The Gospel of John: A Lesson on Humility
John 3:22-36

As we resume our journey through John’s gospel, our text this morning is John 3:22-36. Please stand and let us read the Word of God together:

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 (for John had not yet been put in prison).

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.”

31 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. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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.

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) our human inclination toward jealousy; 2) the source and significance of John’s humility; and 3) setting our seal on what is true.

I. Our human inclination toward jealousy
Beginning with vs. 22, we read:

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

Let’s make a few observations so that we understand the context of our passage. First, John the Evangelist explains that “after this”--after the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus--Jesus and his disciples leave Jerusalem and head north to a rural area referred to as Aenon near Salim, “because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized...” This place called “Aenon” was likely a familiar location for the ancients, but 2,000 years later we are not quite certain where it was located. The Geek with the Greek tells us that the word “Aenon” is a Greek adaptation of a Semitic term meaning “spring” or “natural fountain,” which would explain why there was an abundance of water in that region. John states that it was located in the Judean countryside, so we can assume that it was not too terribly far from Jerusalem, and we learn that John the Baptist was ministering in that area as well.

Now, John mentions in vs. 22 that “he (Jesus) remained there with them (the disciples) and was baptizing.” However, when we get to John 4:2 (next Sunday!), John will clarify that “Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples”.

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These two verses initially seem to contradict one another, but that is certainly not the case. Clearly John would not knowingly contradict himself in his account of what Jesus did in the span of 16 verses! John is revealing here that whatever the disciples did in Jesus’ name was considered the same as if Jesus was doing it Himself; and, of course, that is still the case to this day! We are the “hands and feet of Christ,” right? As agents and disciples of Jesus, what we do in His name is always thought to be representative of Jesus’ actions. So, the generosity we extend to others in Jesus’ name is not our generosity, but His. When we speak the truth in Jesus’ name, the truth is not ours, but His. Here we find a very early example of the ministry of Jesus being executed and accomplished through His disciples.

Note also that John the Evangelist dates this time in the life of Jesus as the time when “John had not yet been put in prison.” When we read the synoptics, we get the sense that most, if not all, of Jesus’ ministry happened after John the Baptist was arrested and imprisoned by Herod the tetrarch of Israel. It is only here in John’s gospel that we discover this brief period of time when the early ministry of Jesus overlapped with the final days of John the Baptist’s public ministry. Although there is no action in this story by Jesus that would warrant being included in an account of His life, John the Evangelist includes this story because it clears up an early church heresy regarding the preeminence of John the Baptist. Remember, John the Apostle is writing several decades after the birth of the church, and he is familiar with some who held that John the Baptist was the Messiah or at least the preeminent prophet over Jesus. So here, in what follows, we hear from the Baptist himself regarding who is the Greater One to be followed and obeyed.

Picking up the story in vs. 25 we read:

Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. 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.”

So here’s the situation that we can observe from not only these verses, but all that we have learned about John the Baptist so far:

1) John the Baptist, chosen by God even before his birth to serve as “one preparing the way for the Lord,” was a Holy Spirit-filled prophet of God who drew large crowds to his ministry of baptism and repentance. The Apostle Mark records in Mark 1:5 that “all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

2) When Jesus began his itinerant ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, it caused confusion for those who were baptized by John and followed John’s teaching. The picture we get here in our text this morning is that a repentant Jew has come seeking baptism, but he’s uncertain as to who he should go to: Jesus or John the Baptist? Whose baptism is better? Whose baptism would make the inquisitive Jew clean in the sight of God?

3) We can also observe that due to the powerful signs and wonders that Jesus performed, the crowds were drawn to Jesus now, which impacted how many people were now coming to John the Baptist to confess their sins and be baptized. Seeing so many people crowd around Jesus and His disciples creates consternation for the faithful disciples of John the Baptist, so they now come to John with jealousy for John and his ministry.
Can you see the situation? Can you feel the tension? Have you ever felt this kind of tension in your life?

I’ve shared with you on a few occasions that I was quite active in both music and theatre while in high school and college. If you have any experience in music and theatre, you know that it is a world of constant auditions. You must audition for solos and roles, and every so often, if you are lucky, you land the featured solo or the lead part in a show. However, no matter who you are, there comes a time when someone eclipses your talent for a part that you longed for…which means you don’t get the part that you wanted, or the part you felt that you deserved. When those times came about in my life, I must confess that I often felt a burning sense of jealously and resentment toward those who eclipsed me. I suspect I am not alone.

