

John 3:22-36
May 18, 2025

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Are there any places we see examples of comparison or competition in the church today? If yes, what are you seeing that looks like comparisons or competition? [Let people engage]

Transition: Churches can “compete” with each other by attracting and retaining members. Churches may focus on what differentiates them from other churches instead of their similarities and what ought to unite them. Some churches want to steal people from other churches. Why? Churches are like businesses – they need good paying customers to survive financially. I read where two local churches were conducting VBS the same week, yet one church was “bribing” kids to attend theirs with the potential of winning a TV. Or we want our youth event or marriage retreat to be bigger and better than what the church down the street did last year.

In today’s text, John the Baptist has achieved a great deal of popularity as a result of his preaching and baptizing. But he is no longer the only one baptizing. While in the Judean countryside, Jesus’s disciples are also baptizing. An argument ensues between John’s disciples and a certain Jew, so they come to John. And their biggest beef is that “everyone is going to Jesus and His disciples!” They are experiencing jealousy, rivalry and bickering. It’s like they are competing with one another. Let’s see how John the Baptist reframes this. Let’s begin.

BOOK:

John the Baptist’s Testimony About Jesus

²² 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.

²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.)

²⁵ An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew (and certain Jews) 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.”

²⁷ 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 (or Messiah) 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.

³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

³¹ “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 (he) 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."

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What stood out to you? What questions do you have? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about man? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? [Let people engage]

Q: What is your takeaway? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

What a delight it is to receive His Word, meditate on it, and make it part of our very lives. But we must never forget the cost of these blessings. For us to be born into God's family, Jesus Christ had to die. For us to enter into the loving relationship of salvation, He had to endure the hatred and condemnation of men. He had to be lifted up on the cross so that we might experience forgiveness and eternal life.

May we never take this for granted! "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 297-299). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.*

Jesus the Bridegroom (John 3:22–30)

Until John the Baptist was arrested by Herod and put into prison, his ministry overlapped that of the Lord Jesus. John did not want anyone to follow him; his ministry was to point to the Lamb of God and urge people to trust Him. But when two popular preachers are involved in similar work, it is easy for both friends and enemies to get caught up in competition and comparison.

It appears that some of John's disciples started the argument. It began on doctrinal grounds—the matter of purifying—but soon moved to personal grounds. In John 3:25, some manuscripts read “a Jew” instead of “the Jews.” Could this unnamed Jew have possibly been Nicodemus? We cannot say, but it is a possibility.

The matter of purifying was important to the Jews (Mark 7:1–23). Under the Old Testament Law, it was necessary for them to keep themselves ceremonially clean if they were to serve God and please Him. Unfortunately, the Pharisees added so many extra traditions to the Law that the observing of it became a burden.

Without realizing it, John's disciples were putting him into a situation of competing against the Lord Jesus! “All men come to Him!” (John 3:26) sounds like a wail of despair. It is interesting to note that four of the greatest men in the Bible faced this problem of comparison and competition: Moses (Num. 11:26–30), John the Baptist (John 3:26–30), Jesus (Luke 9:46–50), and Paul (Phil. 1:15–18). A leader often suffers more from his zealous disciples than from his critics!

How did John the Baptist handle this controversy? To begin with, he stated a conviction: all ministry and blessing come from God, so there can be no competition (John 3:27). Paul would have agreed with this (1 Cor. 3:1–9; 4:1–7). Our gifts and opportunities come from God, and He alone must get the glory.

Then John used a beautiful illustration. He compared Jesus to the bridegroom and himself only to the best man (John 3:29). Once the bridegroom and bride had been brought together, the work of the best man was completed. What a foolish thing it would be for the best man to try to “upstage” the bridegroom and take his place. John's joy was to hear the voice of the Bridegroom and know that He had claimed His bride.

Even before his birth, John the Baptist rejoiced in the Lord (Luke 1:44). John was content to be the voice announcing Jesus to be the Word (John 1:23). Jesus was the Light, and John the Baptist was the witness pointing to the Light (John 1:6–8).

Often press releases and book reviews cross my desk, along with conference folders; and at times I am perturbed by what I read. Very few speakers and writers are ordinary people. They are “world travelers” or “noted lecturers” who have addressed “huge audiences.” They are always in “great demand,” and their ministries are described in such ways that they make the Apostle Paul a midget by comparison.

A Presbyterian pastor in Melbourne, Australia introduced J. Hudson Taylor by using many superlatives, especially the word *great*. Taylor stepped to the pulpit and quietly said, “Dear

friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.” If John the Baptist in heaven heard that statement, he must have shouted “Hallelujah!”

