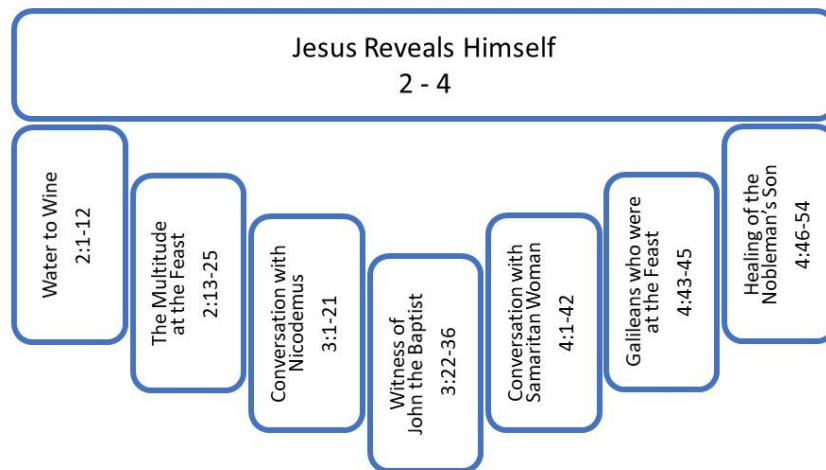


Lesson 6: John 3:22-36 Witness of John the Baptist



Symmetrical structure in historical narrative

We have come back to John the Baptist to hear a second testimony from him about Jesus. A testimony that rises up out of the challenges of real life ministry. There is a discussion going on among John's disciples. They are not happy. They are frustrated. They come to John and John speaks truth into their confusion.

We have just left the conversation with Nicodemus in the first half of chapter 3. There is a big difference between Nicodemus and John. Nicodemus is still in the dark as far as we know. John the Baptist on the other hand is the one person who seems to truly get Jesus, so far. He is our quintessential disciple. He is the one who witnesses. According to the prologue, in 1:6, "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John, he came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light." And in 1:15, "John bore witness of him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me.'"

Then also in the Introduction in the rest of chapter 1, we start with John affirming that he himself is not the light, not the Christ, not Elijah, not the Prophet, not the light and then fulfilling his role to bear witness to Christ, declaring Jesus to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and to be the one who is greater, the one who has existed before.

Now, we return again to John the Baptist, and a second testimony to Jesus. Before we get into the text for this lesson. I want to take some time to consider again the structure of the Gospel of John. This text is at the center of the first section of the first part of the Gospel. If the structure truly is symmetrical then this testimony of John the Baptist is given prominence by John the Apostle. Let's remind ourselves of the structure and also take a moment to consider the implication of a symmetrical form in a historic narrative.

This is the big picture structure we have recognized in John. The Gospel starts with a prologue in the first half of chapter 1. Then we have an introduction in the second half of chapter 1 which will be followed up at the end of the Gospel with a conclusion in chapter 21. Both introduction and conclusion present a small group of disciples interacting with Jesus, inviting us to consider this journey that they have been on with Jesus, from start to finish, and to think about what changes they have experienced in their own lives as a result of this journey.

The main text of the narrative, then, is chapters 2-20, which is divided into two parts, the public ministry of Jesus in 2-12, which we are calling "The Word Among Us" and the passion week in 13-20, which we are calling "The Hour of His Glory." Both of these parts divide into two major sections with some transition chapters. We are in the first section of part 1, chapters 2-4, which I have titled "Jesus Reveals Himself." All of these titles are made up because John did not give us any titles, nor did he

give us any chapters. What he did instead, was use several miracles of Jesus as structure markers and then gather together events and dialogues in a symmetrical pattern. Recognizing these patterns leads us to divide the book into several sections. And recognizing the different sections helps us to recognize and follow the major themes of John as he develops them through the Gospel.

