

Humility Is the First Law of Ministry

Scripture: John 3:22-30

Code: 43-18

Now turn in your Bible to John chapter 3, John chapter 3, John chapter 3. We admit that we have been much assaulted by all of the media attention in Rome, and this text in John 3 speaks to the very things we have been seeing. We have been watching these incredible parades of wealth and wardrobe—garbed in outlandish clothing are these cardinals and priests and popes—and elevation beyond anything else in the world.

How do we react to that? How do we respond to that? In the text before us, it so happens that John the Baptist speaks to that very issue. In verse 30 of the text, and we're looking at John 3:22 to 35, we'll spend a couple of weeks on it. But in the section 22 to 36, I want you to go down to verse 30 and there you read these words uttered by John the Baptist: "He"...meaning Christ..."must increase, but I must decrease." "He must increase, but I must decrease." That is an axiom. That is an aphorism—that's a great old word. That's an aphorism, meaning an adage, an axiom, a canon, a dictum, an epithet, a proverb, a truism. And, in fact, that is the first law of ministry; that is *the* first law of ministry: He must increase; I must decrease. Humility is the first law of ministry—humility, humility.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says "Who is Apollos? Who is Paul? No one. Christ is everything." In 2 Corinthians he says, "We are earthen vessels, clay pots, while Jesus Christ is the glory of God shining." In writing to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul says, "When I came to you, brethren, I didn't come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God, for I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling and my message, and my preaching, were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of the spirit and of power so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." Paul preached Christ, made much of Christ, and made nothing of himself.

And in that wonderful passage in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says in verse 5, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus' sake." The first law of ministry is humility. This axiom expresses that. He must increase, but I must decrease.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, the apostle Paul says, "Appreciate those that are over you in the Lord." It says, "Love them, appreciate them." Yes, love them; yes. Give them glory—no. Exalt them—no. First Peter, Peter writes in chapter 5 instruction to pastors. He says this: "Clothe yourselves with humility, 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." Again, humility is the first law of ministry. All faithful, all honorable ministers make much of Christ and nothing of themselves.

This is precisely what we see in this passage. Let me read you verses 22 to 30. "After these things, Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim because there was much water there and people were coming and were being baptized, for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. 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 answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are My witnesses that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent ahead of Him. 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. So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Any so-called minister, any so-called minister who exalts his own office and his own position into that of a priest, a mediator, is perverted in his claims. There is only one High Priest and one Mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus. Any so-called minister who declares himself an authority over the church is a deceiver and a liar. Any so-called minister who says he exercises power over the church is a deceiver and an antichrist. Any minister who views himself as anything more than a simple Christian equal to every other Christian has corrupted himself. Any so-called minister who claims to be the head of the church, dishonors the Son of God to whom that title belongs exclusively. Any so-called minister who claims the name Holy Father dishonors the true Father/God to whom that title belongs exclusively, and thus did Jesus say, "Call no man Father." Any so-called minister who takes the title vicar, or replacement for Christ, dishonors the Holy Spirit who is in the world today, and who possesses truly that title exclusively. Any professing Christians who treat a so-called pastor or minister or a priest as if he were anything more than any other believer, dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ to whom all honor belongs totally and exclusively.

All human ministers are like night stars, stars who appear in the darkness—their flickering light, not enough to light the world. They fade out as the sun rises. Ministers are like those night stars who fade out of sight as the sun arises. As churches defect, as churches fall into apostasy, they think less of Christ and they make more of their ministers. So they keep elevating and elevating and elevating and elevating, until it becomes bizarre. The resplendent decorations, foolish costumes, hats, accoutrements, are inverse to the diminishing of the glory of Christ. As the sun goes out, the stars appear in the darkness. Not enough to dispel the darkness. To the decaying, corrupt church the sun has gone out and the stars have ascended into the blackness of the sky. In a truly holy church, true church, the church makes little of the ministers and much of Christ. And the Son Himself shines so fully and so brightly in a starless sky that His glory fills everything.

J.C. Ryle said, quote: "Every faithful minister must be content to be less thought of by his believing hearers, in proportion as they grow in knowledge and faith and seek Christ Himself more clearly." The more you see of Christ, the less you see of the minister. "He must increase, I must decrease." How horrible if someone were to say, "I came looking for Jesus, but John MacArthur got in the way."