Human beings are inclined towards jealousy…we just are. We hate to be eclipsed by someone of greater talent, beauty, or giftedness. When we are passed over for the promotion; when we didn’t get the credit that we deserved; when the pretty girl gets all the attention; when our church members leave to attend the new church down the road with the uber-talented pastor and the shiny new facilities…our human tendency is to not only feel sorry for ourselves, but to build up resentment and jealousy towards the one who eclipsed us. How many of you know what I’m talking about?

There is another kind of jealousy that is also common, though we think it to be far more innocent in nature, and that is our jealousy “for” another person.

As I mentioned a moment ago, not getting the lead part or the featured solo was an all-too-frequent experience for me in those days; and I admit, I would often feel a secret resentment when the role I longed for was appointed to someone else. However, what made matters significantly worse was when a well-intended friend would say something like, “You should have been cast for that lead role. You would have been the better choice. Look—that person is not nearly as talented as you are.” My well-intended friend was jealous FOR me…and his intent was sincere. He was trying to cheer me up, to encourage me. He was emphasizing his belief in my talents and trying to affirm my gifts. But man…his jealousy FOR me was like pouring gasoline on the spark of resentment that already existed within my heart…leading my jealousy to explode into a roaring fire that would often do great damage to my soul.

Jealousy is a devouring fire that consumes us and destroys relationships. Among the Ten Commandments, the imperative that we NOT COVET is the most difficult of all, amen? Jealousy, coveting that which belongs to our neighbor, is a sin…and it comes very easily and naturally for us all.

The scenario that we find presented in our text this morning is a perfect recipe for full-blown jealousy. John the Baptist was THE superstar prophet of Israel for several years. When people wanted a good quote, they quoted John the Baptist. When people wanted to point to the true spiritual leader of Israel, they would point to John the Baptist. When people gave their testimony, recalling that moment when they truly repented from their sins, they would recall John’s sermons and their baptism in the wilderness by John the Baptist. To be a disciple of John
the Baptist was to be associated with a powerful, successful ministry that was anointed by God—it was a ministry that was changing lives.

But now, ever since Jesus appeared on the scene, the crowds coming to John the Baptist had dwindled down to a mere handful of people. Everywhere you went, people were quoting Jesus. Everyone was talking about Jesus.

If ever there was an opportunity for John the Baptist to feel indignation, self-pity, jealousy and resentment—it was this very moment when his well-intended friends say, “Look—all are going to him.” If ever there was a lingering thought of self-justification and self-promotion in John’s heart, now was the moment that such thoughts would be both welcomed and affirmed by his disciples.

So let us consider how John the Baptist responds, as we move to my second subheading…

**II. The Source and Significance of John’s humility**

In vs. 27 John answers his disciples with these words, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”

John has a deep conviction and philosophy regarding the way things work in the world. The Baptist believes that God is the giver of all good things, and human beings are only those who receive what God has given. The Apostle James will later write, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father…”

So, I want us all to take a moment and think about John’s teaching here, because it is the first part of the medicine that liberates us from envy and jealousy: knowing who God is, and knowing who we are.

1) Who is God? God is the giver. All good things come from God…apart from Him, we have nothing.
2) Who are we? We are recipients. We are not those who are ultimately capable of earning, achieving, or owning good things. Whatever we have is that which we have received from the Giver of all good things… “from heaven.”

As we reflect upon John’s response, let us acknowledge that the biblical philosophy of John the Baptist spits in the face of Western philosophies. For the modern Western materialist, achieving and accumulating are the highest aims for every human being who is willing to work hard. Our culture teaches us that we can do anything that we set our minds to, and that we can have whatever we want if we are willing to work hard and achieve our goals. Hard work entitles one to riches, rewards, and accolades, right? Now, I know many of us were raised with this western philosophy of achievement and accumulation. I also know that many of us continue to teach these lessons to our children. Thus, the tension between a biblical worldview as articulated by John the Baptist and the Western materialist worldview is a tension that we all need to sit in this morning. All of us as Christians in the West live in this tension every day, and I cannot easily resolve that tension, nor shall I try.
However, what I want you to see is that the modern Western materialist worldview creates the perfect breeding grounds for resentment, jealousy, and entitlement to take root in our hearts. Let’s go back to my audition in college. If I work harder to prepare for my audition than the person who has more talent than I do, I will feel justifiably resentful towards that talented person who wins the role over me, right? That person hardly prepared, and yet they won the role simply because they sing better than I do. His voice makes people melt; mine does not. His voice easily hits the high notes, whereas I have to strain to hit those notes. No amount of work will ever overcome the fact that he is simply more gifted and talented than I am, but my western, modern philosophy tells me that I should be able to work hard and achieve whatever I set my mind to. Can you see that the amount of frustration, jealousy, and loathing that I feel towards that other person who bested me is fed by our cultural assumptions and worldview?

