

Jesus is the Joy of Living

John – 3:22-36

Key Verse: 29

“The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”

How many of you watched the Superbowl last year? As many of you know, I am a huge Bears fan and like many Bear’s fans I watched with a grimace on my face as the Green Bay Packers took a 14-0 lead in the first quarter and never really looked back. And as much as I didn’t like it, you can’t deny that when the pressure was on, Aaron Rodgers, the Packer’s QB, executed their offense flawlessly throwing for over 300 yards and 3 touchdowns becoming the game’s MVP. And when the last whistle blew you could tell that he was overflowing with joy knowing that he had completed the mission he set out to do.

Like Aaron Rodgers, in our passage today, we find another guy who completes his mission, but I don’t know about you, but I’ve never really thought of John the Baptist as a happy guy. I’ve usually thought of him as an intense, bug eating, hostile guy that yelled at people and didn’t know how to smile. I’ve heard a saying that says, “it’s hard for a watch dog to smile while he’s barking.” And I guess that I’ve kind of thought of John like a watchdog barking at people. But after going through this passage, I get a different picture of John. He’s not a grouch, but a man who has the joy of completing his mission, like Aaron Rodgers. But there is a difference between John completing his mission and Aaron completing his. And that difference sends John’s disciples into distress and at the same time puts a big smile on John’s face? What is that difference? Let’s find out through today’s passage.

Our passage starts with verses 22-23. “After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.”²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized.” Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem for the Passover, where he cleansed the temple, performed miraculous signs and had a deep midnight conversation with Nicodemus. Their previous week had been pretty crazy so Jesus took his disciples out to the Judean countryside where he spent some time with them. These four simple words “spent some time with” hint at an important element of discipleship. Out in the Judean country side they could get away from the demands of the city and just relax with Jesus and hang with him. There are a lot of definitions about what a disciple is, but first and foremost, a disciple is one who spends time with the Lord. The first disciples had the privilege to spend time with Jesus in the flesh, for us however it’s different. We spend our time with Jesus through reading the Bible and prayer. This time of study and prayer should be our time of fellowship and intimacy with our Lord. A large part of how Jesus disciplined was simply spending time with his disciples. Likewise if we want to raise disciples, there is no short cut, you have to spend time with them. While they were in the Judean countryside, Jesus and the disciples baptized those who came to them and at the same time, John and his disciples were also baptizing at Aenon near Salim. I read that “Aenon” was the Jewish word for “springs” which is why there was plenty of water there. And that ‘s probably why John chose that spot in the first place.

Did you find it interesting that John felt that it’s necessary to suddenly interject a statement in parentheses in verse 24? I did. Verse 24, “(This was before John was put in prison.)” Why would John feel that it was necessary to include this statement? I think that it’s because out of the four gospels, only John’s includes this. All the other Gospels (M,M & L) start Jesus’ public ministry after the arrest of John the Baptist. (Mt 4, Mk 1) And John wants his readers to know of this brief period of simultaneous ministry between Jesus and John the Baptist, because it’s the setting in which this problem arises because of our Lord’s successful ministry. And this is the last time we read John the Baptist speaking in his own words. So this

passage becomes a fitting tribute to a great man and we can learn a very important truth from it. For John the Baptist's attitude here is a model of humility and what it means to be a true servant of God.

Take a look at verses 25-26. “An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.” John tells us of a dispute that erupted between the disciples of John and a certain Jew over ceremonial washing. The issue of ritual purification, which was significant to the first century Jews, was not really important to the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist that's why the John (the Apostle) doesn't give us a deeper explanation. However the dispute upset John the Baptist's disciples so much that they went to complain to him.

What I find funny here is when John's disciples return to him frustrated and upset, and it's not because of the certain Jew, but because of Jesus. How does Jesus get hated on when he wasn't even involved? Their real problem is that they're ticked off because Jesus and His disciples are becoming more successful and popular than they are. And they almost seem irritated at John the Baptist because he's not doing anything about it. They are almost blaming him because after all, it was John who pointed the crowds to Jesus, and he was the one who kick started his ministry. They were jealous of someone else's successful ministry. Have any of you been there before?

