

He Must Increase We Must Decrease

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 August 2008

Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 00] Let us turn now to Luke's Gospel and Luke chapter 3. We're going through this Gospel and last Lord's Day.

We looked at most of the chapter, but I want us to go back to verse 18. We looked at the beginning of the chapter last Lord's Day, but I want us just to read at verse 18.

This is again talking of John. So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the Tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age. And so on. Now as we know, John the Baptist exercised really quite an extraordinary ministry.

[1 : 29] We've been looking at some of it in the last couple of weeks. We've been looking at, we've looked at the birth of Jesus and the birth of John, and we've seen something of John the Baptist's ministry. It was a relatively short ministry.

John's life burned bright. It didn't burn for a long time, but it burned very, very brightly. And you know, there are times we have seen things like that happen.

And sometimes we don't recognize it or appreciate it at the time. But sometimes there are Christians, and their lives are burning, as it were, so bright.

And maybe they are taken away from what we would term prematurely. And it's afterwards we so often say, well, we should have seen that.

We should have taken note of that. Because there was something about them, about their life, about the impact that their life had upon other people for good.

[2 : 30] That's not always the case. There are some people who have lived a life of a consistently bright Christian life throughout many, many years.

And that's a great, not only a great blessing for that person, but it's a great blessing for those who are in contact with that person. But sometimes the Lord does take away people.

And it's afterwards we say, well, we should have been more aware. We should have really seen that or recognized that. And so it was with John. He was this bright, shining light.

But it was only for a short time. Of course, John's work was not to promote himself. John's great work was to promote Jesus. He was the one who had been sent.

The Elijah-like figure who was to come before the day of the Lord. He was the one who had come to prepare the way. He was a voice crying in the wilderness. We saw all that.

[3 : 32] But John had said about his own ministry, about his own life, I must decrease. He must increase. That's what John was about.

It was about promoting Jesus. He himself wanted to become less and less and less because he was a great figure.

And vast crowds were following him. And people initially, we saw that, were wondering, is this the Christ? Is this Elijah? And John was saying, no.

I am but a voice crying in the wilderness. I am speaking to you. I am preaching to you about one whose shoe strap I am not worthy to untie.

He is the one who will increase. And I must decrease. And I'm sure that as John spoke these words, he maybe didn't realize the way in which he was to decrease.

[4 : 30] Because not only was his ministry publicly to become, as it were, you know, maybe you're saying it's becoming less and less, he was just removed from off the public arena.

Because we read of that in a moment, we read of that where Herod imprisoned John. He just, as it were, took him right off the public arena. And, you know, not only is this a lesson to us for every person who is involved in proclaiming the word, but it is a lesson for every single Christian. Because what John says is true for us as well. That he, Christ, must increase. We must decrease. And, you know, it can be very easy for us to say that and very easy for us to pray that. But it is sometimes not very comfortable when God does that within our lives. Because, you see, we want to go our own way. We want to do our thing. And we want it to go. We really want God to fit in to our plans. But that's often not the way it's going to be.

[5 : 43] Because we've got to remember that God will often take his people along what we might term an unwanted road. A road that we would never, ever, ever choose for ourselves.

John would never have chosen the road of prison and beheading. And yet this was the way that God had. This was all part of the purpose and plan of God.

Now, sometimes these things seem very strange to us. And it's faith that will lay hold upon the great truth that God does all things well. There were times, I'm sure, that the early church could not understand why the apostle Paul was locked up in prison.

Paul writing to the church in Philippi, a church that he loved, he was able to say that his imprisonment was working out for, he says, for the furtherance of the gospel.

That the gospel was being promoted, the gospel was flourishing, and the church's good was being promoted through his imprisonment.

[6 : 52] Now, people might find that very hard to, the people in Paul's day might have found that very hard to understand. because there was nobody who wanted to preach more than the apostle.

He loved to go to the marketplace. He loved to go to the seats of learning. He loved to engage with people all the time, wherever, and preach Jesus Christ and him crucified.

He had a burning passion to bring the message of Christ, the salvation of Jesus, into the lives of men and women, boys and girls. And here he is, he's locked away in prison.

But Paul recognizes that even in prison, God has a purpose for him, and that the gospel was flourishing.

