

John's Gospel - the Right Attitude

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the importance of having the right attitude, which is humility, in our relationship with God and others, as exemplified by John the Baptist's humility.

Duration: 36:23

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 3:29-31, John 3:34-36

Topics: "Attitude"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher begins by emphasizing the importance of believing in Jesus for eternal life. He highlights that those who reject Jesus will not see life and will remain under God's wrath. The preacher then leads a prayer, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to gather and study God's word. Moving on to the passage in John's Gospel, the preacher focuses on John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus. He explains that John's disciples were concerned about Jesus baptizing people, but John reassures them that he is not the Christ and that Jesus is the one they should follow. The preacher concludes by emphasizing the joy that comes from hearing the voice of the bridegroom, Jesus, and encourages the congregation to embrace the gospel of God's grace.

Transcript

Well, we continue tonight in our study of John's Gospel, and I invite you to turn there. We come tonight to the very end of the third chapter, and we're going to consider John's testimony about Jesus, and we're going to read from the third chapter at verse 22 through to the end of verse 36 of John chapter 3. So let's hear the Word of God as we read it. After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them and baptized.

Now, John also was baptizing at Enon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water and people were constantly coming to be baptized. This was before John was put in prison. An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.

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, well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him. To this, John replied, a man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of him.

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.

He must become greater. I must become less. 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. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony.

The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God. To him God gives the Spirit without limit.

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. So far the reading of God's word this evening.

May he add to it his blessing and by the power and presence of his Spirit teach us indeed and apply it to our hearts and to our lives. Let's pray together. Lord, we do indeed thank you for this evening hour of worship, for the privilege of gathering as your people in this place, for the privilege of being together, for the privilege of studying your word together, and we pray that you would speak to us now by your word, that you would take these words and use them for the advancement of your gospel.

Lord, we're here tonight and we have diverse and many needs, and we pray that you would speak to us the gospel of your grace. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

When I was in seminary, I had a friend who was really quite a great guy. But one of the things about him was that he was rather loud and rather brash. Some people considered him abrasive, in fact.

Some people even considered him rather obnoxious and arrogant. And he was the kind of person you always knew was coming because you could hear him coming well before he ever arrived in the room. When we graduated, the year that we graduated, some of us got together and we bought him a book.

It was really a kind of gag gift, but we gave him a book that we thought he might find useful in the ministry. It turns out that was almost 17 years ago. He's actually had quite an effective ministry in the churches that he served.

But the title of the book that we gave him was this, Humility and How to Obtain It. Well, fortunately, he received the gift in the spirit in which it was intended, and I don't know whether he ever read it. But my friend, I suspect, is not the only one who struggles with humility.

Many of us can identify with the character in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, Ruddigore, who said, You've no idea what a poor opinion I have of myself and how little I deserve it. Think about that one. A 17th century English jurist named John Sulden once wrote that humility is a virtue that everyone preaches, no one practices, and yet everyone is content to hear.

And so we want to talk a little bit tonight, out of this passage, about the meaning of what real humility is. Because I think we all understand that humility is one of the great Christian virtues, and that it's the opposite of that great sin of pride, but the reality is that most of us find it difficult to obtain. Usually we're preoccupied with our own petty concerns, we're preoccupied by our own insecurities, we're overtaken by our own little worlds and our own little jealousies.

And most of us, I think, think of ourselves as being so fragile that if we took this idea of humility seriously, we would make ourselves so vulnerable that indeed we'd just get run over in the world. We think we would get eaten up by the world. And so what happens, in fact, is that there's a lot of false humility.

Humility that's not rooted in a biblical understanding of God's grace and God's sovereignty and God's plan for our lives. And I want to suggest to you tonight that that's what makes John the Baptist such an attractive and such a powerful figure for us as he's portrayed here in the Gospel of John, because John the Baptist really had the right attitude. He had the right perspective.

