

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church  
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## Sermon Summary #11

### A Case Study in “Teeter-Totter” Theology John 3:22-30

Most of what we find in the Bible is designed to comfort and encourage us. But there are a few texts that are deliberately designed to frighten us. By “frighten” I mean they are there to wake us up and shake us up. These are the “no-holds-barred-take-no-prisoner” sort of texts that most preachers conveniently ignore for fear of offending people and driving them away. But these texts are there for our good. They were put there by God for two reasons. First, they are true. Second, they warn us of things that are a threat to our souls, both now and into eternity. That is why we simply cannot afford to ignore them. Proverbs 16:5 is just such a text. Here is what Solomon wrote:

***“Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; assuredly he will not be unpunished”***  
(Prov. 16:5).

You may think that Satan is your greatest enemy. Not so. Your greatest enemy isn’t on the outside. It’s on the inside. It’s in your heart. It is something that comes instinctively to people born in sin. I’m talking about pride. ***You have no greater enemy than pride.*** It is the mortal enemy of your soul. If you coddle it, toy with it, nourish it, it will eat you alive. It is the mortal enemy of greatness. The sure and certain way to go down in God’s eyes is to go up in your own.

Conversely, to the extent that you go down in your own eyes, you go up in God’s. It’s what I call “teeter-totter” theology. Any time that you and I exalt and elevate ourselves, we necessarily demote and diminish God. It works the other way around as well. When we humble ourselves and acknowledge our sin and his grace, we magnify God. When we go down, he goes up. And when he goes up, we go down.

This is precisely what John the Baptist tried to communicate to his disciples who came to him complaining that people who formerly followed him were now following after Jesus. John’s response to them is profound. He basically says the same thing in two different ways. But in both cases he is giving expression to “teeter-totter” theology:

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

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

Teeter-totter theology!

The reason that John’s comments are so profound and important is that they do not come naturally to the human soul. This perspective is one that is always and only the fruit of the grace of God at work in a human heart. It is far more natural to you and me that we see ourselves elevated and exalted no matter what it may cost. ***We are by nature prone to pride and self-sufficiency.*** Humility doesn’t just happen. It must be wanted and willed into existence and by God’s grace sustained and nurtured and pursued.

Nothing is more contrary to your natural instincts than humility. Nothing is more at odds with the worldview and mindset of our culture than is humility.

By the way, if you’re wondering if humility is actually as important to the Christian as I’m suggesting, and that pride and self-promotion are as dangerous and insidious as I suggest, consider just a handful of biblical passages:

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43).

Jesus did not say, “Whoever would be great among you should immediately repent of wanting to be great.” Rather he said, “If you want to be great, humble yourself and become a servant.”

“For he who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48).

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4).

Clearly Jesus considered greatness an incentive to pursue humility. If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, and you do, and it’s ok, here’s how you do it: humble yourself.

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Peter 5:6).

Perhaps the most breathtaking passage of all when it comes to humility is found in Isaiah 57:15 -

“For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell in a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isa. 57:15).

God is exalted, infinitely transcendent, and everlasting. God lives forever! And he is holy! Where does someone like that live? Where does he dwell? Isaiah says he dwells “in a high and holy place.” That doesn’t sound like good news. That makes it sound as if you and I will never know him or see him or enjoy him. But then comes the good news. He also lives “with the contrite and lowly of spirit,” i.e., with the humble. The humble heart is God’s home. He dwells with, blesses, speaks to, heals, encourages, upholds, and grants power to the humble of heart. Surely this is simultaneously one of the most terrifying and one of the most encouraging verses in all of Scripture.

It’s encouraging because it tells us that God chooses to dwell and make his presence and power known to humble people. But if God dwells with the humble, he departs from the proud. If God draws near to the lowly in spirit, he withdraws from the haughty and arrogant. If he blesses those who go low, his disfavor rests on those who lift themselves up. God will have nothing to do with proud, self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-promoting, self-congratulatory, self-aggrandizing men and women.

If he is present with the humble, he is absent from the proud. Try to envision your most powerful enemies, the most aggressive opposition you’ve faced, the most imposing obstacles you’ve had to confront . . . they are nothing in comparison with the infinite energy and power of God! You do *not* want God to be in opposition to you.

Now that we’ve settled the case as to where and with whom God chooses to dwell in power and love and joy, how do we get there? The answer is actually quite simple. ***Humility is birthed and grows in the heart of the man or woman who knows and celebrates the truth of God’s absolute sovereignty and supremacy over all the affairs of life.*** Mere knowledge alone won’t accomplish much. There has to be a delight, a joy, a relishing of this truth in such a way that your entire perspective on life, including yourself, is transformed.

To help us move in this direction, we need a ***role model***. We need someone who not only embodied humility but who also explains how it is nurtured in the human heart, and there is no better example of this than John the Baptist.