We believe that through Paul's imprisonment, Paul would have been preaching to the guards who were around him. He had access to people in prison that he would never have had were he not in prison.

[7 : 49] We would never have had these wonderful letters. God had the future, the well-being of the church, your well-being, my well-being, in Paul's imprisonment.

And so you see how God has a purpose in everything. We may not be able to understand the purpose of John's imprisonment and John's execution, but there was a purpose in everything. And so we've got to, we've got to, when we come back to this, we've got to say to ourselves, look, it's not about me.

It's about the Lord. You see, we want, and I believe, if we're honest with ourselves, I believe all Christians in here today, that they're saying in their heart, I want to be used by the Lord.

I want to serve the Lord wherever I am. Are we prepared for the cost of that service?

[8 : 54] Because the Lord will, in order for his glory to be revealed in your life, in order for you to shine for him, you must decrease.

And that is not an easy thing. Maybe that is what the Lord is doing in your life right now.

And you're wondering what is happening. Because the world that you know, it's not working for you the way you thought. You cannot understand. It might be through illness.

It might be through loss. It might be through pain. It might be through disappointments. And you're saying, what is happening? And the Lord is at work. He is causing you to decrease, in order that his glory will be revealed in you.

So we've got to realize that God is a far bigger picture than we ever imagine or realize. And may I say to anybody in here who does not know Jesus Christ as our own Savior, I would urge you, even this morning, that you would look to this all-important issue.

[10 : 04] because you see, a day is going to come very soon, it won't be long, where we are all going to have to give an account for what we have done here in the body, whether good or bad.

And the Lord is going to say, what have you done in this world for me? That is going to be a question. What have you done for me? And we're told in the Bible that what is not of faith is sin.

And that is a sobering statement. And it won't be long, as accountable beings, where we will all be rendering that account.

As sure as we're here today, you and I will be giving an account of all that we have done in this world. Has it been to self?

Or has it been for the Lord? Very important question. Well, anyway, here is John, and John has ended up in prison.

[11 : 07] Why has he ended up in prison? Well, he's ended up in prison very simply because of his teaching, because he rebuked Herod because of the relationship he had.

It was actually an incestuous relationship. And he ended up in prison because of that. John's preaching had caused offense.

And there is a saying, the truth hurts. And that's often true. Truth does hurt. And I'm sure all of us, one time or another, have experienced truth hurting. Well, John had told Herod the truth.

And, of course, people had taken umbrage in Herod's court because of the truth. See, there are people today who cannot accept the gospel. Do you know, if we were to preach, I believe if we were to preach just the way that we preach every Lord's Day here, if we were to preach on prime time television, supposing at 7 o'clock on BBC One, once a week, there would be umbrage.

The state, it would be wiped off. There would be so many complaints. In this politically correct society, people cannot bear to be told that they're sinners.

[12 : 23] They cannot bear to be told there is only one way of salvation. People will not accept the gospel truth as it is proclaimed. If people are, by and large, people are, I would say, the majority of people are happy to accept that God is and that God loves everybody and that everything is all right.

They want a message of peace, peace, when there is no peace. There can only be peace in a person's life, real peace, eternal peace, when God in Christ has dealt with sin.

There cannot be real, lasting, eternal peace apart from that. Anyway, digressing. John is in prison because he preached the truth and he told the truth and he rebuked Herod for this particular relationship.

But it's very interesting about Herod because we read in Mark chapter 6 something we're not told here in Luke that Herod actually had a grudging respect for John.

You know, it's quite interesting when you see some of these and Herod was a monster. It's quite interesting when you see some of these characters in the Bible who are highlighted as evil people, highlighted because of their wickedness.

[13 : 49] And yet, sometimes we see a side to them that there's a grudging respect to the things of God.

Ahab is a classic example. Ahab was a man who did more damage along with his wife Jezebel to Israel than any of the other kings. He sold himself to evil and yet when God's judgment came, when Elijah came spelling out God's judgment to Ahab, we actually find that Ahab tore his clothes, that he humbled himself before God and God heard him.

It's a remarkable incident. And we read about Herod. Whether Herod was visiting the prison and listening to John or whether Herod was privately sending for John, he was keeping him safe anyway.

