
John 3:22-36

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.

"He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all." What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true." For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand." He

who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

There are a number of things going on in this passage so we will take them piece by piece and try and understand what John wants us to receive from this section of his story.

John 3:22

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.

I don't want to run too fast by this introductory verse for it holds a precious gem that we want to capture. Jesus tarried or spent time with those He discipled. Believe me, there is no other way to make disciples than to be personally invested in another's life. You simply must spend time with someone if you are going to effectively disciple them; there really is no short cut. We are called in ***Matthew 28:19*** to go and make disciples of all the world. This concept, however, is altogether different than just witnessing to people and gaining converts. Further, making disciples requires something more than just providing Bible studies, prayer meetings, conferences, and retreats for people to attend. I am afraid that the church has too often opted for structural programs and events versus personal hands on investment in the lives of others.

I have found that unless you take the time to really know someone, all you can do is just preach at them. But when you start to understand how someone is wired, how they think, why they do the things they do, you will start to have the insight to

know how to navigate the Word of God into their heart in such a way that they are able to receive it. In essence, you need to first become a student of those that God has given into your care in order to effectively teach them. If you approach making disciples as if you are the learned “teacher” and they just need to follow you and listen to you because you have the credentials, the position, or the title, you will be marginally effective.

However, to be a good disciple maker you must be willing to get your hands dirty in the all the personal junk that a person carries around with them so you can help show them how and why they should abandon the junk in exchange for the things of God. You must pay attention, listen, and understand why they are carrying around their junk in the first place and, most importantly, you must constantly seek the Lord and ask Him for the wisdom you need to best serve the person you are discipling. All of this means that your life will naturally be inconvenienced and a piece of your life must be surrendered for theirs.

In addition to time, making disciples also requires your intention. It is not a haphazard process where you just throw a lot of God stuff out there hoping that some of it will stick; rather, I believe it to be a very personal and intentional process whereby you communicate the truths of God to a person as they are capable of receiving them. This is the pattern we will see throughout Jesus’ ministry as He taught and instructed those who followed Him. With even just a casual reading you should be able to understand that Jesus had a plan and like a wise farmer He tilled the soil and nurtured the seedlings until they matured and could themselves produce other disciples.

I know that some of you are starting the process of discipling others and I am excited to see what God does. I hope that within a year every one of you will be busy discipling another. But remember, people will only follow where you lead. So

if you are not *yielded* to the Lord in an area in your life, it is unlikely that those who are following you will themselves *yield*.

A final comment about this whole process of making disciples, it cannot be about you, about your ministry, or even about your church. And, it is definitely not an opportunity for you to look to get your ego stroked by being the “go to” guy or gal when it comes to Biblical knowledge. I am cautioning you because this is an area where I have seen the enemy be very effective in capturing unwary believers. Be on guard, be on the alert, and know the enemy’s tactics. And remember, the only way to successfully withstand and rebuff an attack of the enemy is to be fully clothed in the armor of God fully protected behind the shield of faith.

John 3:23-27

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."

John had shifted his ministry from Judea in the South about 30 miles or so north right on the edge of Galilee because there was enough water in that area to continue with his baptism ministry. The gospel writer tells us that John had not yet been thrown in prison so we will understand that this was still early in Jesus’ ministry. All the other gospels jump ahead to the time after John was arrested and

do not provide any detail of Jesus' early Judean ministry which at this time was very similar to John's ministry. Both were declaring that the kingdom of God was at hand, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and were conducting baptisms.

John then seems to just throw in this random fact about a discussion between John's disciples and a Jew about ritual cleansing. But given the response of these disciples when they came back to John, I think that this discussion must have turned a little personal and a little ugly as so often happens when people discuss religious issues. I am sure that John's disciples had the upper hand and were easily fielding the comments thrown at them until out of frustration this Jew made it personal. Maybe the discussion ended with something like the following:

If you think John's interpretations are so right, then tell us, why is everyone abandoning your "great" teacher and following this other guy who is not only baptizing but is doing miracles to boot.

Yes, this Jew probably pulled out the comparison card and the ugly face of jealousy was aroused in John's disciples. Imagine, after 400 years of silence, God brings a new message to the people of Israel through John the Baptist. These disciples had given up everything to follow John and participate in his ministry which was dynamic, powerful, effective, controversial, and which basically stuck it to the man. They saw John go face-to-face with the religious leaders of the day and they were convinced that his words were true and were from God. They found themselves in the center of the action; they had everyone's attention. But now this man whom John testified about was stealing the show.

