

**THE SUPERIORITY OF JESUS' MINISTRY**  
(John 3:22-36)

We come now to a passage in which John the Baptist compares his ministry with the ministry of Jesus.

Some of John's disciples came to him with a little jealousy in their hearts when they saw that Jesus was baptizing and that all men were coming to him (John 3:26). This gave John a beautiful opportunity to instruct his disciples in the superiority of Jesus and the relative inferiority of John.

If this passage has a key verse, it may be,

*He must increase, but I must decrease.*

John 3:30

This message will be divided into two parts: The setting which gave rise to the conversation between John and his disciples and then John's instruction to his disciples. And so, first we consider,

The Setting Which Gave Rise to the Conversation between John and His Disciples

*After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.*

John 3:22, 23

Now it says, "After these things came Jesus." Up to this point, John has been presenting a chronological report of a few things that happened during the first couple of weeks of Christ's public ministry. Jesus appeared first at Bethany where John was baptizing (John 2:28). Then he went into Galilee where he found Philip (John 1:43). While in Galilee, Jesus went to a marriage feast (possibly a marriage of a relative) at which he turned water into wine (John 2:1-11). After this he went to Capernaum for a few days with his mother and brothers and disciples (John 2:12). Then, he went to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast where he cleansed the temple (John 2:13-22), performed many miracles

(John 2:23) and instructed Nicodemus in the fundamentals of salvation (John 3:1-21).

And so, it seems that the chronological progression continues because John says, "After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judea." There doesn't seem to be much of a time lapse between the discussion with Nicodemus and the events which follow because John the Baptist "was not yet cast into prison" (John 3:24).

So it seems that after the Passover Feast, Jesus left Jerusalem and went out somewhere into the rural area of Judea. Remember that Judea is the whole region in the southern part of Israel. It is named after tribe of Judah. Remember, when the kingdom of Israel divided after King Solomon's death, it divided into Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

And in Jesus' day, there was the region of Judah in the south which encompassed Jerusalem, the region of Samaria to the north of Judah and the region of Galilee to the north of Samaria. And it says that Jesus came into the land of Judea. This means that he left the city of Jerusalem and went out into the rural countryside.

You will notice here that already Jesus is shepherding his disciples around. They are following him wherever he goes. They were with him in Cana of Galilee when he turned water in wine (John 2:11). They were with him in Jerusalem when he cleansed the temple (John 2:17). And they now are with him in the countryside of Jerusalem. Already they have seen wondrous miracles and overwhelming evidence of his divine authority. And I am sure that they were receiving divine instruction from day to day.

You will notice that Jesus tarried with them (John 3:22). Here you have a simple statement, but what a profound blessing for these disciples. Only a handful of men on this earth were ever blessed with the privilege to tarry with Jesus. Remember, this is the spring of the year. They have just finished the Passover feast in April. The weather was mild and they tarried with Jesus.

How would you like to sit under a shade tree in springtime in the countryside, perhaps looking down from a

hillside on the beautiful city of Jerusalem in the distance, listening to God himself teach you about the things of heaven? How their hearts must have burned inside of them as they heard the words of God straight from the mouth of Jesus day after day. And they had Jesus all to themselves. Notice that it says,

*And there he tarried with them.*

Jesus did not go off to his room alone, but he tarried with his disciples. In this early part of his ministry and during his entire ministry, much of his focus was on his beloved disciples. Much of what he did was for their instruction. It was for their progressive sanctification. It was for the building up of their faith. And when he tarried, he tarried with them.

But even when he tarried in the rural areas he was busy. For it says,

*And there he tarried with them and baptized.*

It appears that for a short time the ministry of Jesus overlapped the ministry of John the Baptist. And it was a transition period. It was a transition from the forerunner to the King; from the messenger to the True Messenger. And I suppose that the baptism of Jesus was in these early days an extension of the baptism of John. It too was a baptism of repentance. It was a preparatory baptism. Obviously, Jesus had not yet died. He had not yet risen again. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon and into believers. And therefore, Jesus and John engaged in the same baptism at the same time. And they baptized those who would repent of their sins.

Of course, you will note that Jesus himself did not baptize. Only his disciples baptized (John 4:2). I suspect there are a couple of reasons that Jesus did not baptize. First of all, he probably did not want strife and jealousies to arise when some would boast that they were baptized by Jesus himself. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Jesus would be the baptizer in a more spiritual way later.

*I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not*

*worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.*

Matthew 3:11

John's baptism was an earthly baptism. It was a ritual. But Jesus would later engage in a very spiritual and heavenly baptism, when he would immerse all believers in the Holy Spirit.