Our recent, postmodern assumptions now make this situation even worse. In many respects, our current culture has replaced the modern value of hard work with the value of ME. Countless people in our postmodern culture feel that they are entitled to success, wealth, and respect due to the fact that they exist and have an opinion. Everyone is entitled to a trophy; everyone is entitled to win; everyone is entitled to be right because everyone is “special” and deserves to be treated as such. The problem here is obvious, right? If everyone is “special,” no one is special. If everyone wins, no one actually wins. We can’t all be right. These postmodern assumptions are simply not realistic: not everyone can play the leading role; not everyone can be assigned the featured solo; not every person is as talented, beautiful, or competent as everyone else. In the real world, there are always going to be those who eclipse us no matter how hard we work; no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves that it should not be so. However, given our philosophical assumptions in the West, what we can observe is a culture consumed with envy, bitterness, self-pity, and general loathing for those who get the part when we do not. Jealousy and envy is not getting better…it’s getting worse, and social media is not helping that situation one bit. The never-ending process of comparing ourselves to others and feeling resentment has led many people to despair.

Let us now consider the significance of John’s biblical worldview: God is the giver…we are simply the recipients. It takes no great leap of faith to concede that we cannot deserve or earn our good looks or our beautiful singing voice. We cannot deserve or earn our family, the medical care available to us at our birth, the DNA in our genes, or how much hair is on our heads! These things are given to us. That doesn’t mean that we cannot or should not work hard to faithfully steward that which has been entrusted to us by The Giver…we absolutely should, (and God should get all the glory)...but not a single one of us can take credit for that which we received from God in the way we were born, when we were born, who we were born to, what family we were raised in, what country we were born in, and so on. Life is a gift that we cannot ever earn or deserve…it can only be received from the Giver with gratitude.

So let us once again return to the audition: if I am bested by a person who has more talent than I do, my biblical worldview allows me to celebrate the fact that my friend has been entrusted with tremendous talent from God, and should they get the leading role, even that role was entrusted to them by God. At the same time, I can be grateful for that which God has entrusted to me. Perhaps I have not received the same caliber of singing voice as my classmate, but I can be confident that I have received the voice that God designed for me to accomplish the purpose He
has for my life. That doesn’t mean that I should not work hard to develop my voice…of course I should. But I cannot take credit for my voice; nor should I resent my friend who has also received his gift from the Lord.

This is exactly what John is saying to his disciples in vs. 27. If people are going to Jesus, it is because He has received God’s gifts according to God’s plan and design. Who is John the Baptist to disagree or contend with what God chooses to give to others? John takes no credit for that which was entrusted to him; and consequently, John harbors no resentment towards others who have also received from the Lord.

John’s proverb is one that we can all implement and practice in our lives. If ever we could fully accept and implement this biblical worldview, we would defend our souls from the devouring fire of jealousy.

As we return to our text, John the Baptist further unpacks why he is not jealous or envious of Jesus. Beginning in vs. 28:

You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.” 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. He must increase, I must decrease.

I will make two quick observations here:

1) John knows his role—he is the forerunner of Jesus. Though his ministry brought him great acclaim and influence, John never lost sight of his role: his job was to point people to Jesus. John never developed a Messiah complex…he was just the messenger. Many pastors and leaders would do well to remember John’s example.

2) John appeals to an ancient metaphor known by all Jews: that of the relationship of the Bride (Israel) and the Bridegroom (God). He states, “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.” I’ve unpacked this metaphor in prior messages, but we should note a few things here. First, note that John the Baptist is clearly stating that Jesus is God because all the Jews knew that God was “the Bridegroom” in all the OT passages that pointed to this metaphor. We should not yet equate “the Bride” with Christ’s church…that notion will come later. For now, John the Baptist is saying that Israel is the Bride, and that Jesus is the Bridegroom. So it makes perfect sense for the Jews of Israel (the Bride) to be with the Bridegroom, who is Jesus, their long-awaited Messiah.