Although John was humble, he was also a man of great importance. Jesus himself declared that “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than” John (Matt. 11:11). His coming was foretold by Isaiah (40:3-5) and again in Malachi (3:1). The apostle John describes him as “a man sent from God” (John 1:6). Multitudes turned out to hear him preach (Matt. 3:5-6). He attracted Sadducees, Pharisees, tax collectors,

soldiers, peasants, the rich and the poor, the young and the old. His fame eventually reached the palace of King Herod whom he publicly denounced as an adulterer for living with his brother's wife, a sermon that eventually cost John his head.

What accounts for John's humility and thus for his greatness? After all, he was loud and outspoken and aggressive and more than a little weird! A glance at John 3:22-30 reveals three things about John that were the key to his humility.

### *Context*

The background to this incident is important. A dispute over baptism arose, that led the followers of John to complain about the increasing popularity of Jesus. Little by little, the crowds were leaving John and following Jesus. This disturbed John's most loyal disciples and they went running back to their leader with what they thought was distressing news. But it was music in John's ears! To understand their frustration, observe three things in v. 26:

**First**, in what is undoubtedly a spirit of jealousy and envy and rivalry, they refuse to call Jesus by name. They instead refer to him as ***“he who was with you across the Jordan.”*** I should also point out that their report that “he is baptizing” is not entirely accurate. They obviously meant that the group of which he is the leader is baptizing. We know this because of what we read in John 4:2. There it says that “Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples.”

**Second**, they again refer to Jesus as the one “to whom ***you*** bore witness,” suggesting that Jesus is ungrateful for what John had done to advertise his coming and ministry. You can almost hear them: “Jesus is ungrateful. You are the one who spoke so highly of him. Why has he now responded by detracting from your ministry and drawing followers away to himself? Rebuke him!”

**Third**, out of a resentful and bitter spirit, they exaggerate: ***“all*** are going to him!” It was a perfect opportunity for John to ***feel sorry for himself***. It seemed like the perfect excuse to get angry and bitter and jealous and depressed. Instead, John's response was to humbly and joyfully send everyone to Jesus, without bitterness or wounded pride or resentment. How did he do it? The answer is found in three crucial truths John embraced and enjoyed!

***(1) First, John joyfully celebrated the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ in all things, by acknowledging that he was the source of all things.*** I'm not talking about some theoretical knowledge of a doctrine but a life-changing, pride-killing delight in God's utter sovereignty over all things: ***“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven” (v. 27).***

Reflect on the pervasive, all-encompassing and universal scope of his statement! It is truly breathtaking! Your very existence is a gift from heaven. The same may be said about whatever talents, money, or friends you have. Your home, TV's, computers, and cars are included. Each breath you now breathe, together with the beating of your heart and the thoughts racing through your mind are all a gift from God. Whatever favor with men you've gained or the respect given to you by your colleagues comes from God. I could go on without end: love, ministry, influence, athletic achievement, physical health, intellectual powers . . . it's all from God!

Take inventory of your life: every article, every object, every opportunity, every experience . . . How conscious are you of the fact that all of it comes from God? How happy are you about that? Would you be a little more joyful if you could hold back at least a little of the credit for yourself?

In John's case, he is probably talking about the crowds that followed him, the adulation he received from them, the notoriety, and the converts. All these, says John, are a gift of God (see especially 1 Cor. 4:7; Matt. 11:25; 16:17). The same goes for whoever and however many people attend Bridgeway.

The degree to which you attribute anything to yourself is the degree to which you will never be great in God's eyes. The degree to which you take credit for any earthly achievement is the degree to which God will keep

you at arm's length. The degree to which you honestly and happily and whole-heartedly believe and acknowledge that all comes from God is the degree to which you will grow in humility and thus be great in God's kingdom.

***The sovereignty of God wasn't a silent assumption for John.*** It was a conscious, all-consuming passion that governed all of life.

Let me give you one biblical illustration of this. It's found in the story of the Exodus, when God confronted Pharaoh and eventually delivered the nation of Israel from slavery. Among the many lessons here, the most important is that ***God does not like to be taken for granted*** (John Piper). He does not like to be a silent assumption. He has an almost unbelievable passion to be central and supreme and celebrated.

God doesn't want the truth about his sovereignty and supremacy in all things to be nothing more than an article in our statement of faith or a chapter in a book we write about him. He wants this truth to be known everywhere by everyone. This truth must become for us a daily conscious sense that shapes the way we approach all people and encounter all of life.

Here is but one declaration among dozens we find in the story of the Exodus. You will recall how God orchestrated the Exodus such that Israel was hemmed in, with the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh and his armies on the other. Here is the explanation God gave Moses:

“For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD. And they did so.” (Exod. 14:3-4).

