

John 3:22-36

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is John 3, 22 to 36 on page 984 of the White Bibles. Please remain standing for the reading of God's word.

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 Anon near Salim because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized, for John had not yet been put in prison. 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 is with you across the Jordan to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.

John answered, 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.

[1 : 40] 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.

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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. This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. You may be seated. Test. You know, I'm always going the wrong direction on that little button.

I apologize. If you're visiting today, I just want to welcome you and let you know that we are traveling through this gospel of John all the way until Advent and will make our way only in the narrative through chapter 11 where he now turns his face toward Jerusalem.

But we're in this wonderful first half of the gospel. If I had to tag this morning's sermon, it would simply be under the umbrella of human ambition.

[3 : 13] What have you got and what do you do with it? Human ambition. Certainly the setting of the scene that is before us today is dripping with the seductive elixir of an unhealthy ambition.

Verses 22 to 26. It begins innocuously, but by verse 26 displays this unhealthy ambition, particularly on the part of John the Baptist's disciples.

Notice the way the scene begins. Jesus and his disciples are now probably around the area of Jericho near the Dead Sea. And his disciples have begun baptizing.

That is, carrying on this baptizer-like purification in preparation for kingdom work.

And while we don't know the precise locations, it looks like John the Baptist, to whom Jesus had initially come, was likewise baptizing.

[4 : 30] And if the locations of the archaeologists are correct, he's further up the Jordan, just underneath the Sea of Galilee. So, Jesus down here in Judea and John the Baptist up where the waters are plentiful in that lower branch of the river.

And all of a sudden you have two individuals who have hung out their shingle for those who are interested in the kingdom.

It doesn't appear as though anything is at issue. Until, of course, there is this question that arises, verse 25, by some of John's disciples and a Jew.

Evidently, somebody traveling upstream, as it were, coming along to the baptizer's men and indicating that, Do you know, before I leave, Jesus seems to have set up shop somewhere south of you.

And there are a lot of people that are on their way to his work. He seems to be hiring a number of employees, gathering select leadership around him.

[5 : 44] And, well, to be quite frank with you, I think your star is being eclipsed by that of Jesus. I mean, you can see the seductive elixir of an unhealthy ambition when you read how John's disciples approached John with this issue.

Verse 26, The young bucks have gone to their presenting teacher and notice the rhythm of their voice.

He who was with you. In other words, in common parlance, John, your boy, Jesus. The one who came up and under your ministry.

He who was with you, not only that, the one to whom you bore witness. The one that you lifted up. The one that you allowed into the pulpit.

The one that you began to bear witness to that others might take note of him. He who was with you, your boy. He who you bore witness to, you gave him a platform.

[7 : 10] Is now doing what you do and all are going to him. The ambition of the disciples of John the Baptist.

Sensing that if their teacher's bright first century light is fading. Then their own stars are already all but burned out.

It's interesting, isn't it? Ambition often can hide itself behind the simple guise of human association. Let me get that because I don't know if you heard it. Ambition can hide itself in the guise of association. Ambition. There's no need for you to look important if you can simply show yourself to run with those who others consider important.

That's the issue of John the Baptist's disciples. If you're an aspiring academic, it might not be your first paper read at a conference that is important, but when you throw the names of other scholars who are reading their papers at the same conference, you look important.

[8 : 42] If you're in business, it might not actually be the money you turn, but the seat in those rare moments when you're with the CEO.

Oh, you're next to the one who is important. Imagine if you're training for ministry in the church like these disciples were, John the Baptist.

They had hinged the significance of their ministry, not on their own work, but on the work of the Baptists.

And if that was being jeopardized, then their prominence and significance was going to be diminished. Ambition hides itself in the guise of association.

We do it all the time. It's the names we drop next to the places we've been that betray a heart that is longing for adulation, affection, and attention.

[9 : 57] So their world is now threatened by this word they have heard on the street concerning Jesus and his ministry.

I suppose it's important to at least state how significant John the Baptist was here before you move from ambition, 22 to 26, to the Baptist answer, 27 to 30.

This man, John the Baptist, was the most significant public figure outside of elected officials in first century Palestine.

Josephus, a historian of greater or lesser quality depending upon what he's trying to write, nevertheless indicates clearly that John the Baptist had, and in some sense now I quote, the great influence of John.

Because John was so strong, they could put into his power a cause for rebellion. So that governmental authorities viewed the Baptist as the most significant voice of truth to power on the landscape.

[11 : 26] And so John himself, somewhere well before age 30, had risen to massive heights that most of us could only dream about.

I mean, Victor Hugo did write a tragedy by age 15. Pascal completed all his works and died before the age of 37. Tennyson wrote his first volume at age 18.

Alexander the Great conquered the world at age 23. John the Baptist held the whole country in his hands well before age 30.

