

He Must Increase; I Must Decrease | John 3:25-30
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Introduction

“This joy of mine is now complete; he must increase, but I must decrease.” One commentator says this is “**surely one of the greatest utterances that ever fell from human lips**” (Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 242).

The other gospels contain more information about John the Baptist, including his martyrdom, which we’ll explore next week. But in John’s gospel, these are actually the last words we hear from John the Baptist. “He must increase; I must decrease.”

Who was the man who uttered this profound truth? Who was John the Baptist? Over the next four weeks, we’ll dive into the that question through a sermon series focused on four gospel passages about John the Baptist. We’ll discover not only who John was, but what we can learn from him about being disciples whose lives point beyond ourselves to Jesus.

It’s worth asking as we begin, what did Jesus think about John the Baptist? We know from the gospels that Jesus thought of him as “**a prophet**” and even “**more than a prophet**. From a human perspective, Jesus says there is **no one greater than John** (Lk.7:26-28). Jesus and the gospel writers view John the Baptist as a contemporary representative of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah (e.g., Mk. 9:12-13).

A widely held view among Jews of the time was that in the time before the Day of the Lord, the final judgment, Elijah or and Elijah-like figure would be a forerunner of the Messiah. This was based on passages like Malachi 4:5, that says,

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”

Mark's gospel says John was "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" which is **exactly** how Elijah was described in 2 Kings 1:8. Mark tells us John ate a diet of "locusts and wild honey," to which I say "yum." I'll be honest, "locusts and wild honey" sounds more appealing to me than the roasted seaweed snacks from Whole Foods that my daughter likes to eat.

Locusts were wilderness food. It might seem weird to us, but they were not considered unclean to the Jews. They were widely associated with judgement in the Old Testament (Exod. 10:1-20; Joel 1-2). Honey was a food associated with the Promised land, which is frequently described as a land "flowing with milk and honey" (e.g., Exod. 3:8; Deut. 26:9). Even the food John ate is part of his profile as a wilderness prophet who precedes the Messiah.

It is *this man* who says of Jesus, "this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase; I must decrease."

With this background in mind, I'd now like to look at John 3:25-30 in two parts, **the disciples' dispute** (vv. 25-26) and **the Baptist's response** (vv. 27-30).

Now, I hesitate to call him "the Baptist" with so many actual Baptists in the room. I think it would certainly be anachronistic and a little disingenuous to call him, "John the Anglican."

But let's get one thing straight: if John were around in the 16th and 17th century, or even today, John the Baptist would certainly have become "John the Anglican." It's everybody's doing it. It's all the rage.

He would experience the liturgy, the sacraments (including infant baptism), the rich choral tradition, and the Book of Common Prayer, and boom, he'd be on the Canterbury Trail straightaway. And we would welcome him with open arms. "Come as you are, John, with your camel hair coat and your honey dipped locusts. Just bring enough to share, my friend."

Let's look at the disciples' dispute (v. 25) and their question that stems from that dispute (in verse 26), before turning to John's response.

I. The Disciples' Dispute (John. 3:25-26)

Look at verse 25, the ESV tells us, “a **discussion** arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification.”

“A discussion” sounds very non-threatening. It makes it seem like they were probably having a casual chat over a nice cup of tea.

But the NIV translates the same word as “argument,” and that’s a more accurate translation than discussion. The word in question refers to a controversial **debate or dispute**. This wasn’t just a **calm discussion**; it was a **heated argument**.

And argument, the ESV says, that “arose **between** John’s disciples and a Jew.” The original lacks the word “between” and has instead “***from* the disciples of John.**” The verse doesn’t merely say who the argument was between; it tells us who started it—John’s disciples; it was “from” them! And it took place, the passage says, “with a Jew.”

During this time there were many other groups besides John’s disciples who were pursuing repentance and Jewish purity in the wilderness. An example would be the Qumran community (the people who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls).

These types of sectarian groups frequently competed and even condemned one another. They thought of themselves as far holier than everyday Jews. The “Jewish man” in this passage is probably a more mainstream Jew, a Pharisee or the like.

This maps on perfectly to our passage. Verse 25 says, “a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew **over purification**.”

To John’s disciples, everyone else was inferior, less worthy in the eyes of God. Not truly clean. Not sufficiently repentant. Indeed, everyone else was a threat, a competitor—even *Jesus*.

That's why in verse 26, the disciples come to John, their leader, and they specifically ask about Jesus.

“Rabbi, **he** who was with you across the Jordan, **to whom** you bore witness—look, **he** is baptizing, and all are going to **him**.”

I want to pause here briefly to consider the sickness of soul exhibited in disciples' question before we get to John's answer.

John's disciples seem to have gotten lost in **a fog of self-referential religious superiority**. These disciples had been fully committed to

- practicing repentance,
- preparing the way for the Messiah, and
- exercising faithfulness to the Jewish Law

Yet, they proved to be incapable of seeing the fullness in their midst and settled instead for the partial in themselves. They had turned a ministry meant to find its completion in Christ into ministry set up in competition with Christ.

