

# Jealousy or Joy

## John 3:22-30

Today I want us to think about jealousy and joy. Jealousy is destroyer of joy. Envy steals your joy when you don't trust God that He is good and is working all things together for your good. But what we will learn today from John 3 is that it is such a privilege and a joy to be a disciple and a servant of Jesus, that nothing can compare to it. Joy in our relationship with Jesus and in humble service to Him can rid us of the sin of jealousy.

Let me set the biblical scene. For many months, the Jordan River had been the scene of a growing ministry. To this place had come a man from the wilderness, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. He had preached repentance and had baptized those who showed the fruits of that repentance.

This was John the Baptist. The apostle John told us in chapter 1 that John the Baptist was **"a man sent from God,"** (1:6) who **"came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe,"** (1:7). Many had come out to hear him. Of those who came and heard, some (like the Pharisees) went away rejecting the truth, while others went away having believed John's words. There were still others who believed, but who did not go away. These were the ones who remained with John and became his disciples.

Then one day, Jesus had come to the Jordan and had been baptized by John. Later, John had testified that this was the One whose coming had been promised. He said of Jesus, **"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"** (1:29) and **"I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God,"** (1:34). Two of John's disciples had left John to follow Jesus (1:37), but others had remained with John.

After spending a little time in Galilee and attending a wedding there where Jesus turned the water into wine. Jesus and His disciples went to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of Passover. It was then that Jesus had cleansed the temple. And it was probably there that He talked to Nicodemus. Now Jesus has returned to the area of the Jordan and many of those who had been identified with John's ministry are now going over to Jesus after hearing of the miracles which had been performed in Jerusalem.

Our story today begins by describing two thriving ministries that were taking place close to one another. Here we see for a short period of time John the Baptist and Jesus have parallel ministries. John 3:22-24 tells us,

**22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.**

**23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.**

**24 For John had not yet been thrown into prison.**

It seems that Jesus and John were both doing ministry somewhere along the Jordan River, which they were using for baptisms. As John 4:2 clarifies, Jesus Himself was not actually performing the baptisms, but His disciples were. Probably, like the ministry of John the Baptist these baptisms were public confessions of sin followed by immersion in water, which symbolized cleansing from sin and a new life of obedience to God. The other gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) don't tell us anything about this parallel ministry but instead they begin their accounts of Jesus' public ministry after John was thrown in prison.

John wants his readers to know of this unique, if very brief, period of simultaneous ministry because it is the setting from which a perceived problem arises. The problem of jealousy arises from John's disciple because of our Lord's successful ministry at this time. John the Baptist's response here is a model of humility and Christian servanthood. We could sum up his response with his own words in verse 30, **"He must increase, but I must decrease."**

Those words are a convenient outline in reverse of the rest of John 3. **"I must decrease"** sums up 3:22-30 where John shows why his ministry is inferior to Christ's. And **"He must increase"** sums up 3:31-36 where John tells us why Jesus and His ministry is superior.

Today we will focus on verses 22-30 and see why a right view of Jesus and of ourselves will be the difference between jealousy or joy.

First we see,

### **1. The Jealousy of John's Disciples (3:25-26)**

It wasn't long before the parallel ministries of Jesus and John brought about the beginnings of a conflict. It began with a discussion between a Jew and John's disciples.

**25 Then there arose a dispute between [some] of John's disciples and the Jews about purification.**

**26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified--behold, He is**

A. The occasion for the conflict.

One day, the disciples of John were engaged in a discussion with someone when the subject of purification came up. This is what the ministries of Jesus and John were all about. They did not emphasize the ceremonial purification rites as did the Pharisees. They were concerned with a spiritual purification of the individual.

We do not know exactly what the discussion was about except that verse 26 speaks about baptism and baptism is a rite of purification, so it probably had something to do with a perceived difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus.

Notice that this discussion took place between John's disciples the Jews. We are not told if he was a religious leader or a Pharisee. I assume by this that John is indicating this person or group were not disciples of John or of Jesus.

How often do we find ourselves in a discussion with someone that is basically just an antagonist. They may not hold to the position they are challenging us with, they are simply using it to antagonize us. That appears to me to be what is happening here. This is my own speculation, but it seems to fit the text. A man, who is not a disciple of Jesus, is having a discussion with John's disciples about how a person can be pure before God. As often is the case when a person's arguments are weak, they bring up something peripheral to antagonize. We have all heard this commonly done in political debates. I think that in the course of the discussion mentioned here, this man mocks the disciples of John by pointing out that there are more people going to Jesus than to John. In other words, if John's way is the right way to be purified before God, then why are so many people going to Jesus?

