

Living for a Greater Glory (John 3:22-36)

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The rise of social media didn't make us self-centered. It simply gave us new tools to promote our own image and secure the approval we crave. It gave ordinary people power to reinforce our sense of worth and value by acquiring a following of friends around the world. Write a post, upload a picture, update your status, and watch as the retweets, comments, and likes come rolling in. It's the new currency of self-esteem.

You don't have to be on social media, however, to be consumed with what people think of you. Every one of us is intimately familiar with the desperate struggle to measure up in the courtroom of human opinion, whether it's our boss, our spouse, our in-laws, or our friends. It's a battle we never win, friends, because it's a race with no finish line. As soon as we think we've secured the approval we crave, what happens? We're back to work trying to figure out how to not lose it. Every interaction we have with another human being becomes a functional referendum on our personal worth and value.

What sort of advice does the world give if you're stuck in that cycle, drowning in a sea of other people's opinions? Stop worrying about what other people think you should do and focus on what you think you should do, on what you believe is right. "You be you" and let the chips fall where they may.

But that doesn't work either in the long run, does it? We just exchange one form of slavery for another. Once I was ruled by other people's opinions of me. Now I'm ruled by my own opinion of myself. And sometimes, our own conscience, our own inner critic, feels harder to please than everyone else combined.

Here's where the message of Christianity brings real freedom. Christianity says the point of your life isn't to make much of yourself at all, whether in the eyes of your friends or your own. The point of your life is to make much of Jesus. The secret to true joy isn't impressing other people or impressing yourself with how great you are. It's devoting all that you are and all that you have to showing everyone just how great Jesus is.

Joy is found in making much of Jesus, not yourself. And we make much of Jesus, the preeminent Son of God, through obedient trust in Jesus. The Gospel of John makes each of those points in the last part of chapter 3.

1) JOY IS FOUND IN MAKING MUCH OF JESUS, NOT YOURSELF

Vv. 22-24 set the context. Before Jesus' public ministry began, the Lord sent a final prophet, a forerunner named John the Baptist to prepare the way. John told people to repent, to turn away from their sins and turn back to God. Those who heeded his message were baptized or immersed in water as a rite of purification, an expression of consecration to the Lord.

At the same time, he said an even better baptism was on the way. Jn 1:26-27, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." He knew God himself was about to arrive on the scene. The very next day, John sees Jesus walking toward him and cries out, "He's here. This is one I told you about, the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world. And he won't just baptize you with water, purifying you on the outside. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He will purify you from the inside out!"

That's a promise Jesus fulfilled several years later on the Day of Pentecost when he poured out the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit on his people. At this point in his ministry, however, Jesus and his disciples joined John in practicing water baptism for the repentance of sins. Evidently, Jesus and his disciples were baptizing people in one region, and John and his disciples were baptizing people in another.

Before too long, John the Baptist's disciples approach him with a question that no doubt had been growing in their minds for some time. V. 26, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness – look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." Perhaps they really want to know if John is ok with people flocking to Jesus instead of him. The tone of their words, however, suggests otherwise. They seem jealous of Jesus' popularity. When they first started baptizing people, they were the happening place to be. But now everyone's running to the church next door. They're "all" going to Jesus.

Friends, we're not immune, even in the church, in "Christian" ministry, to attempting to build a personal following, wanting people to make much of us, and then succumbing to bitter jealousy when we don't get the affirmation we crave. Let's say you see someone new on Sunday morning take initiative to reach out. You have some good conversations and they seem genuinely grateful you're your care. After a while, however, you start having trouble nailing down a time to meet. Then you learn they've really connected with someone else and decided to join their CG instead of yours, just when you thought God might be giving you the friend you've always wanted.

Or let's say you invest a lot of time in discipling a single adult in the church. Everything's going great. It's a huge source of mutual encouragement. You see significant leadership

potential in them. One day, however, they tell you they're leaving for another church. Six months later, you run into each other at a graduation party and hear all the ways they've been growing spiritually since they joined their new church.

Maybe you've served faithfully in a ministry capacity and never really been recognized. Or maybe you used to serve in a particular role, but someone more gifted has come along and taken your place. Scenarios abound where we are sorely tempted to bitterness and jealousy. Why couldn't they stay in our church? Why couldn't they thank me for my service? Where's my reward? Where's my honor? Where's my relational or leadership return for my money? Why is everyone so unwilling to make much of me?

John's response to his own disciples in vv. 27-30 shows us the way out. First, he reminds them of a foundational spiritual principle. You'll never be able to embrace the lane God created you to run in with contentment apart from the work of his Spirit in your heart. V. 27, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." There's an upside-down logic to life in his kingdom. What is foolish in the eyes of the world is honored in God's eyes. What is honored in the eyes of the world is foolish in God's eyes. We need God's help to remember what John remembered.