Whenever this happens, for them, or for us. Whenever a movement meant to point beyond itself to Jesus begins to point to itself, then the very things that are meant to be **landmarks that lead the way to Jesus** get transformed (even deformed) into **identity markers that point to ourselves**.

Purity, holiness, perfect theology. Captivating leaders, confessions—professions. Denominations, doctrines, decrees. Shibboleths and scapegoats. Boundary markers and heavy burdens. When these things become the end goal of the Christian faith, we end up with a false gospel operating in the name of Christ yet strangely at odds with Christ.

Denominations are not the good news. **Visionary leaders** are not the good news. **Theology** is not the good news. **We** are not the good news. **Jesus is the good news**; Jesus is the Gospel.

[Vamp on ‘Seminary and arguing in the wilderness’]

My prayer, therefore, is that we might be a church where our faith, our theology, our ethics, our spirit, our speech, and everything else about us functions as landmarks that lead people to Jesus rather than identity markers that point people to ourselves.

II. The Baptist’s [very Anglican] Response (John. 3:27-30)

While the disciples’ question gives us a snapshot of the deceptive heart of self-righteous human religion, John’s answer provides us with a powerful watchword for Christian discipleship. He captures it in one succinct sentence: “He must increase; I must decrease.” This has become for me as much a daily prayer as a motto that summarizes the essence of the Christian life.

Before getting to this climactic declaration though, John makes a few preliminary points.

First, in verses 27 and 28, John begins his answer by distinguishing his own mission from the mission and role of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ.

John says,

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’”

Here John reveals his belief that God has providentially ordered both his own prophetic ministry and its messianic fulfillment in Jesus according to his own sovereign purposes. Or in John’s words, **they have both been “given from heaven.”**

John then moves onto to a wedding metaphor in verse 29. Christ is portrayed as the bridegroom and John as the friend of the bridegroom. To Jews of the day, this imagery would have been immediately familiar. It draws on the many passages in the Old Testament that present **God as “a husband” and Israel as his “bride”** (e.g., Hos. 2:19; Isa. 54:5).

The apostle Paul picks up on this theme in 2 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5 when he describes the church as a people “betrothed” to Christ.

In our passage today, when the friend of the bridegroom stands and hears the bridegroom’s voice, “he rejoices greatly.” Like John, our joy can be transformed, made complete, when we **stand** and **listen** to the voice of the bridegroom. Those two words—stand and listen—are significant.

Sometimes we are so busy that Jesus is in our midst but **we’re too preoccupied to even notice**. This was the problem John’s disciples faced. The Christ had arrived, and yet they were so fixated on their own work that they viewed Jesus as a threat to their ministry, a ministry that only made sense if it were to be fulfilled by him.

It strikes me that we’re so often flying forward, full-speed-ahead, running after fleeting human joys that can never be complete because they are always in a state of flux.

The joy John describes here is not like those joys. The joy that John felt in the presence of Jesus, was a joy that had already brought to a state of fullness. “This joy of mine,” says John, “is now complete.”

Standing still for a moment, listening—I believe these are more than incidental aspects of the passage. These are spiritual practices that we can adopt in our own lives. By incorporating **the practice of intentional pausing** where we **stand and listen** to God, in his Word, by his Spirit God will reveal

more of himself to us than a thousand frenetic marathons of religious activities and works could ever achieve.

In solidarity with John, we too can stop, stand, hear, and greatly rejoice at the voice and presence of the Lord Jesus. Christian joy truly begins to deepen when it becomes untethered from our own increase and instead becomes tethered to the increase of Christ in us. It is a joy that cannot be depleted, ever. How could it be, when it already exists in its fulness in Christ? It's a joy that's always on offer. A joy that stabilizes our soul even when earthly contentment is crushed and human happiness seems impossible to achieve.

One simple way we can do this is to use the watchword of John as a tool to continually recalibrate our joy and ourselves under **the greater governance of the eternal joy of Jesus**. It helps that it is short and memorable. We can say with John,

“This joy of mine is now complete. He must increase; I must decrease”
(vv. 29b-30).

With our joy complete in Christ, the baseline of our human experience can transcend the boundaries of shifting human contentment and exceed the limits of fleeting human happiness. It can become a stable joy rooted in Christ, rather than a varying emotion or an ever-shifting mood.

A joy that resources a supernatural contentment that can abide through even the fiercest seasons of doubt and darkness.

A joy that is inextinguishable, whose flame burns bright even through the most devastating experiences of pain and tribulation.

It's a joy that can never be taken from us because it doesn't come from us. It is the joy of Jesus that comes from knowing Jesus.

Do you know Jesus? If you do, your joy is complete in him. You are now set free to work **from joy rather than for it**. And you can truly pray, “This joy of mine is now complete. He must increase; I must decrease.”