Notice that John was simultaneously baptizing in Aenon near to Salim. Now the location of Aenon has been lost in history. Eusebius, a Christian historian in the third century AD, refers to it as being 58 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was probably on the west side of the Jordan river. And John was baptizing there.

Now John chose Aenon for his ministry for a very specific reason.

*And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there.*

John 3:23

This would seem to support the doctrine of baptism by immersion if the reason he camped by water was for the purpose of baptism. Obviously, you could baptize hundreds of people with a small amount of water if you sprinkled them. And so, not much water would be needed for sprinkling or even pouring.

But some people argue that much water was needed for other purposes. People coming from outlying areas would need water for their camels, water for bathing and water for all kinds of uses. So, the matter can be debated from both sides. It seems to me that without further discussion, the verse implies that much water was needed for the purpose of baptism. Look at the last phrase of the verse. It doesn't say that people came and camped and watered their camels. Rather, it says they came and were baptized. If that is the reason much water was needed, then that lends heavy support to the proper method of baptism being immersion.

The time frame of this passage is emphasized in verse 24 when the Apostle tells us,

*For John was not yet cast into prison.*

John 3:24

This would seem to be obvious, since John was baptizing in Aenon. So, it is inserted here for emphasis. If you study the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), you will find that they cover events in the ministry of Jesus which begin after John is imprisoned (See Matthew 4:12; Mark 1:14). But the Apostle John emphasizes that these events are occurring before the imprisonment of John.

Now to further set the stage, some of John's disciples got into a theological discussion with some of the Jews about the Jewish rites of purification.

*Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying.*

John 3:25

We are not told about the nature of the question. Maybe the question was about John's baptism. Remember that purification from ceremonial uncleanness was a huge issue in Jewish life. They had to wash every time they touched something unclean. Purification was a major issue under the Law. And so, when John immersed people in the waters of baptism, I am sure that this raised questions of purification in the minds of the Jews. What did all this mean? Why is John baptizing? What is the meaning of John's baptism? Is this spelled out in the Mosaic Law? What purification is this?

And the disciples came to John with this question. Now in the course of their discussion with John about this issue of purification, they asked him about Jesus.

*And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.*

John 3:26

John's disciples remembered that John had pointed at Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). And now they have discovered that Jesus is also baptizing and all men come to him. Now when it says "all men come to him," it that the

disciples recognized the growing popularity of Jesus. Men were flocking to Jesus and it was a source of concern to John's disciples because they feared it would mean a diminishing of John's ministry.

This should be a warning to us. Our goal is not to draw men to ourselves, but to draw them to Christ. We are not in competition with Christ. We are his servants. Many people value their religious sect more than they value Christ. And everything is about increasing the influence of the sect rather than increasing the influence of Christ.

In John's case, the increase of Christ's popularity necessarily meant the decrease in his own popularity. And now John teaches his disciples about this very matter.

#### John's Instruction of his Disciples

- I. The gifts and success of a man's ministry is given by God.

John's builds his instruction to his disciples upon a spiritual principle:

*John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.*

John 3:27

Remember, these disciples are becoming jealous of the blossoming ministry of Jesus. And they are worried that Jesus is going to take away some of John's congregation. They are already seeing some defections. Andrew and another disciple have already "defected" from John and have become disciples of Jesus. And now, in the eyes of John's disciples, "all men are coming to Jesus." They are concerned about the potential diminishing of the ministry of John.

And John lays out the principle: Every man's ministry is given from heaven. Whatever ministry a man has, it has been given him. If a man has a small ministry, it has been given to have a small ministry. If a man has a large ministry, it has been given to have a large ministry. The idea seems to be here that God has ordained the extent of one's success in the ministry. To

some he multiplies the fruit by tens and to some by hundreds and some by thousands.

Most of us have a relatively small sphere of influence, don't we? We impact our immediate families and our friends and our neighbors. And we have a ministry in our local church. But whatever the depth and breadth of our ministry, it is certain that it is God that has given it.

And it seems that when God gives us a ministry, he also equips us accordingly. He doesn't equip everyone with the gifts necessary for being a deacon. And he doesn't give out pastoral gifts indiscriminately. But he gives the gifts for his various ministers which will equip them in their various areas of service. And so John says,

*A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.*

There is really no value at all in being jealous or competitive or resentful of other ministers in Christ's kingdom because whatever ministry a man has and whatever success a man has in the ministry is received from heaven. It is God that equips his ministers and it is God that controls the extent of the ministry. And because it is God who gives the ministry and the minister simply receives it, there is no place for boasting in the heart of the minister. If there is any glory in a ministry it goes to God who has given it.

