

John 3:22-36

Increasing and Decreasing and How It's Done

He must increase, but I must decrease – v. 30.

Party rivalries have always existed throughout the history of the Church of Christ. In the passage we've read we see such a spirit of rivalry going all the way back to the very days of Christ. Verses 22 & 23 indicate to us that the ministry of the Lord Jesus had moved into the same vicinity as the ministry of John the Baptist. As John's disciples observe the growing popularity of Christ's ministry they approach their beloved leader with a complaint. *Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond the Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him.* (v. 26). The answer John gives to his jealous followers manifests a rare and precious spirit of genuine piety and humility and culminates in the words of our text *He must increase, but I must decrease.*

This is always the answer, you know, to party rivalries that exist over insignificant matters. When the Corinthians were divided into parties that were formed on the basis of their favorite preachers, Paul's answer to them in essence was the very same as John's to his followers. You could interpret Paul as saying in 1Cor. 1: *Let Christ increase, let His name be exalted, and don't place too high a premium on His ministers – for who is Paul, and who is Apollos, but servants?* (1Cor. 3:5). *Yea, let the servants decrease, but let the name of Christ be lifted higher.*

And where this spirit of piety and humility is found, you'll find the right grounds for unity among those that are genuinely saved. The problem that exists in our day is much the same as what was found in Christ's day. Prominent preachers of big name evangelists sometimes reflect the mentality that the more their name is promoted, the more Christ will have the glory. You see this mentality reflected at times by the way some churches will bring forth big name celebrities to give a word for Christ. Sometimes the testimonies of these celebrities have a pretty hollow ring to them and don't really manifest any kind of spiritual vitality. You're sometime left with the impression that Christ is riding on their name rather than vice versa.

Now, where Christ is truly known, and His cause is embraced, John the Baptist's words will reflect the heart desire of Christ's people: *He must increase, but I must decrease.*

I would like for us, therefore, to analyze this text by very simply considering:

The ways in which He must increase; Followed by the ways in which we must decrease. And then we'll consider how these two things are actually related to each other.

I. How Christ Must Increase

Christ must increase in our estimate of His greatness. John saw Him as great in His power and authority. Look at the words of v. 31 *He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is*

above all. And then look at v. 35: *The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.*

In John's day, the Emperor of Rome would have been seen as the greatest figure of power and authority. Yet John recognized that Christ's power and authority went far above and beyond any earthly ruler. *He that cometh from above is above all.* So far does Christ's greatness in His sovereign majesty exceed all earthly powers that we're told in Isa. 40:15 that *the nations are like a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance.* So far does His greatness exceed the greatness of the rulers of this world that we are told in Phil. 2:9 that *His name is above every name, so much so that every knee should bow to that name of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.*

When we look upon people in this world that we admire, and respect, and exalt, there's always a danger of overestimating the greatness of that person. Sooner or later that person's weaknesses will show and he will prove the expression that *even the best of men are but men at best.* But when it comes to Christ, no such danger exists. We can never overestimate the greatness of His Sovereign power and authority. His power is omnipotent and He rules with perfect wisdom. The danger we face is the danger of underestimating or doubting the greatness of His authority and might. We must therefore ever be striving to increase our estimate of His greatness, recognizing that we cannot formulate too high a view of who He is.

But not only did John see Him as great in His authority and power but He saw Him as great in His purpose and work. Recall the words of John the Baptist earlier in John's gospel the very first time Christ was revealed to him: *Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.*

Here is a declaration of the greatness of Christ's purity – *the lamb of God.* That Passover lamb had to be spotless and such a lamb would point to Christ who was holy, harmless, and undefiled by sin. And because of His pristine purity He could and would take up the cause of the sinner's salvation by *taking away the sin of the world.* Here is the greatness of His atoning death – Great enough to remove the sin of the world – sufficient in its value to rescue anyone and everyone that would lay hold on Him for salvation. You think of the multitude of sins committed by a single sinner – indeed consider the multitude of your own sins, every inappropriate word you've uttered, every failure on your part to say what you should have said, every evil thought that you've harbored in your heart, not to mention the actual deeds you've performed, or failed to perform.

