

## Rejoicing in Decreasing – John 3:22-30

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Turn with me in your Bibles, if you would, to the book of John, chapter 3, where we'll be focusing on verses 22 through 30 today. As we continue moving through our harmony of the Gospels study, we're picking up shortly after Jesus' conversation by night with Nicodemus and his recent cleansing of the temple to the great humiliation of the corrupt Jewish religious leaders. Jesus had made quite an entrance in Jerusalem at this, the first Passover of his public ministry. Already he was making some enemies with his bold, truth-telling and his zeal for God's house, though a few, like Nicodemus, were seeing beyond their humiliation to recognize that God was at work and that Jesus was speaking truth from God Himself.

Today in our study we're going to learn from John the Baptist again as he responds to his disciples when they question what's been happening since Jesus came on the scene, and people began flocking to him instead of John. You see, John's disciples were experiencing a struggle that afflicts us all at various times in our lives. The struggle of comparing ourselves to and competing with other people and feeling threatened when we find ourselves and what we're doing paling in the comparison, causing what we've relied on to give us value and importance to be pulled out from under us. Have you ever been there? Do you ever find yourself trying to find your value in what you do, what your abilities are, what you own, or how successful you are in the eyes of others? Do you ever look at what God's accomplishing through other people and feel jealousy or discontentment that what you're doing isn't as impressive or glamorous?

Well if you struggle with these things, welcome to the human race. Boasting, comparing, and competing and trying to find our value by seeking the approval of others or impressing them with our accomplishments, possessions, good looks or great personality, is the natural tendency of every human being apart from Christ. As is so well stated by the writer of Ecclesiastes: ***Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor*** (Ecclesiastes 4:4a).

That's why capitalism works so well: it harnesses the power of selfish ambition. This is the way we all so naturally operate until God teaches us a better way through Christ. And that better way is beautifully presented for us today by John the Baptist.

## II. REPENTING FOR PREPARING (Verses 22 to 24)

Let's begin our study now with verses 22 to 24 of John chapter 3, which I've labeled in your notes: *Repenting for Preparing*. Beginning in verse 22:

***22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison).***

Here in these first verses, we find that Jesus and his disciples had now left Jerusalem and gone into the surrounding rural areas, where they were carrying on a baptizing ministry simultaneously with John the Baptist – though in a different location. Interestingly, we find out in John chapter 4 that Jesus wasn't actually the one doing the baptizing, but rather his disciples were doing it. And we need to remember that this was not yet full baptism into Christ as has been practiced since Christ ascended back into heaven and sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This was still John's baptism which was focused on preparing people for the full, good-news message of Christ and his upcoming work on the cross.

This preparation for Christ was done by calling all people to acknowledge and repent of their sin so they could be forgiven for it. Until they would do that they would not understand and recognize their desperate need for the Savior, as happened with most of the Pharisees who refused to be baptized by John. Why did those Pharisees refuse John's baptism?...Because John only baptized people who repented of sin. There would be no forgiveness without repentance, and there would be no salvation through Christ without repentance. People must acknowledge their sin and desire to turn away from it before they can receive Christ's message of salvation. Repenting prepares the way. It's not something that can be skipped or left out. And even when we've come to new life in Christ, it's still the way to forgiveness and healing whenever we sin.

Did you know that if you're stuck in sin today...If you've done something you know is wrong and your relationship with God is hindered...I can tell you with absolute certainty there's always only way you can begin to find your way out. There's always one thing you must do first: Repent! You'll stay stuck and chained up until you do that one thing. Own up to what you've done and tell God you're ready to turn away from it. There's no other way out. I promise! That's the key that opens the door so Christ can walk you through to healing and forgiveness. You can't open a locked and padlocked door without the key. And you're going to need to open that door if you want to break free and learn the better way of living life that John's about to share with his disciples.

### III. REJOICING IN DECREASING (Verses 25 to 30)

Let's move on now to verses 25 to 30, which I've labeled in your notes: *Rejoicing in Decreasing*. Picking up in verse 25:

***25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given 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 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."***

So after revealing that both Jesus and John the Baptist were carrying on baptizing ministries at the same time, the Apostle John tells us that this situation was troubling to some of John the Baptist's disciples. In the context of a discussion with a Jewish person about purification or ceremonial washing – most certainly related to the baptisms they were performing and probably involving the fact that Jesus was doing the same thing in another location – John the Baptist's disciples came to him with their troubled thoughts.

Up until recently John the Baptist had been the focal point of the spiritual awakening that was happening in Israel. People were flocking to John and many

disciples had attached themselves to him and were expecting that what God was doing would continue centering around him. He was a one-of-a-kind, godly man; a mentor who had loved them and shared his life with them. And though John had so recently told his disciples that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and that John was NOT the Christ, still his disciples were struggling to detach themselves from the one who had loved them so deeply, in order to fully follow the One to whom John's entire ministry pointed.

