

HOW TO BE A USEFUL CHRISTIAN

John 3:22-30

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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.

³⁰He must increase, but I must decrease." *John 3:29-30*

Of all the spiritual giants in the Bible prior to Jesus, none was greater than John the Baptist. We have this on the authority of Jesus himself. Jesus told his disciples, "Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11). Nowhere is John's greatness more brightly displayed than when he is upstaged by Jesus. "Upstaging" is a theatre term. When the lead actor enters the scene, the other actors turn their back to the audience, forcing them to look at the star. At the end of John 3, John the Baptist is upstaged by the arrival of Jesus, and the example he provides shows us all how to be useful servants of the Lord.

Every Christian should seek to be as useful as possible to Christ and his kingdom. We are each given particular gifts and talents. We are put in particular situations. And we have certain amount of time to live and serve in this world, after which we enter into the blessings of glory. So while worldly people are bent on advancing their own interests, it is to be the chief ambition of every Christian to be as useful as possible to the Lord. In pursuit of this, we could hardly have a finer model than John the Baptist. As his ministry gives way to the public ministry of Christ we can discern four key features of John the Baptist's character that made him so useful and great, and that will enable us to be useful to the Lord as well.

A KEY PRINCIPLE

After his stay in Jerusalem, Jesus gathered his new disciples and “went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing” (Jn. 3:22). This scene witnesses the hand-off between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, and also between the eras of the Old Testament the New Testament. John would soon be arrested by King Herod and put to death, but at this point he was still baptizing in the Jordan River. When Jesus arrived, many of the people left John and went to where Jesus was baptizing, and this bothered some of those who were loyal to John. Then, as now, there was a great deal of debate regarding baptismal rites, and in the course of this the disciples complained about Jesus: “Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. 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’” (Jn. 3:25-26).

Here we see one of the chief threats to our usefulness to the Lord: a desire for personal prominence that results in envy and a party spirit. Many able ministers and strong churches have lost their gospel influence because they craved success and fame. Indeed, there is too often a sad spirit of competition among Christians. Evidence of this is found in the early church (see 1 Cor. 1:10-17) and if anything this problem is worse today. Kent Hughes notes, “Our competitive society is structured to compel us to measure our achievements against those of others.” He adds, “Very few things give the enemies of Christianity an occasion for blasphemy like a jealous party spirit among Christians.”¹

Often, as was the case here, it is a leader’s entourage of close supporters who are most jealous for his prestige and most prone to criticize others who are enjoying the Lord’s blessing. Such followers pose a temptation to Christian leaders, but John avoided this by holding fast to *a key principle*. He explains, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27). His point was that we must to content ourselves with the place and

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *John*, 91.

provision the sovereign God has given us, seeking only to be faithful to him. Instead of playing up our own deeds and seeking to outstrip the success of others, we are to receive our work from God and accomplish it faithfully.

This is the antidote to jealousy and strife among Christians. If we have great gifts, they were given us by God for his service. If we have modest gifts, these, too, were given by God for his service. Knowing this should keep us from boasting. Paul asks, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). So if we have gifts, they came from God. If we are successful, it is because of God’s grace. For this reason we should not glorify successful Christians but instead should give glory to God. But, conversely, if God has granted us more modest success, we should not be envious of those who have more. All that we have comes from God and is for his glory.

This helps us to distinguish between godly and ungodly ambition. Christians are to be ambitious, but for the right things. We are to have energy and zeal for the kingdom of God. We should aspire to provide for those under our care, but also to do good in the world, to protect and nurture the weak, and especially to bring people to faith in Christ and disciple them to Christian maturity. Whatever gifts you have, be ambitious about what God can make of them and do through them. But this is a far cry from the selfish ambition more natural to us. We tend to be most concerned with our reputation and well-being. This is where our envy and strife come from: we want to be glorified and admired – otherwise, why would we worry that others are more prominent than we are? We want to acquire high position and riches and worldly luxuries – if not, then we are so anxious when these things are threatened? John’s principle is key both for our usefulness to God and our spiritual well-being. If we can replace self-centered ambition with God-centered ambition then we will be free of envy and strife.

