

025: A Friend of the Groom

(based on Sermon #19 in the Life of Christ Series)

Years ago I had the privilege of visiting several overseas mission fields to encourage the national church planters and serve as directed.

- Many of those fields were third-world countries and, inevitably, I would be asked by the national pastor to baptize those who had been saved recently in his congregation.
- I politely refused in every case, because I did not want to be the source of any divisiveness in the church.
- People could otherwise brag, “I was baptized by the American pastor,” or “I was baptized by the chairman of the mission board.”
- Those dear people need to be baptized by their own local pastor, not by some visiting American.

The apostle Paul dealt with a problem like that in his ministry to the Corinthians.

- The people were choosing their favorite preacher.
- Some said, “I am of Paul,” others claimed, “I am of Apollos,” and still others, “I am of Peter.”
- So Paul was thankful that he had baptized none of them (except for one or two early on), so they could not make it yet another point of division.
- The sinful nature of man is often prideful, selfish, and divisive.
- Undoubtedly, this is why Jesus does not baptize.
- Christ’s followers are being baptized, but according to John 4:1-2, it is not by Jesus Himself but by His disciples.
- Despite the precautions taken by our Lord, the religious leaders work hard to drive a wedge between John and Jesus.

John 3:22-23, 25-26

- 22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.
- 23 Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.
- 25 Then there arose a dispute between some of John’s disciples and the Jews 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!”

John the Baptist and Jesus are now preaching and baptizing in the same region of Judea.

- Hundreds, if not thousands, of Jews are returning to fellowship with Jehovah God by repenting of sins and submitting to the baptism of repentance to signify they have been cleansed.
- The prophet Isaiah had called Israel to become purified:
- Isa. 1:16 Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil.
- The Jews are not happy about this.
- Incidentally, when John the apostle refers to “the Jews,” he is often speaking of the religious leadership.
- That seems to be the case in v. 25.
- The religious leaders of Israel have been opposed to John the Baptist’s preaching and baptism.
- They are arrogant and see no need to repent or be baptized for the remission of sins, because they do not view themselves as sinful.

Recognizing that Jesus is preaching the same message and is now outpacing John in baptisms, the religious leaders see an opportunity to split these two men of God by causing division in the ranks.

- The Jews attempt to make John's disciples envious about purification (v. 25), which is ceremonial cleansing — in this context, baptism.
- That is, they try to stir up trouble between John and Jesus by provoking John's disciples with the thought that Jesus now has a much bigger following than John.
- As if to suggest that Jesus is more "successful."
- John's disciples take the bait and rush to their leader, anxious that Jesus "is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"
- This is a problem for these men, indeed, a real dilemma, so that they become "green with envy."

They condescend to Jesus by not mentioning his name, and they question His audacity to baptize.

- They presume that Jesus needs to be accountable in some respect to John — the Baptizer! — as if John has some monopoly on the purification ordinance.
- They want men to be coming to *their* Rabbi, not to Jesus.
- Do you see the jealousy in their hearts?
- Jesus is gaining more disciples than John.
- In fact, it seems that Jesus is gaining at the expense of John.
- Jesus' congregation is growing, while John's is shrinking.
- John's disciples are hopeful that their master will set the record straight and say something to discredit Jesus and His ministry.

Sadly, this kind of jealous spirit is prevalent even in twenty-first century Christian ministry.

- "Pastor A" gets jealous that his congregation is smaller and not growing like "Pastor B's" congregation.
- "Pastor C" fuels the fire by mentioning it to "Pastor A," thereby stirring up feelings of discontent and envy.
- Where is the spirit of love that rejoices in the successes of others?
- Of course, envy and jealousy are certainly not unique to ministers.
- They are common to man, to the folks in the pews.
- Oh, how self-focused we can become, full of covetousness!

It can be as simple as resenting that someone else is recognized, but you are not, or that someone gets something new that you don't get.

- It can be a spirit that is quick to be offended by what others say or do to you, or it can be a begrudging attitude toward the gains and successes of others.
- All believers should learn from the humble manner in which John the Baptist handles this delicate matter.
- He rises above the immaturity of his followers, never once developing an envious attitude.
- Remarkably, John makes five profound statements that every child of God ought to be able to say with conviction.

1. God gives to everyone as He wills.

- John 3:27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven."
- Those who fully understand the scope of this statement will be cured of all jealousy, enviousness, and covetousness.

- James says it in a slightly different way:
- James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.
- Paul speaks extensively in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12 about spiritual gifts that God gives to each believer as He sees fit.
- Some are given greater talents and abilities and opportunities, others are given less.
- The point is, God gives to each one of us what we need to accomplish His will in our life.
- Jesus said, “To whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Furthermore, God does not revoke His gifts and callings (Rom. 11:29).