We're over our heads in sin. The world is flooded with sin. Nothing short of eternity in hell can suffice to satisfy the justice of God for our sin – but now look away to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. His atoning death is sufficient to remove your sins and mine and the whole world's. It's no wonder His salvation is called *so great salvation.* And if we would say as John the Baptist said: *He must increase,* then we must be ever striving to grasp the greatness of His purpose and work. Strive to come to grips

with His righteousness. Strive to lay hold of the length and breadth and depth and height of His condescending love that brought Him down from above in order to save sinners like you and like me. So Christ must increase in our estimate of His greatness – the greatness of His authority and power, and the greatness of His purpose and work.

And then consider that He must increase as the object of our affections. Look at v. 29 *He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.* Christ so increased in the life of John the Baptist that John could call himself *the friend of the bridegroom* – the best man, as it were. Now a great political statesman may earn our loyalty and respect, but it's a loyalty and respect that comes from a distance. A great star in the sports arena may earn our admiration, but we are no closer to him than a spectator. A fair and honest employer may win our diligence and dedication to our labor, but we recognize that our dealings with him and his with us are within the sphere of business and profit. It is only those who are near and dear that can lay claim to our personal affections. And this is where Christ stood to John, and this is where He stands before you and me – as one who is near and dear.

You think of the tremendous condescension that is here manifested by Christ. Here is the very Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Here is the One exalted above all. Here is the One that the very angels of heaven must cover their faces to approach. He condescends to call us friends. *Henceforth I call you not servants,* He says in Jn. 15:15. Oh, it were glory for rebellious and hell bound sinners to ascend that high, so as to be called servants – but He says: *I have called you friends.* Such wondrous condescension demands an increase in our affections for Him.

But we could go even further, for not only are we friends, but we are His bride. The invisible church made up of those who are true believers are termed in Scripture – *the bride, the Lamb's wife.* And the intimacy of the marriage union is designed to picture the closeness and the affection that should exist between Christ and His people.

And at this point we should all be challenged to see Christ increased in our affections. What if we treated our spouses the way we are sometimes prone to treat Christ? What if we neglected and ignored them the way we sometimes ignore Christ? In the bond of marriage there is the blessing of sharing the most personal things – our blessings, our heartaches, our complaints, our questions. – Christ desires that we share those things with Him and He in turn desires to share His secrets with us. So we read in Ps. 91:1 *He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.* And in Ps. 25:14 *The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.* This is the language of closeness between those that are more than friends.

He must increase then, in our estimate of His greatness. He must increase as the object of our affections. Before leaving this point let's consider one more thing and that is how He must increase in the aim of our zeal.

And here is where John the Baptist becomes most admirable as a character in the New Testament. His ministry had reached its peak. The crowds were beginning to dwindle as more and more of his followers left him to follow Christ. From a human point of view you could call him a *has-been*. And yet the aim of his zeal to the very end of his days was to point people to Christ. We find him in this chapter still baptizing the smaller crowds in preparation for Christ. We find him expounding the greatness of Christ to his puzzled followers who were still jealous for his prominence. Soon he would be imprisoned, and from the dungeon cell he would be sending his disciples to Christ.

The aim of his zeal was to make men followers of Christ. And if Christ is to be increased – then this must be our aim also. It must be the cause that consumes us the way Christ was consumed with jealousy for His Father’s house, the way Christ’s meat and drink was to do the will of His Father. *Of the increase of His government there shall be no end*, Isaiah tells us. And the increase of His government has been committed to His people whose task it must be to labor to see Him enthroned in every heart. How zealous are you for His cause? Do desire His increase? Then you must take up His cause and demonstrate by your life and proclaim from your lips His glory and His Gospel.

