



Text: John 3:22-26¹

Series: *Life in His Name* – The Message of John’s Gospel

Title: Part 7 – Playing Second Violin, and Lovin’ It!

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

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Leonard Bernstein, the American conductor, was once asked which instrument in the orchestra was most difficult to recruit. His answer: “second violin.” The reason it was so difficult to recruit someone for the role was because the person who plays second violin must be someone who is as competent as a first violinist, but who is willing to play a support role, rather than take the lead.

Now, I would imagine that there a good many second violinists in orchestras around the world who take the position of second violin with an eye to the day when they can sit in the first chair.

But the essence of Christian living is learning how to play “second violin” and to do it with joy for the rest of our lives! If we’re going to live with joy as followers of Jesus, we need to learn a basic lesson that I believe is very difficult to learn in the age in which we live. We’re bombarded with messages that tell us that we are the center of the universe. In fact, there was a popular self-help book that made a splash just a couple of years ago that suggested that the secret to happiness was found in our telling the universe how it was supposed to organize itself to meet our wants and desires. The central idea of that book was that, yes, you are the center of the universe. All that that book was doing was re-affirming and re-packaging something that our culture already believes.

A movie that mocks me-centered thinking is a film called, “What About Bob?”² It’s a comedy about an obsessive counselling client who pursues his therapist while the man is on vacation with his family. The client, played by Bill Murray, finally catches up with the therapist in a country store near the man’s vacation home and begs him to counsel him even though it means taking time away from the therapist’s family. Murray dissolves in front of him with a pathetic string of “I need, I need, I need, I need.” That string of “I need’s” summarizes the me-centered attitude of our culture. “Everything else has to be set aside because ‘I need.’ I am the center of the universe.”

Sadly, believers can adopt that “me-centered” thinking without even realizing it. I was reading a message by Pastor Bret Toman, who pastors a church in the state of Colorado. He told of a family he knew whose marriage was coming apart.

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² © 1991 Touchstone Pictures



They were professing Christians, they had helped to start what was a growing and vibrant church but then the husband had had an affair. Pastor Toman spoke with the man's wife who said of her husband, "he's trying to figure out what he wants." Bret Toman wrote: "Someone needed to say to him, 'It doesn't matter what you want! It's not about you. You are not the center of the universe. You are called to be about something far greater than your feelings and what you think you want. God wants you to serve your family and lead them in a God-honoring direction whether you feel like it or not. So get back in there and go to work on your marriage.'"³

Pastor Toman also told of a friend of his who pastors a small church in Minnesota. The church was dying ... quite literally! The membership was dying off but this pastor had a vision for reaching out into the community and growing the church again. He mentioned to his people his desire to add another service, perhaps on a Saturday night or Sunday night, which had a more contemporary feel that would appeal to younger people. One man in church replied, "What about us?" I don't know if this man's name was Bob but his comment is essentially, "I need, I need, I need." "But it's not about you!" Pastor Toman wrote, "The universe does not revolve around us! We are called to something far greater than ourselves!"⁴

I mention both of these stories to make a point: "me-centered" culture is not a generational problem, it is a human problem! It's a problem as old as the human race, it is rooted in our fallen human nature and it's a problem that we'll see in the story we're about to read.

In the passage we're going to read this morning we're going to find a man who understood that he was not the center of the universe. John the Baptist was a man of great ability, who had been the center of attention, but who willingly played "second violin" and he can teach us important lesson about how we can learn do it with joy.

I'm reading from John's Gospel, chapter three, verses twenty-two to thirty-six. This is God's Word, his holy, inspired and authoritative Word. Let's hear it with reverence and respect and let's believe and obey it with faith and joy.

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).

³ Bret Toman, "It's Not About Me," John 3:22-30, SermonCentral.com
http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/its-not-about-me-bret-toman-sermon-on-discipleship-147168.asp?libronix=1&utm_source=Libronix&utm_medium=API-Link&utm_campaign=Logos-Software

⁴ ibid



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." 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."

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.