- He does not change His mind about them; they are irrevocable.
- The parable of the talents teaches that, as believers, we will give an account when we stand before Jesus as to how we use our gifts, talents, abilities and opportunities while on Earth.
- Think of the logical conclusion:
- If everything we possess — life, health, financial status, gifts, abilities, opportunities, etc. — are all gifts from God, and if He gives to every person individually as He wills ...
- then who are we to question the successes and accomplishments of others? Who are we to wonder why others have more than we do?

Learn to rejoice in the prosperity of others, knowing that God may have chosen to give them more than He has given to you.

- That is the spirit of John the Baptist.
- The problem is that we tend to think of ourselves as the key to success.
- As Americans, this is especially true. The “self-made man” mentality and “pull yourself up by your boot straps” philosophy have deadened spirituality.
- John the Baptist has not one ounce of jealousy toward Jesus, even after hearing that Jesus is so much more successful.
- John knows his rightful place: “I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent before Him” (v. 28).
- John makes another humble statement in v. 29.

2. Being the friend of the groom brings great joy.

- John 3:29 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. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.
- Who is the bride in this analogy?
- The text is not clear, but in the context, the bride is likely Israel, the wife of Jehovah (see Isa. 54:5a).
- God had to divorce Israel due to the nation’s adultery (i.e., idolatry, see Jer. 3:8).
- The Son of God is often portrayed as Jehovah in the Old Testament.
- Thus, this could be a reference to Jesus, in the role of bridegroom, calling Israel back to fellowship with God the Father.

Considering Israel’s ultimate rejection of Jesus, this could also could be a reference to Jesus calling out His bride and co-ruler, which will be the faithful segment of His church.

- Just as Eve, Adam's bride and co-ruler was taken out of Adam, so the bride and co-ruler of Christ will be taken out of His body, the church.
- It is quite possible that the bride and groom analogy refers to *both* Israel being called to return as Jehovah's wife *and* faithful disciples being called as Christ's bride.
- Whatever the case, John the Baptist sees himself as a friend of the groom, helping to point the bride to the groom.
- John is essentially referring to himself as Jesus' best man.

In a wedding, attention is not focused on the best man, but on the groom.

- The best man is merely an attendant, honored to be a friend of the groom, and he is most delighted to hear the groom's voice.
- It brings great joy to his heart.
- Thus, John says, "This joy of mine is fulfilled."
- In other words, "The purpose for my life has been fulfilled, knowing that I am the honored attendant of the groom.
- I love to hear him speak; I love to hear the words of truth that flow from His mouth.
- He is my joy, my everything; I live for Him. Jesus is all the world to me; my life, my joy, my all."

I can hear John saying to his disciples:

- "Are you telling me that people are listening to the message of Jesus?"
- Then I am elated, for I have longed for that more than anything in life. My joy is fulfilled."
- Are you a friend of the groom? Would He claim you as His friend?

- Are you content to be the "best man," or must you be the focus of attention?
- Do you rejoice to be His friend?
- Do you long to hear His voice? Are you regularly in His Word, so that you can hear His voice?
- He speaks the words of God (v. 34).
- John makes another humble statement in v. 31.

3. Jesus is Lord over all.

- John 3:31, 35 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth ... The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.
- Jesus, who came from heaven, is God of the universe, the Creator of all things.
- We who are of Earth are earthly, mundane.
- We can speak only within our limited sphere of knowledge, and we know so little.
- But He is omniscient, all knowing, and He can speak of heavenly things, for He is sovereign Lord of the universe.
- By nature of who He is, He is above all.
- Indeed, the Father loves the Son and has given Him authority over all.

From our post-crucifixion historical perspective, we know that Jesus has been exalted by the Father:

- Phil. 2:9-11 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- One day all mankind will bow before Jesus and confess Him as Lord, whether or not they chose to glorify Him throughout their lifetime on Earth.
- There will be no exceptions.
- But what Jesus desires more than anything is for all to bow before Him *now*, “that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18).
- In countries that have a king or queen, the royal figure is often referred to as *your eminence*, meaning, “one of superior position.”
- One day Jesus’ position as *king of kings* will be evident for all to see.
- However, God’s will is that you give Him *pre-eminence*, that is, recognize His superior authority and power *in advance of* that future day when it will be obligatory.
- Choose *now* to treat Him as royalty, as king of your life.
- Make Him your first priority.

Those who do so glorify Him, as John the Baptist points out:

- John 3:33 He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true.
- Those believers who recognize that Jesus is Lord of all, by living in complete submission to Him, *certify* that God is true!
- Christians who have not prioritized Jesus as “number one” in their lives, essentially proclaim that He is not Lord of all and, therefore, not true.
- Does that kind of testimony point others to Jesus as Lord?
- John makes another humble statement in v. 34.