So, we have four major sections in the Gospel, two in part 1 and the two in part 2. I see likely chiasm in all four of these sections. The chiastic structure in this first section of chapters 2-4 seems to me the clearest. The outer frame, that is the beginning and ending of the section, is marked off by the stories of the first two signs, water to wine at the beginning and the healing of the nobleman's son at the end. The second frame of the chiasm consists of two stories on either end referring to people who believed in Jesus at the Passover in Jerusalem. The third frame consists of two dialogues, one with Nicodemus and another one with the Samaritan woman. And finally, the seventh part of the structure takes central place without a parallel element. That seventh story is our focus for this lesson, it is the second testimony of John the Baptist.

Does recognizing a formal structure in the narrative have any implications on the historicity of the story? A false assumption sometimes made in recognizing the parallelism in John is to conclude that the narrative is therefore not historical. It is supposed that, being driven by the impulse to create artistic symmetry, John made up or rearranged material to achieve the parallelism he desired. Historical accuracy suffered in the face of artistic expression. Symmetrical structure and historical accuracy cannot go together, it is suggested.

David Gooding addresses this concern about symmetry and historicity in his commentaries on the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. A Member of the Royal Irish Academy, Gooding is also a collaborator on several books with the Oxford Mathematician and Christian Apologist John Lennox.

I believe Gooding's defense of Luke and Acts applies also to John. Arguing that Luke created symmetrical structure in the Book of Acts while also maintaining chronology and historical accuracy, Gooding writes this about Luke's process.

There's no denying, then, that in the process of forming the symmetry Luke has been very selective in what he has chosen for detailed description, and what he has decided to mention only in summary form. But there is no need to deny it, for it does not call in question the historicity of the incidents he has described in detail. Luke has maintained a basically chronological sequence; but then, admittedly, he has, like a jeweler constructing a necklace out of stones of different colours and sizes, selected events along the course of that chronological sequence that form meaningful symmetries. But how does that in itself form a ground on which to question the historicity of his narrative?¹

Gooding goes on to describe how a first century author might select his material and organize it in a certain arrangement to communicate meaning to his audience. All historians make interpretation through their selection of events, by what they include and what they leave out, and also in their choices in what to highlight and what to skim over. Historians then add narrative to communicate their interpretations about the importance or nature of the events that they have selected. The Gospel writers are historians, but not merely historians. They are intentionally providing for us interpreted history. And in their case, that interpretation is inspired by God. John chose to make an arrangement out of selected historic events. And as Gooding has put it, the resulting symmetry is "meaningful symmetry." We are supposed to notice the design, and in noticing the design be led to further consideration about the themes presented in the symmetrical stories. Let's consider John's symmetry. Symmetry does not imply that John made up stories or inserted fictional events into true narratives just to produce a balanced structure. It is true that John made some narrative decisions to help

¹David Gooding. *True to the Faith - The Acts of the Apostles: Defining and Defending the Gospel*. (Colerain, N. Ireland: The Myrtlefield Trust, 2013) 507.

create symmetry. For example, he choose to call the healing of the nobleman's son in chapter 4 the second sign. It is not the second miracle that Jesus did. Jesus did many signs at the Passover reported in chapter 2. This second sign is the second miracle that John has decided to describe in his Gospel. Choosing to call this miracle the second sign helps him set up the parallelism with the first sign of water to wine at the beginning of the section. So, we start with the first sign, and then we end with the second sign.

While John may have added some narration to help create symmetry, like calling this the second sign, mostly John relied on the selection of historical events to create hi parallelism. The healing of the nobleman's son makes a parallel with the water to wine because both miracles really, historically occurred in the same town, Cana of Galilee. That was a historic fact. John also recognized in both events truth about the nature of Jesus and truth about the way people interact with Jesus. By placing the two events in a symmetrical structure, John invites us to consider both stories together. Maybe we are supposed to compare and contrast the two or maybe we are supposed to see one as an appropriate beginning to this section of text and the other as an appropriate conclusion. John does not tell us why he created the symmetry. We are supposed to reflect on that.