John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived. Therefore, he was the greatest servant of God who had ever lived, the greatest prophet who had ever lived. Did you get that? The greatest man who had ever lived. What was his clothing like? Camel's hair and a leather belt. What was his diet like? Locusts and wild honey, anything he could find. He saw himself at best as the last night star in a sky that had only one. He was the last prophet. There hadn't been a prophet in 400 years; there were no other stars in the sky. Israel was in darkness. One star and he faded out as the Son of righteousness arose. He sought to be hidden. His joy was in being hidden. It was to bring Christ in view that he lived and served.

Think of it, the greatest man who had ever lived in the history of the world, the most privileged prophet, the most popular preacher in centuries, drawing massive crowds, the most powerful messenger bringing the greatest message the world had ever heard—the Messiah is here and here He stands. The ultimate preacher ever. And the lesson he teaches us is how important it is that he fade away and Christ become everything. He had national popularity. All Jerusalem and Judea went out to see him. The Son of God was living in obscurity up in Nazareth, 30 years. He finally appeared; He was baptized by John. John sent a few of his followers to follow Jesus, and Jesus began to gather a few. Went to Galilee; gathered a few more. Had this little band of men, but He stilled remained in obscurity.

And then, as recorded in John 2, He came to Jerusalem on that Passover and He went into the Temple, still in obscurity. And then He broke that obscurity and ended that anonymity when He took a whip and assaulted the Temple and threw everybody out, creating a massive, unparalleled sensation. But He still had only a few disciples.

And then He began to do miracles. Then He began to cast demons out and He began to heal people of all sicknesses. And the crowds began to come to Him 'cause John didn't do any miracles. John the Baptist never did a miracle. And there were people who were demon-possessed, and there were people who were ill, obviously. And they knew that Jesus could deal with that, and so based on His miracle power, He began to draw and no one had ever taught like He had. No one had ever spoken like He had, and His teaching attracted people. And then, of course, John was telling the people, "There He is," chapter 1, verse 29; chapter 1, verse 36, "Behold the Lamb of God," "behold the Lamb of God." And He pointed to Christ and He is saying, "Go follow Him, go follow Him." Who are you, John? Who are you? "I'm just a voice crying in the wilderness. I'm just getting the road ready for the Messiah. The Messiah's here. Follow Him."

So you have John telling people to go after the Messiah. The Messiah attracting them with His teaching and His miracles. And John's beginning to fade. But their ministries overlap. Their ministries overlap for a while, of necessity, because there's a transition going on here. And it's in this context, in this time of transition, that what John the apostle records here takes place. And it's a wonderfully urgent text for anyone in ministry, because here you have the minister being diminished, fading away, and Christ being exalted.

This is a lesson for all of us. This is *the* most basic law of ministry. So John's ministry overlaps with Jesus, probably overlapped for as much as six months or so, maybe a little less. It had to be that way because he was the one introducing Jesus. So he was still ministering and preaching repentance, and preaching that the Messiah had come and telling them who He was and baptizing those who repented. And Jesus began to do that as well. Preach repentance, preach the kingdom, declare Himself the Messiah, and baptize people. The ministries were overlapping.

This fomented a problem. It was a problem very human. John's disciples began to feel jealous. John didn't; there's no rivalry with John. But his disciples did.

I remember reading an article many, many years ago in a magazine. Somebody was...a non-believer was writing about the offense of so many Christians and he made the comment, one line, "I'm certain Jesus had more class than most of His agents, most of His representatives." Well, that would be

true. But it can happen even in a human sense that sometimes those who represent a man don't rightly represent Him. And that was the case with John's disciples. As the sun rises and the star begins to fade, we see an amazing example of humility, of the greatest minister who had ever lived. His humility is magnificent.

Let's look at the setting, verse 22, pick up the story. "After these things," meaning after the things described in chapter 2, verse 13 through 3:21. Of course you know what that is. He came to Jerusalem, went to the Temple, attacked the Temple. And after that the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Him, we went through the whole discourse with Nicodemus from chapter 3, verse 1 to 21. So after the occasion in the Temple when He assaulted the Temple, talked with Nicodemus, did some miracles, convinced some people that He was sent from God, as chapter 2 says at the very end, after those things...Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, into the land, operative word "land." They went out of town, that's what it means. They went into the countryside. And they went into the countryside, leaving Jerusalem for two reasons. There He was spending time with them. Based upon what it says in chapter 4, verse 35, we think this is up to six months. This is very important because we don't have any information about what was going on in that six months, but we do know that He was spending time with His disciples. This is the preliminary, very early training of His followers, a prolonged period of time. At the same time, it's as He was baptizing, which means that He was doing the baptism of repentance, the same kind of baptism that John was doing, which was a kind of an Old Testament, symbolic washing of the outside to demonstrate a desire to be washed on the inside to get ready for Messiah's arrival and kingdom. So Jesus is beginning to do essentially what John is doing. John came preaching the kingdom, preaching Christ, preaching repentance, baptizing people who repented, and Jesus came doing exactly the same thing. So you have this overlap, and it's going on for a number of months.

