



*22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison).*

*25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26*

*And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."*

*31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. 33 Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

**HE > ME** He is greater than me. This is a simple way of expressing John's famous words in verse 30. "He must increase, but I must decrease." Like many well-known verses in the Bible, we often forget the larger context. I know I did! The context is an incitement to pure jealousy. Did you notice that? The Jews did all they could to get under John's skin. "*Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.*" In other words: You're losing John! That upstart is stealing guys from your team! What are you going to do about it?" I think it is fascinating that they did not even use Jesus' name. They basically said, "You know, that one guy. Mr. No Name. He is beating you hands down."

And don't forget John's last name. What's his last name you ask? "The Baptist," right? And as a good Baptist, really the first Baptist and the father of all Baptists, what really matters to a Baptist is how many baptisms you are doing. This is more true than you might imagine. The Southern Baptists have had contests and quotas over the years competing for the number of baptisms performed. Baptism statistics are published in their denominational publications. Pastors have been rewarded financially for increasing the number of baptisms and fired if they did not. I don't know how widespread it has been but it has been a reality. Obviously I am poking fun at Baptists but regardless, the Jews were aiming for the jugular on this one. If they could get John to respond in jealousy, they could have ruined his entire ministry.

I can't prove this with facts, but I am convinced that more ministries are destroyed by petty jealous than they are from affairs and money scandals combined. Probably most of us could name a church that has been torn apart by jealousy in some form or another.

I was at Ethan's basketball tournament on Thursday and Friday. They played one team whose average age was probably twelve, maybe thirteen years old. Every opponent just cleaned the floor with them. We later learned that their team was so young because two weeks prior the church had split in two and the pastor took half of the basketball team with him. They were splintered that they could not even manage to play a few games of basketball together. So sad.

This should not be surprising when you realize that jealousy—and its close cousin—a lack of contentment—is at the heart of most of the Ten Commandments. Murders are committed every day due to jealousy. Thou shall not commit adultery. Have you ever seen an adulterous affair when jealousy was not the core? People also steal, lie and covet because they are not content with their lives in some way or another. A lack of contentment leads to jealousy which leads to all manner of sin and destruction.

And this is where the Jews aimed their verbal firebrands at John. They wanted him to be jealous of Jesus because Jesus was baptizing more disciples than John. Although we learn in chapter four that Jesus did not actually baptize anyone but his disciples were doing the actual baptizing. Nevertheless, they wanted John to be jealous of Jesus. And it was in this context that John declared, "He must increase and I must decrease." John not only knew in his heart that Jesus was outpacing him, but he also knew that the distance between them would grow larger and that this was how it was supposed to be. It was his very purpose in life to make Jesus look glorious so he was delighted to do so.

But this small phrase is at the core of our Christian lives. He must increase and we must decrease. We must realize that he is greater than me. We must die to ourselves because self is continually crawling back onto the throne where Jesus should be reigning. But here's a question that's not often asked. Why? Why is he greater than me? Why must I decrease and Jesus increase? The Sunday School answer is always "Because he is God." That is certainly a right answer but it is not a complete answer. I believe that John gives us several answers to the question as to why Jesus should increase.

### **1. Jesus is our bridegroom.**

*The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.*

Everyone loves a wedding. And the closer you are to the bride and groom, the more you enjoy the wedding celebration. If you have any doubt, just as the Boisen family! Obviously, our family has not married off any of our children yet. Kellyn has been in three weddings and the first two times I saw her walk down the aisle, I almost got choked up thinking about her as a bride one day. So I know I will be an absolute mess on her wedding day. I'm such a cry baby I'll probably cry at the boys' weddings as well.

But if we grasped the meaning of Jesus as our bridegroom, the joy we feel for these weddings would pale in comparison. Because if Jesus is the bridegroom, who is the bride? We are. The church is the bride of Christ. Listen to what our groom did for us.

*25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27).*

And here's another.

*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:2).*

To the degree that we rejoice in our role as the bride of Christ is the degree to which we will decrease and he will increase. In other words, the more that Christ increases, the greater will be our joy. Think about one of your favorite activities or favorite person to spend time with. What if you could engage in 100 times more of that activity or time with that friend. But here's the caveat. No matter you did that activity or how much times you spent with that friend, it would be sin free enjoyment. For example, if you enjoy downhill skiing, you could do 100 times more of that activity but it would not be an idol to you. You could spend 100 times more time with a person but neither of you would ever sin against the other. In both cases, your favorite thing is increasing in your life. The more it increases, the greater your joy.

This is what it means that he is greater than me. This is what will happen if we decrease and he increases. But if Jesus increases and we decrease, which leads to greater joy for us, isn't that sort of self-serving because we benefit from it? Yes, it is. That's the beauty of our relationship with the bridegroom. The larger he looms in our lives, the greater our joy becomes.

## **2. Jesus has been to heaven and back.**

*He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.*

Admittedly, this is as close to the Sunday School answer that we will get in this message. Why should Jesus increase and we decrease? Because Jesus has been to Heaven in back, or in other words, because he is God. But this is part of John's answer to the Jews so it is important to our question about why we must decrease. John admitted that he was of the earth but Jesus was from above.