We can assume that Jesus had many conversations with many people between the time of these two miracles in Cana. John selected just two of those conversations to describe for us, one conversation with an established, Jewish Pharisee and another with a marginalized, Samaritan woman. There is no need to conclude that John made up the stories to create irony or to create symmetry for his narrative. We should probably conclude that he chose these stories among potential other stories as any historian must do. And he chose them with symmetry and theology in mind. Looking over potential dialogues to include in his Gospel, John recognized the irony of Nicodemus not understanding Jesus and how that contrasts with the Samaritan woman who did come to see or understand Jesus. John saw a lesson about faith in the true events of these two stories and was motivated by how these two stories represent these themes, the theme of the nature of Jesus and the theme of the nature of faith. By arranging his material in a parallel fashion, John gives us more food for thought. Not only are we to consider what we learn from the dialogue with Nicodemus and also consider what we learn from the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, but John takes us one step further by encouraging us to consider what we learn when we compare the two. That is what the symmetry does for us. It helps us see important themes while also challenging us to think harder as we compare and contrast the paired accounts.

I am only imagining what John's process might have been. I cannot really know. My point is that it is not too difficult to imagine how a theologian who has years of experience with Jesus would have to consider carefully many events and many miracles and many sermons and then select from that material in order to faithfully communicate a message of truth. In making his selections from the available material, he is able to be true both to the history of the events and also true to the theological implications of the events as he organizes that material in a symmetrical way.

Here is one final observation about John's symmetry. Choosing to sandwich the story about the many who believed at the Passover in between the first sign and the conversation with Nicodemus meant that John would need to have to tell some kind of parallel story between the conversation with the Samaritan woman and the second sign, that is, if he wanted to maintain a symmetrical structure. What he gives us in chapter 4, after the Samaritan woman, is a three-verse reference to people in Galilee. There is not room for much detail in just three verses. When we look closely, though, we see that there is parallelism. John points out that these Galileans in chapter 4 were at the Passover describe in chapter 2, and they had seen the things Jesus did at that Passover. John goes on to make a point about faith in chapter 4 that parallels the point he made in chapter 2. We will look at that point when we get to chapter 4. In the case of these two parallel stories, the length of text is not symmetrical. The Passover story in chapter 2 takes 13 verses and communicates quite a bit of detail. This parallel in chapter 4 is a summary of only three verses. So, it is not perfectly balanced. John took the what he had at hand in the historic material without feeling the need to create a detailed parallel

story to balance the text. The short summary served his need and creates a conceptual parallel. This suggests to me that the historicity of the stories is more important than the symmetry of the structure. John's structure is not rigid. It is not perfectly balanced. There are going to be questions of are we even seeing it right? Is this really parallel? It is more like the symmetry you might find in nature. It is more organic, like a crystal or like a flower. It follows the actual events of Jesus' life and interaction with people. The truth is not invented to create symmetry. The symmetry is means of collecting and presenting historical truth to communicate theological truth. The resulting affect is a narrative that flows smoothly, even though it is structured, the structure remains in the background, and it does not hinder the telling of the story.

The Witness of John the Baptist 3:22-36

Alright, we are ready now to move on to the second half of chapter 3, if we have recognized the structure correctly as three parallel narratives surrounding a central narrative, then this testimony of John the Baptist has added significance as the center of the larger section that is chapters 2-4. Let's consider the text and then consider how the text applies to our walk with Jesus.

The text divides into three parts. First, we are going to get context. Then, we get John's self-identification in relationship to Jesus. And then, we get the testimony about Jesus. Let's read the whole passage, John 3:22-36.

