

He must increase!

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: 15 February 2026

Preacher: John Winter

[0:00] Good morning, everybody. It's nice to see you. We're going to continue in our series on John's Gospel. So we're reading from John chapter 3, verses 22 to 36, and it'll come up on the screen.

This sermon is entitled, He Must Increase. It comes from a phrase that John the Baptist uses here in our text. After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside where he spent some time with them and baptized.

Now John also was baptizing at Enon near Salem because there was plenty of water and people were constantly coming to be baptized. This was before John was put in prison.

An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They talked about exciting stuff in those days.

They came to John and said to him, Rabbi, the man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, this one you testified about, well, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him.

[1:18] To this John replied, a man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.

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. He must become greater. I must become less. 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.

For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God. For God gives the spirit without limit. The father loves the son and has placed everything in his hands.

[2:24] Whoever believes in the son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the son will not see life. For God's wrath remains on him.

Amen. Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his holy word. Next slide, please.

Uriah Heep. One of Charles Dickens' characters in David Copperfield. You might know he claimed to be very humble. He was a Yorkshireman, so he didn't pronounce his H's.

He was very humble. And speaking of his humility, he said, I am well aware that I am the humblest person going. My mother is likewise a very humble person.

We are both persons of an humble disposition. The problem with Uriah Heep, of course, is he was obsessive about his humility. And he wanted everybody to see it and know about it.

[3:27] Which is exactly what makes him suspicious. Dickens describes Uriah as, I quote, having a way of writhing himself into all sorts of shapes.

I like that. Very good metaphor. Snake-like quality. Writhing himself into all kinds of shapes. Yeah? But it was all a performance.

His humility was a performance. He was really a slimy, slithering conman. And David Copperfield later said of him, I had never liked him, and I never liked him now.

Performative humility. Sometimes it suits us to play the humble guy. But John the Baptist never played at humility.

He must increase and I must decrease. He had a following. He was very popular. Had there been newspapers in the day, he would have made headlines.

[4:32] He would have been an influencer by modern standards. But he wasn't interested in fame. He must increase.

And I must decrease. I think one of the hardest spiritual challenges, certainly that I face, and I suspect all of us face, is learning how to step back and get out of the way so that Jesus can step forward and control my life.

I find that really difficult. I was brought up by my father to look after myself. Look after yourself. He would say, nobody else is going to look after you. If you want something, go out and get it. If you want to buy something, make sure you've got money and you've earned it. Oh, no man, nothing. And so, it runs against the grain to surrender my life to Christ. So, every day, I have to set apart Christ as my Lord.

[5:39] Whenever John Winter gets in the way of John Winter, which is a frequent occasion, then I have to remember to surrender all over again. Submitting to the Lordship of Christ isn't a once-for-all kind of decision that one makes at conversion.

It is a decision that we make every day. I must decrease. He must increase. Like I read this morning from Philippians 4 verse 13, I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.

Sometimes I think I can do all things. And even the world will tell us, you can do anything you put your mind to. Well, there's lots of things that we can't do that we put our mind to, you know.

I could put my mind to the fact that I might win mastermind, but I don't think I would. Yeah. I could put my mind to the fact that I could run a marathon, but it would be rather foolish of me, certainly without, certainly at my age and certainly without training.

So, here in John chapter 3 verses 22 to 26, we have the final recorded testimony of John the Baptist. This is his going out speech or his going out preach, if you like.

[6:55] This is what John decides to record. And remember, John is very selective in what he chooses to record. At the end of the gospel, he says, had I written everything that Jesus said, well, the world wouldn't hold the library.

It would be so big. So, he'd chosen what he was going to write down and specifically for the things that were written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and by believing, have life in His name.

So, there's stuff he doesn't tell us about John being in prison, for example, about the dispute with Herod and Herodias. He doesn't tell us that because it doesn't suit this purpose. What he does tell us is how John viewed Jesus so that we can learn how we should view Jesus.