He had the right understanding of what it meant to have a relationship with Jesus and what it meant for his own self-understanding. Now, we've already encountered John the Baptist and this remarkable attitude a number of times in John's Gospel. In fact, if you go back to chapter 1 and verse 6 in the prologue, already John the Gospel writer points this out when he says, There came a man who was sent from God, his name was John, and he came as a witness to testify concerning the light so that through him all men might believe.

He himself was not the light. John the Gospel writer takes great pains to emphasize that, but John the Baptist himself also spoke concerning that reality. He was not the light.

He came only as a witness to the light. Later, in the opening chapter of John's Gospel, after the ministry of John the Baptist begins to be unfolded again, we see this remarkable attitude displayed. You remember when the religious leaders come from Jerusalem and they question John concerning his identity, and we took some time to look at this, and he says, I am not the Christ.

I'm not the one you're looking for. I'm not even Elijah. I'm not the prophet.

I am just a voice of one calling in the desert, and those remarkable words, I'm not even worthy to untie the sandals of the one who is coming. And then a little later, just when Jesus arrives on the scene to be baptized by John, John says, Look, or behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And a couple of John's own disciples, as we saw, leave his side and begin to follow Jesus.

Now, our passage tonight brings us in a very clear way to the very high point, the highest peak, as it were, of the witness of John the Baptist concerning Jesus. Because here we have, in fact, in the 30th verse, which we'll come to a little later, these marvelous and unmistakable words, He must become greater, and I must become less. And in order to understand, really, not only that verse, but indeed this entire passage, we need to understand that, in fact, John had a very successful ministry.

He wasn't just out there doing his own thing on his own without anyone paying attention to him. He had achieved a great deal of popularity. He had achieved a following.

People came out to see him. People came out to hear him preach. People came out to be baptized by John the Baptist.

Luke, the Gospel writer, tells us that the multitudes went out to hear him. Not just a few people, but crowds. Matthew tells us that people came to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan.

The fact of the matter is, he was very popular. Word was spreading concerning the ministry of John the Baptist. Not everyone knew who he was or what he was about, but he was gaining popularity.

His ministry was gaining momentum. He was, by some standards, quite successful. Eventually, of course, John the Baptist was arrested.

He was imprisoned. And then, finally, on what was really a whim, he was executed by Herod, and that story is told in the other Gospels. But at the time of our passage tonight, John is still in the midst of his ministry.

He still, as it were, is at a high point in his ministry. And we read that Jesus and his disciples had gone up into the Judean countryside, and John had now carried on with his own ministry. And the passage that we have tonight, in fact, records for us a conversation between John the Baptist and his disciples.

It records for us a conversation that takes place because some of his disciples come to him and query him. They question him concerning the ministry of Jesus. And it's in the midst of this remarkable conversation, it's in the midst of this encounter, as it were, between John the Baptist and his disciples that we see this real Christ-centered, God-founded self-understanding and humility, this right attitude emerge and indeed reach a high point in John's witness and in his own life and in his own understanding.

And so what I want to do very briefly tonight is look at each of the three paragraphs that constitute this passage tonight and just identify what's taking place in each of them and try to draw from them the applications and lessons for us tonight. The first paragraph is verses 22 to 26. And in this first paragraph, John's disciples express some concern concerning the ministry of Jesus and in fact the future of John's own ministry.

The text says that John was baptizing at Enon near Salem and people were coming constantly to be baptized. And it says that John's disciples, some of them, got into an argument with one of the Jewish religious leaders. Now, it's a very short verse that describes this.

We're not told really the fullness of what the argument was about. It had something to do with ceremonial washing, with purification rites. We're not told really what was at stake in the argument, but some kind of an argument took place between John the Baptist's disciples and a Jewish religious leader.

And for some reason, they go, that is, the disciples of John the Baptist, they go and they talk to John the Baptist. And instead of asking him to intervene in this argument, they start complaining about the ministry of Jesus. Now, I was working this week trying to understand sort of how this happens, and we're not really told because we're not given the details of this conversation, but something drove them to go and talk to John the Baptist himself.

