' comment, **"Success is a lousy teacher. It makes smart people think they can do no wrong."** Far more people are ruined by success than by failure. Self-made men and women are some of the hardest to reach for Christ.

It's easy to understand what happened to John. He had been there first. For a few months, he had been the only one preaching and baptizing and calling the nation to repentance. Suddenly, here comes Jesus who is doing the same thing, and **"everyone is going to him."**

To find out John's attitude about all this, we can run the clock back to the earliest days of his ministry. Jesus had not yet taken centre stage, so the great question in Jerusalem was, **"Who is this man called John?"** Watch how the story plays out in John 1:19-23:

This was John's testimony when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"

John the Baptist knows who he is, and more importantly, he knows who he isn't.

He's not the Messiah.

He's not Elijah.

He's not the Prophet.

He's a voice for God. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

God raised up this man for this ministry, at this moment in history. John knows that, and because he knows it, he can be content with who he is, where he is, and what he's doing.

John knew his days were numbered.

Did he know he would end up with his head on a platter? No, he didn't know that because God had not revealed that to him.

Did he know he didn't have long to live? No, because God hadn't revealed that either.

On this day, John the Baptist had no inkling of what was to come. **But he saw clearly that the rising of Jesus meant his ministry would soon come to an end.**

Did he sense the coming doubts that would fill his mind that we read about in Matthew 11:1-6? That period of gloom happened after he ended up in jail, locked up for speaking the truth to Herod. There he languished for days, weeks, months.

Prison time is hard time, and if John gave in to his fears during those lonely days, at least we can say he's had lots of company across history. **Many a man or woman has doubted in the darkness what they believed in the light.**

I simply ask, when John made his statement, did he foresee his own doubt? The answer must be no.

What then, did John know? He knew his ministry was coming to an end. That essential as his job was, it was only for a little while. **His job came with an expiration date.** The moment had come for John the Baptist to exit stage right.

It's never easy to let go. **Life has its seasons.**

We all struggle to let go at times. No one likes to hear, "We don't need you anymore," because we all want to feel indispensable.

Most of us grasp and hold on tight when something we value is being taken from us.

So many of us go through life trying to control the uncontrollable, trying to mastermind all the circumstances, trying to make our plans work.

We hold tightly to the things we value—our career, our reputation, our happiness, our health, our children, our education, our wealth, our possessions, our mates. We even hold tightly to life itself.

But those things we hold so tightly never really belonged to us. **They always belonged to God.** He loaned them to us, and when the time comes, he will take them back again.

Happy are they who hold lightly what they value greatly.

John the Baptist understood something that often causes us to struggle.

He saw clearly that the major season of his life was ending.

He saw it. He accepted it. He didn't fight against it.

Every job has an expiration date.

Gone were the heady days when all Israel flocked to hear him preach in the Judean wilderness. Gone were the scathing sermons, denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Gone were the fantastic days when he and his men would baptize multitudes in the Jordan River.

How could he “decrease” so cheerfully? John himself gives us the answer:

He knew that everything he received came from God (John 3:27).

He knew he was the “best man”, but Jesus was the bridegroom (John 3:28-29).

If you know the source of your power, and if you know who you are, you don't complain when you must decrease. John wanted Jesus to increase in fame and followers. He wanted more people to follow Jesus even if that meant fewer people followed him.

Consider the morning star that appears in the night sky, heralding the coming sunrise. But when the sun rises, the morning star disappears because it has done its duty.

John was a bright star who faded away when the Son of God began to rise like sunlight in the morning.

Did John fail? Not at all. He succeeded in every way. So it is that we all will rise and fall during the course of a lifetime. God only requires that we be faithful like John was faithful.

Better to be forgotten because we did God's will than to be remembered because we didn't.

What are you struggling with today? Is there something you're holding on to so tightly that it almost makes your hands hurt? Is there something you're afraid to yield to God?

Whatever it is, you'll be a lot happier when you finally say, “Lord, Your will be done.”

No one had to tell John to let go. He knew the time had come.

We live in a “what have you done lately” kind of world. We all get weighed in the balances of life. Only the best among us can respond with the grace of a John the Baptist.

He embraced his “decrease” because of his bedrock faith in the sovereignty of God over the details of life. He knew he had been raised up “for such a time as this,” and when that time was over, he would slip out of the limelight.

His life came to a shocking end when Herod had him beheaded, but even that was part of God’s plan for his life. God used John’s death to convict Herod about the true identity of Jesus (Luke 9:7-9).

What a great man.

What a magnificent life.

What a model for us to follow.

John embraced his “decrease” as part of God’s will for him.

Here is the watchword for every pastor: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Here is the path forward for every Christian: “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John 3:30 is John the Baptist’s final public statement. Everything else he says happens during his imprisonment.

So if this is his final declaration, we can say, “What a tremendous way to wrap up your public ministry.”

No wonder Jesus said that among those born of woman, there has never been any one greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).

How blessed we would be, and how happy our churches would be, and how powerful our impact in the world would be, if we took John’s words as our own and say, “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*”

The happiest people are those who say, “I’ve decided to let go and let God take charge.”

When we come to the bottom line, we find that the message of John 3:30 is the same for all of us, no matter whether we’re “increasing” or “decreasing.”

If we want to see Jesus “increase in our lives and we “decrease, then our whole goal must be to make him first in all things.

Quote hymn, “Take my life” etc.

Give God the glory.

Hold on to that truth in the months to come. As we enter this new year, let John 3:30 be the one verse that we all apply to our lives.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”