

March 17th 2013: John 3:22-36 John The Baptist #4
"Eyes Firmly On Jesus"

As I mentioned in the Participaper, we return today to our consideration of John the Baptist, and in doing so we turn to John 3:22-36. To a time when both John and Jesus were teaching and baptizing.

Now prior to Jesus' baptism, John's ministry had been extremely successful. So many people had flocked to hear him that the Pharisees became concerned that John could in fact be the Messiah that the prophets had spoken about.

But once Jesus commenced preaching, teaching, baptizing—with the additional draw card of miraculous acts—John's popularity began to wane. He still was constantly baptizing people and he still had with him a loyal group of disciples, but it's just not the same. And this begins to really worry his followers.

So it is that in this particular section of scripture we find some of John's disciples in an argument with some Jews, possibly from the Essene sect, about baptism, when it would seem that mention was made about someone else who was also baptizing—namely Jesus. And it was this matter and not the baptismal argument itself, that they later brought to John. The fact that he had a powerful and successful rival in Jesus, and what did he intend to do about it.

Look at John 3:26

²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

It is easy to see from this verse how John's disciples regarded John. They called him Rabbi or teacher. And in comparison how they perceived Jesus. They called him, 'that man'. Even though they recognized Jesus as the one John had testified to when he had said in John 1:29-30

"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'

They obviously were far away from believing that Jesus was greater than John. In fact Pettersen describes their attitude quite bluntly when he translates 3:22 as saying:-

"Rabbi, you know the one who was with you on the other side of the Jordan? The one you authorized with your witness? Well, he's now competing with us. He's baptizing, too, and everyone's going to him instead of us."

It's a sad thing when people put a preacher so high on a pedestal that they take the place of Jesus. They have their eyes firmly on a man rather than on the Lord. And it can still happen today. Yet every preacher is human and will make mistakes, but the Lord Jesus is God and He will never let you down.

But of course the major teaching that comes from this passage and stands as an example for us all, is found in the reaction of John. His eyes are not on his own success or ministry but firmly on Jesus, and in verses 27-30 we surely have a most inspiring passage of scripture about absolute surrender.

²⁷ To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less."

Notice how John begins. He talks about his own role as the fore runner of the Messiah and he neither understates it nor overstates it. A person, he says, can only receive what is **given him from heaven**, in terms of strength, gifts, opportunity, purpose and role in life.

I have been called and gifted by God to point people towards Jesus as the Messiah, he says, and I have done that. Heaven never decreed for me the position of Messiah with crowds following after me, but the position of prophet, and now my work is done I am more than satisfied to fade into insignificance and allow His glory to increase.

And the very same can be said about every follower of Jesus. What we each have received from the Lord in terms of gifts, abilities, resources, and our role and purpose in life is set by God the Father. The differences between us in those things neither makes anyone greater or less than another. We need to keep our eyes firmly on Jesus who is the author of our faith, in obedience

and faithfulness to be the one He has made us to be, and to do what He has called us to do.

For John that meant being the friend of the bridegroom, and by using those words he presented his disciples with a picture they knew well. For in those days the friend of the bridegroom was indispensable. He was responsible for many details of the wedding and his special job was to bring the bride to the bridegroom.

He would wait with the bride until he heard the voice of the bridegroom coming and then he would present the bride to his friend, beautiful and made ready. And the friend of the bridegroom would have immense joy in doing so—the joy of one who knew how happy his friend would now be.

And by using this OT reference to the Messiah as the Bridegroom and the redeemed people of God as the bride, John knows that he has done his part in preparing the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus.

That's why he can say:- ***He must become greater; I must become less.***"

In the context of this passage it meant that the crowds would now follow Jesus and not John. But in the context of John's life it represented the rule he had always lived by. To so minister that Jesus would be glorified more and more and John the Baptist less and less.

And it's in a similar sense that we can apply it to our own Christian lives. For making the decision to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour is also the decision to put Him and His kingdom first and our own little earthly kingdoms second.

This morning the challenge for every Christian here is "How are we going with this lesser greater thing?" Is Christ increasing in your life and the big I, that loves to retain the control, decreasing?

For myself I realize, for that to happen I need to focus less on what other people think, and more on what pleases Christ. Need to pay less attention to my fears, anxiety and pride when it comes to honouring Jesus, and sharing about Him with others, and be more open for Him to use me even when it's really scary and hard. That I need to concentrate less on numbers and outward signs of growth and have more Faith in Christ being constantly at work building His Kingdom.

So here we find John the Baptist so content to see Jesus increasing and himself decreasing. Yet the interesting thing is, that because he chose to put

Christ first. Because he chose to keep his eyes firmly on Christ, in the sight of Christ John is not decreased at all. Later on Jesus was to say of John that among those born of women there is no greater.

You see there may be times when we grumble a little at putting Christ first. Our eyes move to things that are important to us and that restrict us in being completely His. Yet when we give ourselves with our wants, desires, ambitions, and even our problems and weaknesses, completely over to the Master, He transforms us to become people who are beautiful and precious.

Like the story that Myra Welch wrote which was mentioned in TWFT last Friday. About the old violin at the auction that was at first seen as worthless till an old man came forward, dusted and tuned it, and then played it so beautifully. Instantly its value was vastly changed. And as the author went on to say:

"And many a man with his life out of tune, battered and scarred with sin, is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd, much like the old violin...But the Master comes, and the thoughtless crowd never can quite understand, the worth of the soul, and the change that's wrought, by the touch of the Master's hand."

That change is incredible. And the more we Fix our Eyes Firmly on Jesus. The more we commit ourselves to things that cause Christ in us to become greater, then the more obvious to others that change is.

This morning you may well be aware that you have not kept your eyes firmly on Jesus. That instead of putting Him first you have allowed others things to take His place. He waits to play His own special tune on your life but He seeks your permission to do so. Will you confess before Jesus your sorrow at the things that you have allowed to push Him away, and will you right now give Him Lordship of your life? That total surrender that says, "Lord please be greater in me."