HE MUST BECOME GREATER

John 3:22-36
Key Verse 3:30

“He must become greater; I must become less.”

Last week, we studied Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus, one on one. Jesus told him so many marvelous truths about being born again into the kingdom of God. When we are born again, we can see the kingdom of God, though we live in this corrupted and violent world. When we are born again, we have the hope of eternal life. When we are born again, we are saved by faith from the power of sin and death. When we are born again, we can know God's everlasting love. When we are born again, we can walk in the light as children of the light. But Nicodemus wasn’t ready to receive Jesus’ testimony. So he asked again and again, “How can this be?” It is true that the grace of Jesus is unbelievably wonderful and beautiful! But we must not love the present darkness more than the promised light. We must come into the light by faith in Christ Jesus, and find there everything that God has promised to us. In today's passage, John gives his final testimony about Jesus and about the work of God. Through this passage, may God bless us to know what is the work of God, and how we can participate in it!

I. The Right View of God’s Work (22-30)

First, Raising disciples (22-26). Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus marked the end of Jesus’ first ministry in Jerusalem. Nicodemus was in a great agony of soul about what to do after listening to Jesus. He knew that Jesus told him the truth. But Nicodemus wouldn’t come out of the darkness, yet. Nicodemus was a man of indecision. Jesus, however, knew exactly what to do next. Look at verse 22. “After this, Jesus and his disciples went out to the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.” Jesus loved Nicodemus. But Jesus’ focus was on raising disciples. Jesus had called many young men to follow him and see how he lived and what he taught. He spent time with them so that they could understand God's word, and
so that their spiritual eyes might open more and more to see God’s work. Not only so, but Jesus began to train his disciples to do God’s work. Look at John 4:1-2. “The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.” Here, baptism refers to the process of raising disciples. Jesus was training his disciples to become disciple-makers. In the face of a world ruled by darkness and evil, Jesus always found hope through raising disciples and training them to be disciple-makers. If you want to find the meaning of life and hope for yourself in God, please, learn from Jesus and from John, and raise disciples.

John’s disciple-making ministry was going on at Aenon near Salim. There was plenty of water. People were coming to John continuously to be baptized. And John baptized them. He also taught them, “A man who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Son of God, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” John’s teaching was very powerful, because he was not afraid of anyone. He was a true witness for his people of God’s truth. He rebuked the religious leaders, saying, “You brood of vipers. Who told you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” He would rebuke the corrupt king Herod, “You should not have taken Herodias, your brother’s wife, for yourself.” Because of these things, John was eventually arrested (24), and beheaded in prison. Why did John take such risks while doing the work of God? Maybe he should have been quieter, so that he could have raised more disciples? But John was a man of God. He did not calculate how to make his ministry bigger or more popular. He set his disciples an example of an uncompromising messenger of God’s truth. Personally, it was very costly to John to set such an example. But no one can raise disciples for God’s work without a clear decision to obey God. The only way to teach obedience to others is to set the example through personal practice and faith. And we must pay the cost.

John and Jesus were both gaining and baptizing disciples along the Jordan River. The work of God was going on. Look at verse 25. “An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain
Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.” One day, a ritualistic Jew began to stir up trouble among John's disciples regarding the issue of baptism. Of course, the Jews had long accused John of baptizing without a license. This made the disciples a little defensive, and they eagerly argued for their master in the matter of baptism. But through this argument, a question had arisen in their hearts. So the disciples came to John and said, “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.” (26b). John's disciples were loyal followers of John. John had been baptizing for a long time. He had even baptized Jesus. Now, everyone was going to Jesus and being baptized by him. It didn't seem fair. It didn't seem proper. John's disciples were discouraged to see that their master was losing popularity. So they came to John with their complaint. But it was just their human ambition and loyalty. They needed to open their eyes and see the work of God going on. Baptism and disciple-making are human activities. We must not lose sight of the fact that they are given to us to do in service to the world salvation work of God. Anything else is idolatry.

Second, The work of God glorifies God (27-30). John listened to his disciples’ complaint. But John was not at all discouraged by what was going on. John saw that the work of God was going on. So John was joyful, and wanted to share with his disciples this joy. Look at verse 27. “To this John replied, ‘A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.’” Here we see that while his disciples were living in a 2-dimensional world, John was living in the 3-dimensional world of spiritual reality. He was a man living under God’s sovereignty. He was a man who saw and would enter the kingdom of God. “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.” John was flying in the clouds, knowing that he had been given a holy mission to serve as the forerunner of the Messiah. He received his mission as the grace of God, and gave his heart and soon his life for the sake of fulfilling that mission. To John, the man of God, his mission from God was the most beautiful thing he had ever received. The name John means, “Gift of God.” He was living a “gift life” by obeying God’s purpose and mission for him. Many a man is very sorry that he has not received proper recognition and honor from others during his lifetime. Men who crave
recognition are like Potiphar’s wife when she was rejected by Joseph – very dangerous and very treacherous, indeed. During his lifetime, John had been despised and rejected by ordinary men because of his strict and austere life. Now, one of those he had baptized was taking over the disciple-making ministry, leaving him with a few, scrawny disciples. But John was not sorry. He rejoiced. It was because he knew that the best glory any human being can have is to receive God’s favor and God’s holy mission for our lives.

