

Gospel of John Study

Session 9

In our last session we concluded the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Through the conversation, Jesus explained, using several Old Testament references, how a person can experience the eternal kingdom of God. This requires one to be born-again - through both internal cleansing and regeneration that come through faith in Jesus Christ. For those who exercise this faith in Christ, they will participate in God's kingdom. On the other hand, those who refuse to exercise this faith in Christ find themselves under a self-imposed condemnation, even as they are alive now. The good news was stated clearly that everyone can come to know God and His salvation if they will but put their trust in Jesus.

This week we are going to return to John the Baptist and his ministry. As we saw in past sessions, John the Baptist correctly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John was sent as the forerunner of the Messiah and his part was to point people to the true Messiah when He appeared. As we noted, John's ministry was a ministry of baptism calling people to repent from their sins so that their hearts would be prepared for the coming salvation through the Messiah. In this session we are going to examine the intersection of the ministry of John the Baptist's with that of Jesus and the meaning of the Christian ministry in general.

[John 3:22-27]

This gives us the needed background for the incident and teaching which is about to take place. This material acts like a link in a chain connecting the conversation with Nicodemus with what comes after this which is Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well.

V. 22 - "After these things..." (or "after this"). This does not give us any indication of the length of interval of time after the conversation with Nicodemus only that it took place after that event. As we noted the conversation with Nicodemus took place in Jerusalem around the time of the Passover. This event took place in Judea. So we can note that Jesus and His disciples have left Jerusalem and are now ministering in the Judean countryside. He had left the urban environment of the big city of Jerusalem and now was traveling and ministering in the more rural areas of the province on a general heading of north back towards Galilee.

Q: What does the text say Jesus was doing? (*He was baptizing in the Aenon near Salim*)

[John 4:1-3]

Q: Who was actually doing the baptizing? (*Jesus' disciples. This passage also points out that Jesus was heading back to Galilee.*)

Q: What does v.24 teach us about John the Baptist? (*He had not been thrown into jail yet.*)

This bit of information is critical to understand the timing of the ministry of Jesus. Remember that the information contained in John 2-5 is unique to John's gospel and is not found in the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, & Luke). When you read through the synoptics, we are left

with the idea that Jesus' ministry did not begin until after John was thrown in jail.

[Mark 1:14]

So according to Mark, Jesus' Galilean ministry didn't take place until after John was in custody. The synoptic authors did not report on Jesus' earlier Judean ministry. However, according to John, Jesus had some ministry in Judea that was not commented on by the other gospel authors. Remember, John's gospel was written last. This verse is inserted here because he knows that there are other gospel accounts written and they are not reporting on Jesus' ministry until after the arrest of John. Now John is writing on different experiences than they are and wants to make sure that his timing does not contradict the other authors. This gives a seamless flow that harmonizes with the others and gives us insight into why they didn't include these accounts. It was before they began their account of Jesus' ministry.

Q: In v.25, what was the argument about that developed between a Jew and John's disciples? *(the argument concerned a matter of ceremonial washing. In other words, it did not start out focusing on the merits of John's baptism vs. Jesus' baptism. Chances are it began over aspects of John's baptism clashing with more traditional Jewish practices of cleansings.)*

This argument is just the beginning of a discussion John the Baptist will have with his disciples in an attempt to help them overcome the confusion being caused between loyalty to the old rituals versus the new covenant taking shape before their eyes. Keep in mind at this point in history, the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out upon believers. This must have been a tough time for them as John's disciples were Jews, themselves and raised under the old covenant and certainly considered themselves faithful to it. Yet, now they've made some changes according to John's teachings but even more radical changes were on the horizon and they weren't sure how all of these things were going to pan out. Then Jesus was now on the scene and brought even more changes.

The word in v.25 means argument or disagreement, not discussion, though it could have been a civil argument. Like many arguments, it went beyond the original scope of ceremonial purification and got John's disciples to reflect upon the future of John's baptism and the future of John's ministry. When you get to v.26, you can hear the resentment in the voices of John's disciples as they point out that Jesus is getting better numbers than he is. Here are two charismatic leaders, John and Jesus, and the numbers for John's ministry are going down while those of Jesus are going up. In addition to the resentment there may also be a hint of envy as well as astonishment. You can hear the this shock expressed in exaggeration as they proclaim to John, *"everyone is going to Him."* While it is true that John's disciples heard John proclaim that Jesus was the Lamb of God, they still consider John to be the superior leader and one who should be followed. This is one of the devil's favorite tactics to cause division within the body of Christ. He convinces us to criticize others who are faithfully doing the work of the Lord when we see that the crowds gather to them. The devil incites jealousy and a spirit of competition instead of joyful cooperation.