*For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?*

I Corinthians 4:7

We are all ministers and so this principle applies to all of us. But I think it especially applies to preachers who are front and center and who are most prone to conceit and arrogance and pride. And sometimes you see this at preachers' conferences. One man has 10 people in his congregation and another man has 1000 in his congregation and one man resents the other and one man is puffed up with pride. But John the Baptist says,

*A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.*

John the Baptist actually had a very extensive ministry. His ministry was nation-wide. God gifted John with very unique gifts that suited him for this broad, one-of-a-kind ministry. But John's ministry was not destined to be as large as the ministry of Jesus. And so, the gifts given to John were not as large.

So, the principle for all God's servants is that whatever gifts we have and whatever ministry we have is given by God. The obvious result of that is that we are not to resent the success of others, nor to envy them. Whether we are a pastor or a deacon or a newsletter editor or a card minister or a hospital visitor or a comforter or an encourager or a teacher; whatever the size of our ministry we must realize that we have received it from God and the breadth and scope of our ministry is in his hands.

Paul certainly recognized that his ministry was a gift from God.

*But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain: but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

I Corinthians 15:10

Notice that whatever Paul was, it could be attributed to God. It was bestowed on him. And Paul says, "I was the hardest worker of them." But even his work ethic was a gift of God! You see, if God has given a broad ministry, then God gives a broad capacity for work.

So, John instructed his disciples that all ministry is given by God and there is no room for jealousy or envy or boasting. And that principle applies to John's ministry in comparison to the ministry of Jesus.

Now, secondly, John teaches that:

II. A minister should know his role in the kingdom.

Now John the Baptist was keenly aware of his role in the kingdom. He knew very well that he was the messenger that would announce and pave the way for the King of the kingdom. Remember how they had asked him, "Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you that prophet? (John 1:20, 21) And John told them, "No, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord . . ." (John 1:23)

So, because John knew his place in the kingdom, he was not disappointed with Jesus' success. But what if John had begun to think that he was the greatest in the kingdom? What if John forgot that he was the forerunner and that Jesus was the King? Then John would have resented the success of Jesus. John would have resented the loss of his two disciples who left him and followed Jesus. And John would have found himself competing for the followers of Jesus and competing for the glory which belongs to Jesus.

So, it is imperative for ministers in the kingdom to know their role and to fully recognize their own insignificance compared to the glory of Christ.

John illustrates this concept by a short parable which he tells his disciples in verse 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.*

John 3:28

Now in this parable we have three characters. We have the bridegroom, the bride and the friend of the bridegroom. The picture is obviously that of an oriental wedding. And in those days, it was custom that for some time before the wedding, the bridegroom was not to have any contact with the bride. They were to be kept apart until the time of the wedding. And the bridegroom would enlist his best friend to make all the arrangements for the wedding. (Note: We have much the same custom. The "Best Man" assists the groom in the details.)

Now when it came time for the wedding, the best friend would go fetch the bride and he would personally bring her to the wedding ceremony. And the bride would ride on his camel or on his donkey. And she would hold onto his arm as he escorted her toward the groom. And when the bride was finally brought into the presence of the groom, the groom would lift up his voice in joy to finally see his bride. And the best friend would be filled with joy also to see the joy of the groom. And his mission as the best friend would be joyfully fulfilled.

In this parable of course, the bridegroom represents Jesus. And his best friend is John the Baptist. And who is the bride?

In the Old Testament, many passages depict Israel as being the bride and God being the groom.

*For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee.*

Isaiah 62:5

*And I will betroth thee unto me for ever: yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord . . . and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God.*

Hosea 2:19, 20, 23

Of course, even more glaringly, the post-resurrection church is pictured as the bride of Christ.

*For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*

Ephesians 5:31, 32

So, in the parable, the bride is the people of God.

Now John's disciples are anxious because the people are flocking to Jesus. But John says, "Wait a minute, the bride is

being delivered to the bridegroom. This is what is supposed to happen. I am the best man. My ministry was to take care of the preliminary arrangements. But now my ministry is reaching its fulfillment. I am delivering the bride to the bridegroom. And when I hear him lift up his voice with joy over the sight of the bride, then my joy is full.

- III. The ultimate joy of a minister is to lead men to Christ.

Here John is showing great humility in his ministry. He is stating that the multitudes must increasingly follow Jesus and must decreasingly follow him. This is the ultimate goal of any true minister. His work is to point men to Christ, not to gather them to himself.

False teachers and false ministers will be known by their desire to draw men to themselves. But true ministers will point men to Christ. Some of the most noteworthy cults are known by their unshakable devotion to a man. And they become so devoted to that man that they will do whatever he says. If he says everyone must commit suicide, then they commit suicide.

False ministers are unduly interested in the increase of their own influence. They like to be known in the gates and to sit with the rich and the powerful and to discuss their own successes. But true ministers prefer to sit with the poor and the weak and to discuss the glories of Jesus.