And his men now are wondering if they're attached to a ministry that is receding in significance.

I mean, just think of all the parallels that can go through your mind. Why do you choose the school you choose? Why do you choose the job you choose? Why do you choose the models you choose? They're all ambition by association on our worst day.

[12:36] And so all of a sudden, this gospel, which has been talking narrative by narrative about how Jesus replaces things, all of a sudden, John's disciples are realized, oh my word, there might be a complete displacement of the one I am following.

My degree, my vocation, my standing is dropping because the one you put up who came to you, who you gave a platform, well now all are going after him.

Ambition. 22 to 26. Gives way to John the Baptist's answer. Verses 27 to 30. His answer is beautiful.

John answered. Verse 27. And in three simple movements, he forms an argument to correct unhealthy ambition.

Let me show it to you. He offers a true statement followed by a sad irony and weds it to a well-chosen analogy.

[13:56] Let me show you those. He offers a true statement on ambition. John answered. Verse 27. A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.

This is just a maxim. It's not a syllogism. It's not really a fully formed argument. It's a conclusion. He basically goes to his boys and says, hey guys, relax.

We wouldn't have anything here unless God gave it to us. In fact, no one can get anything in and out of this world unless God gives it to them.

Just a true statement. In other words, he's putting all of his people at rest. Guys, don't worry about our rise or fall because we don't get anything without heaven actually dispensing it.

another way to put it would be simply, guys, be grateful for what you got. And he follows that true statement with a real sad irony.

[15:01] Look at how he states the facts for them in verse 28. You yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ but I have been sent before him.

this is really wonderful because they're thinking that his voice is diminishing and the sad irony is guys, you haven't even been listening to my voice.

You're trying to protect my reputation but you're not actually listening to what I said. I have already told you I'm not the one. I've already indicated that there is one coming after me.

I am not even worthy to untie the sandals of the one. I've been telling you those things and you haven't been listening. That's the sad irony.

You want to protect my reputation but you do not want to listen to my voice. A true statement. A sad irony.

[16:00] And then a well chosen analogy. He offers a word picture to drive home the point. Verse 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.

The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears and rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. The well chosen analogy is one of relationship.

He now picks up on the image of a wedding and he in some sense bears reference in the analogy to Jesus being the bridegroom and himself being the friend of the bridegroom.

That the church in a sense the people of God the kingdom of God belongs to the Christ of God. And he is merely one who has been asked to play a part at the ceremony.

This is the perfect well chosen analogy. I mean just consider how ludicrous it would be for you to attend a wedding this summer to only find the best man trying to upstage the groom.

[17:12] I mean it would be horrific. It would be the unseating of the one to whom we've arrived to see him take his bride.

I can't imagine the host of men walking out the groom himself standing here and the friend of the groom trying to move himself in and the groom out.

I heard a pastor once preach this text and he said some of you preachers when you stand before God he's going to ask you one question Jesus is going to look you in the eye and go what have you been doing with my wife namely the church stealing the place of the one to whom the event is pointed.

Think about that then with John by way of analogy here is the greatest man in first century indicating by way of analogy that he is nothing more than the friend of the groom.

that's why he has joy the joy of the friend of the groom now I know the difficulty of the friend of the groom is you've got to buy airplane tickets you got to rent a tux you got to spend your own money but there's a joy in being present at the wedding that is worthy of celebration and so what John is saying is my joy your news which you think hinders my reputation is actually news that increases

my joy that I have come on the earth to serve a purpose of elevating and magnifying Jesus the Nazarene and as I have done so and now people are beginning to go so I have joy overflowing this is this is this is this is the truth of it joy ought to be the response of the soul when one's ambitions are healthy when the when the adulation attention affection supremacy of others begin to rise joy joy true joy

[19 : 52] I mean this this this man the Baptist continues to rise in stature even as we read about him when he faced a diminishing audience and began to realize that his oratorical skills had been surpassed he had joy it would be like a pastor today finding people leaving his church to attend the ministry of another that he had trained when in proximity they could have still gone to his own and yet finding joy as others in our field rise in stature our hearts should not be like the glass that's toppling falling and with shards breaking on the ground rather lifted up all the more in celebration that is

John the Baptist answer to an unhealthy ambition state the truth none of us have anything that God doesn't give us hold on to the sad irony do you actually believe the witness of those to whom you look up to or not and understand a well chosen analogy that you and I it would be entirely unbecoming of us to steal the seat of honor when life requires us to be the friend of the son to whom all honor is due there isn't really anything worse than seeing an old man attempting to hang on to the adulation of others when he has been rightly surpassed in the ministry that he called others to be attentive to ambition answer how do we apply it interestingly most people apply this text simply by having a moral lesson put forward to us on be like