The strategy works, for John's disciples are now upset. We are not told what answer these disciples gave to this Jew, but we are told that the discussion motivated them to come to John and point out what they considered to be a growing problem.

## B. The Point of Comparison.

Notice that these disciples do not even mention the name of Jesus. Instead, they refer to Him as **"He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified."** Do you see what they are saying? Can you see the implications of it?

"This impudent newcomer who is treading on our turf."

"This young upstart who is taking away our people."

"This is the One for whom you gave His start into the ministry. He owes it all to you, John. And this is how He repays you; by undermining your ministry. He has gone down to the Jordan and now He is baptizing there and everyone is going over to Him. Aren't you going to do anything about this?"

Clearly, these disciples have a problem. It is the problem of JEALOUSY. Why are these disciples jealous? John obviously does not share their jealousy. So, why are his disciples jealous? What makes them so different from John? The difference can be seen in John's answer.

So that brings us to,

## 2. The Joy of John the Baptist

We see John's answer in verse 27,

**27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to 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 "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.**

**30 "He must increase, but I [must] decrease.**

John anticipates their complaint about Jesus and he answers his disciples by contrasting himself with Jesus. And from his answer we can learn where John's joy comes from.

**Joy comes from:**

**A. Understanding God is in control.**

**27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.**

This is profound. There is a principle here which allows John to remain free from jealousy, even though Jesus is outshining him in the ministry. It is a principle that can release you from the bonds of jealousy that may have ensnared you, no matter what the cause. It is the principle of the sovereignty of God. *A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven.*

What does this mean? It means that God is in control. If a ministry thrives, then it is because God has so ordained it. Likewise, if a ministry dwindles and seems to fall, it has been done according to God's plan.

No one can have a ministry or a spiritual gift unless it is given by God. All true Christian ministry is granted and sustained by God. That does not mean that every ministry that *claims* to be of God is given by God. Nor does it mean that worldly fame or great numbers indicate the blessing of God. People can abuse and counterfeit the gifts and callings of God. Nevertheless, God is in control.

This principle can be a source of comfort to you. The application of this principle eliminates all motivation for jealousy and its counterpart -- pride. If God is in control, then why should I be jealous of the success of another? If God is in control, then how can I be prideful in the success that He has provided to me? It is nothing to boast about because it is not due to your natural ability. It is given by God.

There is a great deal of security in this principle. You may not have a tremendous I.Q. You may not be popular. You may not be a great orator. But you can know that God is in control. Anything you are able to do, any service for God is given to you from heaven.

When we come to John 6, we will see Jesus demonstrating this same principle. Large numbers of people will gather to Him. They will look at the miracles and they will be impressed. But then, they will leave. Finally, only the Twelve will remain. But, Jesus will not get upset. He knows that the great crowds come from God. And he knows that the Twelve come from God. He has joy in knowing that the Father gives disciples to Him (John 17:12-13).

John expresses that same attitude.

## **B. Accepting our part in God's plan.**

John knows his part in God's sovereign plan. He was called by God to be a witness. His witness did three things.

- He is to Prepare the Way.

This is his ministry of a forerunner -- to go before the King and prepare the people to meet their king. In John 1:23 He said: **"I [am] 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the LORD,' ' as the prophet Isaiah said."**

- He is to Show the Way.

This is what he did when he pointed to Jesus and said, "That is Him! That is the Messiah! That is the Lamb of God which I told you was coming!" (see John 1:29-31).

- He is to Get Out of the Way.

When the first two ministries are completed, then John is to move out of the way and let Jesus take over. This is what set John apart. John was content to get out of the way. Here is the principle. If you are not willing to get out of the way, then you will only be in the way. So in verse 30 John sees it as an imperative, **"He must increase, but I [must] decrease."**

John is not the Christ:

**28 "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'**

These disciples have been with John for many months. They have heard the Pharisees ask him if he is the Messiah. They have heard him answer emphatically that he is not. Rather, he is the witness of the Messiah.

It is not the witness who is important, but the One who of whom he testifies, the one who comes after him. It is not the messenger who is important, but the One who gave the message. It is not the Bible Teacher who is important, but the One about whom the Bible Teaches. John will say, it is not the friend of the bridegroom that is important, but rather the bridegroom Himself.

## **C. Knowing Jesus as Lord.**

John knew that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus was the Lord.