You see, their hopes and dreams had all been built around John. They were John-followers and instead of shifting their focus to the true Savior of the world, they were feeling threatened by Jesus and his ministry and falling into the worldly temptation to compare and compete. *Look, they said to John, he's taken over what we started and now everybody's going to him to be baptized! He's stolen our show!* They'd gotten so fixated on John and so enamored with their personal involvement in what God was doing through him, that they missed the main point John had been teaching them throughout his entire ministry: His ministry was not about himself, but about preparing the way for someone else much greater...the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

Well, John, always the patient teacher of his disciples, responded to their worldly focus on comparing and competing, by providing them with *a universal and life-changing truth, a reminder* of what he'd already told them, *an illustration* to help them understand, and *an application* to the current situation. First, he shared with them a universal and life-changing truth. A truth, that if they would just believe, would free them forever from the boasting, comparing and competing game. That truth was this: ***A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.*** One more time: ***A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.***

Do you know what that means? Any basis for boasting about ourselves, our talents, our abilities, our possessions, our accomplishments, is gone forever. There is not one thing in our lives or accomplishments that we can legitimately claim credit for. We can falsely claim credit as people do every day, but in reality it's a flat-out lie. Our entire existence, our life, our breath, our ability to walk and talk and breathe and think, our talents and abilities and possessions, all originate in God's continuous and gracious gifting to us. None of it would be ours if God hadn't given it to us. We wouldn't even be alive right now if God hadn't created

us and wasn't holding all things together right now. And, of course, this is one of the reasons why it's such a serious thing to reject God and live as if he doesn't exist and has no authority over us or any claim to expect our grateful worship and thanksgiving for all he's constantly doing for us and giving to us.

You see, John wanted to share with his disciples this simple truth that still has the power for us today to free us from the boasting, comparing and competing game. All I have and all my giftings and the job I've been given to do have been graciously given to me by God and, as such, provide me with no basis for claiming credit for them, for finding my value in them, or for exalting myself because of them. I only have a basis for glorifying and praising God and resting at peace with the person he's created me to be and the mission he's given me personally to accomplish by his power. My incredible value in God's eyes is fixed forever by him and not determined by my successes or failures, by my talents and abilities, by my possessions or my job, or anything else besides his great love for me most beautifully expressed in what he did for me at the cross.

Well, secondly, John shared with his disciples a reminder of something he had already clearly told them, but which they had ignored or missed because they were so focused on John himself and the success of his ministry. He said, ***"You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'"*** In other words, *how many times have I told you that I'm not the One? This is not about me. Do you hear the words coming out of my mouth? My entire ministry and mission has been about preparing the way for the One all Israel has been waiting for...the Messiah. Wake up. Get your eyes off me. I'm just the messenger.*

This is a hard one to get through to us because we're born into this life thinking, "It's all about me," and we so very naturally continue down that road as move through life. It's called the sin nature. We're a lot like one of Mindy's aunts who joked about picking up the book, "The Purpose Driven Life," reading the first line which said, "This is not about you," and responding, "Then I'm not interested," and closing the book. Getting to the point where we're OK with it not being about us, but about Jesus, is a huge hurdle that only God can bring us over without a huge wipeout. And yet, that's what God had done in John the Baptist's life and what he can also do in ours. And when he does, it brings great freedom and a much different way of living life.

Thirdly, to help them understand this, John provided his disciples with a wedding illustration. He said to them: ***“The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice.”*** How many of you have been the best man or the maid of honor at a wedding? Were you the focal point of the wedding? Would you have been considered a good best man or maid of honor if you became the focal point of the wedding and it all became about you? Obviously not! The job of the best man or the maid of honor is to serve the bridegroom and the bride and help make their day special and put the focus on them.

Now in Jewish weddings, the “friend of the bridegroom,” the *shoshben*, was roughly equivalent to today’s “best man,” though his responsibilities were much more extensive. “According to Jewish custom, the groom’s closest friend was chosen as *shoshben* and would make all the necessary wedding arrangements.” It might be quite a bit harder to find a best man today if he were expected to make all the wedding arrangements, don’t you think?! And talk about high pressure! But in the Jewish wedding, this was what the friend of the bridegroom was expected to do, and when he finally had everything set-up and ready to go, he would eagerly wait and listen for the groom’s arrival and would rejoice when he finally heard his voice (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*).

John’s point here was that he was not the bridegroom and his disciples needed to stop acting like he was. Instead John was just the close friend who was preparing everything for the bridegroom’s arrival and was overjoyed when he finally arrived. John was a good best man and was not interested in stealing the show from the bridegroom or making the wedding day about himself. He was content in the role the bridegroom had given him and was not one bit interested in being the bridegroom or being upset that the wedding day wasn’t about him or that people had come to see the bridegroom and not the *shoshben*. Now John needed his disciples to get on the same page and view the big picture so they could understand that what they were doing was like being at a wedding feast and trying to put all the attention on the best man.

To bring all of this home for his disciples, John, finally, applied what he had already said to the current situation. He did this by sharing with them the powerful result in his own life of being content and at peace with the gifts God had given him and the mission God had called him to accomplish. Having shared

the life-changing truth that freed him from comparing and competing; having reminded them of the truth that he was not the Christ; and having illustrated his role to be that of the friend of the bridegroom; he finally showed them how it all applied to their concerns about people flocking to Jesus instead of John. He said: ***Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.*** In other words: *I've fulfilled my God-appointed role as the friend of the bridegroom and having seen the bridegroom arrive at the wedding feast I've prepared for him, my joy is running over. And as is meant to happen at every wedding, the bridegroom and the bride take center stage now and I'm just in the background, supporting and celebrating and rejoicing for my good friend on his wedding day.*

Like John the Baptist, can you honestly say this today: *My value and worth is not found in being the center of attention and having everybody look at me and affirm how great I am. I'm totally content and at peace with who God has made me to be and the role he's given me to fulfill, and in that reality I'm free to happily fade into the background...decreasing so that the bridegroom, Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Savior, the One whose bride will be the collective people of God, the Church, can increase and receive all the glory and honor and attention he alone deserves.*

Imagine how powerful it would be if all of God's people would operate under this life-changing approach to life and ministry shared with us by John the Baptist, where selfish ambition and endless efforts to find our value in our accomplishments and our job assignments and our abilities, fades away to be replaced with contented faithful service to the bridegroom by friends who have been deeply loved by him and find their joy and purpose in making him the center of attention.

#### **IV. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION**

Where are you today with the comparing and competing game? Are you still trying to find your value in how you compare with others? Are you relying on your talents and abilities or your successes and accomplishments or your wealth and your possessions to prove your value to yourself and others? Does your job or your position or even the ministry God has called you to do define who you are, to the point where you would feel worthless without it or where you would feel threatened if someone else seemed to be doing it better?

These are the games we so easily play in life. Everyone around us is playing them and it feels so natural to play right along. But have you noticed that there's no way to win these games? Oh we might do well for a while. The over-achievers might feel pretty good about themselves when they look around. But even when we appear to be winning and we compare well to most people in the world, inside there's still a great emptiness and a haunting sense that it's all wasted effort...a striving after the wind. We feel like a hamster on wheel... running, running, running, but never getting anywhere. And that's because we're living in an illusion...a lie offered up by the father of lies. We're taking credit for gifts and abilities God has given us, we're stealing the glory he deserves, we're sacrificing people and God's priorities on the altar of our selfish ambition, and we're making ourselves the center of attention at someone else's wedding.

But as John shared with his disciples in our passage today, there's a much better way. It starts just as all progress does in God's kingdom, *with repentance*...with honestly admitting to God that we've been living for ourselves and for our own glory...that we've been taking credit for the gifts that he's given to us...that we're tired and worn out from trying to find or prove our value and worth in these dead-end ways. And in that repentance a cry out to God that he would open our eyes and lead us into his better way of living...that he would give us confidence and assurance that our great value to him is fixed and established forever. We don't ever need to earn it or prove it to ourselves or others. We can let those chains fall to the ground for good.

And as God hears and answers that prayer prayed from the heart of true repentance, he's going to shift our focus from ourselves and our own glory and our own selfish ambition, to Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, and that beautiful wedding day to come when the church, the people of God from all tribes, tongues, and people groups, and from every time period of history, including you and I, will be his glorious bride, spotless and blameless and dressed in Christ's righteousness. This is the certain future that awaits all of us who have come to true repentance and faith in Christ and his work on the cross. But even now, in this life on earth as we wait for that beautiful wedding day, God will be working to make us like the John the Baptist here on earth, secure and at peace with the gifts he's given us and surrendered with contentment to the mission, however humble, he intends for us to accomplish by the power of his Spirit within us.

Like John the Baptist, every one of us has a mission...good works God has prepared for each of us to walk in. Let's accept that mission with contentment and a refusal to compare our mission with anyone else's. Let's remember that "***a person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.***" God gives us everything we have, including our spiritual gifts and our specific mission assignments. He knows best and does not value us based on the impressiveness of our giftings or a human assessment of the importance of our mission. Let's believe that today and let God lead us to give up the competing and comparing game for good, replacing it with cooperation and encouragement so that each member of the body of Christ can walk into the good works God has prepared for them; not for their own glory, but for the glory of the bridegroom. This is the way of God's kingdom!

And finally, let's never be people-followers. We're followers of Christ. Let's love those whom God's servants whom he has placed in leadership over us, but let's never get so enamored with them that we end up following them instead of Christ. We so easily get distracted with the gifts instead of the Giver, don't we? And we get so attached to those through whom Christ's love has flowed to us that even when they get off track or start letting God's gifts to them go to their head, we follow them right off the cliff. Or when they hurt us or offend us or make mistakes, we let that drive us away from Christ and his church. Jesus is the only one worthy of our worship and our unwavering allegiance and we need to keep our eyes fixed on him and our hearts following him no matter what.

And for those of us in leadership: may we be like the John the Baptist, remembering always that our gifts and our mission are given to us by God and for the glory of Christ, not ourselves. May we always be ready to decrease so he can increase. And may we be ready to happily step aside when the time is right and God is reassigning us elsewhere and raising up someone else to take over the reins, secure in our incredible value to God apart from what we do, accomplish, own or lead.