To help keep things clear today I'm going to refer to the man who wrote this Gospel as "John the Evangelist" and I'm going to refer to the man about whom he wrote as "John the Baptist." There are two sections in this passage. First of all...

**John the Evangelist tells us about *how* John the Baptist exalted Jesus
John 3:22-30**

Then secondly,

**John the Evangelist tells us *why* John the Baptist exalted Jesus
John 3:31-36**

John the Evangelist set the stage for his story about John the Baptist and how he exalted Jesus by placing the ministries of John and Jesus alongside one another for comparison.

The ministries of Jesus & John the Baptist compared

Both Jesus and John were active in ministry in Palestine. Both were gathering disciples and both were baptizing those disciples. In chapter 4, verse 2, John the Evangelist tells us that Jesus wasn't actually baptizing people, but his disciples were. But that aside, Jesus and John are both active in very similar ministries at the same time but it seems, at the beginning, that John was outpacing Jesus in



ministry. The Evangelist tells us that John was ministering in a particular place because water was plentiful there...

“and people were coming and being baptized” John 3:23

The New International Version of the Bible⁵ renders the translation as...

“people were constantly coming to be baptized.” John 3:23 (NIV)

His ministry was very successful. A couple of weeks ago we noted that Matthew tells us that people were coming to him in droves! Matthew wrote that...

“Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Matthew 3:5-6

John was a spiritual super-star! As I said a couple of weeks ago, John the Baptist was the single most respected spiritual figure of his day. In fact, Jesus himself said of him...

“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.” Luke 7:28

John the Baptist had been the focus of conversation and attention. People who wanted to get right with God went to hear John preach and to receive baptism at his hands. The religious leaders of the day sent delegations to John’s meetings to ask him questions (1:19f) because the world was buzzing with talk about this new messenger of God. John was “front page news.” He was what everyone was talking about. He was “cutting edge.” He was the new thing. He was the one where people wanted to be.

But, John the Evangelist tells us, things were about to change.

Some of John’s disciples got into a discussion with a man about purification. “Discussion” is a somewhat neutral word. It might be more to the point to refer to it as a “debate” (NLT) or even as an “argument” (NIV). What they were talking about was the Jewish practice of using water to wash before meals and also to use water in baptism to represent the washing away of sin. Somehow in this “discussion” Jesus’ ministry of baptism and John’s ministry of baptism were compared together and John’s disciples got worried. It seems that this other Jewish man was suggesting that John was losing out to Jesus in the “baptism” business because John’s disciples came back to him after their debate and said to him...

⁵ The NRSV renders it as “people kept coming and were being baptized.”



“Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John 3:26

I want you to catch the tone of their words and I think the New Living Translation has captured it...

“Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us.” John 3:26 (NLT)

“Rabbi (Master, Teacher), that guy you helped out in ministry on the other side of the Jordan River, remember him? You know, that guy you helped out by endorsing his work, well that guy is taking people away from you! Everyone is going to him now! We’re not the center of attention any more! We’re not the cool thing anymore! John, what are you are going to do? John, what about us?”

There was some exaggeration in the words of John’s disciples. It wasn’t true that “all are going to” Jesus, but it was true that “all” were no longer going to John. John was no longer center of the action and his disciples give expression to a New Testament form of “I am the center of the universe” thinking. Here is the “it’s all about me” philosophy in action. And I want you to notice how quickly John the Baptist rejected and corrected their attitude without a moment’s hesitation.

How did John the Baptist exalt Jesus?

First of all, John rejected his disciples’ concern because...

John believed that God’s sovereign purpose was at the centre of all of life, including his own

He said...

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.” John 3:27

John understood that he lived in a universe that was run by God, not by him. He lived in a universe that had God at its centre, not mankind.

The only reason that John’s ministry had been successful was that he had been used of God and if God should now choose to use the ministry of Jesus, that was God’s business. John didn’t worry about whether or not God was blessing someone else more than he was blessing him. That was God’s business and John submitted himself to the sovereign authority of God.

