

# He Must Increase

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[ 0 : 00 ] So as we said at the beginning of the service, we are in the season of Advent, which traditionally focuses on themes such as hope, joy, peace, love.

And I think it's fair to say that this year, maybe more than any other year in recent memory, those things have been in short supply. For most of us, I think discontentment reigns, seems to be our default setting.

These days. I think that's why the season of Advent is so extremely important and necessary and valuable. I feel like it's amazing timing that Advent comes along when it does.

And I think I feel that most every year. And in particular, I'm thankful this week for the example of John the Baptist. That's what we're going to be looking at this week in God's Word. We're going to be looking at John chapter 3, verses 22 to 30.

And we're going to look at this account that often gets overlooked. It's surrounded by more famous, well-known accounts. But it's an extremely important account for showing us how to deal with discontentment.

[ 1 : 09 ] The story breaks down into two parts. We see, first of all, a possible rivalry. And then we see a powerful response. John's response is something that we need to pay attention to and emulate.

It offers us a way to respond to discontentment and a key to understanding the nature of true contentment. So let's pray and then we'll open God's Word together.

Lord, we thank you for your Word and we thank you for your Holy Spirit. And we thank you for the way that your Spirit and your Word work together. Lord, that you're able to take these words and breathe life into them.

They're living words and that they're able to come alive and speak to us in ways that we particularly need to hear, each one of us, right now at this moment in time, Lord. And I pray that you would do that so that we might ultimately come face to face with your living Word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, we see a possible rivalry. Just a little context to get us started here. This is a period of time early in John's Gospel, early in Jesus's ministry, where we actually see that it tells us in the text that this is before John the Baptist has been arrested.

[ 2 : 28 ] And this is a period of time where the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus overlap. It's a period of overlap in their ministries. And so you have two groups of people, one led by Jesus and one led by John.

And they're both baptizing people, same baptism, a baptism of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord. And they're in the same region. And so the only difference between these two groups, really, is that Jesus himself, it tells us later, is not doing the baptizing, only his disciples are. But otherwise, they're two groups doing basically the same ministry. And so it says in verse 25,

Now, a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. Now, we don't know exactly what's going on here, but most likely people are asking this question. Hey, John's baptizing here. Jesus is baptizing here. They're doing the same kind of baptism, but whose baptism is more legitimate?

Right? Is there a baptism that is better than the other baptism? And we want to know because we want to go to that baptism. And it could be that this debate was happening between followers of John and followers of Jesus.

[ 3 : 40 ] We know from historical record that there was a group that persisted for some time in the days of the early church that exalted John and rejected Jesus as Messiah.

So we know that there were people who were very loyal followers of John the Baptist. And so John's disciples come to him in verse 26, and they say, Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, and by the way, they apparently don't know Jesus's name at this point, which is noteworthy. That's not the kind of thing that happens in a legend or a myth. That's the kind of thing that actually happens in a historical record. They don't know his name, but they say, that guy who was with you to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing and all are going to him.

Right? So they're upset by this. And they're essentially saying, John, you're the one who baptized him. You're the one who got him started in ministry.

And now he's baptizing, doing the same thing that you're doing. And now everybody's going to him. And you're losing followers to this guy. So they're indignant over this. And, you know, John's ministry is essentially being eclipsed.

[ 4 : 50 ] It's being surpassed by the ministry of Jesus. And his disciples are clearly envious and upset about this. And even though it doesn't say it in the text, I have a hard time believing that John was not at least tempted to feel envy or resentment or to feel threatened by the fact that this is happening.

If you know anything about John, he had worked so hard. He had sacrificed so much. And for much of his life in early ministry, he had been treated as an outcast. He had lived in the wilderness. He had taken vows that made his life even more difficult. And now he's finally growing in popularity. He's speaking out critically against the local government leaders.

And he's gaining a lot of notoriety for this. And it seems that right as his ministry is starting to succeed, this other guy comes along and overtakes him.

A guy who got started in ministry after he did. And, you know, this kind of dynamic happens all the time in the church. I'm sad to say you've probably been around this.

[ 5 : 52 ] If you've been a Christian for any amount of time, pastors often, instead of befriending and seeing other pastors as allies, they see them as threats, especially if they're successful.

And churches often, if they're grouped in the same region, often see the church down the road as the competition rather than as a collaborative partner in ministry. But even if you're not familiar with that dynamic, this kind of thing, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your perspective, this kind of thing is going to happen to you one way or another, if it hasn't already.

In other words, no matter how smart you are, no matter how much of a hard worker you are, no matter how good you are, no matter how impressive you are, no matter how successful you are, sooner or later, someone is going to come along who will surpass you.

