

Message #12

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John

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HE MUST INCREASE

JOHN 3:22-36

I.

William Shakespeare is widely recognized as the greatest writer in the English language. Part of the reason for that is that he understood human nature so well. Part of the reason that he understood human nature so well is that Shakespeare had a worldview that was steeped in a Biblical perspective on life. In his last will and testament, he identified himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. Much of his writing reflects a Christian perspective on the world. One of my favorite quotes of Shakespeare comes from his play *As You Like It*. A character named Jacques has a monologue (PROJECTOR ON--- SHAKESPEARE QUOTE) in which he says this: "**All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts...**" (Act 2, Scene 2)

The Bible describes the God who is there as a kind of playwright. He is a sovereign God who has a script for this world and roles for us to play. In Ephesians #1 v. 11 (EPHESIANS 1:11) the Apostle Paul describes God the Son and God the Father in this way: "**In him [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...**"

Those who are in drama and theater and movies and TV understand the concept of playing a role. Even in the world of sports athletes who are successful understand the need to play a certain role. In basketball there are very few Michael Jordans or LeBron James's or Stephen Curry's who come along. (PROJECTOR OFF) There are many more players who called upon to play a particular role--- to shoot three-pointers, or to block shots, or to get rebounds. In football there are very few Tom Brady's or Aaron Rodgers' or name your favorite quarterback. There are many more role players with less glorious assignments who are called upon to block for these guys or to tackle their opponents.

So it is in life, especially in the Christian life. We are supposed to be about serving Jesus Christ. In service to Him we are given roles to play. The issue is how well we will play them. Such is the concern of the passage before us this morning.

John's Gospel is organized around seven sign miracles. We have looked at one so far--- the incident involving a wedding where Jesus turned water into wine. The Apostle John is also concerned about the testimony of witnesses who give evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. So far, the Apostle John has given his own testimony as well as that of Jesus Himself and John the Baptist. Today we see how he interweaves the testimony of all three of these witnesses to drive home two important lessons about success in life.

II.

The first lesson that I find, in vv. 22-30 of #3, is that TO SUCCEED IN LIFE WE MUST ACCEPT OUR ROLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. TO SUCCEED IN LIFE WE...) Chapter 3 began with Nicodemus, a leading teacher and rabbi, coming to see Jesus at night during the seven day Passover feast in Jerusalem. He witnessed Jesus perform several miracles. So he wanted to talk to Jesus about his identity and mission. This led to comments from Jesus about the necessity of spiritual birth to become part of God's kingdom. The Apostle John seemed to follow that up with his own remarks about the identity and mission of Jesus.

Now in v. 22 we read, "**After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.**" The author is indefinite about the intervening time period. My guess is that it was after the Passover feast in Jerusalem that Jesus and His disciples went into the countryside. Jerusalem was actually in Judea. It seems to be implied that they went into more rural areas, probably on or near the Jordan River, where John the Baptist had earlier been baptizing.

These disciples were new to Jesus. Some of them had been followers of John the Baptist. So this was an opportunity for all of them to get to know each other. Probably not all of the twelve apostles were yet attached to the group. At this point the message that Jesus and his disciples was giving was probably similar to that of John the Baptist. In Mark #1 v. 15 (MARK 1:15) we are told that the message that Jesus was giving early in His public ministry was "**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.**"

Chapter 4 v. 2 in John gives us the added clarification that Jesus was not actually doing the baptizing Himself, but His disciples were. A good spiritual leader gets his people involved in ministry as soon as possible.

According to v. 23 in our passage, "**John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized...**" (AENON) Aenon may have been somewhat to the north of where Jesus and His disciples were baptizing. The word "aenon" means "springs." The exact location of Aenon is uncertain. A couple of locations just to the south of the Sea of Galilee have been suggested.

