

Decreasing in order to Increase (John 3:22-36)

By Paul Hudson 4/3/22

Good morning! It is so good to be with you this morning. We are continuing our series in the Gospel of John. This morning's message is based on John chapter 3 verses 22 to 36, and I will read that in a moment. Before we move into the passage I want to set the context up for you. So this story comes right after the iconic John 3:16 verse— - everyone knows John 3:16 right? It's probably one of the most famous Bible verses, talking about God's love for the world and his desire to save us through the sending of his Son Jesus. Now if you go back and look at the context of John 3:16 you'll find that it comes in the midst of Jesus describing the central reason for why he has come, which is to save the world. There he describes what it will take for the world to be saved. So late in chapter 2 and through chapter 3 Jesus reveals the way that he will save the world, and we find that God's salvation plan through Jesus basically has two parts to it— one, he will be crucified and raised from the dead- John 2:19, he said "destroy this temple (talking about his body) and I will raise it again in three days." And the second part comes in chapter 3 where Jesus said that to be saved, you must be born again, and being born again comes through believing in Jesus, through having faith in Jesus.

So the context of our passage this morning is Jesus revealing the way to salvation and life, and one more important detail to consider is that Jesus was also making a clear distinction between belief and unbelief, between believers and unbelievers. He says a number of times that whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because of their unbelief. In these statements you'll see Jesus creating a clear division between light and darkness, between those who believe and those who do not believe. From that context we come to our passage this morning. Let's turn to John 3:22-36, the word of the Lord to you and me this morning: (John 3:22-36 NIV).

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

²⁷ To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less."

³¹ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. ³³ Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. ³⁴ For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

The key verse that I want to focus on from this passage is verse 30, "he must become greater, I must become less." So at this point John kind of finds himself in an awkward position in his life and ministry. After he baptized Jesus, John continued in his ministry of baptism and he still had his followers who really believed he was something special. But at the same time, Jesus was baptizing and increasing his followers exponentially

— and John recognized his own place in the picture— he knew he was duplicating Jesus' ministry and he knew his whole life and ministry was really ever only meant pave the way for Jesus. But John's disciple were probably expecting him to engage in a competition with Jesus, but John would not have any of it— he recognized that Jesus was the real star of the show and he was not going to upstage Jesus or try to steal the show.

Now, have you guys ever seen someone steal the show from the real star of the show? I've been to a concert or two where the opening band stole the show with their performance. Just last week I heard about the oscars — now I don't watch the oscars and haven't for a long time— but I heard that Will Smith stole the show to the point that the only thing anybody is talking about in the Oscars is that incident. On a lighter side, one of my favorite representations of someone stealing the show is a good photo bomb. So I took a few pictures off the internet of some good photobombs





So back to our story - if you want to talk about the opportunity for a photobomb of all photobombs, John had the chance to photobomb Jesus and steal the show, but he knew his place, and he knew he had to become less and Jesus had to become greater. Everything about John's life and ministry had Jesus in the center. So if you could take a photo of John and Jesus together he'd probably jump out of the picture and do a reverse photobomb!

Speaking of photos, I want to use one more illustration— imagine if we had a soul camera that could snap an image of your soul— now thank God I don't have any pictures to put up but... what would show up on the screen? Think about this, if there was a soul camera that could take a soul selfie, what kind of image would show up? Ask yourself that question. I have asked myself this and played around with the idea and I have wondered— If I took a soul selfie, would I see a great big exaggerated picture of me? Me, me me, nothing but me in the picture? What would that reveal to me? A soul selfie like that would reveal that everything about me is me, the world revolves around me! That is what my 6th grade teacher tried to teach us in school- that the world revolves around you- and I know that teaching has advanced even further in our schools today— this could not be further from the truth. What if this soul camera revealed an image of my work? It would tell me that my work is the heart of who I am, my internal image is based on my work. Maybe some of you might feel that way right now— is your identity wrapped up in your work such that if your work was taken away, you would become lost in who you are? Think about John and what he must have gone through! Maybe the soul camera