So Christ must be increased in our estimate of His greatness. He must be increased as the object of our affections. He must be increased as the aim of our zeal. We come now to consider the second part of the text. For not only must we consider how Christ must increase but also:

II. How We Must Decrease

And once again John the Baptist sets a tremendous example for us. You may recall how when John was first interrogated by the Pharisees concerning his identity and ministry he said to them that there was one coming after him: *whose shoe’s latchet he was not worthy to unloose* (Jn. 1:27). The thing to keep in mind is how that interrogation came at the very height of John’s popularity and yet we find him already manifesting by his life and testimony the truth of his words: *He must increase, but I must decrease*. The first way then, that believers must decrease is in their sense of self-worth or self-righteousness.

I realize that this sounds heretical in a day such as ours when the mentality is very prevalent that says we must increase in our self-esteem. And even in some Christian circles the emphasis in the classrooms and from the pulpit is that Christians must boost their sense of self-worth.

The danger to this mentality is that the power of the Gospel is completely nullified by this kind of thinking. Salvation begins with the recognition of our sinfulness, not our righteousness. Salvation begins with the recognition that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags before a thrice holy God. We should have the self worth of a filthy rag. And to those who will not descend to that level – Christ has nothing to say to them. The Pharisees were very fond of flaunting their self righteousness before their viewers, and Christ’s word to them was *I am come to call sinners to repentance*. They completely cut themselves off from Christ’s purpose and work by holding onto their self-righteousness.

How would it be if you were to visit downtown Indianapolis and see a wealthy man offering a brand new leather coat with a fleece lining to a homeless man who possessed nothing but a thin, worn-out and tattered jacket? You would marvel if that homeless man said *no, my jacket is quite sufficient thank you*. And yet this is the way sinners treat Christ when they insist on holding on to their own self-righteousness instead of exchanging it for the righteousness of Christ that is freely offered to them through the gospel.

Salvation, begins, therefore, with a decrease in our own self-righteousness. The Gospel calls us down so that Christ may lift us up. If we lift ourselves up, we deny the Gospel. This is true of salvation initially.

But it's also true for Christians continually. Peter tells us in his first epistle 5:5 that we're *to be clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble*. As the believer realizes what he was and what he is apart from Christ he should be of all men the most humble. *Where is boasting?* – Paul asks in Rom. 3:27 *It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith*. There's simply no place for it.

I find it amusing at times to be faced with the accusation that Christians must be very proud and presumptuous to say that they know that they're on their way to heaven. In the minds of many non-Christians that's something you can't know until you die. And it will only be true then if your good deeds outweigh your bad ones. To say you know you're on your way heaven, therefore is the very essence of self-righteousness. You're saying in effect that you know you're good enough to get there.

But the wonder of the Gospel is that the Christian's assurance of a sure place in heaven is not based upon his confidence that he has been or will be good enough to get there. It's based, rather, on his willingness to surrender all self-righteousness and then by faith receive Christ's righteousness. Ours is a confidence that is gained through humility, not through self-righteousness. So we must decrease in our sense of self-worth and self-righteousness. I like the refrain in the hymn that says: *This is my story, to God be the glory; I'm only a sinner – saved by grace*.

And as this decrease is evident in your life, God's grace and peace and joy in salvation will be your portion. So there must be a decrease in self-worth, or self-righteousness.

There must also be a decrease in self-promotion. This is what stands out in this passage concerning the John the Baptist. His followers were leaving him to follow Christ. His ministry was coming to a close and he could see it. Now you take that same situation and transport it a couple of centuries to the present day and you might discover a deacon or an elder's meeting in which this current crisis is being discussed. *What should we do?* – one elder may say to a modern day John. *The crowds are getting smaller, the people are going somewhere else*. And without bothering to find out where that other church stands on the Gospel or what kind of message is being preached there, instead the reaction would be: *We need to change the music, and quite being so formal, and run some advertisements, maybe even hire a consulting firm to find out how we can turn this thing around*. And the Pastor may report that he's received in the mail a brochure about a seminar that's designed to

help do just that. It's refreshing to read in Scripture of John the Baptist who stands in stark contrast to this kind of thinking. *My ministry doesn't have to continue* he says in effect, *all that's important is that Christ is glorified, and men and women are following Him.*

