“HE MUST BECOME GREATER; I MUST BECOME LESS”

John 3:22–36

Key Verse: 3:30

“He must become greater; I must become less.”

Would you like to grow, or shrink? When we want to lose weight, we’d like to shrink down to a skinnier size. But mostly, we’d like to grow. Children would like to grow tall, or grow in muscles. Growth in many ways is good—in maturity, or in wisdom. Many would like to grow financially. Organizations would like to grow in numbers. Churches would, too. People like for their reputation to grow. In today’s passage we find that Jesus’ ministry is growing, whereas John the Baptist’s ministry is shrinking. John’s disciples are upset and come and tell him about it. Then he says something amazing: “He must become greater; I must become less.” In history many Christians have embraced this statement as their life motto. It’s on posters, coffee cups, t-shirts and bookmarks. Today we’d like to think about what it means that Jesus becomes greater and I become less, how that is even possible, and why it’s so important in our Christian life. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his words today.

Look at verse 22. Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem. He had just finished a conversation with Nicodemus at night. Before that, he had been performing miracles in Jerusalem, and many had believed in his name. But here it says he withdraws to the Judean countryside with his disciples. Why did Jesus do that? It says it was to “spend some time with them.” Though he ministered to crowds, and to individuals, Jesus was mainly focused on his disciples. He was spending time with them to build them up, so that their faith in him would reach maturity, and so that they could someday carry on his ministry after he was gone. It also says that they baptized. Obviously people had followed Jesus out there. Jesus’ disciples baptized them, as a way to help them repent of their sins.

Look at verse 23. We’re not exactly sure where these places were, but they seem to be not far from where Jesus and his disciples were. Jesus had already begun his ministry, but John the Baptist had not stopped his. And why not? It literally says because people kept coming to be baptized. And, there was plenty of water. It meant it was still a good time to help people who were seeking to get right with God. John was continuing his ministry for as long as God kept sending people, as long as God allowed. Look at verse 24. This tells us that John’s ministry on earth would soon be drawing to a close. John the Baptist would be put in prison, not for doing anything wrong, but because there were certain people in power who were refusing to repent.

Look at verse 25. The argument is over “ceremonial washing.” It seems that this Jew thinks baptism is not necessary, that all people need to do for purity is follow the tradition of ceremonial washing. John’s disciples believe people need more, that they need a radical repentance that baptism symbolized. In any case, this Jew is emboldened to come and argue because now the numbers of people coming to John have diminished so much. When ministry is booming, it’s harder to criticize, but when it shrinks, it’s much easier to come and find fault.

How do John’s disciples respond to this? Read verse 26. They’re clearly upset. It’s not really about this silly argument over ceremonial washing. What really bothers them is that Jesus’ ministry is growing and theirs is shrinking. They’re upset that Jesus is gaining more and more disciples, and that his disciples are baptizing people now, taking away their jobs. John’s disciples seem silly, but they represent a tendency in us all. When others seem successful, we tend to get jealous and compare ourselves to them. It happens in ministry, but also in all kinds of life situations. Someone else looks great, but I don’t. Someone else achieves something in their career, but I don’t. Someone else gets married and has many beautiful children, but I don’t.

What does John say to his disciples? In verses 27–30 he teaches several things. Firstly, he teaches about God’s sovereignty. Read verse 27. Here, “from heaven” means “from God.” John is saying that ministry is in God’s hands. God is the one who gives a ministry to people, and God is the one who brings that ministry to an end. We can’t make ministry happen apart from God. Knowing that it was God who gave a growing ministry to Jesus, and who was reducing the ministry of John would help John’s disciples. Likewise, only when we accept God’s sovereignty can we overcome our jealousies and find peace.

Secondly, John reminds them of why he came. Read verse 28. John had not come as the Messiah; he’d come as the one “sent ahead of him” to prepare for his coming. It was only natural that people are now going to Jesus, the Messiah. At first this may seem like a minor point. But many people actually struggle with this, especially those in ministry. People often get confused that ministry is *for them. They* need a ministry to carry out. *They* need more sheep. But ministry is never about the person ministering; it’s about the people being ministered to, and, about leading them to the Messiah, Jesus, the only one who can really help them. If we’re secretly trying to enjoy people’s admiration or attention through ministry, we can’t really lead them to Jesus. Though his ministry had been very powerful and very popular, John never allowed it to go to his head; he always kept his heart focused on Jesus, the Messiah. So when his ministry shrank and people were going to Jesus, he wasn’t envious or depressed. In fact, quite the opposite.