Once again, John knows his role, and he states it within the context of this metaphor. “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.”

William Barclay captures the picture of John’s role in his commentary:

The friend of the bridegroom, the shoshiben, had a unique place at a Jewish wedding. He acted as a liaison between the bride and the bridegroom; he arranged the wedding; he took out the invitations; he presided at the wedding feast. He brought the bride and the bridegroom together. And he had one special duty. It was his duty to guard the bridal chamber and to let no false lover in. He would open the door only when in the dark he heard the bridegroom’s voice.
and recognized it. When he heard the bridegroom’s voice, he let him in and went away rejoicing, for his task was completed and the lovers were together. He did not grudge the Bridegroom the bride. He knew that his only task had been to bring bride and bridegroom together. And when that task was done he willingly and gladly faded out of the center of the picture.

Barclay concludes:

John’s task had been to bring Israel and Jesus together; to arrange the marriage between Christ the bridegroom and Israel the bride. That task completed he was happy to fade into obscurity for his work was done. It was not with envy that he said that Jesus must increase and he must decrease; it was with joy.

Church, whatever your job or calling in life may be, the final responsibility of all those who belong to Christ is to bring the Bride to the Bridegroom. In all our dealings with people, in all walks of life and stages of faith, we are called to decrease, that Christ might increase. John’s humility is indicative of Christian humility everywhere in every age: it’s never about us…it’s always about Jesus, amen? If we keep that in mind, we will be able to resist jealousy and envy; we will resist entitlement thinking; and we will willingly decrease so that Christ might increase. Let me conclude briefly with my final subheading:

III. Setting our Seal on what is True

John concludes the third chapter with some teaching that sums up the gospel once again. Beginning with vs. 31 the Apostle writes:

31 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. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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.

Jesus is the one who is above all because he comes from heaven…His testimony is not a philosophy or a hypothesis…Jesus is not limited by the earthly restrictions that the rest of us share. Jesus comes bearing witness about what He has seen and heard. He is the Son of God, the Logos who was with God and who was God. Sadly, comments John, so few receive His testimony. Yes…many were fascinated by Jesus…many even went to be baptized by His disciples. But John the Apostle knows, after many years of ministry, that relatively few will actually surrender their lives to Jesus the King. So many will resist His light because they, too, love the darkness.

There are some, however, who will receive the testimony of Jesus, and whoever does receive Him will “set his seal to this, that God is true.” In the ancient world, a formal document or contract would be rolled up and sealed with pressed wax, and the seal would designate the signer’s full approval and conviction. The seal indicated that the document was valid, agreed upon, and that the sealer stood behind the arrangement.

So, what is the arrangement? What is this truth that we are to receive and upon which we are to “set our seal?”

It is this: that the Bridegroom, the One sent by God, is He who utters the very words of God Himself. He is the One who has the Spirit without measure; He is also the one who initiates new
life in the Spirit for those who believe in His name. He is the Love of the Father. He is the One who has been given all things by the Father. And whoever believes in the Son, the Beloved, the Bridegroom…has eternal life. But whoever does not believe/obey the Son shall not see the life eternal. Instead, the wrath of God…the wrath God has towards all that is unjust, evil, corrupt and unholy, remains upon that soul.

This is the truth that John the Baptist prepared the world to hear. This is the truth John the Apostle wrote his gospel to communicate. This is the truth Jesus of Nazareth died to make possible for all who would believe.

Church, what have you set your seal to? What do you believe to the degree that you are willing to place your seal upon it, take a stand for it, and bear witness to it?

The Gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ is extended to all who will receive it. Yet let us never forget: a person cannot receive a single thing unless it is given to him by heaven. So friends: ask God to make His truth known to you that you might receive it. Ask God for the gift of faith that you may genuinely believe it. And then place your seal upon this: God is true. And God so loved you and all the world that He gave us His Son, Jesus…that we might RECEIVE eternal life!

Go now as ambassadors of this Truth, setting your seal upon the hope we have in the Gospel, and leading people to meet The Bridegroom…who is Christ the Lord.

Let us pray.