We see that in verse 23 with one important note. John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. You need much water to baptize people the right way. You need enough to put them under. That was an accommodating place for John, which means there were still a lot of people coming to John. And it was in...the location is called Aenon, near Salim. We don't exactly know where that is. There are two possibilities. It could be near Shechem, or it could be near Bethshean—both fascinating biblical places, Old Testament places. You can even see them today. Especially Bethshean is an amazing place where Saul was executed. But both of them are in Samaria. That's the interesting thing, both are in Samaria. So what it tells us is, John went north. As soon as Jesus went into the regions around Jerusalem and Judea and began to do His ministry, John went somewhere else. There was no competition in him. He went north into Samaria. He left Judea for Jesus. This is the first act of a humble man who leaves the very location of his success and goes somewhere else to make room for someone else. So he's doing his ministry of preaching, repentance, baptizing and paralleling the ministry of Jesus. Neither of them is doing Christian baptism, as such. That doesn't come into place until Acts 2, verse 41, after the death and resurrection of Christ, which Christian baptism depicts—buried with Him in baptism and raised in new life. So the two are overlapping ministries. They're going on simultaneously.

I just would make one note. In verse 22, He was spending time with them and baptizing. Go over to chapter 4, verse 1. "Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John." So now we get a footnote. More people are going to Jesus now, than have been going to John. Oh, by the way, verse 2, "Although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were." He was baptizing in the sense that He was providing the baptism. He was calling people to baptism, but He was having His disciples do it—obvious reason, right? Who

were you baptized by? Oh, personally I was baptized by Jesus, who were you baptized by? That would just feed human pride. That's 1 Corinthians 1 where Paul says, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius" because that just creates problems. So Jesus could pass off the baptizing, not the preaching; the disciples were too new. Not the teaching; they were too untrained, even after some months. But he could let them do the baptizing and that's what happened. But the note I want you to see is in verse 1, that Jesus' popularity was increasing and John was fading. And apparently John's disciples began to worry about the implications of this on the one they loved. But let's pick up verse 24 where we see that. It says, "For John had not yet been thrown into prison." "For John had not yet been thrown into prison." Why is that in there? That's really an important statement. You say, "But it's obvious. It just said he was baptizing." So we get it. He wasn't in prison; he was out baptizing.

Why is that statement there? Here is the answer: because in Matthew and Mark, John's imprisonment is recorded right after Jesus' baptism by John. If you read Matthew and Mark, you read John baptizes Jesus and, boom, John's in prison. And by the way, people have been reading those gospels for thirty-plus years by the time John writes. So John wants to make the record of history correct, and so he just pushes apart the baptism of Jesus and the imprisonment of John the Baptist and drops this section in. This is in the chronological flow where it belongs.

And by the way, that's the benefit of reading that new book *One Perfect Life*, all that's done for you through the entire story of Jesus. So you read it as it unfolded chronologically.

It is in those months between the baptism of Jesus and the imprisonment of John that the overlap of their ministry goes on. People are shifting from John to Jesus because John is sending them and because Jesus does miracles. So it's in this context, verse 25, that we come to the issue—"arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification." Purification refers to the baptism. Baptism was symbolic of repentance and purification. So they started having a discussion with a Jew. We can assume this. This is a Jew, a fellow Jew who somehow is questioning the distinction between what Jesus was doing and what John is doing. That's what precipitates the issue. I think maybe this man is a disciple of Christ, and he comes across the disciples of John. And this discussion begins about who is supreme, who is preeminent, whose baptism is most important, who is greater. Did John the Baptist's disciples not get the message? He pointed to Christ in chapter 1, he says over and over, "I am not the Christ," "I am not the Christ." In fact, he says that all the time—"I'm not the Christ." John the apostle says he's not the Light; he came to give testimony to the Light. John is happy to say, "I'm not the Christ" when the leaders come and say, "Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you that prophet?" "No, I'm not; I'm just the voice crying in the wilderness."