[I Corinthians 1:10-15]

The Corinthians were rallying around certain prominent Christian leaders rather than the work of the Lord they had each been called and gifted to do. Each leader understood that they played a role in the lives of the Corinthians' lives but no one would take credit for the work. That belonged to the Lord alone.

With this background in mind, we can examine John the Baptist's perspective on ministry. He gives this in v.27. V.27 is a maxim, a broad universal truth.

Q: What is the truth John the Baptist uses to explain his ministry to his disciples? (*A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.*)

Q: What was John the Baptist's specific ministry? (*He was called to be the forerunner or one who announces the coming of God's Messiah.*)

From this answer we can see that John saw his calling as a gift from God and he could also see his place in God's redemptive history. Think of it, John had been born at a certain time (just prior to the Messiah's birth) and a certain place (ancient Israel) and both of these were of God so that John could fulfill the ministry God has for him which was to announce the arrival of the Messiah. He was not the Messiah and had proclaimed that publicly but he had done his job by pointing the masses to Jesus, who he knew to be the Messiah. This view of personal history and God's redemptive history brings into sharp focus the sovereignty of God. Notice John points his disciples to Jesus. Isn't that the basis of all Christian ministry?

Q: Think about your place in God's redemptive history. What is the ministry God has placed before you? Why did he have you born in this particular time and put you around a certain group of people and gift you with His Spirit with certain gifts?

It is crucial to see that everything we've been given, both spiritual and material, comes from God, and that includes our place in God's redemptive history, pointing others to Jesus.

[I Corinthians 4:5-6]

[James 1:17]

Before moving forward there is a point that needs to be made here concerning the bigger picture of John's message. Remember, John, the author, wrote the book in order to show that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah and that in Him we could have eternal life. One of the ways he's been sharing this truth with his readers is by showing Jesus as superior to Judaism and the old covenant. This is the fourth time John has made such a claim in the last two chapters.

1. **John 2:1-11** - Jesus proves that the "new wine" that He creates surpasses anything that Judaism can offer or afford. He rendered the old ceremonial purification jars obsolete by replacing their function with new life.

2. **John 2:12-15** - Jesus displaces the temple with Himself and points to the new role a

true temple, the bodies of those in Christ, will serve as the ultimate point of mediation between God and man.

3. **John 3:1-21** - Jesus fulfills the prophecies of water and spirit regeneration and proves that His death through being lifted up on the cross will supply the power for a person's regeneration through faith in Him. The old covenant had no provision for a new birth though it pointed to it coming through the Messiah.

4. **John 3:22-30** - Jesus surpasses John, who was the greatest of the old covenant prophets, and any rite of purification that he may have represented.

The important point is that John is going to continue making these sorts of points in the background. He won't ever come out and say Jesus is superior to Judaism but in many of his narratives, that's one of the background, deeper messages that permeates the entire book.

John the Baptist elaborates his ministry in this next section.

[John 3:28-30]

Q: Does John the Baptist seem perturbed by Jesus' rising popularity? (v.28 - no)

Q: Why is that do you think? *(He reminded his disciples that he wasn't the Christ but sent ahead of Him to identify Him to the people. Why would he be perturbed by the fulfillment of his ministry?)*

The reason John the Baptist was used so powerfully by God was because John, as we saw, was humble and recognized his own nothingness compared to Jesus. John knew his place in God's plan. Martin Luther once said, *"God created the world out of nothing. When I realize that am nothing, perhaps God can create something out of me, too!"* We need to realize that God can accomplish His plan without us and He doesn't need our permission to do anything. Yet, the beauty of God's ways and love for us are found when we understand that God can use us and desires us to cooperate with Him from a willing heart.

