
Not Receive unless Given

John 3:22-36

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What do you do when someone is promoted over you? When someone begins to get more attention, more recognition, more “followers” in Twitter, Friends in Facebook?

Anger? Frustration?

Disappointment? Discouragement? Depression?

Self-doubt?

How do you think John the Baptist felt as Jesus begins to gain in popularity? In fact, which would you rather have been?

John the Baptist?

Nicodemus?

I keep asking myself, “Why this story at this point?” As I reflected on this, it struck me that what John is doing is contrasting Nicodemus and John the Baptist. Nicodemus is the example of a **religion** that does not save because there is a **regeneration** that is necessary and a **redemption** that is to be believed. John the Baptist is an example of an authentic belief that professes the greatness of Christ even in the midst of personal decline.

So we are meant to see Nicodemus and John the Baptist side-by-side.

The Exposure of their Heart

(v.22-26)

The problem they faced powerfully exposes what is in the heart of the followers of John.

²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison).

²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”

The Parallel of their Ministries

(v.22-24)

The Apostle John is showing us that Jesus’ ministry was much like that of John. He preached. He disciplined. And He baptized. He is in a different location, but they are basically calling men and women, boys and girls to repent for God’s kingdom is near.

The Argument about Purification

(v.25)

John’s disciples get into an argument with a certain Jew about purification. The argument would have arisen because of the clash between the Jewish view of baptism (it was a ritual washing) and John’s view (it was an outward profession of an inward change). It makes sense that this certain Jew was Nicodemus.

In the course of this argument, this Jew (Nicodemus) must have pointed out that everyone was following Jesus now. He must have quoted or misquoted Jesus to make a point. These disciples of John were now very upset.

The Complaint to John (v.26)

The debate causes them to think a bit more about John's ministry. They are very concerned about its longevity in the light of Jesus' rising popularity. Notice how this complaint exposes these disciples of John.

They **measure** the success of their ministry by the size of the crowd. They have wrong motives and false expectations. John's response to all this is going to show that they simply did not grasp what John the Baptist's ministry was all about.

They **blame** John for turning people's attention to Jesus. John the Baptist is the one who kept point to Christ. Two of his own disciples are now following Jesus. And this religious and political leader is quoting and possibly following Him. What about us and our ministry?

Think with me about the following observations:

The difficulties of change tend to expose our hearts. There is nothing like change and difficulty and trials to uncover and unmask our hidden motives and secret thoughts.

Complaining often arises from false expectations and wrong motivations. We must be very careful to be sure that what we expect is Biblical and spiritual lest we begin to apply our own personal standards and criteria.

It is very easy to blame leadership for our own failures. You see, these disciples of John did not understand what he had taught them. They had wrong expectations of what his ministry was all about. So rather than carefully thinking and examining themselves, they blamed John. It was his fault that people were following Jesus' ministry rather than theirs.

The Expression of his Faith (v.27-30)

How does John respond to all this? John replies by articulating the principles on which his life and ministry are grounded.

²⁷ John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

Its Heavenly Source (v.27)

John expresses one of the most essential truths for saving belief. God is the ultimate source and supplier of everything in my life. This is true physically and spiritually. I am utterly dependent on His sovereign and holy purposes and providence. All of the resources that are mine have come from Him, must be used as directed by Him and are designed to bring Him glory and honor.

The new birth that is necessary in order to believe is God's good gift. It comes from Him alone. The salvation provided in the New Covenant which replaces the Old Covenant is God's gift to us. And most importantly, the Lord Jesus Christ, is God's gift from heaven. He has come to his own and unlike Nicodemus, John has received Him.

Its Communicated Purpose

(v.28)

John deeply understands his purpose for life and ministry. He has affirmed over and over again that he is not the Messiah—he exists to point to the Messiah. This purpose for his life is also a great gift from God. What recognition and acclaim he has had received is not self-generated but heaven-given. This deeply felt and widely expressed purpose shapes his responses to both success and decline. It frames his heart to be pleasing to God in the pressure of criticism and eventually, to the prospect of martyrdom.

Its Motivating Joy

(v.29)

I am astounded at the insight of John. He uses an analogy in expressing his joy that is the grand illustration of the glory and gladness of our union with Christ as believers. John the Baptist is the best man at this wedding. He is presenting the groom to the bride. He is presenting Jesus to Israel. He is full of joy. But the Apostle John sadly records that the bride rejected the groom.

Look carefully though at verse 29. This text is also comes to us.

Our joy is in hearing Jesus' voice. How do we hear Jesus' voice today? We hear it in the Word. It is not some inner voice or impression. When God's Word is read or spoken or heard and reflected on, God's voice is heard.

Our joy is full when Jesus is magnified. When Jesus is recognized for who He is, then our joy wells up and bubbles over.

John sets the bitterness and complaining of his disciples over against the fullness of his own joy. Some of you are really struggling with this. Your bitterness and complaining has displaced your joy. How you need to hear Jesus' voice and understand His preeminence, not just as words, but as joy giving realities.

Therefore, regardless of his own personal ambitions, agenda and aims, he has submitted them to God's purposes. So, he can rejoice at Jesus' growing success. He can do so not just because rejoicing in a competitor is a sign of good character, not just because another believer is doing well. No, he can rejoice because Jesus is being recognized and received. Jesus is being glorified.

Its Unfolding Implications

(v.30)

Verse 30 is another verse often taken out of context and misused. ³⁰“He must increase, but I must decrease” is not an imperative. It is not a command for Christian piety or humility. It is simply a statement of fact in John's life. It is a statement of glad submission to God's plan and providence.