They should have known, but they had a hard time with this. When John is finally imprisoned—you can read about it in Matthew 11—his disciples still are having a hard time shifting to Christ. So John sends them to go to Christ and ask Him if He is not the Messiah. And they do. Chapter 11, they go to Jesus and He says, "Well, look, people are healed, the blind see, the deaf hear, the gospel is preached to the poor. What else you need by way of proof?

So they're holding on to John, so they get in this discussion. And they're fighting for the superiority of John over Jesus. So they came to John. They said to Him, "Rabbi, He"...Notice the absence of the name Jesus?... "He who was with you beyond the Jordan." You have to say all that because they don't want to say Jesus; that's how jealous he talks. "To whom you testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." And that is what's called a jealous exaggeration. This is just envy. They

don't even want to say His name. They're zealous and jealous for John the Baptist, filled with dissatisfaction. So they come complaining to John.

Strange attitude, contrary to everything John had told them. What's his answer? How does he feel about the masses shifting to Christ? How does he feel about the Son rising and His glory filling everything so that the one star in the sky fades away? How does He feel about that?

Well, this is what He says in verse 27, "John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.'" Wow, that sort of settles it, doesn't it, with regard to ministry. It's like John 15:5, "Without Me, you can do nothing." Gifts, positions, ministries in God's kingdom rest completely on God's free grace, God's sovereign call, privilege, opportunity.

I love what the apostle Paul says about this. He understands this so well. Second Corinthians 4, "Since we have this ministry as we received mercy." Ministry is a mercy. I've said that through the years so many times. Ministry is a mercy. What is a mercy? Something you don't earn, something you don't deserve, something you are given even though you're unworthy. Paul says to Timothy, reminding Timothy: "I was a blasphemer, I was injurious, I was a murderer, but the Lord counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry and He showed me mercy." You don't earn it. You don't rise to the top because you're holier than everybody else. It's a mercy.

In the writing to the Colossians, that wonderful first chapter of Colossians, Paul talks a lot about ministry, but this is one of my favorite verses. Verse 25, Colossians 1, "I was made a minister according to the stewardship of God." "I was made a minister according to the stewardship of God," stewardship meaning a responsibility, a deposit, an accountability. The principle is very clear. A man receives nothing when it comes to a call, when it comes to the privilege of ministry, when it comes to the power for ministry, when it comes to the fruit of ministry, except it's given to him from heaven. That would be true even of Christ. Look at verse 35, "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand." Even what Christ had was given to Him by the Father.

In 1 Corinthians 4 and verse 7, "For who regards you as superior," Paul asks, "what do you have that you did not receive? And if you didn't receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" That is so foundational.

So the principle is very clear. Ministry is a mercy that flows to an unworthy Christian based upon God's sovereign grace. You can't earn it. You can't gain it. You can't achieve it. But oh, by the way, you can forfeit it. You can be disqualified. That's John's attitude. What humility.

What is John saying? If we can borrow the contemporary vernacular, it's not about me, it's not about me. This is about heaven and what heaven has deposited in my hands as a mercy. That's the only way you can look at ministry.

And then, starting with that reality, he illustrates it in the next two verses. Verse 28, "You yourselves are my witnesses." You've been my followers, my loyal followers, my jealous followers, "But you know that I said I am not the Christ." You know that. "But rather, I have been sent ahead of Him." He said that in chapter 1, verse 15; chapter 1, verse 23; chapter 1, verse 27; all the time, "I'm not the Christ, I'm not the Christ, I'm not the Christ."

You know, every minister needs to say that over and over—"I'm not the Christ, I'm not the Christ." It's not about me; it's not about me; it's about Him. I'm a star, the faster I fade, the better. The faster I'm lost in the glory of Christ, the better, the better.

And then he gives a beautiful illustration of that in verse 29. "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, so this joy of mine has been made full." What made them jealous, made him joyful. That's the right attitude.

If somebody came down the street here and started a church and had twice, three, four, five times as many people as we have here coming to Christ, believing the gospel and being saved, what would be our attitude? Would it be jealous. It's not about us. It's not about me. It's about Him. It's about Him.