When Dallas Block spoke two weeks ago he mentioned that he’d been asking the people of his church whether they had a God-centered Gospel or a man-



centered gospel. The Bible declares a God-centered Gospel but tragically we often slide into man-centered thinking. Our fallen human nature disposes us to believe in a god whose primary focus is giving us what we believe we need. And when we adopt that kind of understanding, we become the center of the universe and God exists to serve us.

There is a little word in John's statement that occurs more in John's Gospel than in other book of the New Testament. It's such a common word that we might not notice it at first glance, but it's a very important word. It's the word "give." John uses the word "give" more than another writer of the New Testament. And very often John uses it with reference to God. In fact, in this portion of his Gospel John uses the word three times that way. First, John the Baptist spoke about how God *gives* us everything we have. We have nothing unless we are given it by God. Then in verse 34 John the Evangelist tells us that God *gives* the Spirit to Jesus without measure. And finally in verse 35, John declares that God has *given* all things into the hands of Jesus. Even in Jesus' life, everything comes to him from his Father in heaven. The little word, "give," points to God as the sovereign giver of life and all that we need.

Second, John rejected his disciples' concern because...

John believed that God's purpose for his life was to point to Jesus and he lived in the integrity of his faith

If you will, John was Jesus' "front man." John said...

"You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'" John 3:28

He reminded his disciples that his ministry was a ministry of preparation. When the delegation had come from Jerusalem to ask him if he was the Christ, he had declared to them, in no uncertain terms, "I am not the Christ." (1:20) "Then who are you," they asked him.

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." John 1:23

God had sent him to call people to prepare themselves to meet with God because God was coming! He was just the opener for the main event, he wasn't the headliner! Jesus was the headliner! He'd told his disciples...

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'" John 1:29-30



John was just the messenger, not the Message! Jesus was the message. And now that the message had been delivered, he could step off stage.

I can imagine John's disciples hearing him proclaim the truth that Jesus was the Christ, the Lamb of God, the One sent from God to carry the sin of the world upon his shoulders; I can imagine them nodding their heads in agreement because their exalted Rabbi John was always right; and then I can see those same disciples resenting the very One who replaced John, their exalted leader.

You see, it's very easy to say we believe one thing and yet live as if we don't! It's very easy to say we believe that God is good and that he is sovereign in our lives, until our health gives way or our business fails or our children rebel against God or our spouse is unfaithful to us or our friends betray us. All of a sudden then, God isn't so good; all of a sudden his reign in our lives is questionable. That's because we've substituted his plan for our lives with our plan for our lives. And when God doesn't come through according to our plan then he isn't good anymore! It's in those times when our self-interest comes into conflict with God's plan that our belief is tested: **will we live out what we say we believe?**

John lived a life where his belief and his life were in sync. The purpose of his life was to point to Jesus. That is what he believed and that is what he did, even if it meant that his ministry must die.

But John wasn't only Jesus' "front man," John was also Jesus' "**friend.**" John said...

"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." John 3:29

In the New Testament Jesus is "the bridegroom" and those who come to believe in him are his "bride." The Apostle Paul uses that picture to describe the relationship between Jesus and his church in his Letter to the Ephesians (5:25ff) and John the Evangelist uses that picture again in the Book of Revelation (19:7; 21:2). The church is the bride, Jesus is the bridegroom and John the Baptist was the "best man." The role of the "best man" is to make sure that the groom and his bride are the center of attention.

As I read John's description of himself as Jesus' friend, I asked myself a question: "Can I say that? Do I make Jesus the focus of my life? Am I concerned about his joy and his glory, or am I really more concerned about my own? **I know that Jesus is my Friend, but what kind of a friend am I to Him?**"

Finally, John rejected and corrected his disciples' concern because...



John believed that God's increasing glory was truly his greatest joy

He saw himself as Jesus' "best man" and as the Bride of Jesus became more and more radiant as person after person was added to her through Jesus' ministry, John could honestly say...

"Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30

Within just a few months of declaring this, not only was John's ministry reduced in size, but John was dead. His preaching ministry had called people to righteous living in the fear of God and one of the local leaders, a minor king by the name of Herod Antipas, had taken exception to John's call to righteousness and by his order, John was executed. You can read the full story in Mark's Gospel, chapter six.