The aim of the entire conflict with Pharaoh is so that God might get glory, so that God might be known as God, so that God might be seen and celebrated as sovereign and supreme over all. John Piper put it this way: “We get anesthetized to the unspeakable and appalling insult rendered to God day in and day out by his being ignored. It starts to feel normal – the way it's normal not to think about air or a solid earth under our feet. How many of you today have given a moment's thought to the air you are breathing or the blood flowing through your veins or the fact that the sun is still shining? That is how we so often treat God.” What I want you to see is that this is ***not*** how John the Baptist thought about or treated God, and it made all the difference in the world.

***(2) Second, John had a remarkably honest self-awareness.*** We often describe people as lacking in self-awareness. They are blind to their true identity and the impact they have on others. Not John. He had assessed himself. He understood his abilities and his limitations and the purpose for which God had called him: “*I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him*” (v. 28). This isn't false humility. He happily acknowledged the important role God had given him. But neither did he fall into unwarranted arrogance. He neither underestimated nor overestimated himself, his ministry or his abilities.

How do you define your life? Is your sense of personal identity dependent on the statement you are making by your hair, the car you drive, your body shape? I fear that many of you would have to honestly confess: “I AM what you see. I AM whatever effect is produced in you by looking at me.”

If so, your experience of value and sense of personal significance will always be determined by others, by how *they* read you, by how *they* either accept or approve of you, on the one hand, or reject and disapprove of you, on the other. Look at John the Baptist. His sense of personal identity and value was shaped by Jesus Christ and his relationship to him as Lord.

***(3) Third, and surely most important of all, he was committed to the supremacy of Jesus in all things.*** My first point was that John was joyfully committed to the ***sovereignty*** of Jesus, i.e., he is the *source* of all things. But now his point is that he is joyfully committed to the ***supremacy*** of Jesus, i.e., he is the *center* of all things. There is a big difference: you may concede that God is the source of all things, at the same time you believe

that *you* are the focus of all things. “God may have made it, but he made it for *me!*” Not John. Jesus is both the source and center of all things. He makes this clear in two ways.

First, look at verse 29. Notice how he uses the imagery of a wedding. John is the best man. He’s grateful for that special role in God’s purposes. But Jesus is the bridegroom! When the bride makes her appearance, the best man steps aside. His joy comes from the attention now focused on the groom. John had prepared the way, not for his own coming or fame, but for the coming and fame of Jesus. The point is simple: ***It wasn’t John’s wedding!***

I have served as the best man in a wedding only once, many years ago. Leading up to the actual ceremony, I was largely in charge. I made certain that everyone arrived on time for the rehearsal. I made certain that the groom actually showed up. I led the many toasts that were given at the rehearsal dinner. I was responsible for making certain that a car was ready to whisk away the couple to their wedding night. I was responsible for guaranteeing that the wedding rings were present. I took on the task of keeping the other groomsmen in line. But when the bride began her walk down that aisle, my role was over. I stepped aside. All attention focused on the bridegroom. It didn’t matter whether or not I was crying. Everyone was looking at the groom. They smiled at his tears of joy. I deliberately and intentionally and by design slid into the shadows so that all the focus of everyone was on the bride and the groom. And so it was with John the Baptist. “My job is over,” he said. “Set your sights on the centrality of the bridegroom: Jesus!”

The key is a commitment to fixing your eyes on Jesus. If you are constantly looking at what others are doing or saying or achieving or failing to achieve, either you will become proud, thinking you are better and more effective or more skilled than they, or envious, thinking them to have received something you haven’t but should have! With all eyes fixed on Jesus, neither pride nor envy will spoil your joy.

Note John’s emphasis on his ***“joy”***. John 3:29 literally says, “he rejoices with joy!” His joy is made complete. It’s fulfilled. Nothing else in life was capable of bringing his joy to its appointed consummation (see Psalm 16:11 and the psalmist’s emphasis on “fullness of joy”). John is a happy camper! Because Jesus is the focus of his faith and efforts and energy, he feels joy, not jealousy! True joy and satisfaction come from knowing you have done what God equipped and called you to do, no more, no less.

John doesn’t say: “Now I have *fulfilled my obligation*. Now I have *performed my duty*. Now I have *conformed to God’s expectations* of me. Now I have *discharged my moral responsibility*. Now *the law has been obeyed*.” No! My ***joy*** is fulfilled, completed, and consummated. My joy is inextricably tied to the supremacy of Jesus Christ. ***My joy is not dependent on my being somebody, but on my seeing somebody*** (Piper). Why does this fail to resonate with so many of us? Because our joy is wrapped up in worldly and carnal distractions.