John’s disciples had heard John say, “I am not the Christ, but am sent ahead of him.” Still, they hadn’t listened carefully to what he meant. These disciples of John were not very good disciples! They had followed John to receive human glory. And they had received glory for a time. Now, that time was over. A time of personal sorrow would follow, as they saw their beloved teacher arrested and toyed with by Herod before finally having his head cut off because of Herod’s childish oath to Salome, the daughter of Herodias by Philip. It would make them question everything, including why they had followed John so faithfully only to have to live in such ignominy. But John helped his disciples by reminding them of his role as the forerunner of the Messiah. Look at verse 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.” When two young people get married, it is a very beautiful and hopeful occasion. But the fact remains that only two people get married. The other guests must find their joy through what blessings the young couple receives. This is especially true for the friend of the bridegroom. According to Jewish tradition, the friend waits with the bride for the bridegroom to arrive, and the wedding to take place. Some times, the bridegroom was very long in coming. But the friend’s job was not to take the bridegroom’s place; it was to hold his place until he came. His joy was to hear the bridegroom, and know that soon the bride and bridegroom would marry. This is the joy that John was speaking of to his disciples. He had come as the forerunner of the Messiah to help the people receive Jesus as their true bridegroom, and the one who could save them from their sins and lead them to their everlasting home in the kingdom of God. The disciples had to celebrate the coming of our true bridegroom, Jesus.
John concluded his parable in verse 30. “He must become greater; I must become less.” In this one sentence, John reveals to his disciples his life-direction and hope as a servant of God. He had not become a servant of God for his own glory. He was a man under God’s sovereignty, so that he might give glory to God. For a time, he was the lamp of God burning in a dark generation. Now, he was flickering. But that did not mean that the work of God was going to stop. No! It was being carried on by Jesus and his disciples. And that was how it had to be. Jesus was sent by God to be the Messiah of the world. John had revealed Jesus through baptizing him and testifying that he was the Lamb of God. Now it was the time for Jesus’ light to shine into all the world, and for John to get out of the way. When we read John’s words, we become sad even to identify with him. We are not happy to become less, while others become more. Could it be true that this is the real struggle we must fight as we follow Jesus and serve him? Yes, it is true. We are all brilliant and insightful in our own way. But unless we use our brilliant insight to glorify and magnify Jesus, and to build up the work of God, we will find that regardless, our light will eventually dim and go out. What is worse, we will be found to be the enemies of God. So, we must make a decision. While we still have the chance, we must give our best to glorify God and God’s Son, Jesus Christ. And we must work together with all of God’s people to see that the work of God is being carried on from generation to generation. May God make the United States a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, when American College students can pray, “He must become greater, I must become less”!

II. The Father Loves the Son (31-36)

First, Heavenly testimony (31-33). John’s testimony about Jesus was so beautiful and inspiring. But John recognized that he spoke as a man, with a man’s understanding of heavenly things. Only Jesus can be the true witness of heaven to mankind. Look at verses 31-33. “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.” Here, John emphasizes that fact that he and Jesus are both God's witnesses to men. A witness gives a testimony about what he has seen or heard. As a witness, John spoke of what God had revealed to him, and of how Jesus had fulfilled what God had promised. Jesus spoke to men of heavenly things that he had witnessed in the kingdom of God and in God's presence. Jesus' witness from heaven is very precious to us. When we listen to the debates, NPR or even the great authors, they are presenting to us some kind of testimony. But their testimony has very limited value. None of them can tell us who we are before God, or what is our hope in heaven. Jesus came to reveal our true hope in the kingdom of God. We must pay careful attention, until we can see and enter the kingdom of God through faith in his words. We should not become proud that we have Jesus' testimony while others don't. After receiving Jesus' words all we can say is, “God is truthful.” Glory to God!

Second, Everything belongs to the Son (34-36). Look at verses 34-36. “For the one whom God has spent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.” God’s will is that everyone might come to have life through the Son. Whoever believes in Jesus as the Son of God will have eternal life. Whoever rejects him and his testimony will remain under God's wrath as a sinner and a rebel. John’s teaching here is not disconnected from his personal decision of faith to accept losing human recognition in order to give glory to Jesus. To recognize Jesus as the Son of God is to humble ourselves, listen to his word of testimony, and give him the glory in our lives. He must become greater; we must become less. Then we can be truly happy, we can live in the three dimensional world of spiritual reality, and our joy can be complete.

John the Baptist was a great man in God’s history. May God help us to hear his personal testimony, and understand that only through believing in Jesus as the Son of God can we receive eternal life and a glorious mission as servants of his world salvation purpose! May God make Jesus greater! May God make us rather less!