And they say, Rabbi, the man who is with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one who you testified about, well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him. Do you see what's happening? The disciples of John the Baptist are somewhat worried about the fact that the crowd is shifting. The people are now going out to follow Jesus, or going at least to find out about Jesus.

Jesus is getting all the attention, and they're beginning to get a little worried. I mean, after all, what does this mean for the future of John the Baptist? They've hitched on to his wagon, as it were. What does it mean for them as his disciples? John's star was sinking.

The meal ticket was about to expire. And what made it worse in their eyes, it seems to me, is that John himself was encouraging this by all that he was saying concerning Jesus, by all that he was doing. And it's almost as if they come to him and they say, you know, all you really need to do is start drawing attention

back to yourself, and start talking the way you were talking a little while ago, and not talking so much about Jesus, and things would start to go our way again.

I mean, why should Jesus get all the attention? Why should this new, young, upstart preacher take away the crowd that we've been working at cultivating? Why should his disciples benefit from all the work and the toil that we've been putting into this ministry? You see, they wanted John to be the center. They wanted John to have an effective ministry. They wanted that ministry to be successful.

They wanted to invest their lives in something that was going to make an impact. And there was still time for John to turn things around. Well, I don't think I have to push too hard to help you see the reality of how this applies to our lives and to the life of the Church of Jesus Christ today.

Isn't it the case that Christians, that even often Christian leaders, Christian ministers, Christian pastors, elders, are driven by their own concerns, by small concerns, by petty jealousies, by desires for success, by intentions that may even appear to be noble? I mean, after all, the disciples of John could argue, you know, if John has a successful ministry, that means, in fact, that more people are repenting, that more people are coming out to be baptized. Isn't that a good thing? But you see, the problem is that the disciples of Jesus, or the disciples of John, unlike John the Baptist himself, didn't have the big picture in view. They didn't see the will of God.

They did not see the redemptive purposes of God unfolding before their very eyes in the ministry, in the life of Jesus. They were concerned only for themselves, for their own ministries, for their own concerns, for what mattered to them. You know, we're living at a very unusual time in history, because on the one hand, we're living at a time when people know, and when people seem to understand, and when people experience more of the world and understand what's happening globally than at any other time in history.

We turn on our television sets, and we see right around the world, and it's as if we get the big picture. We live in a global village. But at the same time that all of that is happening, for many of us, our worlds get smaller and smaller and smaller, so that, in fact, most people are concerned first and often only about themselves and our vision becomes narrowed.

We are myopic. We see only what we want to see. And the challenge, of course, is to see as John the Baptist saw, to see through the lens of the redemptive purposes of God, not just to think globally, but to think biblically, to think in terms of the unfolding of God's will and plan for the day in which we live, and not just to see the things which concern us.

That's the downside of the psychologized, narcissistic culture in which we live. Everything is turned inward. It's sort of like the mouse that was riding on the Roman chariot.

I put this on the outline that I've given you tonight. He's riding on a Roman chariot, and he looks back, and he sees all the dust kicking up, and he says, my, what a dust storm I've created. We somehow think, you see, that everything that happens is a result of who we are and what we do, and we're driven by our own little worlds and insecurities and don't see things in terms of God's purposes in the world.

Sadly, many of us, even within the church, even Christian leaders, are often like John's disciples. But then secondly, notice that the text goes on, and the second paragraph records then John's self-understanding in verses 27 to 30. I really love this section, because in a very real sense, what's going on here is John engages in a little bit of self-analysis.

He engages in a little bit of analyzing of his own life, and he diagnoses his own life, and he begins, however, not in the way that you would expect someone to begin as they begin to explain their life to someone else. If we were going to do that today, we would begin with our own experiences, we would begin with what mattered to us. He begins with a profoundly theological statement.

He says to his disciples, look, I've only got what I received from heaven. He points to the sovereignty of God. He says, look, if you want to understand my life, if you want to understand who I am, if you want to understand what motivates me, if you want to understand what my passions are about, if you want to understand what makes me get up in the morning and do what I do, it's because of God.

My life begins because God, in fact, has given me something. And my life is about what God has given to me. I only have what I received from heaven.