But because he links this with the way he lived his life in humble submission to the lordship of Jesus and the preeminence of Jesus, there is something for us to learn.

And next slide. This passage answers three critical questions. Who am I as an individual human sinful fallen man?

[8:03] Who am I? Who is Jesus because he is the one who answers my need as a humble, sinful, needy individual.

And then, how should I respond? What is the right way to respond to Jesus? These three questions I suggest to you are answered here. So, firstly, we look at knowing who you are.

In verses 22 to 28, we're given a brief explanation of a dispute that's going on between the disciples of John and a Jew. We don't know who the Jew is, but we know what they're arguing about.

Ceremonial washing. It was a big deal. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, we're given some insight into the Qumran community. And they used to preserve old scripts, old vellum texts, papyri texts of the scriptures.

Going back hundreds and hundreds of years, they give us the earliest copy, for example, of the book of Isaiah and the books of Deuteronomy from the 8th century BC. They go way, way back.

[9:14] And they preserved these. And they wanted to be a pure community. So, making sure you were clean ceremonially and clean, metaphorically speaking, spiritually, was important to them.

Washing their hands, washing their feet, washing their heads, going through ceremonial washing.

And being baptized was one of these ceremonial cleansings. Jews were circumcised when they became, when they entered into covenant at eight days old, Jewish boys.

But if anybody wanted to enter into covenant later on, a non-Jew, or anybody wanted to commit to God in a new way, they would often go through a washing, what we might call a baptism.

And John called people to believe in Jesus as the forerunner of Jesus, and to be baptized literally with a view to the forgiveness of sins.

It is a future tense. A view to the forgiveness of sins. It doesn't come across in the English version, but that's the intention. Because he was telling us of one who was coming to take away the sin of the world.

[10:22] Behold the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world. I am come before him. He is going to bring to you the forgiveness of sins. So now be baptized in anticipation of his coming.

His baptism was meant to stop once people believed in Jesus, trusted in Jesus, and enjoyed the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood on their behalf.

And then they would be baptized into the body of Christ. Christian baptism and John's baptism are not the same thing. And in Acts chapter 19, we're told of Paul coming across some believers who had never been baptized into the Christian faith, but had been baptized in the name of John.

And so Paul baptized them again. It was a different baptism. One looked forward, the other looks back. But there was an argument going on, which is the best way to ceremonially clean people.

And you can imagine John's disciples are saying, you've got to be baptized by John, the Baptist.

And then this Jew was saying, oh no, maybe you have to go off to the Qumran community.

[11:40] Maybe you have to go and see an important rabbi. We're not sure what the details were, but they were arguing about it. And then they'd heard that Jesus was baptized in elsewhere, although they were misinformed because John later tells us Jesus never baptized anybody, but his disciples did.

So some people were now being baptized in the name of Jesus. And it all got very, very confusing. You can imagine the rabbis having good arguments about this.

And John's disciples were so upset about this, you hear their voice of insecurity. They come to their rabbi and they say, John, the man you pointed to, the one you spoke of, the one who you said is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he's baptizing people over there and he's baptizing more than we are now.

We're losing our popularity. You're going to be a nobody soon. How's that going to feel? Aren't you worried about your position? Aren't you worried that Jesus is going to take over?

What about us? What's going to happen to us? And John says, a man can only do what is given to him from heaven. That's all we are.

[12:52] It doesn't matter. That's why I came to point away from myself to the one, the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world.

I'm so glad, so glad. For I must decrease and he must increase. this is right.

This is how it's meant to be. Accept the will of God for your life. Submit to the lordship of Jesus just as I do.

Beautiful. Competitiveness is something that the church knows a lot about.

Well, you've been using me, Lord, and you know, you've been blessing me and blessing my ministry and blessing this church and it's really important that you continue to do that because my reputation and my fame depend upon it.