Now listen to me carefully. Hear what I am saying. John is saying primarily that Jesus' public ministry will grow larger while his grows smaller. He understands that he is now presiding over a declining ministry because God has made it so and his purpose implies that it will be so. And since Jesus will be magnified in it, he can not only just accept it, but also actually be joyful because of it.

Now the reason all this is true is because we will decrease in our own esteem to the degree to which we esteem the worth and value and greatness and supremacy of Jesus. What was happening to John as a reality of ministry was an analogy for a spiritual reality. Self-humiliation always comes in Christ exaltation.

D.A. Carson has helpfully noted, “For John the Baptist to have wished he were someone else, called to serve in a way many would judge more prominent, would simply be covetousness by

another name; if the person he envied were the Messiah himself, he would be annulling the excellent ministry God had given him. Deep discontent over God's wise, sovereign disposition of people and things would in that instance betray not only unbelief and faithlessness, but the worst form of the perennial human sin, the arrogance that wants to be God and stand where God stands." [Carson, p.211].

John understands that his life and ministry are to magnify Christ. He is living his life and pouring himself out in ministry so that Christ will be seen as supreme and preeminent. Have we come to where this is an inward reality in our own lives?

Do we truly grasp our utter dependence on God for absolutely everything?

Does God's purpose for our lives so grip us that we will remain unshaken in the face of all sorts of difficulty?

Are we so satisfied with Jesus that we find in Him the fullness of our joy?

Is sacrificial living the natural outcome of our way of thinking?

The Explanation of this Truth

(v.31-36)

The issue for John the Baptist, just as it was for Nicodemus, is this, "How do you respond to Jesus?" This is the central truth in Christianity. It is what makes us Christians. It is what motivates Christians.

³¹ 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. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶ 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.

Once again, I believe that these verses are not the words of John the Baptist, but are the commentary of the author, the Apostle John. There is a discernable shift in verse 31 into the Apostle John's way of talking and writing.

Remember that we are seeing the contrast between Nicodemus and John, the Baptist. John is showing is that the "presence of faith", that an act of believing is not in and of itself, saving. Believing always has content, a "what is it that is believed?" Faith in faith is in fact false belief. I do not put my trust in my belief. Saving faith is not focused on itself. Saving faith not only requires the new birth, but also to look away to something or someone outside of itself. It accepts as true what is asserted. It accepts it as true for me. It trusts in it particularly in what is promised. It lives in the light of what is accepted as being true and true for me.

Here are living illustrations of the difference between a belief that does not save and one that does. So, what about Jesus is being put forward as the "what" of belief?

Jesus is exalted above all

(v.31)

Saving belief affirms that Jesus is above all. He is exalted over all because He is from heaven. In contrast, all those who are of earth, belong there and speak in earthly ways. This is a strong contrast. When the one from heaven speaks, He is to be believed. That is the basis for the next sentence.

How we must return to this truth over and over again. How we need to declare this truth. Jesus is supreme and exalted. So, He is to be believed over all other voices; His speaking is to be believed as coming to us from heaven. True saving faith believes that Jesus is exalted above all.

Jesus speaks God's truth (v.32-34)

Jesus reveals what He has seen and known by experience. He is the one from heaven and testifies of all that is heavenly. Yet, His testimony is not received. Just as our writer declared at the beginning of the book, Jesus' testimony is not believed. But anyone who accepts or believes what Jesus says then has agreed that God is true. The sense here is that when we believe Jesus then we are agreeing the God is the one and only TRUTH, the one and only God.

Why? Because God sent Jesus into the world. God not only sent Him, gave Jesus the Holy Spirit without measure. He has received all of the Spirit that is possible to be received. The Old Testament prophets received the portion of the Spirit necessary to carry out their ministry. Since Jesus has received the Spirit without measure, He is equipped to carry out the ministry of Newness that God has given Him. No one before; no one after; He alone.

Jesus is God's truth. Jesus speaks the truth about God. When we believe what God tells us through Jesus, then we affirm the truthfulness of God. True saving faith believes that Jesus speaks the truth of God.

Jesus is the center of God's love and purposes (v.35)

See how the flow develops? Jesus is exalted and reveals God because He is at the center of God's love and glory. Remember what John said? "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven." Here is the glory and greatness of God's love for Jesus – He has given all things to Jesus.

This means we must be careful turning God's love for us, as great as it is, into something it is not. We are not at the center of God's love. Jesus is. Does God love us greatly? Yes. True saving faith believes that Jesus is the center of God's love and purposes.

Jesus is the difference between life and wrath (v.36)

³⁶ 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.

The conclusion is clear. Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Those who do not will not have live but remain under the wrath of God. Therefore, believing in Jesus is the difference between continuing under the wrath of God and having eternal life.

Reflect and Respond

Nicodemus - God loves the world and gave His Son
John the Baptist – God loves the Son and gives the world.

Do you esteem Him in such a way that humbles self?

Do we truly grasp our utter dependence on God for absolutely everything?

Does God's purpose for our lives so grip us that we will remain unshaken in the face of all sorts of difficulty?

Are we so satisfied with Jesus that we find in Him the fullness of our joy?

Is sacrificial living the natural outcome of our way of thinking?

Do you believe in Jesus?

True saving faith believes that Jesus is exalted above all.

True saving faith believes that Jesus speaks the truth of God.

True saving faith believes that Jesus is the center of God's love and purposes.

Believing in Jesus is the difference between continuing under the wrath of God and having eternal life.

Truly believe today.