The second way John makes clear his commitment to the centrality and supremacy of Jesus is in what he says in v. 30 – ***“He must increase, but I must decrease.”***

He “must” increase. John declares that the supremacy of Jesus ***isn’t merely advisable or good counsel***. This is more than merely prudent or practical or “OK”: this is God’s purpose; it ***must*** happen. Nothing else will ever make sense apart from the self-conscious exaltation of Jesus. This is ***no mere concession*** to the victor, as if John begrudgingly gives up, knowing that it is a lost cause to resist the growing influence and power of Jesus. This is ***glad-hearted acknowledgment that the supremacy of Jesus Christ trumps every other desire and goal and ambition***. These are not words of resignation. These are not the bittersweet words of a man facing retirement.

Consider Drew Edmondson’s “concession” speech to Governor Stitt following the election here in Oklahoma last November. That is not what John is doing here! John didn’t say: “Well, we put up a good fight men, but all the polls indicate that Jesus won.” Rather, John is describing his greatest and sweetest and most intense joy. The most passionate desire of his soul is the unrivaled pre-eminence of Jesus.

Let’s linger for a moment on that word ***“must”***. John is talking about something that is an ***absolute, unequivocal, unconditional, unadulterated necessity***; “I won’t tolerate anything that even potentially distracts from it or diminishes my capacity to pursue it.” The word “must” reflects John’s determination not

to let anything hinder or deter the increase of Jesus. It forces us to self-examination, personal evaluation of how we use time and money and mind and body. “Must” is a reflection of his personal priorities and values.

**Must!** Not, “Oh sure, I’d be happy . . .” Or, “It’s ok with me if he increases . . .” No. John lived each moment of each day **energized by an internal compulsion**, a force that rose up within the depths of his soul, not imposed from outside, as if he were being coerced by a stronger power.

How many of us can honestly say today that our lives are characterized by a necessity, a sense of unrivalled urgency? Don’t just read John’s words: listen to his heart – **HE MUST INCREASE!** There is an intensity, a resolve, a determination to his life. There is spiritual violence, an explosive commitment to attain one and only one thing: the acknowledgement by all of the absolute and uncontested supremacy of Jesus Christ.

If you want trouble with John the Baptist, try to work contrary to the increase of Jesus. Nothing, absolutely nothing, will be tolerated or permitted or allowed to distract from this one thing, this one pursuit, this one priority: not relationships, not money, not athletics, nothing. Everything is subordinate to this single all absorbing passion: the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

Can you now understand why we have chosen as our mission statement as a local church: **“We exist to exalt Christ in the City!”**

And note well: this is John’s **joy**. There isn’t a single person present today or anyone who will later listen to or watch this sermon who isn’t deadly serious about increasing their joy. If you are already filled with joy, you want more. If you feel joyless, you want some, no matter how little it may be. And I’m telling you in no uncertain terms that it doesn’t come from personal increase or the praise of others. Oh, it may come a little bit at first; but it won’t last. Neither fame nor fortune nor promotion nor notoriety nor increased sales of some product, be it a worship CD or a book will bring you deep, abiding, lasting joy.

Getting your picture in the paper, or a whole lot of followers on Twitter, or multiple pats on the back, or the best seats in the house, or access to the VIP room, limo service, first-class accommodations, none of it, no matter how much of it you may obtain, will bring you the kind of joy your heart really desires. And the sad fact of it is that so many of us are convinced we deserve recognition, praise, and honor: it’s our due; people owe it to us; we are worthy of it; it’s beneath our dignity as uniquely anointed and highly gifted people to receive anything less.

As I said earlier, today **we are obsessed with being somebody. John was obsessed with seeing somebody.** John’s greatness had nothing to do with what he **achieved** for himself. It had everything to do with what he **believed** about Jesus.

What does it mean to “decrease”? It doesn’t mean you denigrate yourself or deny your gifts and abilities. It doesn’t mean you neglect personal hygiene or intentionally dress in some shabby manner. It doesn’t mean you walk around hanging your head and looking like you’ve sucked on a lemon all day. **It means you stand resolutely opposed to anything or anyone that diverts attention away from Jesus.** This isn’t self-neglect or self-loathing. This is a relentless, passionate, single-minded, all-consuming determination to make known the supremacy and splendor of Jesus!

The world today says: “I must increase. And if you get in my way, if you ‘dis’ me, you will go down. You will decrease.” The Christian declares: “I **must** decrease. Jesus **must** be exalted as supreme and sovereign and central in all things.”

### *Conclusion*

This, then, is the solution to the destructive power of pride in our hearts and the way to cultivate Christ-exalting, saint-serving humility. It doesn’t come in the form of a vitamin to be ingested along with your breakfast. And don’t assume it will simply happen as a routine feature of your Christian life. We must strive in the grace of God, by the power of his Spirit, to set in our minds and to joyfully celebrate in our hearts the sovereignty, supremacy, and centrality of Jesus Christ in all things. May God help us!