[Matthew 11:11]

Q: What did Jesus say about John the Baptist? *(He was the greatest person who was ever born.)*

That's high praise coming from Jesus Himself. Jesus said in **Luke 22:26** - *"But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, the leader like the servant."* John was far from a nobody but at the same time John understood that he was not the story. John was humble and lived out this verse Jesus spoke. His consuming desire was to tell others about Jesus and point them to Him. That should be the pattern of our ministry as well. It's not about us but about Jesus. This is probably why John was content with the role God had given him to perform in the redemptive history.

Q: What is the point of the parable John tells in v.29? *(It is to describe his pleasure in the ministry God gave him, the joy he has seeing his ministry fulfilled in Jesus.)*

One of the interesting laws concerning ancient marriages were that the “friend” noted in v.29 is who we’d call the “best man” today. He was responsible for organizing the details of the wedding and in fact in Judea, he would be the officiant of the ceremony in many cases. By law the best man was also prohibited from marrying the bride as he was one who was charged with keeping the bride pure and safe during the time leading up to the wedding ceremony itself. You can imagine his joy when the bridegroom appears and he has completed his task satisfactorily.

[Revelation 19:7-8]

This is the marriage supper of the Lamb, the final consummation of the love between Christ and His church. He loves us despite our unfaithfulness, our imperfections, our limitations and our failures. Think of it this way, we come to church each Sunday to worship Jesus, to look upon the face of our groom, and to see the One who loves us with an eternal love - the One we will dwell with forever in heaven after this life.

It is important to keep in mind that John did not find pleasure from popularity but rather in the fulfillment of the role God gave him. His pleasure was in seeing the bridegroom appear - not just because this was his mission but because it was his passion. He found joy because the wedding was successful. The world needed a Savior and He was finally here.

Q: In v.30, what did John say was his purpose? *(To decrease while Jesus increased)*

Q: How did John bring glory and honor to Jesus? *(He pointed others to Him. He also explained that he was not the Christ and that the Christ, when He came would be greater than himself. He didn't try to recapture the hearts of men but saw the importance of allowing people follow Jesus instead.)*

Q: How are we to decrease while allowing Christ to increase in our lives? How do we live out v.30 today?

John doesn't find joy in grudgingly conceding victory to a superior opponent but rather in wholeheartedly embracing God's will and the supremacy it assigns to Jesus.

One thing I miss about West Texas is the night time sky. We lived at nearly 4000 feet elevation but it was a very flat terrain. There was rarely any humidity so at night, we could lie down and see the wonder of the stars clearly. The longer night went on, the brighter and clearer the stars shone. However, the sun would come up every morning and the stars and moon, as glorious as they had been to view started to fade and by the time the sun was up, the stars were gone. John the Baptist was like the stars and moon. He shone brightly before the Son of God rose in human history and then his light faded as Jesus' increased. John's message in short was that this diminution of himself was OK. From now on follow Jesus, the Light.

Q: How does John's example of ministry affect your understanding of your evangelism and

discipleship?

The next thing John says is to furnish further explanation for why people should follow Jesus, the Messiah. The rest of the chapter (vv. 31-36) is nothing but an explanation of v.30. It describes who Jesus is and His importance in gaining eternal life.

[John 3:31-36]

The first thing John points out to people, especially his disciples in this text, is the supremacy of Christ.

Q: In this context, who is John referring to when he says, “He who comes from above...”? (*Jesus*)

Q: What is the point John makes about Jesus? (*He is above all*)

Q: Since Jesus was born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph, in what way could Jesus be considered “from above”? (*Though he had a human birth, He has always been. He has eternally co-existed with the Father and Holy Spirit. In that way, He is from above.*)

The truth that Jesus Christ is the supreme being of the universe is taught throughout the New Testament.

[Philippians 2:5-11]

[Colossians 1:13-19]

[I John 4:4] - This one deals with Jesus supremacy on a personal level. He is greater than any other being which may harass or persecute us.

While the supremacy of Jesus is easy to state it is often hard to swallow and many reject it outright.

Q: How would you define supreme or possessing supremacy? (*Over all, authority and power to do as one wishes to do, knowing all, owning all things on a fundamental level, etc.*)

Q: Are there some examples from the New Testament of people who have rejected Jesus’ supremacy? (*the rich young ruler, Pilate, Judas Iscariot, the Pharisees who encountered the man born blind that Jesus healed, many of the people who heard Paul preach at Athens, ...*)

Listen to the response of the Pharisees after talking to the man who was born blind but Jesus healed. This comes after the Pharisees confirmed with the formerly blind man’s parents that he was indeed born blind.