4. Jesus has the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

- John 3:34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure.

- Since He chose to function as a man on Earth, as opposed to God, Jesus needed spiritual power for His earthly ministry.
- At His baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him for that very purpose.
- Acts 10:38 God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.
- Jesus was noticeably different after His baptism.
- Holy boldness came upon Him.
- The men in the synagogues at Nazareth and Capernaum were astonished at His teaching (Luke 4).
- He was different, empowered!

Prior to that, He had been filled with the Spirit and had walked in the Spirit — in fact, perfectly so — but He needed fullness of power for His ministry.

- As He prayed at the baptism, presumably asking for the Spirit’s empowering, the fullness of power came upon Him.
- If Jesus needed to be endued with power for His ministry, how much more do we?
- As believers, we can rejoice that God promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.
- Luke 11:13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

In Greek, the definite article (*the*) is absent before *Holy Spirit*, which means that what we receive when we ask for Him is not His *person*, but His *essence* — which is fullness of power.

- Those who are regenerated do not need to seek His *person*, of course, for we already have Him!
- Indeed, He lives within.
- But we need what Jesus needed — “Holy-Spiritness,” in a manner of speaking.
- In other words, we need the Bread of Life for hungry people — that is the context of Luke 11 — and we need to be able to present it to others with divine power and authority.
- Based on His promise, when we ask for Holy Spirit, He gives fullness of power, holy boldness to confess Christ and testify for Him.

Jesus wants all believers to “know what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:19).

- In the Greek, the verb “believe” is a present active participle and should therefore be translated, “to those who are believing.”
- In other words, those believers who are continuing to believe God, claiming His promises for “Holy-Spiritness,” will understand the exceeding greatness of His power.
- His ultimate desire is, “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).
- The problem in modern times is that many believers are content to live a substandard, apathetic form of Christianity, never experiencing the fullness of the Spirit.

But that is not God’s intent for the church of Jesus Christ.

- Eph. 4:11-13 He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of

the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

- Christ’s goal for His church, and for individual believers, is that we become *perfect*, that is, mature, *to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*.
- What an incredible goal!
- Can you, like John, say with conviction, “*God did not give the Spirit by measure* to Jesus, and He wants to give me the same fullness?”
- According to Luke 11:13, all you must do is ask. That’s powerful!
- John makes another humble statement in v. 30.

5. Christ must be exalted and self must be abased.

- John 3:30 He must increase, but I must decrease.
- To read this, and even desire it, is one thing, but to truly make it one’s mission is quite another.
- A high price is required if Christ is to be exalted and self is to be abased.
- John the Baptist will soon be arrested, jailed and beheaded by Herod.
- Some believe he has an intimation of this, yet his resolve is unshaken: He must increase; I must decrease!
- How is Christ exalted in the life of a believer, and what are the glorious results?
- Jesus spoke of this on another occasion.

Matt. 16:24-27

- 24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.
- 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

- 26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?
- 27 For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”

Some claim this text outlines how unbelievers are regenerated and receive eternal life.

- But that cannot be, for the gift of eternal life is received by believing Jesus for it.
- This passage is not about *believing* but about *doing* — denying self, taking up one’s cross, and following Jesus.
- Jesus is speaking to His disciples about matters of discipleship.
- While a believer is one who has chosen to believe on Jesus for the *gift* of eternal life, a disciple is a believer who has chosen to forsake all to follow Jesus and inherit the *reward* of eternal life.

Matt. 16:24-27 is about reward — verse 27 make that abundantly clear.

- “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”
- This is referring to the Judgment Seat of Christ and salvation of the soul, which is a sanctification matter.
- In fact, the word *life* in v. 25 is the Greek word *psyche* or *psyche*, most often translated *soul* in the New Testament.
- Those who desire to save their life (soul) — by living for self and the things of this world rather than God — will lose it at the Judgment Seat.

- In the context of v. 27 that means they will lose any prospect of reward.
- On the other hand, those who lose their life (soul) for Christ’s sake — by denying self, taking up their cross, and following Jesus — will find it at the Judgment Seat.
- That means they will be rewarded.

The entire passage is about sanctification unto reward as contrasted with self-focused living resulting in loss.

- Jesus asks a profound question in v. 26:
- “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”
- Again, Jesus is not talking to unbelievers about salvation in the sense of regeneration. He is speaking to believers about sanctification and discipleship unto reward.
- As if to say, “What good is it, if you live the way you want and lose your soul — your reward — at the Judgment Seat of Christ?”
- How can a child of God give a worthy account at the Judgment Seat and hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant?”
- The answer is in v. 24: By denying self and taking up your cross and following Jesus.

