

I Must Decrease

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[0 : 00] Thank you for reading that passage, and I want just to tell you that it probably is a very surprising thing to you, as it is to me, to think that what we're trying to do today, in this time that we have, is to put together John the Baptist with his camel's hair and his leather girdle and his diet of locusts and wild honey and his long hair and his beard, and here he stands, so to speak, at the corner of Georgia and Berard, and how much attention are you liable to pay to him is a great question.

Now, to help me to understand that, I had a visit. I was in the office on Saturday afternoon at the church, and a man came and knocked gently at the door and came in and spoke to me, and he was a very quiet-spoken man, and his hair, too, was down to here, and he had on blue jeans and a jacket and quite a long, angular face, and he told me something of his story very quietly, and he said that I've slept out now for 200 nights, and he looked well enough, and he was, he looked in good health for his 200 nights.

200 nights takes you back fairly early in this year. I asked him where he stayed. He said at the Safeway, described that there was a sort of part at the back of the Safeway where you could get up on top of something and under a roof, and he slept there these last 200 nights.

I asked him what his name was, and he said his name was Mr. LeBlanc, and I told him my name was Harry, so I knew he wanted to be formal when he told me that he was Mr. LeBlanc, and I didn't know what he wanted.

He told me that he was fed up with the sort of welfare hotels in Vancouver, didn't like them at all, because people didn't behave very well in them, and they'd stolen most of what he had at one time or another, so he didn't want to go back there.

[2 : 25] And I asked him, well, what do you want? I mean, what have you come to see me about? He said, well, basically I want a guitar. And so I asked him how much it would cost.

He said about \$700. But he did suggest that he probably, if he had one for \$60, it would be all right too.

But the one he really wanted, but that was what his life was all about. Now, I really had a good talk with him, and I really enjoyed talking to him. And because even though our society may think that there's a great difference between this person here and that person there, at a very basic level, there isn't very much difference.

You know, our culture may be able to stretch people apart and make them very distinct one from another, but at heart, there's not a lot of difference. And I noticed that too when I came, when we went to Kenya in the summertime, and you could ride over the territory and see the great Maasai herds of cattle with these men standing from dauntedust there in their crimson red cover and their spear and their club, and they stood there.

And I wondered that they didn't come over to ask me about how life should be lived. And then as I watched them for a few days, I had a tremendous longing to go over and ask them how life should be lived.

[4 : 04] Because you sort of get the impression that they in fact may know quite a lot more about it than I know, and that I didn't have a lot to give them, and they might have had quite a lot to give me.

So I'm suggesting this to you because I think this strange figure of John the Baptist and this little fragment of Scripture that we have, which gives us a kind of cameo picture of John the Baptist, is probably very important in telling you and me how life is to be lived, how it's to be done.

And what I've put together in looking at this Scripture is a kind of breakdown of how it happened.

And this is what I want to share with you from this. And if you look at the passage, you look at verse 25, and you'll see that now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying.

Now, some of the New Testament scholars say that Jew might have been Jesus. That's just a possible conjecture that somewhere in the manuscript you could prove that that was at least a possibility.

[5 : 30] So there was a discussion between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And purifying, as you know, is the thing where you get clean.

How does that happen? And you have the sense of being defiled, of being dirty, not physically, because we've got lots of soap and water and shampoo in our society, but there's a cleanliness which is deeper than that.

And the question of how you achieve that cleanliness, whether it's through baptism like John's or some other kind of baptism, is one of the great questions. So there was this discussion going on about that.

Now, if you look at the first word I want you to underline, is this word discussion, because it means that people were gathered together because they were seeking something by talking to one another.

We generally talk to one another in the sense that I'm up here and somebody else is down there and you have all the answers and they have all the questions and that's the way communication takes place between you and them.

[6 : 45] But that's not what's taking place here because here you have people who are seeking for something and getting one another to help them find what they're both looking for.

And the basic picture then here, the possible picture here, is that here were men engaged in discussion, looking for something, with Jesus.

And that's the first principle on which life has to be lived, is that you're looking for something and you're talking about something and you want to know where it is.

And it's not all here in the authority figure and all absent here in the questioner, but it's something which everybody's looking for, which is beyond them both.

pointing to looking for something which neither of them really grasps and which they can only help each other to find. So the first thing that you have to do about life is get involved in this kind of discussion.