reveals the Almighty dollar? Or maybe its some kind of ideological construct or a belief in how the world should be, so life is wrapped up in the pursuit of ideologies, philosophies, or political leanings— maybe the soul camera would reveal a collage of different pictures, a bunch of small thumbnails, like work, family, entertainment, church, maybe a thumbnail is God or the Bible alongside tons of other little pictures, some bigger than others— or maybe the soul image reveals a favorite tik-tok influencer, or some other idol that is adored, where every action and word is imitated. As I've reflected on this thought for myself, I have to admit I've found that my soul selfie must have an image of Jesus but there are a lot of images where.... surprise! There's a photobomb of me or something I've held onto that steps in front of Jesus.

My friends, the idea of a soul camera is a bit of a disturbing if not outright frightening thought— - but the Bible says that for us to truly find life, the selfie of our soul must reveal the image of Jesus. For us to truly find our life, the image of our soul should be one where the light of Jesus is increasing and shining bright, and the light of our self is fading and becoming less. Jesus said in Matt. 16:24-25, “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” John said that Jesus must become greater, and I must become less. Why is that? It seems backwards! It seems to fly counter to God's command to humans when he created them. Don't be scared by the thought of losing yourself because we have to take into account the whole word of God and understand God's heart for us and what it means for us to flourish as humans.

When God created the first humans, he told them to be fruitful and multiply— to increase not to decrease! Of course God was talking about multiplying on the face of the earth but he was also talking about increasing in fruitfulness, to be fruitful, to have authority over the earth, subdue it, and to bear fruit— to make all of the discoveries of all the mysteries that God hid in his universe. I'll come to back to that thought in

a second, but first I want to dig a little more into the scripture and see how John closes this story.

So in verse 31, John starts talking about Jesus and who he is and why Jesus must become, in essence, the star of the show, or the hero of the world, the very image in our own souls— so look at this— why is it that Jesus must become greater and I must become less? John answers that question in verse 31: “The one who comes from above is above all...” that’s Jesus, he is above all— “and the one who is from the earth”—that’s us— “belongs to the earth”— so from dust we are and to dust we will return... John’s saying “hey folks, Jesus is the only eternal one walking on this dirt right now!”

Now skip over to v. 33— here comes the most important part of all this, John is talking about the words of Jesus— “whoever has accepted it (that is, the words of Jesus) has certified that God is truthful.” So if you think about it, this is all about truthfulness— because Jesus is the truth and he speaks the words of truth. So in this life, we can align our souls with the truth and let our souls become certified with truth or we can let our souls bear the image of the dust of this earth— let me ask, which one is eternal, the truth from God or the truth that this world would have you believe?

Now let’s look at Verse 35 and 36, it says that everything has been placed in the hands of Jesus, “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” This is John’s ultimate answer to the argument that was taking place with the Jew, remember earlier in this passage? We don’t know exactly what the details of the argument were other than it had to do with the purification ritual or washing ceremony in relation to both John and Jesus’ baptisms— but based on John’s answer here, I think John was saying to that argument, “no-no-no- you guys have it all wrong— these baptisms that Jesus is doing and that I am doing are not going to do anything to truly make a person clean— they will do nothing to purify a

person— what these baptisms are all about is belief in the truth— belief in the Son of God— it is belief— accepting Christ and his words as truth— that makes us clean and brings eternal life. These baptisms are a declaration of faith in Christ and a symbol of being born again into eternal life— and because of who Jesus is and where he is from, I must become less, and he must become great. Speaking of baptism- if you have not been baptized yet I would encourage you to talk to Pastor Brian about getting baptized— baptism is a public declaration of your faith in Christ and it symbolizes being born again into a new life where the old passes away and the new life in Christ transforms you and opens eternity for you.