All that I am and all that I have is from heaven. My life is in the hands of God. And I want to suggest to you tonight that this is a profoundly important principle for Christians to understand today and that not a lot of Christians even understand the significance of what this is about.

Because what John is saying is this. I define my life in terms of who God is. My life does not begin with the I. I think, therefore, I am.

But my life begins with what the Bible says God is. Therefore, I am. God precedes me.

God precedes my thinking. God precedes my feeling. God precedes all that I am.

And all that I am is a result of who God is. And you see, what goes on in the modern world, in the world in which we've been living in the past 200 years, is that we're always trying to conform God to the big I. The ego. We start there and everything must flow from that point forward.

And the Bible turns all that upside down and on its head and says God precedes us. That's how we define life. That's how we understand who we are.

And then John, from that profoundly theological basis, reminds his disciples that they shouldn't be surprised at this. Because, in fact, they heard him say already, I am not the Christ. I am not the Christ, but I am sent ahead of him.

You see what's going on here? Because John has this profoundly theological understanding of who he is, he defines his life in terms of who God is, he has no Messiah complex. He has no pretension about the fact that he can save others or that he can even save himself. But, in fact, he knows that he's simply been sent to witness to the one who can save.

He plays a unique role, yes. God has a purpose for his life, yes. His life is rooted in the grace and the goodness of God, yes.

What he has, he's received from God, yes. But he was not the Christ. And the reality is, you see, if you start with the big I and move forward from that point, what you're always trying to do is justify yourself.

You always have to justify yourself before others. You always have to justify yourself somehow before God. You have to somehow prove to yourself and to others and to God that somehow you're worth it, you're worthy.

And that's exactly, of course, what the Bible undercuts. We cannot save ourselves. And when we begin with God and God's grace and understand who we are, it sets things aright.

And then John pushes further by saying that he's not the bridegroom. I love this. He says, I'm not the bridegroom.

And what he's really saying here is, you know, there's a wedding to take place here. There's going to be great joy at this wedding. It's going to be a wonderful feast of the kingdom of God, but this is not my wedding.

I'm not the bridegroom. I'm just the friend. I'm the friend who's at the wedding, who listens to the bridegroom's voice, and who takes great joy.

I take great joy, John says, when I hear the bridegroom's voice. He knows it's not his wedding. He knows he's not center stage.

The wedding feast of the Lamb has begun. The kingdom of God is at hand, and John the Baptist is filled with joy. And that joy comes from this profound sense of the reality that he has in God's presence and the fact that he's been sent to witness to the Christ.

And then the remarkable high point of John's humility said, in this context then, you see it? He says, he must become greater, referring to Jesus, and I must become less. If you want to know what the doctrine of sanctification is about, this is the sum and substance of the Christian life, right here. He must become greater, and I must become less.

Christ being formed in me, being shaped in my life, welling up within me, that's what sanctification, that's what holiness is about. Being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, he must become greater, and I must become less. John here has a glorious understanding, a passion to see Christ glorified, not only in the world, but indeed in his own life.

And I suggest to you that this is the litmus test of true Christian faith. And if you want to do something worthwhile this week, I suggest you take this 30th verse and just sit down and meditate on it for a while, and write down on a sheet of paper the thoughts that come to you, and make that a part of your prayer life, because this is a profound statement. What does it mean to believe this? What does it mean for me to say this? What areas of my life do I need to turn over to Christ? What areas must become less so that Christ can be magnified? Where must I decrease, and where must he increase? How do I keep my eyes fixed on Jesus? You see, many people have the idea that somehow humility comes by somehow pushing yourself down.

They focus on the negative side of this, that somehow you can cultivate this by just dealing with yourself. But Arthur Pink had a wonderful way of expressing it. He said, Humility is not the product of direct cultivation.

Rather, it is a byproduct. The more I try to be humble, the less I shall attain unto humility. But if I am truly occupied with Christ, the one who is meek and lowly in heart, if I am constantly beholding his glory in the mirror of God's word, then I shall be changed into the same image from glory to glory.