The image of the Bridegroom would have been significant to the Jewish people, for Jehovah had a “marriage covenant” with the nation (Isa. 54:5; 62:4ff; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Ezek. 16:8; Hosea 2:19ff). Alas, Israel had been unfaithful to her vows, and God had to put her away temporarily. Today, **God is calling out a people for His name, the church, the bride of Christ** (2 Cor. 11:1–3; Eph. 5:22–33). One day the Bridegroom will come to claim His bride and take her to her home in heaven (Rev. 19:6–9; 21:9ff).

The word *must* is used in three significant ways in this chapter. There is the “must” of the sinner (John 3:7), the “must” of the Savior (John 3:14), and the “must” of the servant (John 3:30).

Jesus the Witness (John 3:31–36)

Bible scholars do not agree as to who is speaking in John 3:31–36, John the apostle or John the Baptist. For that matter, some students believe that John 3:16–21 came from the Apostle John and not the Lord Jesus. There were no quotation marks in early manuscripts, but since all Scripture is inspired, it really makes little difference who said the words.

The emphasis in this paragraph is on witness (“testimony”), one of the key subjects in John’s Gospel. The Greek word translated “witness” or “testimony” is used forty-seven times. John bore witness to Jesus (John 1:7; 5:33), but Jesus was also a witness to the truth. Why should we heed His witness? For several reasons.

He came from heaven (v. 31). He was not simply called from heaven, or empowered by heaven; He *came* from heaven. It was this claim that the Jews disputed, because they knew it was His claim that He was God (John 6:38–42). John the Baptist certainly was not “from above,” nor did he claim to be. No earthly messenger of God came “from above.” Only Jesus Christ can make that claim and prove it to be true.

Since Jesus came from heaven, He represents the Father; and to reject His witness is to reject the Father (John 5:23). We know that His witness is true because He is the true God. We can trust it and rely on it.

It comes from Him firsthand (vv. 32–33). He shares what He has seen and heard from the Father (John 8:38). Those who receive His witness *and act on it* know by personal experience that His witness is true (John 7:17). Our Lord’s teachings are not to be studied intellectually, separated from everyday life. It is when we obey His Word and put it into practice that we see its truth and experience its power.

The Father has authorized His Son (vv. 34–35). God sent Him (another key theme in John’s Gospel); God gave Him the Word; God gave Him the Spirit; and God gave Him all things (John 13:3). What a commissioning! To reject the Son’s witness is to rebel against the highest authority in the universe.

We usually think of God’s love for a lost world (John 3:16), but John reminds us of the Father’s love for His Son. Jesus is the Father’s “beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

Because the Father loves the Son, He has given Him all things, and He shows Him all things (John 5:20). It is a love that can hold nothing back.

Therefore, when we receive His witness, we share in His love and His wealth. To reject Christ's witness is to sin against love and light. No wonder our Lord wept over the city of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37–39). They had rejected His witness—both His messages and His miracles—and their rejection led to judgment.

We might escape the wrath of God (v. 36). This is the only place in any of John's epistles or his Gospel that he uses the word *wrath*. (He uses it six times in the Book of Revelation.) **This verse parallels John 3:18 and makes it clear that there can be no neutrality when it comes to the witness of Jesus Christ: we either trust Him or we reject Him.**

“Everlasting life” does not simply mean eternity in heaven. The believer possesses that life right now! It is the life of God in the believer. The opposite of eternal life is eternal death, the wrath of God. A person does not have to die and go to hell to be under the wrath of God. “He that believeth not is condemned already” (John 3:18). The verdict has already been given, but the sentence has not yet been executed. Why? Because God is patient and long-suffering, and He continues to call sinners to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

As you review John 3, you can see that the Apostle John is emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is a *living relationship* that begins with the new birth, the birth from above. When we receive Jesus Christ into our lives, we share His very life and become children in the family of God. It is also a *loving relationship*, for He is the Bridegroom and we are a part of the bride. Like John the Baptist, we desire that Jesus Christ increase as we decrease. He must receive all the honor and glory.

It is a *learning relationship*, for He is the faithful Witness who shares God's truth with us. What a delight it is to receive His Word, meditate on it, and make it part of our very lives. But we must never forget the cost of these blessings. For us to be born into God's family, Jesus Christ had to die. For us to enter into the loving relationship of salvation, He had to endure the hatred and condemnation of men. He had to be lifted up on the cross so that we might experience forgiveness and eternal life.

May we never take this for granted! “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Blum, E. A. (1985). John. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, pp. 282-284) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

6. The final testimony of John the baptist (3:22–30).

3:22–24. For a short time, the ministry of **John** the Baptist overlapped Jesus' ministry. Thus, **the Judean countryside** must have been alive with the teaching of both these great preachers of

repentance and God's kingdom. Both John and **Jesus** had **disciples**, large crowds followed both of them, and both **baptized**. The statement that Jesus "baptized" (vv. 22, 26) probably means He was overseeing the baptizing done by His disciples (4:2). The site of **Aenon near Salim** is unknown today, but a likely location is about midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea (and about three miles east of Shechem). Both groups were baptizing and thus two "reform" movements were popular. **This was before John was put in prison** (3:24). This statement reveals how the Fourth Gospel supplements the Synoptics. It implies that readers knew about John's imprisonment from reading the other Gospels (Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 3:19–20) or from common church tradition.