²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and *people* were coming and were being baptized— ²⁴ for John had not yet been thrown into prison. ²⁵ Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." ²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks 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 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Context of the Witness 3:22-26

Verses 22-26 set up the context for us. Jesus and his disciples have left Jerusalem, where Jesus performed many signs and met with Nicodemus. Now they have gone out of the city and they are still in Judea, but they are in a rural area, and they are baptizing. That is one of those tantalizing references to the ministry of Jesus that gets no follow-up anywhere. Only John mentions that Jesus and his disciples included baptism as part of their ministry. So, we really don't know much about it. Later in 4:2, John will clarify that Jesus himself was not baptizing. His disciples were baptizing. The comparison in the text between the baptism of John and Jesus, seems to be the point, and especially at this early stage in the ministry of Jesus, suggests to me that we should think of Jesus baptizing people similarly to how we think of John the Baptist baptizing people. It is a baptism of repentance to prepare the heart of the individual to participate in some new thing that God is doing.

There seem to be two discussions going on here. One leads into the other. The first was between John's disciples and a Jew. Maybe the reference to Jew here indicates someone with position in Jerusalem, a priest or a Pharisee. We do not know. The discussion has to do with rites of purification.

As we noted in the story about water to wine where purification jars were used, Jews held both to Mosaic laws about washing for ceremonial purification and also to traditions from the elders about washing. There were baptismal pools in the temple area in Jerusalem. These pools allowed for the washing of the whole body. They were used for initiation into Judaism by converts, but more regularly by Jews performing Mosaic or traditional washings. If baptism is connected to washing for purification, then a Jew might be baptized many times. The discussion seems to have started somewhat along these lines. The Jew wants to know how John baptizing fits in with Jewish law and traditions about purification. So, he is questioning John's disciples.

But when these disciples approach John the Baptist and call on him as their Rabbi to resolve the dispute, we see that the discussion has moved on from an argument about that purpose of baptism to a complaint that Jesus was draining people away from John. It is not clear how the conversation changed course, but you can imagine the disciples defending the validity of John's baptism to the Jew and then somebody bringing up the fact that Jesus' movement threatened the distinctiveness and the size of John's movement. You can imagine John's disciples being frustrated with Jesus' disciples. "Baptizing is our thing. Why are they baptizing? They just want to steal people from us."

We can't really tell how negative the disciples were in their comments to John. But John's response to his disciples comes off as a rebuke to me, and that suggests they were not happy at all that people were going over to Jesus.

John's witness about himself 3:27-30

As we noted before in chapter 1, John's witness of Jesus includes a sober assessment of who he himself is. He states who he sees himself to be. Success, even success in doing the right thing, can go to a man's head, leaving him with a heightened sense of his own importance and of the importance of any movement or church he has been involved in establishing or growing. In the success of his own ministry, John has not forgotten who he is. You see that in how unshaken he is by the decline of his movement. Let's read again how John sees himself in 3:27-30.

²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.

John says something that could be taken as rather pious, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven." That's something you might say when something you value dearly is taken from you, and you just can't do anything about it. God gives. God takes away. But that's not John's heart. John does not begrudge that which was taken from him. He understands that he had a special role to play. He was sent ahead to prepare for the coming of Jesus. For many personalities, at least for mine, I still feel like John must have some twinge of regret or sadness at the demise or decline of his own work. So, I love the illustration John uses to help me understand how he feels and why he feels that way. He compares himself to a friend of the bridegroom. It is an analogy I can understand emotionally. It has always been about Jesus for John. He knew he was preparing for a wedding. He knew he wasn't...The bride is not his. It is his friend. And everything he is doing to set up the wedding, prepare the flowers, to make the dresses, or to bake the cake, or whatever, he has always been doing it for Jesus. It has been clear in his mind. He has known he was not the bridegroom. He is the friend of the bridegroom who cannot wait for the wedding to happen. He can't wait for the bridegroom to come and to be glorified, to be celebrated with his bride. He looks forward to the wedding and it brings him joy. It is the joy of the marriage of his friend. That's the joy John feels as he sees the movement of Jesus increase, and his correspondingly decreases. But for John his movement is not just decreasing, his people are going over to Jesus. It is like he is handing the bride off into the hands of the bridegroom. It is really about Jesus for John. His heart is fixed on Jesus not on his own creation, his own work, his own movement, his own church.