John pointed out that Jesus was “bearing witness” to what he has seen and heard. This is just so logical that it smacks you in the face. Would you rather submit yourself to someone who is merely “of the earth” or someone who has been to heaven and back? When you put it that way, it is just so absurd that we would ever elevate ourselves above Jesus. More than that, twice John said that Jesus is “above all.” This is a statement of the absolute supremacy of God that is exemplified in Colossians 1.

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent (Colossians 1:15-18).*

Jesus clearly deserves to increase, which means that we must decrease. But to balance out this principle, this next one is so helpful.

### **3. Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit.**

In case you are feeling like we are only falling back on the Sunday School answer, notice what John said in verse 34. *For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.* This is hugely important because John is talking about the measure of the Holy Spirit that was given to Jesus during his earthly ministry. Here’s where this is so relevant to us. If we think about Jesus only in terms of his divinity, then his example could potentially have less impact upon us. For example, if we say that Jesus overcame temptation and performed miracles and healed the sick and raised the dead *because he was God*, this could mean that we can never do any of those things because we are obviously not God.

So it goes like this. “Of course Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness—he is God. Of course Jesus obeyed his Father—he is God.” Let me illustrate. When the president calls a press conference, who is allowed to sit in the press room and ask questions? You have to have verified press credentials to be in that room asking questions of the president of the United States. You and I would never be allowed in that room. So that’s how we often view Jesus. He has “God credentials” if you will and every time he gets in a tough spot, he simply pulls out a little card which says “I am God” and everything falls into place.

But that is not at all how it worked because John said that the Spirit was given without measure to Jesus. Here are five possible options in regard to how Jesus accomplished his mission and ministry.

1. Jesus lived entirely in the power of his own divine nature, with no dependence on the Spirit. This option would mean that he always pulled out the “God card.”
2. Jesus lived mostly in the power of his divine nature, with a little dependence on the Spirit. Therefore, he sometimes pulled out the “God card.”
3. Half and half.
4. Jesus lived predominantly in the power of the Spirit, though sometimes he exercised divine power in a way that demonstrates his deity.

5. Jesus never used the power of his divine essence, but always only worked as a human empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Before we draw our conclusion, let's look at a few passages.

Luke 4:1—*And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.*

Luke 4:14—*And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.*

Luke 5:17—*On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.*

Based upon what John taught here and these other passages, I would conclude that option #4 is most accurate. Here is a helpful summary of this principle.

The problem...is that this is sort of a Superman version of Christology: We can't really consider imitating Clark Kent if Clark Kent is really solving all his problems by being Superman.

Instead, [one could argue] that "Jesus predominantly relied on the divine resources of the Father and the Holy Spirit to accomplish his messianic mission." That is, Jesus' life of obedience, righteousness, teaching, and even working miracles, was not primarily a matter of him flexing his deity muscles, but was predominantly a matter of him living a human life that was in obedience to his eternal Father, and empowered by the eternal Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

I hope you see the relevance for our daily lives. If Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit for his life then you and I have just as much potential to depend on the Holy Spirit for our lives. This crushes the Sunday School answer of "because he is God."

#### **4. When you receive Jesus' words, you affirm its truthfulness.**

*Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.*

Let me admit the bit of circular reasoning in this principle. It goes something like this.

1. God's words are true because I believe them.
2. I believe God's words because they are true.

Verse 33 is more or less asserting point number one above. However, we tend toward point number two. We believe God's words because they are true. But how do we know that they are true? Well here is where you run into the questions of skeptics who say that man has changed the Bible over the years; that the Bible really can't be trusted; that it is filled with errors; that it is biased and religiously motivated; that there is no such thing as a genuine miracle, etc. When we bump into these kinds of questions, we start to apply the long list of apologetics that we have learned. We might pull out Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. We rely on what we know about the overwhelming evidence for the historical reliability. We talk about how

archaeology has always perfectly confirmed what the Bible says. We see that the Bible is internally consistent with its own teaching and externally consistent with all other areas of human knowledge. Then, once we have amassed all of this evidence to tell us that the Bible is true, we finally come to believe it.

Is there anything wrong with this? No, this is perfectly valid and the Bible stands up to all of this scrutiny. It is trustworthy and we can trust what it says. But at the end of the day, we will never truly believe God's words until we believe God's words. In other words, when I decide to trust what God says, the Holy Spirit will confirm that God's words are indeed true. This is what John meant in verse 33. *Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.* You may not trust God's words fully because you have never received them.

Now don't misunderstand. I am not advocating an existential leap in the dark. This is not a matter of saying, "Well I have absolutely no idea if God's words are true or not, but I'm just gonna go ahead and say that they are true anyway." It's not that way at all. Instead, you are taking what you already know is true and then solidifying its truthfulness in your heart and mind. This is fundamentally an inner work of the Spirit but it requires that we first receive Jesus' words.

#### **5. Only just wrath awaits the unbeliever.**

*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

*God's wrath* is not some impersonal principle of retribution, but the personal response of a holy God who comes to his own world, sadly fallen into rebellion, and finds few who want anything to do with him.<sup>2</sup>

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, consider which of these principles most apply to you the most.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scriptorium/2012/05/imitating-jesus-dependence-on-the-father-and-the-spirit/>

<sup>2</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 214). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.