Their thoughts naturally turned inward to the "me" as they began to be concerned about their ministry, their future, their place. I am sure they were thinking of the personal sacrifice they had made in following John and wondering

if it was all for naught. They had been drinking from the cup of power and prestige and lost sight of the fundamental purpose of why John was in ministry in the first place. I find it interesting that they did not stop and connect the dots between John's testimony about Jesus being the Son of God and what Jesus was doing. This just shows you how easy it is to make ministry about the "me" and succumb to the enemy's temptations. Please take note and be very wary.

John, on the other hand, does not seem to be moved by this temptation; he was ready for it. I love how he responded: "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven." Or as the New Living states it: "God in heaven appoints each person's work." In this one statement John said a theological mouth full and communicated the following principles:

- God assigns each person's tasks.
- God's plan is massive and involves so many people, that each person needs to be responsible to complete the job that God has assigned to him.
- God is the one who is in total control and is responsible for results; we are just responsible to do what He instructs regardless of the results.

John saw the slippery slope of the "me" that his disciples were starting to travel and he wanted to give them a critical lesson regarding ministry and the humility of loving God. Let me ask you a question. Have you ever stopped to consider why John did not just close up shop and go and follow Jesus? After all, this was the Messiah the One of whom John was not even worthy to unite His sandals. I know that if it was me, I would have wanted to follow Christ for He had not just the

words of truth, but also the words of life. But here we find John at the river continuing on with his baptism ministry.

You see, John was not about the “me;” he lived to fulfill the will of God in his life. John clearly understood what God had asked him to do and he was not going to deviate from those instructions unless and until God changed his marching orders. Therefore, he pushed forward and continued in his work notwithstanding the fact that his popularity was decreasing and people were flocking to Jesus.

Notice that John did not convene a staff meeting to discuss what they must do to improve their performance and up their numbers. His team did not stop and analyze his message or how he was delivering it and suggest changes hoping to increase the overall palatability to his audience so they could attract a wider spectrum of followers. They did not tell him to dump the camel hair clothes and locust diet and fix the do. No, market success did not matter to John; he knew that he was accountable to God and not to the marketplace.

I find this very amazing. John totally entrusted himself to God and realized that God was in control of the details – yes, the details – of John’s life. John knew that his God was a very personal God and had given him very specific instructions. He understood clearly what those instructions were and he knew that the ups and downs of his ministry were not his to control; they were God’s responsibility.

John had a remarkable grasp of the truth; as such, he was able to freely minister without intertwining the call of God with his own ego and personal identity in the way that most people tend to do. This is why he could be at rest when his disciples were getting seriously concerned about the numbers. You see, just like today, in those days people equated professional, financial, and material success with the “blessing” of God and believed that if you were doing it “right” the blessing would be yours and conversely if you were doing it wrong, there would be little to no

“blessing” on your life. But that is simply a bold faced lie of the enemy. God is responsible for the outcomes in a person’s life. Sometimes it is filled with what we would consider to be the “blessing” of God and other times it simply is not. I mean look at King David’s life for example, it was filled with ups and some serious downs; yet, God said that David was a man after His own heart. So you cannot correlate doing it “right” and so called earthly “blessing.” John understood that his numbers had to decrease and in fact he wanted them to decrease if people were turning from their sin and following Jesus. We will find that instead of sadness and sorrow, this actually gave John great joy.

Do you understand how radical this is? John did not live by what he could see or reason; he lived by faith and what he understood to be the plan of God for his life. This is so radical. The principles upon which John lived stand in stark contrast to much of what has been taught in Western Christianity about ministry, the will of God, success, and blessing and is counter intuitive to much of what has been ingrained into our beings about being productive, responsible, and the “pull ourselves up from the boot-straps” kind of people so we can experience personal and material success.

The pressure we have in our society to be successful and part of something that is considered by others to be meaningful is intense. If you are not careful and are not keenly aware to protect yourself from this pressure, it can sweep you into its wave and you will find yourself doing things that are ridiculous and demonstrate that you put more trust in the world of marketing and finance than you do the sovereign will of God. It is so sad, but I could tell you so many stories of how this mindset has infected and corrupted ministry after ministry. Believe me, this is one of the enemies most successful tricks and the funny thing is that it is not even very clever; it is just a big fat lie that people choose to follow.

To live free from these trappings takes a very solid understanding of core Biblical truths and it takes an active faith to live those truths. Again:

- 1) All our assignments come from God
- 2) We are to know what God has asked us to do (which requires intimate fellowship with God) and continue to do it until God changes the plan
- 3) God is absolutely sovereign over our lives; therefore, the results of fulfilling His will are His to determine.