This is a rebuke to his disciples. "Don't you guys get what we have been about? Do not feel misplaced loyalty to me. Our first loyalty, our first love, is to Jesus. Don't make me your Jesus."

After communicating how he understands himself in relationship to Jesus, John gives testimony to who he understands Jesus to be. We need to know who we are. More importantly, we have to know who Jesus is. This is 3:31-36.

John's witness about Jesus 3:31-36

³¹ He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. ³⁴ For He whom God has sent speaks 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 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

That's the testimony. Verse 31 contains the same language Jesus used in his rebuke of Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things (John 3:12)?" Now here John is connecting himself to earthly things and Jesus to heavenly things. Jesus is as greater than John in his revelation as the Sun is greater than the moon in its light. John can speak only as a man of the earth, even speaking as a prophet of God, even with the Spirit giving him words from God, he cannot rise to the level of Jesus who speaks as one who comes from heaven. Jesus does not speak words from God that he himself has not experienced first-hand knowledge about. John says of Jesus, "What He has seen and heard, of that he testifies."

But then John makes this statement about the reception of Jesus, "No one receives His testimony." Those words remind us of the prologue, 1:10-11,

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

We have gotten a concrete glimpse of this in the last two chapters. Jesus cleaned out the temple, his father's house, as the son who had come to his own, but he was challenged by the stewards. They did not know him, and they did not receive him. And they did not want to give their stewardship up to him. One of them came to Jesus at night, drawn to him, but still not able to know him.

Faith in Jesus as spiritual reality

The statements are made in a very stark, black and white way. "The world did not know him...His own did not receive him...no one receives his testimony." That sounds pretty absolute. But then, both in the prologue and also here in this testimony, some hope is given that the reality is not so absolutely bleak. In 1:12, "But as many as received him, to them He gave the right to become children of God." So, it is not true that no one received him. And here in verse 33, "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true." The starkness of the initial statements indicates to me that the majority will continue to be against Jesus. And it also indicates that this really is the truth of all people. Nobody in the world can know Jesus. None of his own can receive him. All people will continue to reject Jesus in their own nature. No one will believe. No one will receive. No one will know. Not unless God does something to enable them to believe. A man cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. That was Jesus' word to Nicodemus. God must do a spiritual work in us if we are to see Jesus. This truth about the nature of faith, that it is a spiritual reality that God must initiate, is possibly suggested here. I think it is suggested to Nicodemus. We have to wait until chapter 6 before Jesus asserts this truth directly. So, we will mention it again when we get there.

Faith in Jesus as an acceptance of truth

We can hear another idea. We can hear this idea that faith is a person's agreement or putting their stamp, their seal, to the truthfulness of God. And that idea is also not really developed here. The

concept of truth has not been developed yet by John. It is barely alluded to in the prologue. “We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jesus somehow realizes the truth of God. The idea that faith acknowledges the truthfulness of God is getting ready to be addressed in the very next chapter when Jesus has his conversation with the Samaritan woman. We will consider the nature of truth at that point when Jesus declares that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (4:23).” In this we see that this testimony right here at the center of chapters 2-4 is summarizing some ideas that John has already developed, for example, in the conversation with Nicodemus, but is also introducing ideas that are going to be developed in the second half of the section, for example in the conversation with the Samaritan woman. Truth is one of those ideas that is going to be developed.

Truth here is connected to Jesus as the one who speaks the words of God. He is the one who has seen and heard first-hand. And that speaking of truth is connected to the Holy Spirit. The revelation of heavenly truth here is presented as a trinitarian work involving Father, Son and Holy Spirit, centering at this moment on the Son. Nothing is withheld from Jesus. He comes from above. He is in perfect love relationship with the Father. Everything we need in order to be in relationship with God comes through Jesus Christ, because God has put all things into the hands of Jesus.