Denying self means “disregarding yourself or renouncing your privileges.”

- That is a tall order, seeing we are inherently self-focused.
- *Taking up your cross* is obeying God and confessing Christ, and willingly enduring any suffering for Him.
- I once saw a man in downtown Chicago supposedly “taking up his cross.”
- He walked around the city, carrying a huge, twelve-foot-long cross of rough-hewn timbers.

- But he was cheating, for the cross had wheels on the back end, so that it rolled along quite nicely, with very little effort on the man's part.
- It also had comfortable padding where it lay on his shoulder.
- That is certainly not what Jesus intended.
- Incidentally, the phrase *deny yourself and take up your cross* in v. 24 is the same idea as *losing your life for Christ's sake* in v. 25.

If you are not disregarding self, confessing Christ before men, and enduring any consequent suffering, then you are preserving your soul for self, with the end result that you will lose it at the Judgment Seat.

- On the other hand, if you are truly growing in self-denial and enduring hardships for Jesus' sake, then you are practicing self-forfeiture, so to speak, and you will experience reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- Simply put, to save your soul in this life is to find happiness through what the world has to offer but then stand ashamed in the presence of Jesus at His judgment bar.
- To lose your soul in this life is to forfeit your own fleshly happiness and find true joy in Christ and glorious reward in His presence.
- This is the essence of exalting Christ and abasing self.
- Your future position in His kingdom is dependent on how you live now.
- Is your soul being saved for His glory?
- If so, then your heart attitude is: "He must increase, but I must decrease," and you will be able to say it with conviction.

John closes his discourse with the religious leaders by making a profound statement:

- John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.
- The two usages of the verb *believe* in this verse are actually present active participles, as we saw in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:16, discussed in the previous study.
- *Young's Literal Translation* of the Bible translates the verb using the correct tenses:
- John 3:36 He who is believing in the Son, hath life age-during; and he who is not believing the Son, shall not see life, but the wrath of God doth remain upon him.

Now listen to vs. 16, 18, also translated by *Young's Literal*:

- John 3:16 For God did so love the world, that His Son — the only begotten — He gave, that every one who is believing in him may not perish, but may have life age-during.
- John 3:18 He who is believing in him is not judged, but he who is not believing hath been judged already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
- In like manner as Christ's conversation with Nicodemus, John the Baptist is *not* speaking about matters of salvation, in the sense of regeneration.
- He is speaking about matters of sanctification unto reward — millennial reward.
- All three of these verses (John 3:16, 18, 36) provide the key by which one can deny self, take up the cross, and follow Jesus.

The key is continued belief, constant trust in Jesus, claiming His promises for abundant living —

- to the point of participating in His divine nature and escaping the corrupting influences of the world (2 Peter 1:4).
- Notice the benefits:
- **a. In 3:16** — Those believers who keep believing Jesus for victory in the Christian life will not perish but have age-during life, that is, millennial life.
- Thanks to traditional teaching, the minds of most Christians assume Jesus is saying that those who believe in Him (initially) will not go to Hell but instead will go to Heaven.
- While John 3:16, 18, 36 assume that initial belief has occurred at some point, that is only an implication in these verses.
- These verses are more explicitly focused on the continued belief of believers.

As demonstrated in the previous study, John 3:16 is not about the *gift* of eternal life.

- It is about the *reward* of eternal life. It is saying that those believers who continue believing Jesus will not die spiritually.
- The apostle Paul says:
- Rom. 8:6 For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.
- Those who keep trusting Jesus for victory in the Christian life will not become carnal and wither up spiritually.
- They will experience abundant living now and be rewarded with glorious millennial reward (life) in the age to come.

- **b) In 3:18, 36** — Those believers who continue believing Jesus are not judged (here and now), but those believers who do not continue believing Jesus are judged already.
- Indeed, the wrath of God remains on that child of God.
- According to Rom. 1, God manifests His wrath by giving sinful people over to their ways.
- That inevitably results in self-destruction now and disinheritance in the millennial age to come, unless that child of God repents and returns to the Lord.

So the key to denying self, taking up your cross, and following Jesus is continued belief, continued dependence on the Lord for the Holy Spirit's enablement for victory that results in reward.

- Think about John the Baptist's five remarkable statements of humility:
- 1. God gives to everyone as He wills.
- 2. Being the friend of the groom brings great joy.
- 3. Jesus is Lord over all.
- 4. Jesus has the fullness of the Holy Spirit.
- 5. Christ must be exalted and self must be abased.
- Do you, like John, believe these five statements with conviction?
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS!