

John 3:22-36

Exalting Christ

Humility is a virtue that we all agree is good. But it is rarely seen. True humility is the opposite of self-righteous pride. One man in whom that quality was exemplified was John the Baptist. He had acquired a great deal of popularity because of his preaching.

In Luke 3:7 we are told that multitudes of people went to see and hear John. We read in Mark 3:5 that people came from "Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan." In Mark 6:20 we learn that even Herod, the tetrarch of galilee heard John gladly and did many good things as a result. But that ended when the Baptist reproved Herod for living with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Herod threw John in prison and then had him beheaded at the request of Herodias and her daughter.

Here at the end of John chapter three is the last time we will read about the Baptist in the gospel of John. But his godly humility shines brightly. Our story, though begins with a note of tension. The tension arose because there were two different groups baptizing people. The first group was composed of the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. The second group was John the Baptist and his disciples.

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. ²⁴ For John had not yet been thrown into prison.
(John 3:22-24)

So two groups were doing the same thing, baptizing people. The only difference according to John 4:2 was that Jesus did not personally baptize anyone. But trouble was brewing, because John's ministry was being surpassed by Christ's ministry. And John's disciples became jealous for John. The tension finally boiled over with a question about purification.

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!"

(John 3:25, 26)

We do not have the question about purification spelled out for us. But it would seem to be this: "How come there are now two groups baptizing? Is one baptism better than the other? Who gets you cleaner, John or Jesus?" And in the phrase, "behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him!" we have a sense of shock. How dare Jesus move in on John's ministry!

The Baptist's star was being eclipsed. He could have very easily bought into the jealousy and resentment and tried to reassert himself. But he did not. He was true to God and his calling. The apostle Paul faced a similar situation when he was under house arrest in Rome. While the apostle was under house arrest people began to preach about Christ. Some were doing so, because they were inspired by Paul's courage. But others to take advantage of Paul to promote themselves. Let's read about this in Philippians.

But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.

¹⁸ What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes,

and will rejoice.
(Philippians 1:12-18)

The apostle Paul was not discouraged or made jealous by the fact that others were preaching about Christ. Some were preaching out of love for Christ and for Paul. Others were preaching, because they were envious of Paul's authority as an apostle and they selfishly tried to steal his thunder. But Paul, like John the Baptist had that quality of true humility and was glad that Christ was being preached. The Baptist tried to comfort the hearts of his disciples by telling them that he has a ministry from God, but so too does the Lord Jesus Christ.

John answered and said,
"A man can receive nothing
unless it has been given to
him from heaven.
(John 3:27)

Here again, is the Hebrew idiom of something or someone coming down from heaven, meaning given by God. Both the Baptist and Jesus Christ were endowed by God for their specific calling and work. And so too are you and I. Just as John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were called by God to serve in different ways. Each of us is gifted by God to serve the church and to reach the world for Christ in a unique way. This fact should sweep away the possibility of rivalry and jealousy. This is revealed to us in Romans 12.

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.
(Romans 12:3)

We are to have sound biblical thinking on who we are and what we do in the church. Our measure of faith is the divine ability to serve by means of your gift or gifts.

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.
(Romans 12: 4, 5)

Just as all the various parts of our physical body have a function to keep us healthy, so we are all gifted in a unique way for the benefit of the whole church.

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.
(Romans 12:6-8)

The idea behind the word “ministry” is service in any capacity, to help in any way possible. Don’t be jealous that you do not have someone else’s gift. Just get busy being a blessing to others.

In the church at Corinth there was a lot of disunity and jealousy and false pride as believers either bragged about their spiritual gift or denigrated others or were jealous of someone else. And the apostle Paul wrote and told them not to be puffed up with false pride. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive *it*, why do you boast as if you had not received *it*?” That’s exactly what John the Baptist said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.”

All of us have our gift of God for the blessing of the church. Use it for God’s glory and don’t gloat over it. There is a section in 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul uses the image of the human body and wrote, “And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”¹ We are all needed to give and serve and love and comfort and encourage and pray for one another. And it is God who gifts us knowing what is best for us and what will bless others the most and exalt Christ. The question is not, “Why don’t I have what she has” but “Am I doing what God wants me to do? John the Baptist knew his calling and he knew what his cousin was called to do.