3:25. The zealous **disciples** of John the Baptist found themselves at a disadvantage in **an argument**. **A certain Jew** asked why he should join **John's** group. He (and others; cf. "They" in v. 26) argued about **ceremonial washing**. Since there were Essene lustrations and Pharisaic washings, why should Jews follow another washing, John's baptism? Besides, the group following Jesus was larger (v. 26).

3:26. John's disciples may have been angry and jealous. (They were interested in John's movement and were not committed to Jesus.) They complained that Jesus, of whom **John** had **testified**, had now captured the nation's attention. They longed for the former days when **everyone** went to hear John (Mark 1:5).

3:27. John's greatness is revealed in his reply. He said, **A man can receive only what is given him from heaven**. God is sovereign in bestowing His blessings on one's ministry. If Jesus' movement was expanding, then it must have been in the will of God. This principle of God's sovereignty is stressed in John (cf. 6:65; 19:11) as well as elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:7).

3:28. John also reminded his disciples that they were forgetting part of his teaching. For he had clearly taught that he was **not the** promised Messiah **but** was only **sent ahead** by God to do a work of preparation for the Messiah (1:8, 15, 20, 23).

3:29–30. In Jesus' growing influence, John found his own **joy** fulfilled. He illustrated this for his disciples by referring to a custom at Near Eastern weddings. **The friend of the bridegroom** was only an assistant, not the main participant in the marriage. The assistant acted on behalf of **the bridegroom** and made the preliminary arrangements for the ceremony. His **joy** came when he heard the bridegroom coming for his bride. John the Baptist's work was to prepare for the arrival of Christ, the "Groom." John baptized only with water, not with the Spirit. Therefore, Jesus **must become greater**, and John **must become less**. This was not merely advisable or fortuitous; it was the divine order. John willingly and with **joy** accepted Jesus' growing popularity as God's plan.

7. The testimony of John the evangelist (3:31–36)

The quotation marks in the text of the NIV are a modern innovation and the judgment of translators. The original Greek manuscripts did not have any quotation marks. As the NIV margin indicates, the closing quotation marks could be placed after verse 30 rather than at the

end of verse 36. It seems better to view this section (vv. 31–36) as the testimony of John the Evangelist because the theological exposition about the Father and the Son is more a feature of Christian theology than a part of John the Baptist's testimony.

3:31. Here John the Evangelist developed the theme about the supremacy of Jesus, which John the Baptist spoke of to his followers (vv. 28–30). Since Jesus has come from heaven, His words surpass those of any religious teacher. Each human teacher is limited by his earthly boundaries (he **belongs to the earth and is from the earth**). But **the Logos from heaven is above all**; He is preeminent (Col. 1:18).

3:32. What Jesus spoke came from His previous vision of and communion with the Father in heaven (cf. 1:1, 14). Yet in spite of this clear reliable witness, mankind as a whole has rejected His message (cf. 1:11).

3:33. The message of Jesus has not been universally rejected as verse 32 by itself might indicate. One who receives it gives his attestation or certification to the fact **that God is truthful** (cf. v. 21). To reject this testimony is to call God a liar (1 John 5:10).

3:34. Jesus gives the perfect truth of God as He **speaks the words of God**, because He has the full endowment of the Holy Spirit, **the Spirit without limit**. The Old Testament prophets had the Spirit only for limited times and for limited purposes.

The Apostle John referred to Jesus as **the One whom God has sent**. Thirty-nine times the Gospel of John refers to Jesus being sent from God (vv. 17, 34; 4:34; 5:23–24, 30, 36–38; 6:29, 38–39, 44, 57; 7:16, 28–29; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44–45, 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). This affirms Jesus' deity and heavenly origin, as well as God's sovereignty and love in initiating the Son's Incarnation (cf. Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:9–10, 14).

3:35. The relationship between **the Son** and **the Father** is one of loving intimacy and complete confidence. The Son is endowed with all authority to accomplish the Father's purposes (5:22; Matt. 28:18).

3:36. Man has only two options: trust **in the Son**, or reject **the Son** (cf. vv. 16, 18). Unbelief is tragic ignorance, but it is also willful disobedience to clear light. **God's wrath** is mentioned only here in the Fourth Gospel (but cf. Rev. 6:16–17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). "Wrath," God's necessary righteous reaction against evil, **remains** (*menei*) on the unbeliever. This wrath is future, but it also exists now. Endless sin and disobedience will result in endless punishment (Matt. 25:46).

