

He Must Increase
John 3:22-30

A few years ago I was driving between Tennessee and Kentucky on a road I had never traveled before and I saw a sign for a place on the National Historic Register of Historic Places. Normally, unless Jen is with me and she demands we stop to satisfy her deep of history, I just write places like that off. But I recognized the name from my studies in Church History—the Red River Meeting House. **(insert cabin picture)**

What is the Red River Meeting House? Well...I am glad you asked. It is recognized as the beginning location of the Second Great Awakening—one of the greatest spiritual events in the history of our country and even the world. It began as a camp meeting, the kind of thing today we call a family camp. In June of 1800 and dozens of families from several churches were led by a Presbyterian Pastor and after they received communion and the Holy Spirit fell. People began testifying and giving their life to Christ, confessing their sins and giving up terrible habits and practices. And as the meeting got louder and more boisterous as the Holy Spirit increasingly fell, the Presbyterians tried to quiet people down because things became so disorderly. But soon even they were caught up in the spiritual fervor! Even the most dared in the wool, literally, staunchest, predestinarian Calvinist was jumping up and down and rolling on the floor like they were part of the Triple Rock, Holy Ghost Fire, Church of the What's Happening Now, Full Gospel House of Worship and Waffles. It was an amazing outpouring of God's grace and it spread throughout the country, forever changing America and the American Church. The Presbyterian Pastor who led Red River Meeting called it:

The most glorious time that our guilty eyes have ever beheld.

The Holy Spirit did an amazing, world-changing work in that place. But today it is just a log cabin with a metal sign outside and you can look with a magnifying glass and not see any sign at all that a miraculous, heavenly outpouring happened there.

God's work increased and then decreased. And the Holy Spirit went on to increase somewhere else in this world.

Just like He did with John the Baptist.

Today we talk about a new phase of John's ministry when his ministry and Jesus' co-existed and John's ministry began to decline. John's work decreased while Jesus' work increased

John's Gospel teaches us:

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

John 3:22–24

Jesus and his disciples had begun baptizing people in the hill country of Judah away from where John had been baptizing. Jesus, you may remember, was about six months younger than John and His

ministry too also began about the age of 30. And for a brief period, John's ministry and Jesus' ministry coincided. They were both preaching and teaching in two separate locations. Jesus' ministry began to flourish and John's began to wane.

And at least among a few, this created a controversy.

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

John 3:25-26

Is there anything people love more than controversy? Even among Christians, people who know God and should know better, folks will try to create controversy. An unnamed Jewish man was drawing a distinction between the worth of the baptism being offered by Jesus' disciples and the baptism being offered by John. It appears that this man was saying that the baptism by Jesus' disciples was higher, better, holier purer than John's baptism. And shared this with John's disciples to make his point that everyone was now going to Jesus rather than John. And John's disciples told John about it. They told John that his cousin' Jesus' ministry was putting John out of business.

You know, it is actually nice to know that people leaving one ministry and going to another ministry that seems newer and better is an old problem. This is something every pastor and every church knows about. At the Church I served in Kansas City there was a great church just down the street from us. I know the Lead Pastor. We are still in touch to this day. They had been a new church development about 10 years before I got there and they built an amazing new facility at a great location. He is gifted teacher, they prioritize the right things and have great ministries and a lot of great people. Sometimes a family would migrate over to that church from ours. And it made sense because it was a great church.

And this used to bother some of our folks who believed in our mission and vision and what we were doing. To be honest, I didn't care for it much either. But I know it was my fleshly side, my sin nature because I know those folks were going to a great church. I have learned many people are more bothered when people leave their own church for another church than they are when someone just stops going to Church altogether because at least in the latter case, they didn't lost someone to the competition. That realization and the whole experience caused me to ask some very intentional questions of my ministry—like "Is my ministry about me or Jesus? Am I more committed to building Jesus' Kingdom or my own?" I am glad I got to the point, after a lot of pain and fear, that I could ask that question. Although I admit it is still not easy at times.

John was way ahead of me. John's disciples told Jesus that everyone was going to be baptized by Jesus and leaving them—in other words they were going to the hot new church with the shiny building down the street. And here is how John responded:

John answered, "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.' 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. He must increase, but I must decrease."

John 3:27-30

John knew he must decrease and Jesus must increase—living the fullness of his life and his mission required less of him and more of Jesus.

We need more of Jesus and less of me.

But this is so very counter-intuitive. If we want to be all that we have been made to be, we must become less than we are. We are consumed today with increasing. We want more of everything—more money, more stuff, more power, more authority, a better title, a better office, a better home, a better family, a better school. We judge people's worth and influence by the number of followers they have on social media or by how many books or articles or blogs they have written or how many people listen to their podcast.