Because, do you know what it tells us? That he heard him gladly. It's not amazing. It would indicate that Herod was having private consultations with John and that what he was hearing, some of what he was hearing, produced a response in the life of Herod.

And maybe for a moment you think, oh, we've got high hopes for Herod, but no. You know the life of Herod is actually a disaster. because, you know, what did Herod do with John?

[15 : 25] It wasn't something that he chose to do, but because of an oath, a vow, a rash vow that he made, he ended up having John beheaded. And Herod, in that moment, cut off the one voice that was speaking the truth to him.

One voice that was challenging him in his life. He cut it off. And I believe that John preached Jesus to Herod in that prison because Herod was longing to meet with Jesus.

And I believe that it was all linked up. But you know, there came a day when Jesus stood before Herod. And you know, it's one of the saddest and most solemn parts of Scripture.

Jesus had nothing to say to Herod. Nothing. And what did Herod start doing with Jesus? He started mocking him. That's what he did.

Started mocking him. Herod had longed to meet with Jesus. The day came. It was the time of Jesus' trial. Jesus was sent to Herod. Herod had longed for this moment, but Jesus had nothing to say to him because Herod had cut off.

[16:38] He had cut off the voice of God that had been sent to him. Was maybe Herod put John in prison, but there was mercy in John being in his prison because John was the voice that was proclaiming the truth to Herod.

Herod was enjoying hearing him and yet he cut off that voice. And Jesus had nothing else to say. The voice from heaven was silent.

And we find in turn that Herod turns on Jesus and begins to mock him. It's extraordinary. You know, some of those who mock the Lord Jesus Christ today, maybe there was a day in their experience when it was very different.

There might have been days for some of those who are mocking the Lord today when their hearts were soft, when they were moved in one way or another through God's providence, when they were thinking about their eternal future, when there were concerns and worries about eternity, but it's gone, they're hard as nails and they're mocking Christ and the things of Christ.

It happens. It happened then and it still happens today. My dear friend, without Christ, be careful. Be careful, be careful what you do with the voice that is speaking to you.

[18:05] In case one day that voice will speak no more. That's what happened for Herod. Make sure that will never happen for you.

Anyway, we read, and the time is moving on just very briefly, we read there that after this, now it's interesting that Luke, you see, Luke is such a, he's a doctor and he's a very ordered and structured in what he's telling us.

And it's why, I believe, why Luke puts this in here, he's talking about John and John's ministry, and then he's going to move away from John to Jesus, so he is telling us, just as it were, by the way, what has actually happened to John, he's just put this in, telling us about how John was imprisoned. And then we read then in verse 21, now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven, you are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.

So just one or two things here, very, very briefly. And we see here that after Jesus' baptism, we find that the heavens opened, it's as if the sky parted.

[19:29] And we find the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove. Now I do not know who all saw this, if anybody else saw this, other than the ones that God, I do not believe, I don't know.

It might be something that would be worth debating over, it doesn't tell us, but it tells us John certainly saw this, because John was promised this.

He was told that the one on whom the Holy Spirit, this would be the confirmation. And of course John knew this was Jesus, but this was like a confirmation. And the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. And it's important for us to understand that. We're told in Scripture that Jesus had the Spirit without measure. Jesus as our representative lived his life in his public ministry dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

His divine nature was giving merit to all that he did. But he was exercising his dependence upon the Father and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

[20:44] He had to in order to be our representative. And so we find the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Why? That way?

Again, I'm not altogether sure. We know that the dove represents purity, represents gentleness, represents tenderness. And again, when we think about the Holy Spirit with regard to ourselves, we know how sensitive the Holy Spirit is.

We're told not to grieve the Holy Spirit. We're told not to quench the Holy Spirit. And it's so easy to grieve Him. And my dear friend, if you are struggling in the Christian faith, ask yourself, am I grieving the Holy Spirit?

Is there something in my life that is grieving God's Spirit? Because if so, then we will not see the things of Christ because the Spirit's ministry is to reveal to us the things of Christ.

you know, there are lots of things that can cause grief to the Spirit. Again, I'm digressing here. But God is concerned with our attitudes and our spirit.

[22 : 00] Do you know in Malachi, and it's something, I should go back and read it, but in Malachi chapter 2, God is rebuking the people and rebuking the priesthood.

and one of the things is because of their attitude to their wives, their attitude in their heart, in their spirit. God has, as it were, he has taken umbrage against the priesthood because he is, God is seeing their spirit and seeing their attitude, and it's almost like one of devotion.

even although there wasn't, even although they weren't separated from their wives, even although there was, they might be living, as it were, a very comfortable life with their wife, their attitude was wrong.

Their spirit to their wife was wrong. And God was seeing that, and God was judging them because of that. Now, is that not a solemn thought? That God is seeing our inward spirit, our inward attitude to people, two things.

And through that, we can be grieved. This is just one tiny example, where we can be grieving God's spirit. And if our attitude or our spirit is wrong towards anybody, or towards the Lord, then we will not have spiritual communion and spiritual fellowship with the Lord.

[23 : 33] And we'll be struggling and we'll be saying, I don't know what's wrong. the spirit is so sensitive. Grieve not the spirit. Quench not the spirit.

There are many, many things that we could say here about Jesus' baptism and about the coming of the spirit. And again, we have here a wonderful demonstration of the Trinity involved in our salvation.

Here is the voice of the Father declaring his delight in his Son. Here is the Son who has come in order to save. Here is the Holy Spirit who is the one who is ministering to Christ and the one who ministers to us and takes of the things of Christ.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved, my dear friend, in your salvation. Isn't that wonderful? people. And you know, there are so many things here we find Jesus, it's interesting also, it says that when Jesus, when all the people were baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, when he was praying, baptism and prayer.

May I say just a word here to parents who have baptized their children. I hope there's nobody just sitting back and saying, well, he's been baptized, he's all right, she's been baptized, she's all right.

[25 : 06] No, my friends, you've got to pray. You've got to pray for them, constantly, continually.

And we find Jesus praying, and you know, it's as he prayed that the heavens were opened.

We're longing, for revival. We're longing for God's spirit to move amongst us. Are we praying? Are we really praying?

This is the key, really praying. Praying privately, wrestling at the throne of grace, because it tells us that the Lord who sees secretly, if we are wrestling and battling in the secret place, the Lord who sees in secret will reward openly.

And I believe that if the church is at the throne of grace, wrestling night and day in the secret place, that the Lord will open the heavens and pour down his spirit.

But are we? Or are his people silent? Or is it just a word here and a word there? Just one final thing as we come in conclusion.

[26 : 18] We then come and we see the genealogy of Jesus Christ. It tells us Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age. Of course, that was the age when the priest began to work in the temple.

And so we have the Lord's family tree. Now, there are many things we could say here, but just a couple of things by way of overview. When you go through this list, there are great saints and there are great sinners.

There's people in it that you would never expect to see. And that's the way the Lord works. his church is full of people who are sinners and they've been made saints.

It's a wonderful role of honor. How wonderful. But you know, one of the other things, you can never read through the family tree. Whether it's the family tree here, the human family tree, or whether it was your own family tree, you can never come to a family tree without being made aware of your own mortality.

Everybody has their day. It's our day just now. Generations have come and gone. There were many people in this church who were so vibrant, so active.

[27 : 38] Their memories linger, but they have gone. The amazing thing is that there are some in here today who do not even know of the memories of some of the great people of the past who

were in this congregation.

You see, life is so short. It's so fleeting. Our day is just like but for a moment, and we too will soon be gone.

The place which once knew us will know us no more. Are we in Jesus? are we seeking to serve him?

Are we seeking to obey him? Well, may we consider these things particularly in light of the Lord's Supper next Lord's Day. May we examine ourselves as to where we are and what we are doing to and with and for the Lord.

Let us pray. Amen. O Lord, our God, we pray to have mercy upon us. We pray to bring us more and more to understand how great thou art, to appreciate more and more the majesty and the glory and the work of God in our salvation.

[29 : 00] We pray, O Lord, to lead us to appreciate more and more the splendor of Jesus' work, of God's great love in giving, of the Son's great love in giving, of the Holy Spirit's great love in applying.

O Lord, help us and have mercy on us. Take us all home safely. Do us good and forgive us for Jesus' sake. Amen.