**29 "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled."**

To whom does the bridegroom refer? It is really rather obvious. It is Jesus Christ. Who is the bride? It is God's people. It is the assembly of God's people. It is both Israel and the church. There are a number of passages in the Bible that present this symbolism.

John knew that Jesus was the promised bridegroom and that the bride belongs to Him. John's role was that of the friend of the bridegroom, sort of like our "best man." His role was to take the bride to the bridegroom and then get out of the way. The focus of the wedding was not on the best man, but on the bridegroom and bride.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is often pictured as the bridegroom (or husband) and Israel as His bride. For example, in Isaiah 54:5, the Lord tells Israel, "**For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts.**" Isaiah 62:5b declares, "**And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you.**" In Hosea 2:16, the Lord tells Israel that in the future, they will call the Lord, "**My husband.**" He promises (Hos. 2:19), "**I will betroth you to Me forever....**" Jesus used this analogy of Himself when He explained to some of John's disciples why Jesus' disciples did not fast (Matt. 9:15): "**The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.**" The same analogy carries over to the New Testament epistles, where Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is His bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7; 21:2; 22:17).

Now, if Yahweh is Israel's bridegroom in the Old Testament and John the Baptist proclaims Jesus as Israel's bridegroom here, then it's an affirmation that Jesus is Yahweh. Jesus is God. Whether or not John the Baptist put the two halves of this equation together, it is evident that the apostle John through the Holy Spirit wants us to put them together: If God is the bridegroom and Jesus is the bridegroom, then Jesus is God. When you came to Jesus Christ in faith, you entered into the family of God. You became a part of a relationship that is to be so intimate that it is described in the terms of a marriage, a bride and groom.

John goes on to say, "**but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice,**" (3:29). In ancient times, the friend of the bridegroom was the one who had helped the groom to arrange the marriage feast. We would call him the "best man." He would go with the groom to the house of the bride to negotiate with the bride's father the terms of the betrothal. He would arrange the details of the wedding feast and see that all was prepared.

On the day of the wedding, he would accompany the groom to the house of the bride's father. He would ceremonially introduce the bride to her groom and, until he had done so, they were not to speak to one another.

This is the picture here. John's ministry has been to prepare the way for the bridegroom and to introduce Him to the nation of Israel. Once that introduction has been made, then John's job is finished. The groom has remained silent until the introduction has been made. But once the introduction has been completed, the groom can now speak for Himself.

At the beginning of the wedding arrangements, the friend of the bridegroom held a very important place in the proceedings. However, once the groom and the bride have been brought together, then the importance of the friend decreases.

The friend of the groom no longer stands between the bride and the groom. His job has been to get them together and then to get out of the way.

The friend doesn't go on the honeymoon. He is not the center of attention at the marriage feast. He just sits there and is silent. Is he upset about this? He is not. Rather, he rejoices at the happiness of the groom.

That brings us to the fourth and overarching principle. Joy comes from,

#### **D. Magnifying Jesus and Humbling ourselves.**

So John gives his ministry principle in a summary statement:

##### **30 "He must increase, but I [must] decrease.**

So it is with John. He is not upset or jealous because Jesus is getting all of the attention. This very thing that upsets these disciples is John's source of delight. This is the very thing that John has been working toward. This has been John's goal from the beginning. Now, his job is done.

John's aim and his joy was to bring the bride to the bridegroom. By the way, you probably don't think of John the Baptist as a joyful man. But he was full of joy when he heard the bridegroom's voice and could bring the bride to Him. If people followed after Jesus, John's purpose had been fulfilled. His joy was full.

I read this week a quote from Robert Murray McCheyne: *"I see a man cannot be a faithful minister, until he preaches Christ for Christ's sake—until he gives up striving to attract people to himself and seeks only to attract them to Christ."* We always need to keep in mind that it's all about the bridegroom and not at all about the best man. **"He must increase, but I must decrease."**

Like the morning star, John was fading from view as the sun rose in the sky. John's ministry was only temporary. The apostle reminds us in verse 24 that John would be put in prison. He would not only lose his ministry, he would soon lose his life.

It's important to remember that being a faithful servant of the Lord does not guarantee a trouble-free life. John the Baptist was the faithful, God-appointed forerunner of Messiah, but he got thrown into prison and had his head cut off in his early thirties. We aren't guaranteed long lives or impressive results in our ministries. The Lord could take me out of the picture today and His work would go right on according to His plan. He owes us nothing. It is our great joy if He uses us in some way to exalt Christ and to bring others to exalt Him, too.