Conclusion

The watchword “he must increase; I must decrease” is one of the most impactful statements in the entire Bible. To me, it describes the key to the whole life of discipleship. As Jesus increases, something of me decreases, and in that process I become the version of myself that is most like Jesus. Profound. But also kind of scary.

Sometimes it can seem like ‘finding our identity in Christ’ means losing our individuality. Losing our sense of purpose or vocation. But that’s not what John means here.

“I must decrease” does not mean “**I must be deleted.**”

“I must decrease” does not mean our unique callings and vocations are meaningless or unimportant.

“I must decrease” did not mean that John was advocating for generic, unmotivated, unambitious versions of ourselves who carry out unimportant work. No John’s purpose and joy came through a profound understanding that **the goal of his work was not himself but Jesus Christ. This did not deplete** his prophetic impact but rather made it truly **complete**. His work took on an infinitely greater significance in and through Christ. Through Christ, John’s mission was fulfilled and his joy was made complete.

Let me give you an example.

Austin Aplin

Rafael Sousa

Luke Bannister

Brett Pawlick

Do you recognize any of these names? I would imagine that virtually none of us would. I recently saw the new Spiderman movie *Brand New Day* starring Tom Holland, Sadie Sink, Mark Ruffalo, Marisa Tomei and many others.

It must have been going around online that a teaser was coming at the end of the credits because when the movie ended, the entire audience stayed and sat through the entire roll of credits. It was so weird. The whole theatre sat for a good ten minutes watching a list of around 3000 names roll by.

The people I mentioned before were four names out of the nearly three thousand who worked on the film.

Austin Aplin was the Visual Effects Producer

Rafael Sousa was the Lead Animator

Luke Bannister was the Drone Camera Pilot, and

Brett Pawlick was the Director of Photography.

Each of these individuals had hundreds of people working under them. You'll probably never know any of their names even though they're all technically listed in the credits.

But the point is this: the joy and glory of the final product exceeded the sum of their individual contributions, significant though they were. Like this film, the gospel is not about 'establishing a name for ourselves.' That being the case, it's also true that the gospel doesn't call us to a state of disinterested passivity. I think that is what many people think is the only alternative to raw, idolatrous ambition. A kind of boring, generic, uninspiring existence.

The point of John's watchword, "he must increase; I must decrease **is not**

- "it doesn't matter what you do, or
- "it doesn't matter if you even try."

John watchword is not an invitation to a **permanent vocational vacation**.

"Just throw in the towel and wait around until you go to heaven someday, biding your time like a drab form of earthly purgatory."

The point is that what you do with passion, excellence, and greatness *really* does matter in this life, even if is never honored or acknowledged by anyone else, this side of heaven. It honors God, and it is honored and used by God. It

stands to bring the fullness of God in Jesus Christ, his joy and his presence to others. Like John, we prepare the way, but what people receive is not more of us; but more of Jesus *through us*.

A truly great movie eclipses the name recognition of **those who were instrumental in making it**. **What people remember is *the movie*; that's the whole point**. But the ones who participated in making it are not any less significant in light of the greater fullness and completion to which their work meaningfully contributed.

It matters that they did what they did; ***but it is not about them***.

It matters that John did what he did; ***but it's not about him***.

It matters that we do what we do; ***but it's not about us***.

Far from stealing our joy from us; this makes our joy complete in Christ, because a joy that is complete in Christ cannot be depleted in us or by us.

It bids us to pray to Jesus that, “he might increase and I might decrease,” knowing that when we humble ourselves we will not be forgotten, erased, abandoned, or made insignificant in the eyes of God.

Rather, as our Lord Jesus Christ promises “whoever humbles himself, will be exalted.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) “I must decrease” does not mean “**I must be deleted.**” How can ambition, our unique skills and calling be truly retained but resituated under **the greater governance of the eternal joy of Jesus?**
- 2) How can we use the watchword of John, “He must increase; I must decrease” as a spiritual tool to find the completion of life, joy, salvation, and peace in Jesus?
- 3) What is the significance of the connection between John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophet, Elijah? What can it tell us about how God keeps his promises and the nature of John’s ministry of repentance before judgment?
- 4) What are the things in life that cause us to fly past Jesus as the source of our ultimate joy? What are the things that we lament losing in the past or run towards that we tell ourselves, “if I have this, I’ll finally be content” only to find that when we have it our souls need more to be complete?
- 5) In the sermon, it is stated, “Purity, holiness, perfect theology. Captivating leaders, confessions—professions. Denominations, doctrines, decrees. Shibboleths and scapegoats. Boundary markers and heavy burdens. When these things become the end goal of the Christian faith, we end up with a false gospel operating in the name of Christ yet strangely at odds with Christ.” How can we ensure that our ministry of landmarks meant to lead people to Jesus, never become idolatrous identity markers that point to ourselves, other captivating leaders, or ideas instead of Jesus himself?

This is a preaching draft.

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