The gifted preacher, F. B. Meyer, struggled with envy. God called him to serve in London at the same time as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, arguably the greatest preacher who ever lived. So despite his ability and hard work, Meyer would stand outside his church and watch the carriages flow by to Spurgeon’s Metropolitan Tabernacle.

Later in his life, G. Campbell Morgan eclipsed Meyer's success. When they spoke together at conferences, vast crowds listened to Morgan, then left when Meyer was to preach. Convicted over his bitter spirit, Meyer committed himself to pray for Morgan, reasoning that the Holy Spirit would not allow him to envy a man for whom he prayed. He was right! God enabled him to rejoice in Morgan's preaching. People heard him saying, "Have you heard Campbell Morgan preach? Did you hear that message this morning? My, God is upon that man!"² In response to Meyer's prayers, Morgan's church so overflowed that people came and filled Meyer's church too.

It is the glory of John the Baptist that he apparently had no such struggles when it came to Jesus. He knew that he was not the Christ. "You yourselves bear me witness," he said, "that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him'" (Jn. 3:28). John understood his place and role; all along he had been preparing and then directing people to follow Jesus, the true Lamb of God and Savior. So he rejoiced when they did. It did not bother him in the least that his star was declining with the rising light of Christ. God is sovereign, he knew. God apportions works to each of us and the gifts to accomplish them. What matters is that we faithfully fulfill our particular calling to the glory of God, seeking his approval instead of man's praise.

A JOYFUL ATTITUDE IN SERVICE

The second great thing we note in John the Baptist is a by-product of the first and is itself a key to our usefulness as Christians.

John explained that far from being frustrated by his waning prominence, he maintained a *joyful attitude* in his service to the Lord. John explained this by saying, "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" (Jn. 3:29).

The "friend of the bridegroom" was like our "best man", except his responsibilities were greater. "He acted as the liason between the bride and the bridegroom; he arranged the wedding; he took out the

² Hughes, 95.

invitations; he presided at the wedding feast. He brought the bride and the bridegroom together... It was his duty to guard the bridal chamber and let no false lover in... when he heard the bridegroom's voice he let him in and went away rejoicing, for his task was completed and the lovers were together."³ The best man does not want to be the center of attention: this belongs to the groom and his bride. Moreover, he rejoices in the privilege of performing his service, in the honor he shows to his friend, and in the sheer delight of bringing the bride and groom together. James Boice asks:

Do you know that joy? Some persons think that there is great joy in material possessions, but things in themselves do not satisfy. Others think that there is joy in worldly fame, achievement, or pleasure, but these goals are relatively unrewarding. They satisfy at best for a short time. Real joy comes in being able to say to Jesus Christ, 'Here I am, Lord, use me,' and then finding that out of His grace He is able to use you to bring others into a saving relationship to Himself.⁴

John the Baptist may be the greatest New Testament example of this joyful attitude in service. But the greatest Old Testament example is Jonathan, the covenant friend of David. There are few more noble figures in all of Scripture than Jonathan. Consider that as King Saul's son, Jonathan could expect to ascend to the throne of Israel. When David came to the fore by slaying the giant Goliath, we might have expected Jonathan to be jealous. Most people would look with hostility on a rising star who threatened their own ambitions. But not Jonathan. It is obvious that Jonathan shared John the Baptist's conviction that our place in life is given by the Lord. Jonathan was animated by an ambition for God's glory and the blessing of God's people, not for selfish ambition. That is why he rejoiced when David was anointed as God's choice to be king. The Bible says, "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1). Jonathan gave his public support to David: "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt" (1 Sam. 18:4). What could possess a royal prince to give his place of honor to a nobody who had risen to become a rival? The

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:143-144.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice: *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), I:257.

answer is that he rejoiced in God's blessing and was glad to play even a supporting role alongside David, if that was God's will for him.

John the Baptist looked to Jesus and saw much more than even King David. John saw the true King, the Savior Lamb "who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29). Far from resenting Jesus' coming, John rejoiced at the salvation light shining into the world. He wanted only to point to that light, to hail Jesus as Savior, and to lead the bride into the arms of his friend, the bridegroom. John Calvin notes, "He has obtained the height of his wishes and... has nothing further to desire, for he sees Christ reigning and people listening to him as He deserves."⁵

What is the greatest *reward* of service to Jesus? The greatest reward of serving Jesus is simply the *joy* of serving Jesus. This will make us useful Christians – if we rejoice not merely when our ministry is blessed with success, not merely when others praise and approve us, but whenever we have the privilege of serving Jesus, simply because of our love for him and how great he is. John the Baptist had earlier said, "He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Lk. 3:16). He was saying that not only was the most menial service to Jesus not beneath him, but it was a privilege greater than he deserved. He was overwhelmed with the joy and privilege of doing anything for so great a Lord as Jesus Christ. So his joy was especially great when God used him to direct others to Jesus, and our joy in leading people to saving faith should be equally great. Our goal in evangelism is not glory for ourselves. We lead sinners to Jesus for the same reason the friend of the groom brought to him the bride, for our love of them both and the simple joy of serving the Lord.

A HUMBLE RESOLUTION: "I MUST DECREASE"

Thirdly, John was especially made a useful believer by *his humble resolution*, which Leon Morris describes as "some of the greatest words ever to fall from the lips of mortal man."⁶ Not only did John refuse to compete with Jesus or show envy towards Jesus, but

⁵ John Calvin, *John*, 81.

⁶ Morris, 118.

John went further and declared “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn. 3:30). He saw that his ministry must give way to that of Christ. In the same way, Christians who are useful and make a difference in this world are resolved to make little of themselves so that Christ will be exalted, believed, and followed.

This kind of humility is the most unnatural and therefore most difficult of resolution. By nature we always want to increase. Indeed, this self-exalting attitude is at the heart of all sin. The Serpent sealed the original temptation to sin by promising, “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). In reality, sin makes us like the Serpent – that is, Satan – and his constant desire is to increase in rebellion to God.

John models the highest godliness when he says, “I must decrease.” In fact, when John says he *must* decrease, he means not merely that it is his will but also that it is God’s will that he should decrease. This is the third “must” of John chapter 3. We “*must* be born again,” Jesus said (Jn. 3:7), “the Son of Man *must* be lifted up” on the cross, and we “*must* decrease” so that he can increase. This aptly structures the whole Christian life: the new birth inspires faith in the crucified Christ, and devotion to Christ brings a humble desire for his glory. To be humble is to be Christ-like; indeed, it is only in Christ that we can ever truly be humble. A. W. Pink rightly says: “Humility is not the product of direct cultivation, rather it is a *by-product*. The more I try to be humble, the less shall I attain unto humility. But if I am truly occupied with that One who was ‘meek and lowly in heart,’ if I am constantly beholding His glory in the mirror of God’s Word, then shall I be ‘changed into the *same image from* glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord’ (2 Cor. 3:18).”⁷

Humility is not a pathetic guise we wear because we must. Humility is a glorious grace that is a key to true greatness. The apostle Peter wrote, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Pet. 5:5). A. W. Tozer writes,

True humility is a healthy thing. The humble man accepts the truth about himself. He believes that in his fallen nature dwells no good thing. He acknowledges that apart from God he is nothing, has nothing, knows

⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 149.

nothing and can do nothing. But this knowledge does not discourage him, for he knows also that in Christ he is somebody. He knows that he is dearer to God than the apple of His eye and that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him; that is, he can do all that lies within the will of God for him to do... When this belief becomes so much a part of a man that it operates as a kind of unconscious reflex... the emphasis of his life shifts from self to Christ, where it should have been in the first place, and he is thus set free to serve his generation by the will of God without the thousand hindrances he knew before.⁸

This is why God's greatest servants have all been humble people. Moses was the great deliverer of the Old Testament, and the Bible calls him "very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). It was as a humble servant that David was called "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest mortal man yet born, declared, "He must increase; I must decrease." And above them all towers the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11:28-29).