The words of John's disciples give them away. Look at how they refer to Jesus. They don't call him by his name, nor the Messiah, nor Lord or Lamb of God, even though that's how John introduced them to Jesus. Instead they called Jesus “that man.” I think they reacted that way because they were jealous of Jesus. If they're jealous of his success then they don't really understand who he is and they don't acknowledge Jesus as Messiah as John does. For His identity and success were related. And the fact that John associates himself with Jesus, should give Jesus credibility. What was worse, from their point of view, was that John testifies about Jesus. And in the end all they do is complain, “everyone is going to him!” Which is their real problem in the first place. They sound eerily similar to the Pharisees later in John's gospel when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and the Pharisees complain, “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” (John 12:17-19)

We are tempted to think that the problem existed with John's disciples only, but Jesus' disciples react the same as John's. For example, they don't like it when others attempt to do the same things as Jesus like healing or driving out demon, (Mk 9:38; Lk 9:49) and they dread the thought of failure and suffering. (Mt 16:21-22) In the Gospels, the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus go along with them until they learn the meaning of taking up one's cross and then they have difficulty. That's why John's disciples are mad at him because they feel he created this situation in the first place and they don't like the fact that Jesus is doing the same thing as them only with greater success. They put two and two together and see the end of their ministry and their future.

So why don't John's disciples, just leave him and follow Jesus if they are so upset? The truth is they were bad disciples. John's disciples were loyal to him but they didn't listen to him. (Joab comes to mind) If John's disciples really listened to him, they would have left him and followed Jesus. Sometimes even if leaders do their best to point to Jesus, some people just don't get it. The reason some people don't get it is because they are earthbound and don't look heavenward. Look at how John's disciples interact with him. When they called Jesus “that man” and John “Rabbi,” they've rejected Jesus as the Messiah and they are trying their best to prop John up to be what they want him to be, not what God wants him to be. And I think that they do this not because they have great intentions for John but because they are for themselves. They used John for their own purpose. Maybe they liked the popularity and were doing everything they could to hold on to it. That's why they were upset and John wasn't. Maybe John's top disciples left for Jesus and now these guys moved up into the top positions and thought now it's their time and they didn't

want to give them up. And they look upon Jesus as their competition, rather than as the culmination of their ministry and they should transition to him. Some people become unhappy about their ministry when they don't have their eyes, or focus upon Jesus but on something else instead. And when it doesn't go the way they want, they despair, get angry, or something else. This happens because their sense of worth comes from what they do and not from God. In Tim Keller's book "Counterfeit God's" he gives examples of many financial executive who, in the crash of 2008, lost a lot of money committed suicide because their sense of worth came from how much money they had. So when they lost it, they didn't value their life anymore. We need to focus upon Jesus and get our sense of worth and meaning from our relationship with our Savior and not what we do for him. Otherwise our joy will go up and down like the stock market.

Another thing we have to understand is that everyone has their own purpose – all of us were designed by God for a specific purpose. All of them had a purpose but it wasn't their identity. Adam to build the foundation of humanity, Noah to build the ark, Abraham to build a nation, Joseph to save his people, Moses to free his people, David build a kingdom, John the Baptist to be the forerunner. Etc. When we find our place in God's work, that's when we become joyful and successful. However, John's ministry was to introduce the Messiah and he's done that so his mission is over. John's disciples are acting as though John is the Messiah. They seem to think that their mission and ministry will continue on forever. A secret to joy is finding the mission and purpose God has planned for us personally.