- IV. John explains why the ministry of Jesus is superior and why Jesus must increase.

- A. Jesus is from heaven whereas John is from earth.

There is something different and superior about Jesus. It is not hard to understand why the ministry of Jesus must increase and the ministry of John must decrease. And the first reason is that Jesus cometh from above and is therefore by nature above all.

*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.*

John 3:31

You will notice that Jesus is compared with John and one of the greatest contrasts is that Jesus comes from heaven and John comes from the earth. John was never in heaven. The beginning of John was when he was conceived in Elizabeth's womb here on earth. In other words, John is a man.

Jesus, on the other hand, existed before the world was created, was with God before the world was created and was God. (John 1:1) And he came down from heaven. (John 3:13) Therefore, it is concluded that Jesus is above all. He is above all in rank. He is above all in authority. He is above all in knowledge. And therefore, people must be pointed to him.

B. Jesus speaks the words of God.

*And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony.*

John 3:32

The ministry of Jesus is also more highly recommended than John's ministry because Jesus speaks the very words of God. Jesus was there in heaven and has seen and heard from the Father. And these are the very things to which Jesus testifies.

Example: In court, a witness might be on the stand and the Judge might say, "Tell us what happened." And the witness might say, "Well, I wasn't actually there Judge, but Aunt Susie told me that Uncle Joe was told by a friend of his who heard through the grape vine that the Defendant was seen somewhere around the crime scene on or around the date of the incident. And the Judge would say, "Sir, do you have any personal knowledge of these things." And he would say, "No, not really." But then, the next witness is called and the Judge says, "Tell us what happened." And the witness says, "Judge on May 15, 2012 at exactly 5:30 p.m. I was standing in the First and Only Security Bank of Our Town and the Defendant who is seated right over there, who I know well because we grew up together,

walked into the bank and pointed a gun at the teller and demanded that she give him all the money in her drawer. When he loaded up his paper bag with the money, he ran out of the bank and got into his 1993 Chevrolet Hatchback and he drove off North on Commerce Boulevard at a high rate of speed.

Now this example shows the huge difference between the testimony of Jesus and the testimony of John. The testimony of John was accurate as far as it went. But the testimony of Jesus was accurate and thorough to the very last detail. And it is accurate because Jesus was there in heaven to witness the things of God firsthand.

Now notice an interesting thing. Though Jesus was a firsthand witness and highly qualified to testify of heavenly things,

*No man receiveth his testimony.*

The words “no man” are here to be understood in the sense of few men, comparatively few men. Though the multitudes came to him; drawn by miracles (John 2:23), drawn by the prospect of being fed (John 6:26), drawn by curiosity and various other reasons, only a comparative few came to him in faith.

C. Jesus had the Spirit of God without measure.

*For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.*

John 3:34

All other prophets up to this time, had the aid of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of performing their assigned tasks. They were gifted by the Spirit to perform his or her particular assignment. But this was not so with Jesus. Jesus had full access to the Spirit of God. Now again, this is a difficult concept, since Jesus was God himself. But all we can say is that in his humanity, Jesus had the full resources of the Spirit of God.

D. Jesus was loved by the Father.

*The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.*

John 3:35

This is the peculiar advantage of Jesus. He was loved by the Father. The Father loved Jesus like no one else. This is his only begotten Son. This is the One who shared eternity with the Father before being made a man. All of the Father's love flows through the Son.

Now the Father's love did not flow through John the Baptist, but it flowed through Jesus. If God loved John, it was because John was in Christ.

This is a great truth in itself. Romans chapter one tells us that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness."

**Example: You might picture it like this. It is raining wrath from heaven. And it is raining upon all men because all men are sinners. It is a downpour and there is nowhere to get out of the rain. And as you are standing out in the middle of the field, you notice a house in the distance and this house is the only shelter from the storm. So you run to the house. And when you get there, the mailbox says the house of Jesus Christ; and it the only place where you can get out of the rain.**

And Jesus is the only shelter from the wrath of God because the Father loves Jesus and the Father's love for all other creatures flows through him. Now the masses of men come to this house and they say, "No thanks. I'll look for shelter somewhere else." But a few knock on the door of Jesus and they find shelter from the storm of God's wrath.

Oh how the Father loves his Son. And his Son is the only place where there is shelter from the wrath of God.

- E. The future destiny of all men hinges on their response to Jesus.

*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.*

John saw the multitudes beginning to flock to Jesus. And John must have rejoiced in his heart because John knew that life was not in himself but it was in Jesus. And so John pointed all men to a place down the road where Jesus and his disciples were baptizing. And he told his disciples,

*He must increase, but I must decrease.*