First, remember your identity. V. 28, "I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him." Oh, that we might do the same, brothers and sisters! That in every moment, every situation, every gospel ministry context, we might remember that we are not the Savior. We're not God. We're creatures made in his image, saved by his blood, but we are not the Creator. We don't open blind eyes. We don't change hard hearts. We don't make broken relationships whole.

When you're tempted to make much of yourself as a parent by yelling a little louder or piling on consequences to make that kid change, remember, you're not the Christ. When you're tempted to make much of yourself by badgering your spouse until they comply with your wishes, remember, you're not the Christ. When you're tempted to get angry because a leader in the church had the audacity to suggest a certain ministry position is not the best fit for you, remember, you're not the Christ. Remember your identity.

Second, remember your role. John's illustration in v. 29 is provoking. "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom." Imagine a wedding where the best man throws a public tantrum because the bride was given to the groom, not him. Would you sympathize with the guy? Of course not! The bride at a wedding is reserved for one person only and that's the bridegroom. If the best man were to cut in front and take her hand before the groom could, a fight would break out and for good reason!



Friends, the church is Jesus' bride, not yours or mine. The loyalty, affection, honor, and submission of God's people are ultimately reserved for him and no one else. In John's day, it was the role of the best man, the friend of the bridegroom, to bring the bride to the groom. In a spiritual sense, John recognized that was his role too, not to build people into himself or acquire followers for himself, but to point people toward Jesus, build people into Jesus, and rejoice as they chose to follow Jesus, wherever he leads.

I love how John declares, upon hearing how people were leaving him for Jesus, "Therefore this joy of mine is now complete!" He's not resigned or just "ok" with people leaving him for Jesus. He's exceedingly glad! The bride has been united with the groom, and nothing brings him more satisfaction than to stand on the sideline and cheer!

God has entrusted us with the same role today, to find our joy not in getting people to make much of us, but rather in helping people to make much of him. John the Baptist's example here challenges us with a critical question. Is the goal of your labor, not just within the walls of the church but in everything you do, to leave people impressed with you or impressed with Jesus? Is your aim in all your activities, big and small, for people to worship Jesus, or does part of your heart want them to worship you too, to recognize you for being an amazing friend, spouse, child, leader, servant, employer, or employee?

John Calvin recognized the wickedness of selfish ambition for the praise of men in the context of Christian ministry in particular when he wrote, "Those who win the Church over to themselves rather than to Christ faithlessly violate the marriage which they ought to honor."

Brothers and sisters, the Son of God will not stand idly by as we steal the heart of his bride. God's eternal commitment to his own glory guarantees Jesus must increase and we must decrease. He's the sun in whom the candles of our renown will inevitably melt and be consumed.

To make much of yourself and try to convince others to join you is to chase a glory that's guaranteed to fade. Lasting joy is only found in making much of Jesus, in magnifying a glory that will never fade. He must increase. We must decrease.

So take care, friend. Take care to work, study, rest, speak, dress, and spend in such a way that anyone who watches you finds their attention quickly drawn to him. Don't assume that's happening. Ask a Christian who knows you well for an honest assessment. Whose glory am I living for? Is the way I'm living drawing attention to me or to Jesus?

2) WE MAKE MUCH OF JESUS THROUGH OBEDIENT TRUST IN JESUS

John's example teaches us our greatest joy will never be found in making much of ourselves, but in making much of Jesus. But that raises a good question. Why is that the case? John could have said, "He must increase, but I must decrease. This is necessary." It is necessary, but that's not what John said. He said, "He must increase, but I must decrease. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete."

What made Jesus' exaltation not just a divine necessity but a personal joy? Why did making much of Jesus instead of himself make John exceedingly glad? V. 31, because "he who comes from above is above all." You are not above all. Your friends are not above all. Your circumstances are not above all. Whoever gets elected this fall is not above all. Jesus is above all. In power, beauty, excellence, purity, goodness, majesty, and wisdom, he is utterly and eternally supreme. No one is greater than him. He's not of the earth like John. He descended from heaven.

And as the Majestic One, God the Son incarnate, what did he do? How did he display his glory among us? V. 32, "He bears witness to what he has seen and heard." What has Jesus seen and heard? From eternity past, he has been intimately acquainted with the glory of God the Father. Jn 1:18, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

What can you bear witness to this morning, friend? What you watched on the news? What you saw on a walk through your neighborhood? Jesus bears witness, Jesus gives us a firsthand account of the thoughts and ways and character of Almighty God, not because someone told him about God, but because he has been with God the Father from eternity past as the only-begotten Son.