[7 : 49] Now if you look at the next verse, you'll see the problem that comes in for us because these disciples subsequently went to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, he is baptizing and all are going to him.

Now what has happened here is you begin to see the snake in the garden, jealousy. Here was John the Baptist who had a tremendously popular ministry that when people up and down the country came out to hear him in great numbers.

You know, lots of scholars say that the actual public ministry of John the Baptist was perhaps numerically far greater than the public ministry of Jesus. He was a very great man.

And here his disciples suddenly found that a lot of the people who had been listening to John were now going to listen to this other fellow. And this other fellow was somebody who John had endorsed and borne witness to and had given him his start.

And here he was copying John now and baptizing people and all sorts of people were going to him. Well, you know what a terrible thing jealousy is.

[9 : 10] Jealousy between Christians, jealousy between people, jealousy between partners, jealousy between husbands and wives. It is a vicious, vicious thing which absorbs enormous amounts of energy.

And so they were in great danger of being thrown off guard because their jealousy was getting to them because this other man was drawing more people than John the Baptist was.

But John the Baptist was able to handle that. And since that kind of thing is so destructive to us when we start comparing ourselves with ourselves and being jealous one of another, that John the Baptist starts to deal with it.

And this is how he deals with it. If you look in the next line, you'll see verse 27, no one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven.

So that if you have this here, this here, and this is your gift over here and somebody else's gift here, the way you spend your life is not worrying because your gift is smaller than this gift because what you've got is less than what this person has.

[10:28] What you do is deal with the gift that you've been given because it's given by God and it's for you to exercise. And you're not to waste the whole of your time worrying about somebody else's gift.

You're to do your thing. You are a unique individual person who has your own gift to do your own thing in your own situation and God holds you responsible for doing just that.

And to spend your life caught in this relationship is going to be an enormous waste of your time. And so that's what John tells his disciples. No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven.

So that if the guy with this gift pretends to have this gift, he makes an ass of himself because he can't handle it. He can only handle the gift that he's been given.

And so John says, that's how you're to behave. The next thing that John tells him about how you're to live your life, he says, remember what I told you. I said to you, and this is in verse 28, bear me witness, he said, I am not the Christ.

[11:47] I have been, well, let me just say this, I am not the Christ. You see, what happens to us in terms of how people relate to us and how we relate to other people is that we present ourselves to one another as I am the solution for your problem.

And you are lucky that you know me because I am the solution for your problem. And I happen to be, you know, that this kind of thing takes place.

You can do certain things, like you can turn the other cheek, or you can walk the extra mile, or you can share your second overcoat, or you can visit the sick, or you can visit the man in prison, you can feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, but you are not the Christ.

You are not the Messiah. You are not the answer to somebody's problem. And you see, that's what a lot of people think that Christian faith is, being the solution to somebody else's problem.

And you can get eukered into it, if you'll excuse the phrase. You can get put in that position very easily because somebody wants to set you up as the solution to their problem.

[13:23] And you want to accept the honor because you know deep down in your heart essentially that's who you are and that you have within yourself all the answers to all their problems.

And if they will accept it from you, how wise they must be. And you lose a lot of money that way, I might tell you, because you're just a mark.

Because people can see you coming when you put yourself up to be the solution to other people's problems. Now, if there was ever a man who by his gifts and by his ministry could set himself up to be the solution to other people's problems, it was John the Baptist.

But he said, I want you to remember what I told you. I am not the Christ. I cannot do for you what Jesus alone can do for you.

And that's where we get in one another's way all the time. We try to be Christ to somebody else. We don't think they're quite smart enough to figure it out for themselves.

[14:37] Or we don't think God really could tolerate that kind of person, so I will tolerate that person on God's behalf and I will be to them what they need. And that's what happens to people in my business all the time.

You get in the place of being the Christ to somebody else. You see, and when you do that, let me remind you that you take the place of Christ who has by the one oblation of himself once offered, presented the full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and thereby established the grounds for the atonement between God and man and woman, Christ alone has done that.

That alone is, he alone is the one that has done for you what at the, in the final sense has to be done.

He has done it for you. And so for me to get you to put your faith in me and I will do for you what you can, what I can, is stupidity.