We should also note that the place of baptism was chosen partly because there was much water there. The implication is that the mode of baptism was not sprinkling. They would not have needed a lot of water for that. The Jewish background of baptism was immersion. That is apparently what was being practiced here. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 24 adds, "**(for John had not yet been put in prison).**" This parenthetical comment helps us to understand the early chronology of Jesus and His public ministry. The other three Gospels begin the description of the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee. The Apostle John is describing what happened just before Jesus started teaching and doing miracles in Galilee, to the north of Judea.

In Mark #1 v. 14 (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 1:14) we are told, "**Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God...**" So it would seem that it was shortly after the time of our story here that John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, and put into prison. We are told in the other Gospels that the main reason for the arrest was that John had publicly criticized Herod Antipas for marrying his sister-in-law. This new wife would eventually trick Herod Antipas into having John the Baptist beheaded. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 25 we are told, "**Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.**" Probably the issue had to do with John the Baptist's practice of baptism in comparison with Old Testament cleansings and Pharisaic applications of those Old Testament rules in the current day. The substance of this discussion was not the main issue, however. The main issue had to do with what came up in the discussion in the next verse.

According to v. 26, "**And they [the disciples of John] 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.'**" Keep in mind that these disciples made a different decision than the Apostle John and Andrew and perhaps Peter did in deciding to leave John the Baptist and follow Jesus. These disciples have kept their loyalty and commitment to John the Baptist. It is these guys who are concerned about what is happening with Jesus, and perhaps even a little irritated.

Notice that they do not even call Jesus by name. They do not call Him the Messiah. They simply refer to Him as the one to whom John bore witness.

This is an issue that we pastors and committed church members can understand. We have heard that there are big crowds that have been going over to First Episcopo-Presbyterian Church in town. Even some of our own members have been spotted going to church there. What are we going to do about it? The preacher over there seems to be pretty orthodox in his doctrine. But he is the new guy in town. We are not so thrilled that he is seeing all of this church growth.

The disciples of John say that everybody is going over to see Jesus. That is hyperbole. It is an exaggeration. There are still people coming to see and listen to John. But the trend line is away from John and toward Jesus.

So maybe John needs to make some changes. You know, this camel's hair thing that John likes to wear turns some people off. Maybe he at least needs to wear a tie. Probably John should also change his tone a little bit. He is offending a lot of folks with his in-your-face style of telling people to repent. Maybe John should caution his congregation a little bit about this Jesus guy. Maybe he should at least add some music to his presentation. You know, this reduced attendance is affecting us, too. The offerings are down. Maybe it is going to get tougher for to make ends meet.

Verse 27: "**John answered, 'A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.'**" John responds with good theology. He gives a heavenly perspective. He believes in the sovereignty of God.

He expresses a Biblical principle that James, the half brother of Jesus, verbalized in his New Testament epistle. (JAMES 1:17) In #1 v. 17 he wrote, "**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.**" John the Baptist doesn't have the same gifts as Jesus does. He does not have the same abilities. To our knowledge, John the Baptist never performed a miracle. How could he compete with Jesus?
(PROJECTOR OFF)

More importantly, John has a different assignment. The divine Coach has given him a particular role to play. That role is not controlled by his disciples or by his audience. He knows his mission and he is accomplishing it to the best of his ability.

In v. 28 John continues, "**You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'**" John understands his role. If you turn back to #1 vv. 22 & 23, you will see how John responded to the religious leaders who were sent by the Sanhedrin to question John about his identity. "**So they said to him, 'Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.'**" John recognized that he was fulfilling the role of the one prophesied in the Old Testament who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Then in #1 v. 29 we read, "**The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the World!'**" John knew that he was not the Christ. He knew that his job was to protect the quarterback. His role was to support the leading man.

Thus in our v. 28 John declares, "I am not the Christ." This is the temptation that most of us face. We would sort of like to be God. We would like to be in control. Even as Christians, we would like to control our mate and our kids and our parents and our coworkers and our friends and our Bible study group and our church. We would like these other people to follow my agenda and to agree with my priorities. Even in my prayer life with God, I would like Him to answer my prayers according to my plan. But it just doesn't work that way.