And if you "receive" Jesus' testimony as the truth, if you lean the weight of your life on what he says about God, centered on the gospel of salvation from sin and death, what are you doing? You are affirming, setting your seal as it were, to the truthfulness of God himself. Why? V. 34, because Jesus speaks the very words of God. When Jesus speaks, God speaks. His "testimony" isn't some religious teacher's fallible take on God – right in some ways, wrong in others. Jesus's "testimony" is God's revelation of himself.

How do we know that? How do we know that every word that came of the human mouth of Jesus is nothing less than the very word of God? Because (v. 35) God the Father gave God the Spirit to Jesus "without measure." Isa 11:1–2, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD."

As Christians, we experience the power of God's Spirit "according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph 4:7). Jesus, in contrast, was filled with the Spirit "without measure." He was the Spirit-filled man par excellence. In and through his human nature, every thought he had, every action he took, every word he uttered was under the total influence and complete control of the Spirit of God.

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus only did what was pleasing to his Father. He was the beloved Son, as v. 35 reminds us, with whom the Father was well-pleased. And in response to his humble obedience, the Father gave him authority over the entire created universe. Psalm 2:10–12, "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him."

That's comforting news as we anticipate the election this fall, isn't it? Political candidates play to our fears by warning us of all the bad things that will happen if "all things" are given into the hand of the other party. A Christian finds refuge in knowing the Father hasn't given supreme authority to the Democrats or Republicans. He's given it to Jesus. All things are in his hand. Therefore, we will not fear!

Vv. 31-35 are one of the most glorious meditations in the gospel of John on the supremacy of Jesus. It's why John the Baptist found so much joy in making much of him. He didn't choose to exalt Jesus out of a lineup of religious figures. He recognized his preeminence, his all-satisfying splendor, and delighted in exalting him accordingly.

So how do we do that today, friends? In light of Christ's supremacy, what must we do to join John in making much of Jesus? V. 36 is exceedingly practical. If you want a crystal-clear recipe for how to experience the joy of making much of Jesus, not yourself, here it is. It comes to us in the form of a choice you must make. V. 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."

If you want to experience the gift of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and the blessing of restored relationship with God both now and forever, you must what? You must believe Jesus. That's a word we'll come back to again and again. You must embrace, trust, and rely on him to deliver you from the judgment you deserve. What's the alternative? To "not obey the Son" and experience in your body and soul the full weight of holy wrath.

So why does John say, “whoever does not obey”? Why doesn’t he say, “whoever does not believe”? I think there are two reasons. First, the ground of our salvation is distinct from the ground of our condemnation. If we are saved from the wrath of God, it will be through faith alone, wholehearted reliance on Jesus to rescue us through the power of his life, death, and resurrection. But if we are condemned under the wrath of God, it will be because of our own willful disobedience of his holy law.

Second, believing and obeying Jesus are really two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. If you actually believe Jesus you will obey Jesus, not perfectly, but faithfully. And the only way we can ever obey Jesus – not just on the outside, but on the inside, at the level of what we love and cherish – is if we first choose to believe and trust him.

In that sense, making much of Jesus requires two things. We have to trust Jesus and we have to obey Jesus. We have to believe what he says and do what he says. In the words of Paul from Rom 1:5, we make much of Jesus through the “obedience of faith.” Be honest, friend. Is there something Jesus says that you struggle to believe? Is there something Jesus tells us to do that you’re reluctant to obey? Share that with a Christian friend and ask them to pray for you. Believing and obeying Jesus isn’t a box we check. It’s a direction we run. Your salvation on the final day depends on it.

CONCLUSION

Joy isn’t found in making much of yourself, friend. It’s found in making much of Jesus because no one is greater than him. And we make much of Jesus by believing his word and obeying his word. V. 36 warns us the choice between making much of him or making much of ourselves isn’t a lifestyle option for those who are spiritually inclined. It’s a matter of life and death for every man and woman who has ever lived.

If you spend your life making much of him, your joy will be complete. If you spend your life making much of yourself, your sorrow will never end. I urge you, friend, for the sake of your eternal good and God’s eternal glory, choose the former, not just once, but every day the Lord has graciously given you on this earth. There is no better or more gladsome reason to get up in the morning than to make much of Jesus.

J.C. Ryle was right. “We can never have too high thoughts about Christ, we can never love Him too much, trust Him too implicitly, lay too much weight upon him, and speak too highly in his praise. He is worthy of all the honor that we can give him. He will be all in heaven. Let us see to it that he is all in our hearts on earth.”