We are all about the increase. And its literally killing us.

But if we want to know the fullness of life Jesus intends, we must decrease—we need more of Jesus and less of me.

How do we do that?

We cannot deny ourselves to spiritual fullness just in the same way that we can't gratify ourselves to the fullness of life Jesus intends. If we want to have the fullness of life Jesus intends, if we want to live out our God-given mission like John, our first move must be toward Jesus.

John's biographer Frederick Brotherton Meyer put it like this:

The only hope of a decreasing self is an increasing Christ. There is too much of the self in us all; chafing against God's gifts, instigating the very services we render to God, simulating humility and weakness for the praise of men. But how can we be rid of this accursed self-consciousness and pride? Ah! We must turn our back on our shadow and face toward Christ.

This is one of the keys to the Christian life—crafting the habit and the pattern of turning continually toward Jesus. Like the glow of the rising sun overwhelms the lesser lights of moon and the stars every morning, we must allow the light of Jesus to shine on us daily.

We have looked a couples of times at this 500-year-old painting of Jesus on the cross, part of what is known as the Isenheim Altarpiece. It was painted by a German artist named Mathias Grunewald—who was a man of incredible faith, a man who knew Jesus very well and his intimacy with Jesus came out in his art. **(Isenheim Altarpiece—big picture)**

In the painting John stands with an open Bible at the base of the cross, with Jesus' twisted and broken body hanging over him and he is speaking this very phrase, "He must increase and I must decrease." Grunewald's work is a visual illustration of what allowing Jesus to increase and ourselves to decrease should be.

First, **John stands close not only to Jesus but close to the cross.**

Unless we know a crucified Jesus and we fully understand the reason for His crucifixion—in all its offense shame and terror—we do not know the real Jesus. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth who kept a copy of this very painting above his writing desk wrote this about the Crucified Christ:

In the death of Jesus Christ God has humiliated Himself and rendered Himself up, in order to accomplish His law upon sinful man by taking his place and thus once for all removing from him to Himself the curse that affects him, the punishment he deserves...

If we don't know Christ crucified, if we don't plant ourselves at the foot of the cross, we don't know the real Jesus.

A little while ago I stumbled upon a podcast called "Jesus and Islam." It was a Muslim scholar that had made his career studying Jesus. He talked about how Jesus was a great teacher, even one of the greatest. He said Jesus is a man that all Muslims should revere and honor. But he also shared that he did not believe Jesus died on the cross, that it was inconceivable that Allah would allow a man like that to die such a terrible death. Instead, he claimed that Jesus' betrayer Judas died in Jesus' place and it only appeared Jesus died.

As Alisa Childers mentioned last week some people, even Christians struggle with Jesus' death on the cross because they perceive a blood sacrifice of God's only Son for the sins of the world as barbaric. Instead, for them, Jesus is a merely a good moral example that we need to follow and if He died on the cross then it's a merely a metaphor for being unselfish and the danger of speaking truth to power.

But the real truth is unless we embrace the cross, put a camp at its very base, and understand why our sin makes the cross so very necessary, we don't know the real Jesus. Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2

We need Christ crucified and we need the cross because we are dead in our sin. We are dead to knowing the fullness of life for which we have been made. We will struggle, strive, strain and work until we are so exhausted to become the fullness of what we believe we can be. As Charles Spurgeon said, we must be tethered to the cross.

I cannot tell you the number of people with whom I have sat who are well along in life and by any measure they are successful. They have anything this world can offer. They are celebrated in their career. They are well-educated, wealthy. They have great families and vacation in beautiful places around the world. Compared to 99.99% of people who ever lived, they live in paradise. In many cases, they are even part of a church.

But they have not come face to face with the reality that they are dead in their sin. And their critique of their own life comes down to this question, "Is that all there is?" Their soul is something like a hollow tree that has died but whose decay has been hidden by a hard bark on the outside. They have everything this world has reasonably to offer and it is not enough. To know that fullness of life Jesus cannot be a mere teacher or guide or moral example. He must be more than a friend. Jesus must be our Savior and living sacrifice. We must place ourselves right at the foot of the cross and ask Jesus to take away our sin and give us His grace.

In others we must ask Him to increase so we can decrease—more of Jesus, less of me.

Second, you will see that **John has the Bible open in his hands. (insert picture of John alone)**

Knowing God's Word, cherishing His Word, living by His word is so very important if we are going to allow Jesus to increase in our lives. This is why one of our core practices is here is "Read and Practice Scripture."