Faith in Jesus as the only way to eternal life

And so we get this last grand statement, really the central point of this testimony, the central point of the whole of chapters 2-4, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

This is a summation of that truth already proclaimed at the end of the conversation with Nicodemus. Just as the wrath of God remained on the Israelites who were instructed to look to the bronze serpent for salvation, so also the wrath of God abides on everyone who does not now look to the Son of God for salvation. Eternal life and wrath are not states that await us. John testifies about these things as though they now are. If you truly believe in Jesus Christ, you have already entered into eternal life. If you do not, then the wrath of God remains on you already.

Jesus is the key. Belief in Jesus is essential to eternal life. There is no other way to eternal life. There are not many ways. There is one way. That way is Jesus. This is the testimony of John the Baptist.

Faith in Jesus as related to obedience

There is one more new idea suggested here but not yet developed. John does not say here that he who does not **believe** in the Son will not see life. He says, “He who does not **obey** the Son will not see life.” Obedience is now brought into our conversation about faith for the first time here. And it is set parallel to belief. “He who **believes** in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not **obey** the Son will not see life.” So, obedience has some relationship to true faith, to discipleship. And as with the concept of truth, this connection between belief and obedience is only suggested here. It is just brought up but is not developed. It is hinted at. We are going to address this idea most fully not until chapter 14 when we are really talking about discipleship. For now, we are just left to think about it.

And we do have some context for thinking about obedience here in this story. John accepts his role as a forerunner to Jesus. He is not looking to build his own movement to build his own identity, to create for himself his own basis for honor or value out of his work of ministry. That is not what ministry is about for John. Because of his faith in Jesus, because he has seen Jesus and in seeing Jesus he has seen himself, John is able to carry out in joyful obedience the ministry God has given him to fulfill.

Application

Let's make application to our lives. John's testimony here challenges me to stop and consider my own heart attitude. Why am I serving in Christian community? Who am I serving in Christian community? In whatever you do for God in his service, in church or in Christian movement or in any sort of provision or care for people, you have to stop and ask yourself at times, "Am I in this ministry for Jesus? Is Jesus the central reason for everything that I am doing? Do I understand my role as only a part in his great design? Is he my joy?"

A healthy heart serves God first out of love and gratitude and wonder, and then serves the people God loves. Even when our motives are right, motives are always mixed. We have other cravings which get fed by our service. Christian ministry feeds our craving for affirmation, validation, influence, control, significance, power, intimacy. So, we continually need to come back and monitor our own heart. John's testimony here to his disciples recommends to us four heart check questions.

1) Is this my ministry?

The more responsible you are for your role or your group or your childcare or your food pantry or your movement or your church, the more likely you are to feel, like, "Yes. This is my ministry. It was my idea. I raised the funds. I had the vision. I gathered the people. This is my personal ministry. This is the part of our community that I contribute, I developed."

When I feel deeply that some aspect of ministry is mine, isn't that saying something about the state of my heart?

What do I mean when I say the ministry is mine? What would it really mean to say that the ministry belongs to Jesus? Can I affirm with John, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven?" Did I really build this? Do I own this fruit? Can I affirm that with contentment, this is really a gift from God, without begrudging God, especially if God decides to take it away?

Can I give up my ministry? Can I be okay with the ministry diminishing? Can I accept that my service is not a major emphasis of our church or movement? Can I support the ministries that are a major emphasis of our church or movement?

How much of my value or identity or importance in our community is tied to my ministry?

This is the first heart monitor test. What does it really mean in my heart to say that this ministry is not mine, that all my effort and participation is in the service of my king, this is his ministry?

The second heart monitor test from John is this.

2) How do I feel when I compare myself with others?

That is what these disciples were doing. They were comparing their work with John to the work that Jesus was doing.