If we don't quite want to be God, perhaps we would at least like to be the quarterback or the coach or the leading man or lady or the director or the boss or the head elder or the pastor of First Episcopalian church who is getting the big crowds and the extra staff people.

To succeed in life we need to accept the role that we have been given. We need to use the gifts and talents that God has given us. We need to figure out the role that God has given us to play and fulfill it to the best of our ability. John the Baptist understood that it was his role to prepare the way for Jesus and bring attention to Him. As Christians, that is also our ultimate purpose. It's not about me. We are to glorify Him. He is God. He is our Coach. He is our Judge. He is the one who has given us eternal life and forgiven us our sins.

In v. 29 John continues to explain this important principle to his disciples. He says, "**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.**"

In this little parable that John is telling it is evident that John is the friend of the bridegroom, what we would call the best man. Jesus is the bridegroom. In the cultural background of this time the friend of the bridegroom was responsible to arrange the details of the wedding. He was involved in bringing the bride to the bridegroom for the wedding.

In the Old Testament the nation of Israel was described as the bride. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 62:5B) Thus in Isaiah #62 v. 5 the prophet addresses Israel, saying, "**...and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.**"

John the Baptist has brought Israel to the bridegroom, the Messiah Jesus. He has done his job. He has fulfilled his role. He has announced that the kingdom of God is at hand and that people should repent

from their sins in anticipation of the coming of the King of this kingdom. So he has great satisfaction in this. He has joy to see that his mission has been accomplished. It is good that crowds are going to see Jesus. That should likewise be our joy--- to see kids and coworkers and neighbors and church attenders come to Jesus and to grow in their relationship with Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 30 in our text John concludes, "**He must increase, but I must decrease.**" John understood that it was not about him. That is an important lesson that teachers and preachers need to understand. It is not about bringing attention and glory to us. It is not about attracting people to us. It is about bringing attention and glory to Jesus.

John understood that. So he was happy to give the top billing to Jesus. This is the last that we see of John the Baptist in the Apostle John's Gospel. Shortly after this John is arrested and put in prison. Some time after that he is beheaded by Herod Antipas. Outwardly it might not seem that he was very successful. He lost his congregation. He experienced a humiliating imprisonment and death. He died alone.

But in the end, what is the most important evaluation we can receive? Who is the Judge who matters most? In Matthew #11 v. 11 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 11:11) Jesus says this: "**Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**" How is that for an evaluation? Think of all of the Old Testament heroes--- Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Daniel, Nehemiah. John the Baptist never did a miracle. He never ended up with a lasting congregation. He apparently did not leave an earthly family. He never wrote a book. He never achieved a military victory. He never made a lot of money. But Jesus says: There is no one on my list who is higher than John the Baptist.

John the Baptist knew his gifts and his role, and he played it out to the max. What about you? Are you content with the gifts and situation in life in which you find yourself. Are you willing to play out your role to the max, having as your highest motivation the desire to glorify Jesus? Will you find joy in doing that? Is it enough to know that you are playing out the role that the divine Coach has established for you?

III.

In vv. 31-36 we also learn that TO SUCCEED IN LIFE WE MUST TRUST IN JESUS. (III. TO SUCCEED IN LIFE WE MUST...) Verse 31 says, "**He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.**"

There is a problem here similar to what we had in v. 16. It is not clear who is doing the speaking. It could be John the Baptist, but I am more inclined to think that it is the Apostle John who is commenting upon what has happened and who is summarizing the message of the chapter. This especially seems to be the case when we get to v. 36. For in v. 36 the author speaks about believing in the Son and having eternal life, all of which are themes that the Apostle John repeatedly emphasizes in terms that seem to be characteristic of his writing.

The word for "from above" in this verse is the same Greek term that was used in v. 3 when Jesus spoke about being "born again," or "born from above." The word has both meanings. The context here shows that it is "from above" that is the meaning here. It is Jesus who has come from above, from heaven. John the Baptist is merely human. So he is earthly.