I mean, it's stupid of me to try and it's stupid of you to ask because you have got to allow Christ to do for you what he alone can do.

[16:06] And so John the Baptist comes up with this great reality that he knew who he wasn't. And most of us spend our lives pretending that we are somebody that we're not and we never get hold of that.

Look at the next verse then. And we're the same verse, the end of the same verse where Christ says, I have been sent before him and what happens here you see is that you have a clock you see

and that clock tells you what the time is and Christ is high noon and where John the Baptist fit it in was right here at about 5 to 12.

I was before him and my special responsibility was to point to him. And if you want to know where you fit into history then this is 12 o'clock for you spiritually and you may be around here at about 1147.

But the fact is that where you are is measured by your relationship to Jesus Christ. That's what John meant when he said I came before him.

This is where I fulfilled my part of history. But it's Christ who is in the sense high noon. He is the one by whom the time in which you live is measured.

[17 : 43] How you understand the particular time you live in is where you stand in relationship to Christ. Then he goes on and says something else about himself.

He says I am and this is in the next verse he said I'm not the bridegroom. The bridegroom is the one who has the bride.

I am the friend of the bridegroom who stands near him. The bride doesn't belong to me. I play a strictly secondary role.

I prepare for the marriage. My work is to prepare for the wedding. And so that I find the meaning of my life in terms of my relationship to Christ who is the bridegroom who has come to claim his bride which is the church is the calling out of the people of God.

That's what Christ has come to do. I must understand my life in terms of being his friend and helping to prepare the wedding and my joy is going to come as he claims his bride.

[19 : 04] When the bridegroom shouts in a sense in exultation and in joy at receiving the bride then the friend of the bridegroom his heart surges with joy because that is the ultimate fulfillment of what life is all about.

Christ coming to claim his church. That's why we have so much trouble with marriages in our society is because we think marriages are an end in themselves.

Marriages are not an end in themselves. Marriages for better or for worse for richer or for poorer in sickness and in health till death us depart are only given to us to indicate the ultimate joy and the ultimate reality of Christ claiming his bride.

And that's what marriage is to signify to us in the dimensions of our little lives the great reality of what Christ is doing in history in coming to claim his bride.

And our position is the position of being a friend to the bridegroom so that the meaning of our life comes again out of our friendship with Christ.

[20 : 21] So that that's the other thing he tells us. The last thing that John says in the last verse of the passage we have before us is he must increase but I must decrease.

You notice that that is a kind of a divine imperative. It must happen. Now that means that when you see your life on the decrease and no longer on the increase you recognize that that's what has to happen.

John the Baptist ministry pinnacles just before Christ came on the scene. When Christ came on the scene then he tended to fade out. He did a fade out and Christ was exalted.

You know that there is a very interesting fact. which all of you are very familiar with on a wet dark rainy day in late November in Vancouver and that is that the days are getting shorter.

Right? You know when John the Baptist birthday is celebrated on June the 25th because that's the day things start getting shorter.

[21 : 40] You see that he must decrease. the days go down and down and down. You know when Christ's birthday is? It's marked on December 25th because that's the day when the light starts returning and the days start getting longer.

And that comes I guess in the wisdom of somebody way back somewhere out of this verse that he must increase decrease.

But I must decrease. So I'm going to sum up with just telling you what we've been over from these verses. How do you live your life?

By discussion in which you are seeking something. Discussion with Christ. Secondly you deal with the snake in the garden.

The jealousy which can destroy you because it forces you to try and be somebody who you're not. Thirdly you are to accept that unique and peculiar gift which heaven God has for you alone and which alone it is your responsibility to use.

[22 : 52] You are to realize that you are not the Christ even though that's an overwhelming temptation for you to think that you're the solution to the world's problem. You are to measure your time by his time.

You are to find your joy in serving his purpose and you are to know that you must decrease that the pattern of your life is going to be like this.

Now that shouldn't be hard for you to take. Most people think it should be up and up and up. But the fact is that it isn't. You decrease and he increases. And that's because God has ordained that.

And we have to come to terms and recognize that. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for John the Baptist. We thank you for the scriptures by which we encounter him.

And we ask that you will help us to learn how to live our lives as we listen to and read about and study this man whom the Lord Jesus said was the greatest man born of woman and yet less than the least in the kingdom.

[24 : 11] Teach us this we ask in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.