Someone out there is going to be better than you. And it'll happen if it hasn't happened already.

They're going to come along and they're going to be better professionally than you.

They're going to be better looking than you. They're going to be a better athlete than you. They're going to seem like a better parent than you. It's going to happen one way or another.

[ 7 : 03 ] And that can be devastating. It can be devastating. And I think much of our discontentment, coming back to that theme, much of our discontentment comes from the secret fear inside that we are not actually good enough.

That secret fear that we don't measure up. The secret fear of our own inadequacy, of our own unworthiness. And I think that's one reason why it's so easy for us to feel threatened or envious, to feel diminished by the success of other people.

I think we can often take that as confirmation of our own inadequacy. John's response here is not what we would think it would be.

It's certainly not the way I would probably respond. John's response is incredibly relevant and instructive for us. And I think it teaches us something vital about contentment and the human heart.

And so we've looked at the possible rivalry between John and Jesus. Now let's look at John's response, this powerful response. John says in verse 27, says John answered, A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

[ 8 : 20 ] In other words, this success is evidence of God's blessing. And then he goes on to say, You yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

And then he uses a very important metaphor that's very central in Scripture for talking about the relationship between God's Messiah and his people.

John says in verse 29, He's saying he's the friend of the bridegroom, not the bridegroom.

And then he says the very important verse, verse 30, He must increase, but I must decrease. In other words, John is saying, this is exactly what is supposed to be happening, right? This is exactly what God's plan has been all along. All of these people, all of the people that used to follow me, they're all now going to Jesus because that's what God wants them to do.

[ 9 : 25 ] That's been the plan all along. And so he's saying, when you see these people going to Jesus, that's the bride going to the bridegroom. The bride shouldn't go to the best man.

The bride always goes to the bridegroom. And so John is saying, you need to be very clear about this. I'm not the bridegroom. I'm the best man. And the job of the best man is to stand by the side of the groom and to hear him speak.

It's about him. It's not about me. My job is to celebrate the love between the bride and the groom. And then comes the core principle that I want to focus on.

John says, he must increase and I must decrease. And in one sense, John is talking specifically about Jesus's ministry increasing as opposed to his ministry, which now needs to decrease. But there's another sense in which this describes the entire aim of salvation history. All the way back in Genesis chapter 12, when God promises to give Abram many descendants, he also says that one of those descendants is going to be the one through whom all of the nations of the earth will be blessed.

[ 10 : 39 ] He must increase. In places like Psalm 2, God warns all of those in power, all of the greatest kings and queens throughout history, that one day God's anointed ruler is going to come along and he will eclipse their authority.

He must increase. In Isaiah chapter 9, a great passage that we often read at Christmastime, verses 6 and 7, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. He must increase. It's written all the way through the story of Scripture. God's plan from the beginning, God's entire plan to put this world right hinges on this mandate.

Jesus must increase and everything else, including us, must decrease in deference to him. I use this illustration a lot because it really helps me in the way I think about these things.

If you think about the way the solar system works, the only reason it works is because there's a common center, the sun, around which everything else orbits.

[ 12 : 09 ] Because all of the planets orbit around the same center, they're able to move together in perfect harmony. And the solar system is this dance of beauty and precision.

But without that common center, everything would be chaos. Planets would be slamming into each other or spinning off into the void of space. And in the same way, our lives, all of our lives, are meant to orbit around the same center, which is Jesus Christ, God's son.

And without that common center, we have chaos. And that's how Christians make sense of all of the brokenness and the darkness and the evil in the world right now.

When we look at things like violence or alienation between people, when we see injustice, when we see the horrors and the atrocities of war or oppression or exploitation, when we see sickness like this most recent pandemic, when we see disasters, when we see poverty, when we see racism, all of these things are the chaos that results from the fact that the world no longer shares the common center.

Jesus is no longer at the center of the world that he made. He has been decreased in the minds and the hearts of his people. And God says the only answer is to reverse that.

[ 13 : 29 ] He must increase above everything else. All right, so the only thing that can restore this world or make my life work is for Jesus to become the center, is for him to increase and for me and my pride and my petty agendas and my priorities for all of that to decrease in response.

So we see that John understands this. This is why John responds the way he does. He says, this is what is supposed to happen.

And I know my place in the story. But now we want to ask, what does this mean for us as we live in this time and in this place? And it has a couple of implications. First of all, if you're a Christian, this is quite simply the core of all Christian ministry.

A couple of years ago, my family and I were blessed enough to be able to take a sabbatical. And one of the things that we got to do was to go see the Eisenheim altarpiece in person.