If you want to do one thing to grow your relationship with Jesus, if you want to cultivate one daily habit to know the fullness of life Jesus intends, spend time in God's Word daily. Just like God's Word created teeming abundant life in a dark and formless void, allowing God's Word to permeate your spirit, even if your spirit deems a dark void, will create abundant life.

That's what the Holy Spirit did for John.

How difficult was it for John to see his ministry, after it had rocked the world and changed thousands of lives, to begin to diminish? We get no indication that it was difficult for John at all! In fact John even said that allowing Jesus to increase and himself to decrease even completed his joy! This kind of thinking really hard for us to understand—if we allow ourselves to think this from an earthly point of view.

John had joy at Jesus' increase and his decrease for a simple reason. John trusted God's Word. He trusted His promises and purposes and plan for his life. Immediately after John talked about Jesus' increase and his decrease, he said:

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. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

John 3:32-34

John drew a distinction between earthly words and God's Word. He did not confuse the two. One word comes from a world broken by the power of sin, so it is fractured, impartial and incomplete. Its truth and authority is limited. The other Word comes from above, the Kingdom of Heaven and it is perfect and true and its authority is ultimate.

More of Jesus. Less of me.

And the only way we learn to distinguish between the two words is by encountering God's Word. And how it works is really very simple. It works exactly the way it does in our life. The more we listen to someone, the more we learn how they sound.

There is a common e-mail scam that tries to victimize some of you every so often. Someone sets up a false email using my name and they send an email acting like me asking for help. This has happened to almost every pastor I know. The scammers get points for creativity. But the email doesn't sound like me. It sounds like someone trying to sound like a Presbyterian pastor. So they say things like

“Blessings” or peace to you—which I really never say. But...if you didn’t know me, you might think I would say things like that.

And if we don’t know what Jesus sounds like we are likely to give all kinds of voices and influences in our life amazing authority and often with good intentions. Like: God helps those who help themselves, human beings are basically good, we are responsible for the sins of our ancestors and people who look like us, its okay to hate, love is love, God just wants you to be happy, or all kinds half-truths that are common today.

But its not just about knowing what Jesus sounds like, knowing what God’s Word sounds like. The Bible tells us that even Satan and the demons know God’s Word. Satan tempted Jesus using God’s Word and even using obscure passages! They just don’t give Gods Word authority. If we want more of Jesus and less of me, we will make God’s Word the ultimate authority in our life. There is abundant life, astonishing life amid even death, when we give God’s Word authority.

Many of you here know our Elder Crystal DePue and her daughter Jeannie. If you know Crystal and Jeannie, then you know Jeannie’s Dad and Crystal’s first husband Jim was killed 37 years ago last month by a school shooter. Jim was the principal of a Junior High School in Kansas and he stepped out in the hallway to stop a 14 year-old boy from walking into a classroom carrying a handgun. Instead of shooting up a class of children, the boy instead shot Jim. Jim and Crystal’s children were 10, 7, 5 and she was six months pregnant.

It was, of course, an unimaginable tragedy—an evil event. It is the kind of thing that makes most people question God.

Crystal’s brother James drove to be with them that night. As the family prayed before bed James read to them from Psalm 68:

His name is the LORD; exult before him! Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

And for 37 years, that family has relied upon that promise. For 37 years that family has given authority and trust to God’s Word and they have seen His faithfulness.

This week James died after a long illness—but what a legacy of trust in God’s Word he left behind. Literally speaking God’s Word created life amid death. And you think of all the things a human being could say in a moment of tragedy and pain. You think of how someone might be tempted to speak out of their own wisdom and insight at such a dark moment.

Instead James spoke God’s Word.

Jesus increased and he decreased.

More of Jesus. Less of me.

There are some who say that we need another Great Awakening in the Church. There are some who are looking for a moment just like the one at the Red River Meeting House. They say that the fate of the Church and our nation depends upon it.

We can pray for that. But for that kind of thing to happen, we need more of Jesus and less of me. He must increase and we must decrease. We must plant ourselves at the foot of the cross and preach the forgiveness of sin by the shed blood of God's only son and lay aside a Gospel of self-improvement, self-fulfillment and personal progress. We must hide the Word of God in our heart and hold it as our unrivaled authority and stop allowing our hearts and minds to be formed by social media, cable news and self-selected talking heads that echo our political convictions and confirm our biases.

Jesus must increase. We must decrease.

Less of me. More of Jesus.

Next week we will talk about how the world doesn't like that.