[13:52] It's very easy to fall into that. Well, that group over there are doing this. They're not doing it like us. Tell them they're doing it wrong, Lord. That's what Jesus' disciples did.

They said, there are people casting out demons in your name. Shall we stop them? And Jesus said, no, if they're not against us, they're for us. Just relax. Relax.

If anything's been done in the name of Jesus, bless it. Well, we wouldn't do it that way. Well, that's fine. Do it your way. But however you do it, do it for Jesus. Competitiveness. Competitiveness is the scourge of the church.

And too often, people have used it to theologically justify divisions. Well, we only sing hymns. They sing choruses. We don't like these choruses. They're not as deep as the hymns or vice versa.

You know, they're charismatic. We're not charismatic. They shouldn't be charismatic or we should be charismatic. They baptize adults. We only baptize in. Hey, kid, go on. We have to learn in our competition.

[14:59] He must increase. I must decrease. And that includes my denomination or my way of doing things or anything else. Who is Lord after all?

Is it I or is it Jesus? And I think too often, and you have to be very cautious of this when you go on the internet and get kind of pulled into these mega churches and everything else.

Sometimes I'm left with the impression that what's Lord or who's Lord here is not Jesus. That's not to bash the big churches. But there's just something that goes with success that is quite dangerous and tempting.

In order to maintain our success, we must maintain the man. But the man is nothing. As William Carey once said, I think I've got a slide on this.

William Carey once said, after I am gone, do not speak about William Carey. Speak about Carey's Savior.

[16:07] That's all that matters. For the Lord builds his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, but anything that John Winter builds alone will turn into nothing.

It will be nothing. John says, I am not the Christ. Don't follow me. Once I'm gone and my voice is silenced, it doesn't matter.

Jesus still speaks and his power is still revealed. Learn to accept the role that God has given you. Accept the person God has made you.

Accept the calling he has placed on your life and don't be envious of others for you can only be who I called you to be. Do you need to hear that today? Do not be envious of anybody else.

Be the person God called you to be. Accept what he called you to do and be prepared to decrease in yourself in order that Jesus might increase in you.

[17:11] The second thing we notice is that we are to rejoice in Christ's supremacy. So know the person you are but rejoice in Christ's supremacy.

John goes on to give a wonderful illustration. He says in verses 29 to 30, 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 is now complete. He must become greater. I must become less. Have any of you ever been a best man or even a best woman?

Have you ever been a best man or a best woman? It's quite good, isn't it? If you go to a posh wedding, you end up wearing the same suit as the bridegroom. You stand at the front of him, front with him when the bride comes down and the music's playing and everybody looks at the bride and thinks, wow, she looks great.

And they look at the bridegroom and the best man and they think, wow, they look smart and handsome. And for a while, the bridegroom, the friend of the bridegroom, rather, he gets as much praise as the bridegroom himself because they look identical in the way they're dressed and they're well, you know, well manicured and all of that.

[18:28] But at some point, the best man has to step back. He has to get out of the way because the day isn't for him.

It's for the bride and it's for the bridegroom. And John says, I'm a bridegroom. Sorry, I'm a friend of a bridegroom. That's who I am. I'm not the bridegroom himself.

That's Jesus. I've come just to shine a light on Jesus. And when I've done that, I step back. I step out of the way and I let him get preeminence.

Jesus, all for Jesus. all I am and have and ever hope to be. I love the song, don't you? Easy to sing, mind.

Easy to sing. It's like when people, you know I'll speak about Newcastle, don't you? So when people go to Newcastle's match and they say, we'll support you evermore. And then they lose and they criticize the manager online.

[19:32] Useless, I'll never go back again. You get a similar spirit sometimes in some churches. Jesus has let me down. I'll never go back again. I don't like that church.

They're not very friendly people. I'm not going there again. But whoever says it was about the friends of the bridegroom, it's about Jesus. I need to magnify him.