A CONSUMING PASSION

How can we be useful Christians? How can we be the kind of believers who make a difference for Christ in our time? John the Baptist models for us a key principle of contentment in God's sovereign provision, a joyful attitude in serving the Lord, and a humble resolution to decrease so that Christ will increase. But there is one more characteristic that motivated John in all that he did, namely, *a consuming passion* for Christ so that we love him and desire his glory in all things.

When the Holy Spirit inspired John the Baptist to speak of the bride coming to the bridegroom, surely he wanted to remind us of the love between Jesus and his church. This imagery "emphasizes the place of love and commitment. A tender love binds bride and groom in any rightful marriage, and this is of the essence of the relationship of the church to Christ... The church is the object of the love of Christ, a love so great that Christ died for the church. It is important that

⁸ A. W. Tozer, *God Tells the Man who Cares*, p. 138-140.

church members respond to this love with love. There is nothing more important in the living of the Christian life than love.”⁹

If we want to be useful to our Lord, then we will have the same passion for him that a bride has for her groom. With that in mind, I want to conclude with three applications by which we should express our love for Jesus and make ourselves useful as his disciples.

First, a bride prepares herself for her groom. She spends her wedding day putting everything in order, making herself as beautiful as possible. We are to do the same thing, beautifying our character with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian who wants to be useful to Christ must devote himself or herself to constant spiritual growth, plowing the field of his heart with God’s Word and seeking the Holy Spirit’s power by drawing near to the Lord in prayer. A bride does not just slap on some make-up and run a brush through her hair before walking down the aisle, but does everything possible to make herself beautiful. Are you doing this for Jesus? Are you seeking spiritual beauty to present to Christ? If you love him and want to serve him, you will.

Second, a godly bride always wants her husband to shine. In this same way, useful Christians devote themselves as witnesses to Jesus and his gospel. They have forsaken desires for personal glory and daily decrease so that he may increase.

I mentioned the popular preaching of Charles Spurgeon in 19th century England. But Spurgeon was a great servant of Christ not by being popular – he was often despised as much as admired – but by being faithful as a witness to the gospel of Christ. The story is told of a group of American Christians who were visiting London for just one week. Their friends wanted them to hear the city’s two famous preachers and bring back a report. On Sunday morning they went to hear Joseph Parker, a man famed for his eloquent oratory. As they departed from the service, one of them exclaimed, “I do declare, it must be said, for there is no doubt, that Joseph Parker is the greatest preacher that ever there was!” The group longed to come back to hear Parker in the evening, but they remembered that friends would ask them about Spurgeon as well. So that night, they attended the

⁹ Morris, *Reflections*, 116-117.

Metropolitan Tabernacle, where Spurgeon was preaching. And as they departed, they spoke in marveling terms, “I do declare, it must be said, for there is no doubt, that Jesus Christ is the greatest Savior that ever there was!” Let that be what the world sees in us – whether we are preachers or laymen – not the glories of our Christian lives but the glory of the Christ who lives through us.

Lastly, when a bride takes a husband she places herself under his full authority. In like manner, let us be ever ready to answer Jesus’ call upon our lives. When there is a need we can meet, let us meet it in obedience to his call. When there is a sacrifice that can make a difference, let us make that sacrifice. When there is darkness around us, let us shine his light. He said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn. 20:21). Wherever Jesus calls us, and however Jesus calls us, let us be ready and willing to serve in his name, giving pleasure to his heart and being the useful Christians this world so greatly needs us to be.