John decreased, but Jesus increased. But the interesting thing is that two thousand years later we're still talking about a prophet from some obscure corner of the world by the name of John the Baptist. Not because of who he was, but because of his connection with Jesus. John's story illustrates the truth that as we make Jesus' glory our greatest joy, we never lose a thing! When we try to make ourselves great, we lose everything; but when we make Jesus great, we gain everything! The record we have here of John's life is only a hint, a foretaste, of how that truth will be revealed in eternity. There have been millions of followers of Jesus whose lives are unrecorded by human history, but in God's books every moment of every day lived in Jesus' name is recorded and God will never forget one of them!

Jesus said...

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John 12:24-25

Jesus said...

"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Matthew 10:39

I love the observation that Corrie ten Boom once made about the glory of Jesus increasing as we slip into the shadows around him. Corrie Ten Boom was a woman who modeled godly humility, despite her world-wide fame through her books and films. Together with her family, Corrie hid Dutch Jews from the Nazis during the Second World War but was caught and imprisoned in a concentration camp along with the very people she had sought to protect. After the war, her



story of courage under persecution and her forgiveness for her persecutors gave her a platform for sharing the Gospel of Christ around the world.

She was once asked if it was difficult for her to remain humble. She replied: "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road, and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of the donkey that any of that was for him?" Corrie went on, "If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in His glory, I give him all the praise and the honour."

That's the spirit of someone who has learned the truth that "he must increase, but I must decrease." But we still remember Corrie.

As William Carey, the first Baptist missionary to India, lay dying, he turned to a friend and said, "When I am gone, don't talk about William Carey; talk about William Carey's Savior. I desire that Christ alone might be magnified."⁶

"He must increase, but I must decrease." But we still remember Carey.

How do we develop a mindset that places Jesus above all things in our lives?

Why did John the Baptist exalt Jesus?

John the Evangelist tells us that he did it because he believed that...

"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." John 3:31

John the Baptist placed Jesus above all things, because he believed that Jesus was from above

Jesus is not from this world. He speaks heavenly things. He is God's eternal Son, sent by his Father into this world to speak the very Word of God and to give eternal life to everyone who hears and believes his word.

John the Baptist understood that Jesus was more than a gifted prophet; he was God come to visit this world with a message from heaven itself. It's only when we are gripped with the truth that Jesus is "above all" because he is "from above" that he will become the centre of everything in our lives.

C.T. Studd was a man who gave up fame as an English sports figure in the nineteenth century to become a missionary to China. He once said...

⁶R. Kent Hughes, *John : That You May Believe*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), 94.



“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.” C.T. Studd

I thought of this as I spoke with a man this week about his spiritual questions and it struck me that this truth was the answer to his soul’s question. Jesus, the One who is above all must be the center of all for us.

In the 2nd century AD the Egyptian astronomer Ptolemy postulated that the earth was the center of the universe. He argued that the earth stood still and that the other planets orbited and rotated around it. According to Ptolemy, the universe revolved around the earth. It made sense, and people believed it for 1400 years until in the 16th century a man named Nicklaus Copernicus started poking around and asking questions:

"Why do some stars appear in the day and others at night?"

"What causes the seasons to change?"

"Does anyone know exactly how far ships can sail before falling off the edge of the earth?"

Copernicus had figured out that not only did the earth rotate but that it also revolved around the sun. His ideas caused scandal. “What do you mean, the world doesn’t revolve around us?!” Those were fighting word! Galileo came along a few decades later saying essentially the same thing and for advocating these beliefs the church and the state put him under house arrest.

Copernicus and Galileo pointed to the sun and said ... "The center of the universe"

Max Lucado in his book, It's Not About Me, writes: "What Copernicus did for the earth, God does for our souls. Tapping the collective shoulder of humanity, he points to the Son - his Son - and says 'Behold the center of it all.'"⁷

“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.” C.T. Studd

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:30

- ❖ **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- ❖ **Final Song: I Will Glory in My Redeemer**
- ❖ **Benediction**

⁷ As quoted in Bert Toman, “It’s Not About Me,” SermonCentral.com