I need to allow him to increase in my life. He needs to become more in me. I rejoice in his supremacy. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, even my sin. And so the next thing we need to realize is we need to recognize who Jesus truly is. And John tells us that in verses 31 to 35. He shifts from personal testimony to theological proclamation. He says this, 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. [20:37] 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. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God.

For God gives the spirit to him without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

So next slide. Who is Jesus according to John? Well, Jesus comes from above and he is sent from God. Jesus is above all.

He has all things in his hands. Jesus speaks things he has seen and heard from the Father. Jesus gives the truth to those who receive him. Jesus gives the spirit to those who trust in him. Jesus is loved by the Father for he is the Son of God. And Jesus communicates life to us and life which is everlasting. And this is why he must become greater and we must become less.

[21:46] for John the Baptist in contrast is not from above, but he is from the earth. And John the Baptist just like us testifies to what we have seen and heard, but we have no direct communication in the same way as Jesus did and we don't have the same insights that the Son of God had.

We simply repeat the message that he has given us. And John the Baptist although he was a great preacher couldn't preach like Jesus. Nobody said of John the Baptist no one ever spoke like this man.

And John the Baptist was limited in terms of the measure of the spirit that was given him. He baptized with water he said but one will come after me who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

I can preach I can make you wet but I can't give you the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus can do that. And I do not have the Spirit of God without limits but Jesus did.

And whether or not you believe what I preach it really does not matter too much what John Winter has to say. But if you do not accept the gospel message of Jesus Christ then you will not be accepted by God for the wrath of God remains on you.

[23:12] this is who we are human beings limited but Jesus is unique and sovereign and glorious and powerful and we bow at his feet and we worship him as Lord and we say you deserve the preeminence and that is why I must decrease and that is why he must increase.

because if this is Jesus as John the Baptist describes him then we are safe in his arms safe in the arms of Jesus safe on his gentle breast.

if he has everything in his hands as John says our future is safe our obedience to him matters our trust in him must be complete and he is never to be reduced by us as a mere helper or a guru or an advisor or a moral example he is much more than that he is Lord he is my Lord and on him my hope rests for eternity this is Jesus whom I believe in this is what it means to say Jesus is my Lord he must increase I must decrease and John actually uses John the writer uses a continuous present tense to say this he literally says I must continually decrease he must continually increase it's an everyday thing it is not an intellectual belief alone it is something that makes a profound difference to my life everyday

John the Baptist fades from this passage faithfully and in fading away faithfully well he died okay he died a pretty gruesome death they chopped up his head but he wasn't afraid he faded faithfully from this world scene without any jealousy or envy without any frustration that some things had been unfulfilled or somebody else had taken away his limelight he was happy with recognition he was happy with not being recognized it didn't matter he knew what he had been called to do he fulfilled his calling and he died happy oh God help me to live and die just like that what I am

I am by the grace of God what you and I have been given we have been given by the sovereign will of God learn to accept who you are learn to accept what God has given you learn to trust Jesus as Lord and Savior and then be prepared to do his will for however long he calls and then when he

says your time is done bow out gracefully there is a time for us to be born there is a time for us to die and here in the middle of all of that God says my times your times are in my hands not one of them not one moment of them needs to be wasted every moment ordained for me the psalmist says is written in his book before any of them come to be

[27:16] I am fearfully and wonderfully made be encouraged whatever you are learn to accept who you are and surrender surrender to the will of God because Jesus in you must increase and you must learn to decrease and so the last slide a little prayer I wrote at the end of it it was my prayer on Friday but perhaps you'd like to stand and say it and if you don't say it if you don't want to say it that's fine it's between you and God but if you want to say it but you think hey I'm not up to this then God knows that none of us are up to it but by the Spirit of God we can all say it with hope and confidence in our hearts

Lord Jesus I surrender my life to you today may there be less of me and more of you Lord let my pride fade so your glory shines Jesus let my plans bend to your purpose for me empty me of self so I may be filled with you please become greater that I may become less Amen Amen the Lord bless you