To explain further, John gives his disciples an analogy. Read verse 29. In this scenario, the basic truth is stated first: “The bride belongs to the bridegroom.” She doesn’t belong to the bridegroom’s friend; she belongs to the bridegroom, right? In this analogy, Jesus is the bridegroom; John is the bridegroom’s friend, also known as the groomsman. In their culture there were two groomsmen, one for the bridegroom, the other for the bride. They would act as intermediaries between the unmarried couple, tend to their needs, introduce them at the wedding, and finally lead them to their bridal chamber. At the wedding the groomsman of the bridegroom would be listening for the bridegroom’s voice as he approached the place of the ceremony, singing. When the bridegroom finally arrived, the groomsman would get to fulfill his duty to introduce him to his bride. It was the greatest moment to get to introduce the bridegroom to his beautiful bride. A real friend of the bridegroom would be happy to do it. He also would be happy to get out of the way so that the bridegroom and bride, who belonged to each other, could finally enjoy each other’s company. How weird it would be if the groomsman tried to hold onto the bridegroom’s bride! Or be the center of attention at the wedding! John is not just not jealous of Jesus, that everyone is going to him; he’s actually “full of joy.” He even says his joy is “now complete.”

This tells us that there’s real joy in serving Jesus and in leading people to him. It’s the joy of seeing people find their true Messiah in Jesus. It’s the joy of seeing people finding a real solution to their sin problem, finding the deepest satisfaction that nothing and no one else can give. In life we can be joyful about many things. Like when our favorite team wins. Or when we get whatever it is that we wanted. Or when people finally recognize us. But the greatest joy there is is when we get to be a part of leading someone to Jesus. It’s the most significant thing that can happen in somebody’s life. When John saw people going to Jesus, he didn’t feel empty or sorry; he felt complete joy. He felt he’d led a life worth living. Every human being would like to do something significant with their lives, to make a difference in the world. But when life is all about me, my advancement, my enjoyment, my fulfillment, paradoxically, it ends up being meaningless. Even if we try to help people in some way, through education or health care or some other compassionate activity, it can feel empty when what we do doesn’t really solve anything. But if we’ve really led a person to Christ, something of eternal import has just happened. We’ve really impacted the world.

Read verse 30. This is John’s personal testimony; it’s bringing his ministry to a close; it’s pointing his disciples not to himself, but to Jesus. But it’s also a worthy life motto for every believer. Why do we need to grapple with this truth? It’s because we’re by nature so self-centered. We may not even be conscious of how self-centered we are. Even the best, most selfless people, are still in some way self-centered. Who are we really living for? Usually it’s for ourselves. But John was living for Jesus. He was doing his utmost to exalt Jesus. He genuinely wanted people to go to Jesus. It gave him the greatest joy, regardless of his personal situation. If we’re thinking of ourselves all the time, we can’t do that, we can’t be really be like him.

So how can Jesus become “greater” in our lives? It starts when we repent of focusing on ourselves. We’ve got to make a conscious effort each day to focus on Jesus. The other Gospels tell us of Jesus’ teaching: we each need to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. To do this, we need basic re-education. We need to learn to live for the sake of Jesus’ name, not for my own name. But this needs to happen from our hearts. It means we need to learn to delight in spending time with Jesus. We need to make it our personal goal to contemplate his glory, and to please him (2Co3:18; 5:9a). The more we do, the more we’re transformed into Christ-centered persons. The more we love him, the more we want to live for him, and the more we want others to know him, too. Ultimately this can’t happen with our human efforts; it can happen only when we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in us and let him change us.

Apostle Paul is a good example. Before meeting Christ, his name was Saul, meaning “the great one.” He was a Pharisee living for his own honor and glory, doing his utmost to impress people. But after meeting Jesus, he completely changed. He changed his name to “Paul,” “a small one.” He began living for Jesus’ honor and glory. He risked everything for Jesus. He gave up everything in life that was for his own personal gain (Php3:7,8). He confessed, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Php1:21). Though he suffered to live for Jesus, even being trapped in prison, his soul was full of joy. For Christ to become greater and us to become less usually involves some painful life choices and some painful sufferings. But when Christ increases in us, we have no regrets.

In verses 31–36 the author compares Christ to any person on earth, be it John the Baptist, the greatest prophet, or Nicodemus, the greatest man humanly. Really there’s no comparison, because Christ alone is from heaven. He speaks as one from heaven. He speaks the words of God, empowered by the Spirit of God. He enjoys a unique love relationship with God the Father. The Father has placed everything in his hands, meaning all his authority, his sovereign rule, and his kingdom. Some people refuse to accept Jesus’ testimony. But those who do realize that God is truthful. Read verse 36. We’re all under God’s wrath due to our sins. But instead of disobeying Jesus, we need to believe in him and obey him, so that we can have forgiveness and eternal life. Read verse 30 again. May God show us the most fulfilling, most joyful life of living for Jesus. May he help us cooperate with the Spirit so that Jesus can become greater and we become less.