Am I excited that a guy younger than me is able to gather together a bigger Bible study than I am? Does it bother me that the numbers in whatever I am doing, whether evangelism or discipleship or care, are less than her numbers or his numbers or that ministry's numbers or that church's numbers?

Does it bother me that he or she gets more praise for their ministry? Why do they get mentioned? They get mentioned all the time. I never get mentioned.

Whom do I compare myself with? Of whom am I jealous? Who do I wish I could be like?

Can I accept with joy that my role may diminish while someone else's role is increasing?

Can I trust God to raise me up or leave me where I am? Or do I feel like I have to push myself forward? I have to take what is mine.

Can I support the person in my community who seems to do all things well?

Can I support that other ministry or church that seems to do all things well without feeling the need to emphasize what they do not do so well? Can I just rejoice in what they are doing?

The third heart monitor question has to do with the happiness of your heart.

3) Is Jesus my joy?

Success in ministry can rightly bring happiness. We want to do a job well. We want to experience fruit from our labor. We feel good when God smiles on us.

So, ask yourself, “When I do not have success in ministry, do I still have joy?”

In my success can I identify the source of my joy? What makes me happy in ministry? Is Jesus at the center of that?

Do I delight in Jesus? Can I just leave everything right now and go take a walk with Jesus and experience joy? Can I experience joy in what Jesus is doing through other people and other movements and other churches? Am I a friend who really, really is happy for the bridegroom?

Here is one last heart monitor check.

4) How important is it to me to follow a particular leader?

John’s disciples seem to be very committed to him. They may be worried about themselves as the numbers of their movement decrease. But they may also be worried about the honor and prestige of John the Baptist. They love him. They think he is wonderful. They owe their spiritual growth to him. They have never heard anyone preach like him. They love his vision, his rough appearance, his independence, his standing up against religious institutionalism.

And to see his ministry diminish hurts.

Who are the most important Christians in your life? Has a particular man or woman especially poured into you? Has a preacher or teacher led your church or opened your eyes in a special way? And do you put that person on a special pedestal? Are they the only one who can really do what they do?

John’s disciples were right. John the Baptist was absolutely unique. He had insight that no one else in his day had. He could really see Jesus. He understood more than anyone what God was doing. He was spiritually advanced beyond all of the twelve disciples gathering around Jesus. He was special.

But as John the Baptist puts it, “He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.” Jesus is central, not John the Baptist. Have I made anybody else central to my experience of Christianity?

Our true allegiance is not to any man or woman on this earth. Our true allegiance is to Jesus Christ. And Jesus has his people doing all kinds of wonderful, fruitful ministries all over the earth.

So, we consider these questions.

Am I holding on too tightly to any human leader? What would happen to my faith if that person fell into sin? Or turned away from Jesus?

Have I made my Christian service dependent on any one person?

John the Baptist does not want to build a movement around himself. John the Baptist wants to point people to Jesus. That is his joy. And that is the kind of leader you want to follow, one who is quite ready to let you go, who will support you as you continue to pursue Jesus wherever Jesus sends you.

Focus on Jesus. Keep on serving him. Be sure to take a moment every now and then to monitor your heart. Do a heart check. And when you see a problem, a wrong motivation, find a friend to talk to and pray with who will help you get your eyes fixed back on Jesus and then continue serving him.

Reflection questions

1. Read John 3:22-36. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
2. Imagine the discussion of John's disciples in 3:22-26 in some modern day context. What are two or three possible examples that would include someone like the Jew who initiated the question and then two other parties in apparent or perceived competition like John's disciples and Jesus' disciples?
3. What impresses you about John's witness about himself in 3:27-30? In what way would you like to be like John?
4. How does John's witness of Jesus in 3:31-36 summarize points made so far in the Gospel? Be specific.
5. Go through the application section and consider each of the four heart monitor questions for yourself. If you are not participating in any area of service, you can also address these questions to your ministry to your family or to your desire to live as a Christian witness at work.