Verse 32 reads, "**He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.**" Jesus bears witness to what He has seen in heaven, but no one receives His testimony. This is an exaggeration, which is modified in the next verse.

The Apostle John did a similar thing back in John 1 v. 11. He said, "**He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.**" As a broad generalization this was true. But there were many exceptions. All of the twelve apostles were Jewish, as was Paul. In v. 12 of #1 John modified that broad generalization by adding, "**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...**"

Now in v. 33 in our text John modifies the broad generalization that no one receives His testimony by adding, "**Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.**" When people, Jews as well as Gentiles, believe that Jesus is the Son of God, they demonstrate that God is true. They show that they believe that the message sent through the Old Testament prophets, through John the Baptist and through Jesus Himself is from the God who is really there.

A seal (SEAL) was a clay or stone or metal object that was used in ancient times to leave an impression upon material like wax that was placed upon an object or envelope or document. The seal was like a signature. It indicated ownership. If the wax impression left upon an envelope or other object was broken, it showed that the enclosed object had been tampered with. The offender would then have to deal with the owner of the seal.

Besides leaving a mark of security, a seal was put upon a document or paper to show agreement by the owner. It was like a personal signature or a notary stamp. In our context the Apostle John is saying that belief in Jesus is a personal agreement that the witness from heaven is true. We are giving that testimony the seal of approval. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 34 adds, "**For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.**" The rabbis claimed that prophets in the Old Testament received revelation from God with measure. Their revelation and knowledge was limited. But this is not the case with Jesus. The Apostle John says that Jesus, who was sent from above, receives the Spirit without measure, without any limitation.

Verse 35: "**The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.**" God the Father has given all authority over the earth and over the human beings whom He created to Jesus Christ. In a similar way Paul wrote in Ephesians #1 (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:22-23), "**And he [God the Father] put all things under his feet and gave him [Jesus] as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.**"

The conclusion comes in v. 36: "**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.**" (PROJECTOR OFF) Here is a restatement of the Apostle John's theme in his Gospel. Jesus is the Son of God. Trust in Jesus produces eternal life. This eternal life can be a present possession. We don't have to wait until we die to find out where we are going in eternity. If we truly believe, we have eternal life now. We do not have to worry about any condemnation from God. If there was something that could happen to take away this life, it would not be eternal. It would be temporary, or provisional. But the guarantee is that when we believe, our eternal destiny is secure. We are going to heaven.

To not believe in this Jesus is disobedience. The result is no eternal life. Instead, the wrath of God abides upon us. This is the only use of the term "wrath of God" in John's Gospel. But in his later Book of Revelation there are more references to the wrath of God. For in His first appearance upon earth Jesus comes as the loving and gentle Lamb who purposes to take away the sins of the world. But in His second appearance upon earth He will come as a conquering King who will exhibit wrath and judgment upon His enemies.

This wrath hangs over those who do not believe in Jesus. The Roman writer Cicero described a legend about a king in Sicily named Dionysius. Dionysius had a member of his royal court who was named Damocles. Damocles was jealous of the position of King Dionysius. He was often commenting upon how fortunate Dionysius was to have such power and such luxury and so many people to wait upon him and such beautiful clothes to wear.

The king finally got tired of these comments and offered to trade positions with Damocles for one day. Damocles eagerly accepted the offer. When the day came, he sat down on the king's throne. He saw all of the attendants ready to wait on him and all of the luxury surrounding him. But then he happened to

glance up and see this huge sword hanging from the ceiling with the tip of it pointed toward his head. The sword was suspended from the ceiling by a single hair from a horse's tail. Dionysius was seeking to teach the lesson that great fortune and power comes with great danger.

The picture that the Apostle John leaves with us at the end of our chapter is one that offers great opportunity and great danger. A sword of Damocles hangs over our heads, unless and until we put our trust in Jesus Christ.

To succeed in life we must trust in Jesus. To succeed in life we must accept our role, which has been given to us by God.