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,’

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:21

but, 'I have been sent before Him.'
(John 3:27, 28)

There was no sense of rivalry or jealousy in John. John stayed faithful to his divine assignment to point others to Christ.

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)

John had described Jesus in different ways, the Lamb of God, the Son of God and the Christ. And now reaching back into Old Testament metaphor and prophecy he calls Jesus the Groom. John was the friend of the Groom as we would say today, the best man. In ancient Israel it was the friend of the groom who planned the wedding and then actually handed the bride to the groom. John was completing what God called him to do and he was full of joy! He brought the bride to the groom and he was delighted.

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

John's ministry was to point to Christ and exalt him. When we do our ministry we point to Christ and exalt him. True humility does not come from abasing yourself it comes from placing Christ in his proper place of preeminence. The we love and serve others not to make ourselves great, but to show how great Jesus Christ is. John has just announced his great recession. The whole of the old covenant is coming to an end.

Now, one of the difficulties in John's gospel is that it is not always easy to know when the apostle is speaking or someone else. But the way in which the next six verses are written, it is my belief that the Baptist's comments end in verse 30 and the apostle's comments begin in verse 31.

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.
(John 3:31)

Here again we have the Hebrew idiom of coming from heaven. This does not mean that Jesus was in heaven before his birth. It means that Jesus was ordained by God for his ministry. He did not speak worldly wisdom, but the Word of God.

And what He has seen and heard,
that He testifies; and no one receives
His testimony.
(John 3:32)

Jesus Christ fully revealed all that God had told him. When he spoke about God and the kingdom of God it was not a fairy tale. It wasn't his opinion. It was the truth—the whole truth. Jesus told us exactly what he had seen and heard. And by the way, that is our job too. We are not called to speculate about the things of God, but we are called to say and to do what we learn from the Word of God.

And what is interesting here is that when John wrote that Jesus Christ “testifies” he put the verb in the present tense. Jesus still speaks to us, first and foremost through the written Word of God. In Ephesians 4:21 we read, “if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus.” The Bible is not something dead or dated. It is alive and powerful and refreshes, heals and equips our lives

And when John states that “no one receives” Christ's testimony what we have here is hyperbole. This is because in verse 33 we are told that there are people who do believe Jesus Christ. But we can never forget that there is a spiritual battle raging around us. We just learned from John 3 that there are people who love darkness more than truth.

He who has received His testimony
has certified that God is true.
(John 3:33)

When we accept what Christ said we affirm that God is true and at work in our hearts.

For He whom God has sent speaks
the words of God, for God does
not give the Spirit by measure.
(John 3:34)

Up to this point in the history of salvation those sent by God had the Spirit of God, but only in part. But Jesus had the Spirit in full measure and it enabled

him to know and understand the *Logos*, God's will. And it enables him to obey it and to delight in it. It was prophesied of Christ in Isaiah 11:2,

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and might,
The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

And we have the same measure of the Spirit, because in John 1:16 we are told "that of His [Christ's] fullness we have all received. Therefore we can understand God's will and delight in it to obey it.

The Father loves the Son, and
has given all things into His hand.
(John 3:35)

This refers to Jesus Christ as the agent of God. All authority in heaven and earth has been granted to Christ.² In the Old Testament there were times when angels and prophets spoke God's Word in the first person grammatically. They said things like, "I am Yahweh and I will do such and such." When someone acted as God's agent it was as if God was saying or doing something.

By not understanding the concept of an agent, people have wrongly proposed that God was an angel or that Jesus is the God/Man. He is not. In John 5:30 he tells us "I can of Myself do nothing." God was at work in Christ and has granted him to have all authority and power. But we are also told in 1 Corinthians 15:28 that a day is coming when the Lord Jesus will give all the power and authority back to God that God "may be all in all." Finally,

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)

Here again as in John 3:16 is the decision everyone must make. Do I choose life or death? In Deuteronomy 30, Moses said, "I have set before you today life and good and death and evil...therefore choose life."³ Let us choose life and exalt Christ.

² Matthew 28:18

³ Deuteronomy 30: 15, 19