Isn't that marvelous? You see, what cultivates this right attitude within us is not a preoccupation with ourselves, with what's wrong in our lives, with what's right in our lives, but it is a preoccupation with the

glory of Christ, cultivated by immersing our lives in Christ, not by simply trying to improve ourselves. And then finally, notice the third paragraph records a remarkable description of Christ. You see what's happened here? The disciples of John have come and they've questioned John.

John has responded first by giving this self-diagnosis, this analysis, but then he gives a remarkable witness to Jesus in verses 31 to 36. First of all, he says that Jesus is the one who comes from above. I'm from the earth, John says.

Jesus comes from above. Jesus comes from heaven. He comes from the very presence and from the very heart of God.

And Jesus is greater than me, he's saying, because his origin is in God the Father, is in heaven. He is begotten of the Father. And then secondly, he says, John says, because he is sent from the very presence of God, he testifies to what he has seen and heard.

The idea here is that Jesus, the words of Jesus are real and the words of Jesus are true, because these are not words that he simply received by revelation as John the Baptist may have received words, but these are words which he himself knows, which he himself experiences, which he himself has access to. He himself is the word, the revelation of God. John the Baptist can only speak the words given to him, but Jesus can speak the words which indeed are his own.

Jesus, John says, has been given the spirit without limit. Do you see all of the things he's pointing out about Jesus in difference, in distinction from himself? I have the spirit with a limit, as much as the Father has given me, John says. Jesus has it without limit.

I have words which the Father has given me. Jesus has words because he is the word of God. I have a ministry and a mission because God has given it to me.

Jesus himself has come from the very heart of the Father. And Jesus, he says, has been given all authority. Everything has been placed in his hands.

John's point is clear. John's really saying to his disciples, if you're in this because of me, you're in it for the wrong reason. If you're in it because you think I'm going to save you, then you're sadly mistaken.

If you're in it because ultimately you think I'm going to be able to help you, then you need to take another look. People, disciples, you should not be investing your life in me, but you should be investing your life, without reservation, in Jesus. And this passage ends with words that echo an earlier part of John 3 and Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus.

John the Baptist says, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son, whoever insists on placing me above Jesus, God's wrath will remain on him. What a devastating word to his own disciples. I mean, can you imagine being one of John the Baptist's disciples and really hearing your teacher and your master say to you, if you place your trust in me, God's wrath is going to rest on you.

But if you place your trust in Jesus, you will have life. They will be judged, John says, for their small-mindedness, for their narcissistic worldview, for their failure to see the purposes of God at work in Jesus. And I want to say to you tonight, my friends, that what John the Baptist says to his disciples is what the Word of God says to us.

What are we trusting in tonight? How do we think we're going to be able to cultivate a right understanding of who we are? What do we hope will give us life? Do we think it's going to come from ourselves, from someone else, from some source? Or are we placing our trust in Jesus Christ and in him alone? Because when all was said and done, that's what it came down to for John the Baptist. And he went to his death according to the Bible, believing that he was not the Christ, but that he was given a profound mission to point to the one who is the Savior of the world. And he carried out that ministry and that mission magnificently.

When William Carey, one of the great pioneer missionaries to India, was dying, he turned to a friend and he said very simply these words. He said, When I am gone, don't talk about William Carey, but talk about William Carey's Savior. I desire, he said, that Christ alone would be magnified.

What a marvelous sentiment. But it's more than a sentiment. What a marvelous statement of faith.

And as a statement of faith, it's a principle on which we can build our lives now and for eternity. He must increase. And I must decrease.

Lord, we confess that this whole area of having a right understanding, having humility is hard for us. We're filled with pride. And sometimes to counteract that pride, we fill ourselves with a false humility.

Lord, give us a right understanding that's rooted in your word, that's rooted in your gospel, that's rooted in your grace, that's rooted in your goodness. Help us to so place our lives in your hands that we know indeed that you are and you alone are the one who saves us. So tonight we commit ourselves afresh.

We commit ourselves anew to follow you. Amen.

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