My friends, we need to make Jesus and his words the image of our soul, and it is not as hard as it seems because we were created already in the image of God. So the truth is that the image of Jesus, who is God in the flesh, is the most natural fit for our souls. All other images of the earth that are not centered on Christ are an unnatural fit, and it will not lead to true life!

Now there is one last part of this to look at to give us the right perspective because you might be thinking, well if I lose my soul image then what am I left with? You might be thinking, I don't really know what you're talking about Paul, am I supposed to now just become a religious zealot or a cookie cutter Christian, what if I don't want to be the perfect do-gooder Christian— or like my sister use to say to me, a goody two shoes? Some of the younger folks might not have ever heard of that— look up goody-two shoes on google, a goody-two shoe is an ostentatiously virtuous or well-behaved person— in other words, a very boring and predictable person— is that what I'm supposed to become?? You may or may not be thinking that but you know, that kind of an approach really misses the mark on God's heart for us.

What this really means must be taken in context with what God has created us to be— so we start with the truth that God created us in his image from the start, and then he commanded us to be fruitful and to

multiply, to subdue the earth and rule over it, to increase in all aspects— to increase in our numbers, to increase in our knowledge, to increase in our intelligence, to increase in our skills, to increase in our craft, to increase in ways of life that bear fruit, increase in our values and morality, even to discover and increase in the sciences of how the universe and our own bodies work— to increase in all aspects of what it means to be a human made in the image of God.

So, how do we reconcile God’s command for us to increase and all that entails with John’s example and Jesus’ words that tell us to decrease — to lose ourselves, to deny ourselves, to empty ourselves and deny our own lives. This is not just about denying our sinful flesh, there is more to it than that. So I want to dig into some Greek for these two words from our key verse this morning, John 3:30— let’s look at the greek words for greater and less- some Bibles use increase and decrease. First, the greek word for less is ελαττώω (elatto-o), it means to become less important, diminish, to be reduced in status or rank— - it is meant to give the idea of the dimming of light. So John is saying in effect, my light needs to be dimmed down, and the light of Christ needs to shine brighter. My work must become less important, and the work of Jesus must be made more important. My status must be reduced, and Christ’s status must become greater. That is one half of the equation.

Now here’s the second half of the equation, the greek word for greater is αὐξάνω (auxano) and it means to cause to grow, to increase. Now, this word is used in a few other places to help us shed light on what this means in practice for us, as we become less and Christ becomes greater. This word αὐξάνω (auxano) that John uses is found in 2 Cor. 9:10 and 1 Cor. 3:6. Let’s look first at 1 Cor 3:6 and I’ll read to verse 9— this is Paul speaking: “I planted the seed..” (He’s talking about his work as God’s servant) “Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” so there’s the word auxano right there— grow, God has been making the work grow. Continuing on, “so neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and

the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Cor. 3:6-9) You are not the earth's field, you're God's field— you were made to grow in God's purposes and plans, to become a partner with him, to be his field, his building, to be his dwelling place— not to bear any other image but the image of the eternal God, the image of Christ who gives eternal life to all who believe in him.

Now let's look at 2 Cor. 9:10— this is Paul talking about being generous in our service and giving— he encourages us to give generously with cheerfulness and as we do that, God will bless us abundantly and fill us with everything that we need at all times- so verse 10 in 2 Cor. 9 says, "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase (there's that word, auxano) your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. Verse 11- "You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion..." So in closing, what is this talking about? This is talking about us being fruitful and increasing not just spiritually but in all things through the growth of increase that God gives so that we will be blessed and we will be able to bless others, resulting in thanksgiving to God (the end of v. 11). As we deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Christ— as we decrease so that Christ might increase— we actually fulfill the command to increase and lead fruitful lives. Everything about us, our life's work and what we are about from the inside out needs to reflect Jesus. And we do that by making our lives less about ourselves and more about Jesus. Amen? When we become less, Jesus becomes greater, and that is ultimately how we flourish and find life. So my friends, let Jesus be the greatest light shining in your souls, and let the image of Christ stand out within you, and resist that photobomb!!

Let's pray.