John the Baptist in other words the handles of application of a scene like this very often run to how we ought to exercise our place of leadership!

or it becomes in a sense a text on servant leadership but that's not what's going to happen in 31 to 34 I just need to make this clear this text according to the writer John because you're moving now from John the Baptist answer 27 to 30 to the apostle John and his ruminations and applications 31 to 36 and it's not so much about how you ought to lead as who you ought to follow it's it's really a text not about servant leadership as it is about Christian discipleship let me see if I can show that let me see if I can move from ambition 22 to 26 through the Baptist answer 27 to 30 and show you the apostle

John's application verse 31 to 36 and I'll tell you what's interesting about it is John the writer mirrors John the Baptist answer watch this John the Baptist started with a simple truth statement about heaven that we get what we got because of heaven look at the way John the writer picks up and begins to apply the text 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 that's the bracket he wants you to know I know that while John the Baptist says whatever you get comes from heaven John the writer is saying and the one who comes from heaven ought to get it all see that that's the application he's basically pushing the reader to say John the Baptist did the right thing in what he said but what

[25 : 08] I want to preach to you is if it's true that everything we get comes from heaven then it is more true more complete more full that the one who came from heaven should get it all in other words your success if not mirrored to his success is a stealing of his glory your your life ambition if not wedded to the expansion of his rule is ruining his work what an incredible application think about it how pitiful to see the sight of an individual who was once great still grasping onto the notion that they should have no rivals imagine you or me thinking that we should have no one superior there are no others who will climb higher there are no others who should loom larger there is no one else who should replace us in size stature or significance that

I'm to be the top of my field forever I mean the lunacy of it the ego of it the repulsive heart that it exposes so what he's saying here the writer is saying Jesus has come from above John the Baptist came from the earth the one who comes from the earth belongs to the earth he speaks in an earthly way but he who comes from above is above all that is the truth statement that's what you do with ambition you put Jesus on the throne that's another way of saying that's how you become a Christian but then the writer goes on and he mirrors not only John the Baptist answer of verse 27 about heaven he's going to mirror John the Baptist answer in verse 28 about a witness with Jesus himself as the witness look at verse 32 he bears witness to what he has seen and heard yet no one receives this testimony whoever receives this 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 again the Baptist had said you guys aren't even believing my witness and John the writer is saying the sad irony is equally true that they don't receive the witness of Jesus but the ones who do receive his witness guess what you're going to get the spirit in immeasurable form you want something out of life then you've got to have Jesus in your life because he will give you the spirit of the rule of God and life with purpose and the sad irony is that people are rejecting his witness you see how the mirroring is taking place and it actually follows all the way through to a well chosen analogy the relationship of a bridegroom and the friend of the bride gives way in verse 36 to John wanting to call his readers to seeing the relationship of the father to a son it's an even closer relationship so what he says beginning at verse 35 the father loves the son and has given all things into his hand whoever believes in the son has eternal life whoever does not obey the upon him what John the writer is saying the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus is one thing let me apply this to you and talk to you about the relationship of the son to the father which is quite another thing and what he wants the reader to wrestle with is do I believe this will I believe this John the Baptist had joy will I have life will I have eternal life will

I listen to the son if not the wrath of God remains in other words you or I will resist God by seeking an ambition which remains our own which will reject the testimony of the most significant man of the first century Palestine and will reject the testimony of John the writer and will reject the testimony of what you read about Jesus you are a tri-fold rejecter of witness the Baptist the apostle and Jesus and when you reject that umbrella the wrath of God remains on you because you are a stealer of his glory and then he's done week by week we seem to come back to the same question what are you going to do with

[30 : 57] Jesus according to John here's a perfect word picture of bridegroom who's come for the church here's a perfect word picture of a son that gives glory to the father here's here's the word picture that that Jesus himself took up on this question of wrestling on what makes us pure at the time of the Passover Jesus in Luke's gospel picks up on the meal that was celebrating

God's saving activity and he actually then replaces it displaces Passover with a word about his own body and he says this is my body which is given for you do this in remembrance of me and likewise the cup after they had eaten this cup is poured out for you it's the new covenant of my blood and I invite you to that today if you are like many here merely coming on Sundays to consider the Christian thought then just sit quietly and watch this word picture play out but if you have come to believe that Jesus in his life and death offers a substitution for your sin that is the answer to all your unhealthy ambition and you are willing now and ready to give him the platform for everything that you do then welcome be strengthened in him let me pray as we partake our heavenly father we now come to the lord's table we're going to see men and women and younger people stand we're going to see people wait to come forward we're going to see elements partaken of that represent a belief that

Jesus is everything and that without him we have no standing before you strengthen all those who do believe that we might throw off the guise of our own importance by way of association humble us through this meal but give us great joy in Jesus name amen to