In Philippians chapter 1, Paul is in prison when he writes Philippians 1 and there are some other preachers who are saying, "Ah, this is our chance to shine. You know, the old man's in prison, now we can capture the day. He's not able to circulate." And so they start throwing, really, arrows at him. They're wounding him. He uses the language. It's not enough that I'm in chains. They're adding pain on top of my chains by saying I'm in prison because of sin and because the Lord has punished me and they're...verse 15, Philippians 1...they're preaching Christ from envy. They're preaching Christ from envy. Wow! Envy? How awful.

What's your attitude, Paul? Verse 18, "So what. So what. Christ is proclaimed and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice." That's...that's...that's the humility of the minister—Christ is preached; Christ is exalted. Some preach out of good will toward me. Some preach out of envy toward me. In any case, "Christ is preached, in that I rejoice." John doesn't have any competitive attitudes toward Christ or toward any other person who preaches Christ. He's like a best man at a wedding, and that's the illustration of verse 29. What is the best man's job?

Well, in ancient times, the best man, called *shoshbin*, he had a very important role to play, a very important role. Weddings were big deals. They lasted as long as a week. They were planned months in advance, and the bridegroom was getting his house ready because the wedding took place when the house was ready and everything was prepared. And so he had a best man, his closest friend, who would do all the work, take care of all the duties and all the responsibilities, and all the while communicate with the bride and communicate with the bride and let the bride know when and where and how to meet and get everything ready. And then when the day was done and it was supposed to happen, he would take the bride and present the bride to the bridegroom.

John says, "That's my job. I'm not the bridegroom. I just want to connect the bride to the bridegroom. I just want to take sinners to Jesus. That's all I want to do. And when I've done that, I rejoice, I rejoice. This joy of mine has been made full. You guys are jealous. You're upset because Jesus has more people than I do. I'm telling you, this is why I live. This is what I'm called to. This is my joy. My task is done."

And when the bridegroom takes his bride, the best man isn't even a footnote; disappears. And thus, he says, "He must increase, but I must decrease." This is the first law of ministry. Humility, a great ministry never produces disciples of the ministry; it always produces disciples of the Savior. You

understand that; foundational. Whenever the people worship the man, something is corrupt, something is corrupt. When Christ is diminished and the ministers are elevated, you have Satan's church. Where you have Christ's church, the ministers never see themselves as anything other than equal to every other Christian—a sinner saved by grace, given gifts and a merciful stewardship from heaven that elevates them above no one, no one. Hierarchy in the church is a corruption. The maxim then is this. He must—"must" is the operative word—must be on the increase; I must be the retreating shadow. But the prophet is slipping into fullness of joy. He holds nothing for himself. And oh, by the way, at the end of this time of overlap he is arrested. He's still fighting with his disciples about the issues regarding Jesus, and that's why he sends them to get information. And then he's languishing in the prison, and one day they call for him. They bring him out of his cell, they cut his head off, and they bring his head on a plate into an orgy. And that's the last scene of John.

But, you know, his decapitation just ushered him into eternal joy. And I'm sure he heard, "Well done, good faithful servant." So that's "I must decrease." Next week "He must increase."

Lord, we come to You this morning with grateful hearts. We have so much to be thankful for, so much to praise You for. You have given us the truth. Thank You for rescuing us from false Christianity. Thank You for rescuing all these people from Roman Catholic churches and Mormon churches and other cults, and even from Islam and atheism—thank You. And may we together exalt Christ. May we fade away as He and His glory fills all in all. May it always be about Christ, always about Christ. We thank You for bringing us to the knowledge of Him and we pray for those who are in our midst today who have not come to know Christ, who are languishing in darkness, maybe in the darkness of Roman Catholicism, or some other false religion. Would You be gracious and allow the light of the gospel to shine unto them that they may see Christ for who He is and fall at His feet, understanding that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Him alone and not by any works they could do or any ritual. And it's not offered by any institution. It's a gift to a penitent sinner who comes by faith alone, not depending at all in his own works, and cries out for the mercy of new birth. And we thank You Lord, again, for the deposit that comes into our minds every time we gather around Your Word. We're given another treasure, another investment of divine gold deposited into our minds, into our lives. Make us spiritually richer, more useful to You. May we spend that treasure as it's needed to declare the truth to others. And may the light of the gospel shine in the darkness of this world and may it become clear where the truth is so the people can avoid the deception. Elevate the true gospel, faithful preachers, and humble them so that people become followers of the Christ they preach and not of them. We'll thank You in the Savior's name. Amen.

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