Another problem is when people look at the servants of God and idolize them, like in Acts 14 when the people started to worship Paul and Barnabus as gods. Many times what happens in a ministry is that people come to that ministry because of the leader. The leader has been gifted by God with talents to lead. But there is a danger for the leader to become proud and then it becomes all about them. Then if something happens to that leader, they die, or fall, or whatever, then the ministry goes into a tail spin and it crashes and burns, or worse they lead people astray. The truth is that it is all about Jesus. And if the leader is gospel centered, the ministry can withstand the test of time and it can grow even after the leader is gone. Because let's face it, no one lives forever. We have to be careful when people study the Bible with others, and make sure to lead them to Jesus and not to ourselves.

John's attitude was completely different from his disciples and he viewed his ministry as the one he received from God. Take a look at 27-29. "To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven."²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete." John's God-given ministry was not to be the Messiah, but to introduce the Messiah, to be the forerunner. Jesus was the fulfillment, the grand finale. John illustrates what he's saying by using the analogy of marriage. Jesus is the "bridegroom" and John is the "friend of the bridegroom." The wedding is not about the friend, it's about the bride and groom, it's their day. Imagine if the friend tried to take over at a wedding? How embarrassing and awkward would that be. John tells his disciples that he must not exceed the calling he received from God or compare himself to others. John's purpose was to stand ready at the wedding, like the best man, ready, waiting to help the groom however he needed help. And on that wedding day, the grooms friend is so happy for the groom because he's getting married. John's joy is complete.

Verse 30 projects this principle and practice into the future. It says, "He must become greater; I must become less." John's makes it clear that the purpose of his ministry was to elevate Jesus, so that there was no rivalry between the two of them. Jesus must become the center of attention, while John must fade from the picture. The "must" of verse 30 is crucial. John is showing deep humility, it is true, but he is also saying that this is the way it "must" be, the way it will be because this is the plan and the purpose of the sovereign God. There is no sense fighting against it for they would find themselves fighting against God.

Another reason John's joy is complete is because he knows who Jesus is. Jesus is God and John got to serve him, how great is that. Take a look at verses 31-36. "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. ³³ The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. ³⁴ For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." John's joy comes from knowing Jesus, who is God. Jesus is God because he comes from heaven. And coming from heaven, he knows and speaks of heavenly things. Not only that Jesus has the full measure of the Spirit. And the Father God has given him full authority. And John's ultimate joy comes from knowing that he has eternal life. Notice that John's statement is in the present tense, "has." This is not just a future expectation but a present reality. That is why John could be so joyful even though his mission was winding down. When we believe that Jesus is God's son and accept him, we get the gift of life and that brings joy because when you realize where you came from you are thankful. Most people think they are ok because they didn't do anything that bad. But the truth is no one is good, because everyone has done wrong thus God's wrath is upon us. When you understand that, there is joy in knowing that Jesus saves us.

The difference between John the Baptist and Aaron Rodgers, who both complete their mission, is this: while doing a job well done does bring a sense of joy and fulfillment, however John's joy is amplified because he completes his mission for God. Not only that, he has a deep relationship with God. There is a stark contrast between John's joy and his disciples' jealousy. John's joy comes from knowing Jesus Christ—and from his relationship with Him. John understood that his ministry, his moment in the spotlight, and his declining popularity, were all a part of God's sovereign plan and purpose. In this, John found great joy. He saw himself swallowed up in the service of Him who is the greatest. Whether by life or by death, his ministry was to exalt Christ. On the other hand, John's disciples weren't joyful but frustrated. It was because they were out for themselves. Too often Christians only look for personal fulfillment and not about worshiping our Lord and Savior Jesus. What motivates your service? Is this the reason why your joy and mine is not on the same level as that of John the Baptist? Are we serving our Lord selfishly? Jesus calls us to "take up our cross." Serving God is in our own best interest, but when we begrudge the glorification of Christ because it seems to come at our sacrifice and our expense, then we have become like John's disciples. If this is the case, we should repent of our sin, asking God to restore to us the joy of our salvation.