But living this way takes faith – an active belief in the truth – and a spirit that is willing to *yield* to His wisdom and His ways. Do you realize how much pressure is taken off our lives when we live this way? It puts the burden on God and keeps us in that place where we can stay maniacally focused on seeking Him, which will result in our knowing His will for our lives (See *Psalms 25*). Living this way keeps our eyes off the “me” and crossing that line whereby we make ministry about us. Rather, it firmly fixes our eyes on God believing that He knows what He is doing with our lives. This is radical. Even as I say it there is a part of me that cringes.

John 3:28-29

"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.

In addition to John once again pointing out the fact that he is not the Christ but Jesus is (as this whole discussion is about what Jesus was doing), I also see an interesting exchange that has taken place in his heart: pride for joy. Instead of sulking about what is happening with his ministry, instead of wanting more, he finds joy in the fact that God is furthering his amazing plan of redemption and the time is near when the groom will gather the bride. I love that about God. He never asks us to surrender something without fully planning on filling us with more of Himself, in this instance, His joy.

I want you to understand something. When you know the will of God for your life and you are doing exactly what God has asked you to do, there is peace, rest, and joy. The times may be good or they may be bad, but just that assurance that you are smack dab center in the middle of the will of God is so comforting. I don't know how so many Christians live their lives outside of that place. So many people are in ministry doing what they think they are supposed to do, but the fruit of their life does not shout of His joy and His rest. Being busy for God and doing ministry is so different than being in the will of God and the distinction is readily apparent. One comes with peace and joy whether or not you are succeeding or failing in the eyes of others, and the other one does not.

Let's look at John's assignment. John was the friend of the bride groom, or the best man, which next to the bride and groom was the most important position in a Jewish wedding. Jesus is the groom and we—believers—are His bride and John was assigned the privileged role of announcing the coming of the groom. If you remember our little history lesson in Chapter 2 when we studied the wedding at Cana, after the engagement the groom took a year or so to make all the necessary arrangements for both the wedding and the future life that he would have with his bride. Then when he was finally ready he would gather up his group of friends and

they would start their journey to the bride's home to collect her and her entourage and bring all of them back to his father's home for the wedding. The best man would go before him and announce that the groom is coming giving everyone an opportunity to quickly get ready for his arrival. This was the job John had been assigned; thus, he was telling people to repent from their sins and turn to God for the kingdom of God is at hand, for the groom has arrived and is ready to collect his bride. But like in any wedding, inevitably the attention switches away from the best man to the groom.

John 3:30

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John understood that it was the groom who gets the girl, not the best man. So he knew that once he made the announcement of the groom's arrival, his role would naturally diminish. After all, Jesus is the Messiah, he is not. But now try and step into this story and the real life dynamic that was going on. John was a man just like you and me and I am sure that he battled a lot of emotions and doubts on his way to reconciling himself with this truth. Just like you and me, he had to take his thoughts and emotions captive to the obedience of the Word of God. And it is obvious that John chose to punish and remove all that was inside of him which spoke out against the truth.

This was also a vital lesson that he wanted his disciples to learn. Jesus' role, prominence, and purposes in our lives must ever increasingly dominate and prevail whereas our desires, our expectations, and our pride must continually be discarded. I love the fact that John was not going to sit back and watch his disciples be

overcome by the enemy's lies. He took very serious his role of disciple making so he told them a truth that if followed would be a key to their experiencing more and more of God: "He must increase, I must decrease."

Let's take this in the context of the *New Creation* and our *Old Man*. We have spent a lot of time talking about what it means to live from the *New Creation* as opposed to our *Old Man*. Here is a quick recap. According to the Bible, our *Old Man* is evil, rotten through and through, full of deception and lies, and hopelessly sick. For those of you who might have missed the last couple of weeks the references for this truth are found in ***Job 15:14-16; Ecclesiastes 9:3; Romans 8:6-8; Galatians 5:17; and Jeremiah 17:9***. Believe me the raw truth about our condition is not pretty which is why most of us would rather ignore this reality and live in delusion; which, by the way, is to be expected if as Jeremiah says our hearts are more deceitful than all else. We convince ourselves that we are really ok and not that bad; besides, others are way worse. But from God's perspective our *Old Man* is simply not redeemable, He does not even try, which is why He had to make everything new and we have to find new life in Him.

Those who have looked to the cross and trusted Jesus for salvation have been given a new aspect to their being which we have been calling the *New Creation*. It is when we learn to live from our *New Creation* that Jesus increases and we decrease. This is really a zero sum game, there is either increase or decrease and there is no safe happy middle ground. The idea that we can live in some kind of balance or status quo is a delusion; things are always moving one way or another – Jesus said you are either gathering with Him or scattering.