Oh that we might imitate John's attitude and John's desire. The FPC doesn't have to continue, but Christ must be glorified and our aim must be to make men and women followers of Him. We could broaden the scope of our application to include many things: Your prosperity doesn't have to continue, but Christ has to be glorified. Your health doesn't have to continue, but Christ has to be glorified. Your status and position in life doesn't have to continue, but Christ must be glorified – and if He is glorified in the termination of a ministry, or the decrease of my health and wealth and well being, then our heart-felt cry should be *Amen! – He must increase, but I must decrease.*

Let's think finally for a moment on:

III. How this Increase and Decrease are related to each other.

For Christ to increase, we must decrease, and as Christ is increased, we surely will decrease. The two things work together. And yet I wouldn't want you to leave the study of this passage this morning with the wrong impression about how this comes about. We don't find John the Baptist with a martyr's spirit or tone of self sympathy saying *well that's okay. I desire for Christ to have the glory, so I'll just settle for a place in the back somewhere, and I'll get by somehow. Don't worry about me. I'll be alright.*

John made no attempt to afflict himself with a self-induced humility. Quite the contrary – he rejoiced in Christ. Look at v. 29 *He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.*

It would be wrong for you to leave the place of worship this morning with the determination that you're going to beat yourself up more in order to bring upon yourself the needed decrease that leads to Christ's increase. That's the monastic mentality of a Martin Luther in the Augustinian convent flogging himself and starving himself as well as deceiving himself into thinking that if he just engaged in enough self inflicted punishment God would be pleased with him.

All we need do is make John's practice our practice – standing and walking with the Bridegroom, hearing His words and becoming absorbed with His greatness, reading our Bibles with the aim of focusing on His greatness, while rejoicing to hear His words. And as we take the time to fellowship with Him through prayer and in the Scriptures then we'll know something of what Peter describes in his epistle – that day-star arising in our hearts. And as our perception of His greatness grows, then we'll be lost in His light just like a candle is lost in the light of the sun. This is how you can tell true humility has been obtained. You find yourself rejoicing in Christ.

This practice coupled with the practice of submission to His sovereign rule will bring about His increase and our decrease. John was willing to submit to Christ. He tells us in v.

27 a man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. He recognized his ministry and the acceptance of his ministry as being heaven sent gifts. And now if his ministry had fulfilled its purpose, then he was willing to submit to whatever God and Christ had for him. His increase calls for your and my submission, even if that submission takes everything from us – and in John’s case it would take away more than simply his vocation. Isn’t it interesting how v. 24 notes *For John was not yet cast into prison.* In a short while he would be cast into prison. And not long after that he would be executed while in that prison.

We might be tempted to wonder whether from John’s vantage point his ministry was worth it when his decrease saw his ministry dwindle, and then himself unjustly imprisoned, and then through the treacherous manipulating of Herod by his wife he would be beheaded and his head presented to the daughter of Herod because of her provocative entertainment that so pleased Herod that he offered her whatever she wanted.

And yet the tribute that John would receive from Christ would be a tribute that any follower of Christ would rightly covet. We hear that tribute in Mt. 11:11 *Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.* I dare say that such a commendation coming from the Ruler of the universe and the Savior of sinners will make any sacrifice for Christ well worth it.

So He must increase, but I must decrease. Let’s fellowship with Him and worship Him with that aim. I dare say that the more we’re taken up with Him the less we’ll even think about ourselves and true humility, I believe, consists not in self degradation but rather self forgetfulness. Let’s strive to increase our estimate of His greatness. Let’s strive to make Him the chief object of our affections. Let’s strive to make Him the aim of our zeal. These are things that lead to His increase. And let’s do away with the pride of self-righteousness and self-promotion, and let’s joyfully submit to His sovereign rule and purpose. This is what leads to our decrease.

And the way you’ll know that this whole sanctifying process is working is when you, like John can say *this my joy therefore is fulfilled.* May the Lord grant you that joy as Christ increases and you decrease.