White, J. E. (1998). *John*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (pp. 469-470). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Jesus the Discipler (3:22–36)

When students of the life of Christ list the priorities of His ministry, many items come to mind; the miracles, the crucifixion, and of course, the resurrection. **But one of the most significant**

items on Jesus' agenda is found in this: "Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them." Jesus took twelve men and poured His life into theirs, discipling them in thought and deed in order that they might become the foundation of the church following His death, burial, and resurrection.

During this time an argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleansing. The appropriate means of achieving ceremonial purification was of great interest to many in the Jewish community. In coming to John over the matter, the question of Jesus' ministry in relation to John's ministry was surfaced. The loyalty of these disciples to their master, John, is evident as they allowed envy to enter their thinking regarding Jesus. John's reply affirmed his previous testimony about Jesus, as well as providing an important insight into John's character.

Knowing a teachable moment had presented itself, John informed his students that one "can receive only what is given him from heaven." The point of this affirmation is clear. **Knowing God has given everything, one who loves God will not envy another person's gifts, abilities, or accomplishments.** John understood his role in relation to Jesus to be that of the "best man" to the groom at a wedding. John instructed those that had supported and followed his ministry that Jesus must become greater, while he "must become less."

John knew that he was "from the earth," while Jesus, as God's Son, was "from heaven." John taught his disciples that their relation to Jesus determines life itself, for rejection of Jesus brings about God's wrath. Therefore, the one who accepts Jesus and the truth of His message avoids God's wrath, participates in the life of the Spirit, and has life eternal. That life is not as a gift in the future but life eternal as a present reality that begins at the moment Jesus is accepted in faith and engaged in relationship.

Allen, J. P. (1972). John. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (pp. 668-670). Broadman and Holman Publishers.

A New Kind of Birth (John 3:1–36)

The passage—The last word in the preceding chapter leads to the first sentence of this famous section of John- "man." Jesus knew the nature of men. They were easily impressed by miraculous works, but likely to miss the deeper issues of faith. So, he did not lightly trust himself and the secrets of his kingdom to them, "for he knew what was in man" (2:25). But, "There was a man" (v. 1)—and with this man Jesus did open the mysteries of the new birth. John now uses the interview with Nicodemus to show how a new kind of kingdom demands a new kind of birth.

Special points—Since Nicodemus was a Pharisee the story assumes more importance. He sat on the highest court of the Jews, but he recognized God at work when he observed Jesus' signs. He was spiritually sensitive even though his training was largely legalistic. Word had come to the Sanhedrin concerning certain miracles Jesus performed. Most called it trickery. Nicodemus felt these were impossible for any man "except God be with him" (v. 2). So, the signs accomplish their purpose. Nicodemus was moved to seek out the new teacher.

That he came “by night” has caused some to suggest cowardice. It is more likely that it was wise caution, since he was only in the seeking stage. He was not ready to openly accept the teachings of Jesus. That he did so gradually, and without fear, is indicated by further references in 7:50 and 19:39.

Jesus answered Nicodemus’ unspoken question. He knew what the young lawyer wanted to know. In essence Jesus responded something like this. “Now listen to me (the “verily, verily” in verse 2 is John’s usual expression of force). You sense that I am from God, and you are right. And I have not come to teach or renew the old Mosaic system. Instead, I will make possible a radical new relationship with the Father that does not depend on race or natural birth. It will be such a realm as not to be recognized from outside. You will have to enter it by a personal experience so drastic that it can only be called being born again. Only then can you see it.” No wonder Nicodemus was puzzled. His deepest conviction was that men were in God’s kingdom when they were from Abraham. The new idea startled him. He could only murmur, “How can these things be?” (v. 9).

Jesus tried to aid his faith by illustration (v. 6). Flesh and spirit are in obvious contrast. And the spirit is the higher order. Nicodemus knew that there were spiritual factors which could not be experienced by the fleshly body. So, then, there were also other realms that required spiritual perception, Jesus told him. So he would have to come alive to heavenly realities through faith (v. 12). It was what God had always wanted, as he could understand if he remembered the salvation of Israel in the wilderness (v. 14).

Most of all, the new relationship with God would be through a new sacrifice (v. 16–18). One wonders if Nicodemus did not see this clearly in the years following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Truth for today—It is plain that God desires a relationship, not mere obedience to commandments. Like a father, he wants a loving trust, not fear. When any person exercises that faith in Christ, the resulting life can only be described as having come from “being born all over again.”

Perhaps the concluding part of this chapter should suggest a related truth. After birth, comes growth and maturity. That is as much a part of God’s plan as is the first step of spiritual rebirth. John the Baptist reflected that maturity when he was able to conquer the jealousy others suggested to him in Jesus’ popularity (v. 26). It takes a man, not an infant, to say, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (v. 30).

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). John 3:22-36. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.