We must therefore learn to reject the voice of our *Old Man* and instead learn to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God—trusting Him with our

lives. And more than reject, we must learn to hate our *Old Man*, truly hate him. We must hate him so violently that we are willing to go to war against him.

I have asked a few of you to study the story of King Josiah in **2 Kings 22;23** because this man's life gives us a picture of what it means to hate our *Old Man*. As you know, Israel and Judah rarely followed God and their history is replete with king after king leading them into idolatry and wickedness. But every once in a while there arose a king who desired God and wanted the nation to return to the Lord and seek His will. Josiah was one of these good kings. When he ruled Judah, he did far more than just lament the condition of his nation and campaign for their return to the Lord. No! He put action behind his beliefs and he went to war.

He destroyed every idol, tore down all the high places of worship, and executed all those who did not solely worship the Lord, and he continued until he cleansed the land. His actions were aggressive, violent, and unrelenting. Like Josiah, we must remove, burn, carry away, grind to dust, tear down, defile, destroy, smash, desecrate, crush, demolish, and execute everything that is not of God. This is the way that He increases and we decrease.

Remember, there is no middle ground. Either what is in our life, and that which flows from our life, finds its origination and expression from God in the *New Creation* or it is evil and corrupt and originates from the *Old Man*. It is either or – we are either increasing or decreasing. But if you do not truly believe that the condition of your *Old Man* is so horrible and wicked, you will not take aggressive, violent and unrelenting action; and you will be unable to legitimately declare that He must increase and I must decrease. Oh sure you can speak the words with feigned religious conviction, but it is altogether something different to put action behind your beliefs and go to war—for that is truly an expression of faith, something that John clearly understood.

John 3:31-35

He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. For he is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands.

John then brings His instruction to a powerful climax by making this awesome testimony to the Lordship of Christ; once again, declaring that Jesus is God. Someone needs to start keeping count of how many times this gospel declares that Jesus is God—it is unbelievable the number and how blatant the claims are. Anyway, Jesus is above all and is greater than all else. No one compares. He came from above and He testifies about what He has seen and heard, but sadly so few believe His words.

This statement is not referring just to unbelievers. It also refers to everyone who has chosen to prioritize the voice of their *Old Man* over the voice of God and has decided that they have a greater wisdom and authority for their own life than does God. This is talking about us – you and me and the wrong belief and unbelief that prevent us from walking in the humility of truth.

Yet, it is amazing, when you “accept His testimony” and let the Word of God be authoritative in your life then you will come to realize how true His words really are and no one will be able to convince you otherwise. For example, once you accept the truth about your *Old Man*, it is so easy to understand why we have to

live from our *New Creation* continually presenting ourselves to Christ. It's as if once you believe the truth and apply it in your life, your eyes get opened and then you can see more and more of the truth and you wonder why you did not see it in the first place. What John says reminds me of a verse in Matthew:

Matthew 13:12

To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them.

This is why faith must be active. You have to yield your will to His and then He will add to you more and more. His Word will become so alive to you; your experience will be nothing short of awesome.

John proclaims that Jesus has been sent by God, He speaks the words of God, and the Spirit of God is fully expressed through Him. With this being the case, please tell me why you still choose to reject His wisdom, counsel, direction, and plan for your life? Why do you hold on so tight believing you have to figure it out? Let go of yourself; decrease so He might increase. It is the only way to experience His life. The fruit of living for your *Old Man* is nothing but ugliness and everyone who knows you and has experienced you can attest to that reality. Sorry, that is just the truth. I know we don't like to hear it, but if we are honest we must agree with the testimony of Jesus about these things.

John then tells his disciples that the Father loves the Son and has put everything into His hands. This is like the exclamation mark or the summation of this critical lesson. If everything is in the hands of the Son, if all rule and authority over the

affairs of men as well as all of creation has been turned over to Jesus, then not only must Jesus be God, but we can rest for every part of our life is in His hands. This is why John is not freaking out over the status of his ministry. This powerful truth should make it so easy for you to abandon your *Old Man* and live from the New Creation doing only what God tells you to do, saying only what He tells you to say, and going only where He tells you to go, and then resting that the results are His and His alone.

John 3:36

And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment.

Then just in case there is any lasting shred of doubt in the hearts of His disciples John makes a statement of ultimate finality. In other words, there is no other way, there is no other system, there is no other philosophy, and there is no hope except in Jesus Christ. Everything rests on the Son and only in Him is there life; everything else leads to death.

Let's Pray.