It was painted by Matthias Grunewald. And one of the panels of this extraordinary altarpiece, one of the panels depicts John the Baptist. It's one of my favorite parts of this work of art.

[ 14 : 44 ] And in this depiction of John the Baptist, he's standing. And with his left hand, he's holding a book, presumably the scriptures. And they're open. And with his right hand, he's pointing.

And he's pointing to Jesus. And it's beautiful. And I remember when I was there, I stood there looking for a very long time, just contemplating the meaning of that panel.

There's Latin writing just over John's right arm. And in Latin, it quotes this verse, he must increase, but I must decrease. And, you know, there's no greater summary of Christian ministry anywhere, in my opinion.

That's our entire job description. Anyone who's a pastor in full-time ministry, ministry leaders, Christians who are called to ministry, really every Christian and all of the ministry we're called to. That's the heart of it. And I think this is something that we as the church need to be reminded of on a daily basis because we live in a culture that celebrates celebrity and status and influence.

[ 15 : 52 ] And naturally, those priorities are going to seep and make their way into the church. And so our constant temptation is going to be to do the opposite of what John the Baptist does. I think we're always tempted to try to increase our own status and to increase our own influence, even if it means diminishing the role of Jesus in our life and ministry.

You know, recently, a well-known pastor was actually fired over various moral failures, and people have accused him of doing just that, of seeking his own increase as a celebrity among celebrities while diminishing Jesus.

And a lot of articles came out about this. And, you know, one article I read stood out to me. It was written by a non-religious person. And yet this writer points beyond this specific pastor in the specific situation, and he points to an issue that he sees among Christians in general in our society. It's what he calls the, with a twist of Christianity, trend that he sees in the church in the United States. And here's what he says, quote, I'm not religious, so it's not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe.

Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me feel uncomfortable for not doing so. And then he says this, If they share 90% of my lifestyle and values, then there's nothing especially inspiring about them.

[ 17 : 24 ] And then he goes on to call out people on the right and the left. He talks about, quote, right-wing business-oriented evangelicals who offer capitalist self-enrichment and hubristic jingoism with a twist of Christianity.

And then he talks about, quote, progressive Christians who promote the usual left-wing causes and ideas about what should be done with our bodies with a twist of Christianity. And then here's the clincher.

He says, So, if Christianity is such an inessential add-on, why become a Christian? Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.

Right? This guy's not a Christian, but in this sense, he has nailed it. The world is watching.

The world is watching, whether you know it or not. And when we as Christians care so much about our own status that we are willing to minimize or compromise our faith, what we communicate is that none of this really matters.

[ 18 : 30 ] It has nothing to offer that can't be found anywhere else. What we tell the watching world is that Jesus is nothing more than an inessential add-on.

And when we do that, not only do we lose integrity, but we're robbing people of the only hope of ever finding true contentment.

And that's criminal. And this leads us to the second implication of this passage here in John 3. The truth is, the only hope any of us has of ever finding true contentment is for Jesus to increase in our own hearts.

That's the only way we'll ever find true contentment. Any of us. The reason that we feel so threatened and so diminished by the success of others and the reason that some of us struggle so much with envy is because we live under a constant barrage of voices.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, many of these voices tell us in one way or another that we're not good enough. John's own disciples, without meaning to, highlighted his inadequacy when they voiced their concerns.

[ 19 : 44 ] They're highlighting the fact that John is less popular than this other guy. Never mind the fact that it's Jesus. But all of us have experienced this. And we have lots of people like these disciples that don't mean to do it, but they do it anyway.

They speak into our lives with the best of intentions, but what they communicate is, you're not good enough. So it could come from a parent or a teacher or a coach. It comes from celebrities.

It comes from politicians. It comes from media. It comes from advertisers. In fact, the entire advertising industry is aimed at convincing you that you're not good enough or your life isn't good enough until you get this product that they're selling.

That's the point of advertising. Right? So all of these voices speak to our worth in one way or another. And we all have these voices in us.

You know, just before we recorded this, we had a 45-minute just sort of explosion with our kids, with a major temper tantrum. And ever since that happened, I've had this voice in my head saying, you're not a good enough parent.

[ 20 : 48 ] You're not patient enough. You're not loving enough. Right? These voices are constantly with us. And so, you know, our culture says that the answer is to tune out all of the external voices and to look within and to, you know, find that inner voice and to listen to and follow that voice, that that will lead us to the truth.

And, you know, that's all well and good if you're a Disney princess. But any actual flesh and blood human being who's taken that advice realizes it is horrible advice. Listening to the voice within does not lead me to greater contentment.