[John 9:30-34]

Q: Back to v.31, who is John speaking about when he says, “he who is of the earth is from the earth...”? (*He’s speaking about himself, John the Baptist*)

The translation “earth” is good here, even though this word is often translated “world”. Why it is good in this context is because John the Baptist isn’t denouncing the sinfulness of the world as the term is often used in the New Testament but rather John is using this word to describe the limitations and finiteness of the earth and those who are from the earth. Those from earth are not supreme and do not know anything about heaven naturally and do not exercise authority over the spiritual realm or even the earthly realm, except what has been granted to them for a time.

What John was getting at was that while he could point people to Christ and conduct water baptisms which symbolized their repentance from sins, he could not reveal heaven’s wisdom nor could he offer the regeneration from above. John’s references to the Spirit were portrayed as promises of what another would be and do (**John 1:32-34**). Though he was sent from God, he fit into the earthly category of existence and had to wait for the One who was supreme to appear and reveal heaven to us.

VV. 32-34 talk about the testimony of Christ.

Q: What does Jesus testify about? (*What He has seen and heard*)

Q: What has Jesus seen and heard? (*He knows about God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and heaven, everything in the spiritual realm*)

Realize that everything Jesus knows about God is firsthand knowledge. He didn’t need to ever rely upon anyone else’s knowledge. Think about it. Jesus saw, heard and experienced everything He spoke about.

Q: What is the significance of the believer who receives the testimony of Jesus? (v.33 - *he has set his seal to this: that God is true. Notice that it doesn’t say that Jesus is truthful but rather than God is truthful. Setting a seal was an ancient method of attesting to something or someone’s truthfulness. Those who come to know Jesus set their seal or attest with their lives that God is truthful.*)

Q: What does Jesus speak? (v.34 - *the words of God*)

Jesus completely say and does all God says and does and that is all Jesus does. So when you believe in the Son of God, you are also by extension believing in the Father above. On the other hand, to not believe Jesus is to reject the Heavenly Father as well.

Q: What did God the Father give to Jesus? (v.34 - *the Spirit without measure*)

Think on this. Throughout history, God spoke through many messengers who were faithful to God’s Word. Each of them received a measure of God’s Spirit that was required for

their assigned task - their role in the redemption story. So when a prophet in the Old Testament spoke a word from God, it was according to the measure of each prophet's assignment from God. However, Jesus is different. God gave Him the Spirit without any limits. This is how we can fully trust Jesus - His words and ministry - because He has the Holy Spirit without any limits at all. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ.

[Romans 8:5-10]

Notice v.9 - the phrase Spirit of God is interchangeable with Spirit of Christ. Since person with the Spirit possesses life, for Jesus to have the Spirit without measure means He has life without measure.

John has told his disciples that whatever Jesus has said is true and that He is supreme because He came from above. Now John is going to end his comments with an encouragement to trust Jesus.

Q: What has the Father put in Jesus' hands? (*v.35 - all things*)

Q: If someone puts something in your hands, what does that symbolize? (*that you have authority over whatever was put into your hands*)

The Father puts everything under Jesus' authority because He loves Him. Because of the Father's great love for His Son, He has put all things under His authority and given Him the Spirit without measure. In other words, Jesus is the perfect revealer of God the Father.

[Hebrews 1:1-3]

V. 36 is a fitting end to this chapter as it lays out the two distinctly different alternatives for a person concerning Jesus.

Q: What is the fate of a person who believes in the Son of God? (*eternal life*)

Q: What is the fate of those who does not obey the Son? (*suffer God's wrath*)

This is pretty much the same things Jesus Himself said to Nicodemus at the end of His conversation with him. Not much later in history, John the Baptist is taken into custody and is beheaded for his righteous preaching. As Jesus said in Matthew 11:11 after John's death, he was the greatest man ever born to a woman (that is, through the natural or earthly manner of children being born). However, as the greatest under the Law, his beheading was a symbolic cutting of the head of the Law off. His death signified the upcoming death of the Law so that people could enter into the Kingdom of God freely by faith in Jesus - the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. John the Baptist loved his disciples and wanted them to be participants in the eternal kingdom but he knew that it wouldn't happen unless they embraced Jesus. That's the point of this section of Scripture.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?