I don't know what your voice within is like, but I think for many of us, that voice can be relentlessly critical. It can be far worse than any external voice.

It's a voice that often focuses only on our flaws, only in our mistakes. It's a voice that rehearses conversations when we're trying to go to sleep at night. It's our voice that whispers about worst case scenarios that might happen tomorrow or the next day.

It's a voice that fills us sometimes with dread or hopelessness or anxiety or despair. It's the same voice that leads us to overeat. It's the voice that whispers to us that we should just drink ourselves numb.

[ 22 : 02 ] It's the same voice that whispers that we should maybe leave our spouse because maybe there's someone better out there who's more suited to meeting our needs.

It's the voice that leads us to compare ourselves to other people and their lives that seem better in every way. It's the voice that leads us to fantasize about living a different life.

That's not the voice of contentment. So none of these voices, whether they be external voices or internal voices, will ever lead us to contentment.

I think they're actually the source of most of our discontentment, if not all of it. We need a voice we can trust. We need a voice we can trust.

Look at this. This is an incredibly important passage. In verses 29 and 30, here's what John says. He says, as Jesus increases and he decreases, and as he hears the voice of Jesus, he rejoices and his joy is complete.

[ 23 : 06 ] So what he's saying there is very important. As the voice of Jesus becomes louder and all other voices fade away, my joy increases. My contentment increases.

My joy is made complete. You say, well, why would that be? Because as John says in verse 31, Jesus is the only one who has come from above.

He alone has the authority to speak into our lives. What he says is not just subjective, it's objectively true. What he says about you is objectively true in a way that no other voice has the authority to claim.

But there's another reason, and it's right here in our passage. All of the voices around you, outside you and inside you, may tell you that for one reason or another, that you're nothing, that you'll never measure up, that you're never gonna be good enough, that there are people that are way better than you out there.

They're gonna tell you in all these ways that you're not enough. And your own inner voice may echo those lies. But when Jesus looks at you, when Jesus looks at you, he is filled with the same love and delight that you see in a groom when he beholds his bride for the first time on their wedding day.

[ 24 : 28 ] That's how Jesus feels when he looks at you. And you say, well, how do we know that? Does he really see me?

Does he really know what goes on in my heart? Has he really seen the ways I've failed today? As I said, the Eisenheim altarpiece has a panel of John the Baptist pointing to Jesus.

What I failed to mention is that this is the crucifixion panel. John is pointing to Jesus as he hangs naked and suffering on the cross.

And what we see here is that this is what it means for Jesus to increase. He's not lifted up as a celebrity. He's lifted up as a criminal.

He's lifted up to die on a cross, which is the worst form of execution devised at that point in history. And you say, well, why would Jesus do something like this?

[ 25 : 29 ] And the answer is simple. Love. That's why he did it. Love for his father in heaven and a desire to do his will alone. Love for you.

Love that says, I will do whatever it takes so that we can be together. I will take the punishment for all of the ways that you failed, all of your sin.

I will take all of that on myself. I will give my life to pay the atoning price for all of that so I can set you free from that sin, set you free to become a new human being so that I can free you from the finality of death, so that I can restore you, so that you can join me as my bride, as my, that you can be one with me in the new world that God is building through me.

And so when Jesus speaks to you, when he speaks to you through the Holy Spirit, when he speaks to you through the scriptures, that is the voice of true love speaking into your life, right?

That is the voice of the one who loves you the most. There is no one out there who loves you more than him. When his voice increases, all other voices fade away.

[ 26 : 52 ] They can't hold a candle to the power and the authority and the love of the voice of Jesus. So a question for us to ponder this Advent season, something that I've been thinking a lot about in my own life, which voices are you listening to these days?

Which voices are you paying attention to? Which voices do you look at, do you listen to, and give permission to define your worth?

Who are you allowing to tell you what you're worth in this life and in this world? Here's the thing I want to leave you with. True contentment is only possible if the voice that you listen to most comes from the one who loves you the most.

True contentment is only possible if the voice that you listen to most comes from the one who loves you the most. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

There are so many voices that are clamoring for our attention and our loyalty. Lord, in the power of your Holy Spirit, for all those listening right now, I pray that you would silence those voices and that you would amplify the voice of Jesus in our hearts so that it drowns everything else out so that the only voice that we hear is the voice of the one who loves us enough to give himself for us.

[ 28 : 30 ] Lord, I pray that in response to that love, we might have the courage and the fortitude to give ourselves fully to him. And I pray this, Lord, not only because it is the best thing that could possibly happen to us, but because it will glorify you.

And I pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.