January 8, 2023

ON BEING LIKE THE MOON

John 3:18-35

There is something we learn early in life. We are being rated. We are being compared to other people all the time. Early in childhood we were being graded in school. A meant your work was excellent, B meant it was very good, C was average, D was poor and F was failing. Think about that C grade. It’s average. How do I know how I’m doing? By comparing with the other students. If l’m right in the middle, better than some, not as good as others, I’m average. Nothing special. Everyone knows if you get C’s, a 2.0 GPA, you’re not going anywhere. You’re just average like everybody else. The measuring stick is how am I doing compared to everybody else? And that is happening in every facet of life. We are constantly comparing ourselves to others to see how we’re doing.

I recently read an article that asked, “How are you doing financially compared to the average American?” For some reason the question intrigued me. I expected that it would be kind of depressing because I am not a money guy. Financial things somehow bewilder me and cause me stress. I’m really not good at it. Laurie isn’t very good about it either, but she has a much better attitude about it. She just doesn’t worry about it, in large part because she trusts God to take care of us. I do too, except sometimes. Those times would basically be when I think about it.

This article gave 5 benchmarks and said if you meet these then you are doing as well the average American. As I went through the article I realized that Laurie and I not only met them, we were doing better than average at every single one of them, in some cases much better. For a few moments I started feeling better about myself. But later I realized all that meant we were doing a little better than getting a C in finances. I was comparing myself with other people and patting myself on the back because I was doing better than they were. But that is ridiculous. I know our financial situation, and knowing I’m as good as other people, who according to experts in the field actually are not doing well at all, doesn’t change anything about what our needs are. Comparing with other people isn’t actually very helpful. In fact, it is a negative way to live, and it has some unfortunate effects on us. So how can we avoid the temptation to compare ourselves with others? We will get some important perspective on that question from John 3:18-35.

JOHN DEALT WITH COMPETITION

After visiting Jerusalem Jesus headed out into some of the more rural areas of Judea. Crowds began coming to him and some of them wanted to be baptized. John 4:2 tells us that Jesus himself was not baptizing people, but his disciples were. This is likely because several of them had been followers of John and they were doing what they had seen him do.

An argument started between a Jewish leader and some of John’s followers about baptism as opposed to ceremonial washing. Ceremonial washing was a common practice of the ancient Jews and part of the Law. We don’t know exactly what the controversy was, although it clearly had to do with how baptism even fit with that practice. This was another example of how religious people are good at finding things that are trivial to argue about. It appears that in the course of the argument this leader somehow tried to use the fact that now people were going to Jesus instead of John to get baptized to try to unsettle John’s followers.

This was true and concerning to them. In verse 26 they went to John and, referring to Jesus, said, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one you testified about, look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.” John had been the big draw, but now the crowds were flocking to Jesus instead of John. There was a new flavor of the month, and it wasn’t John. These guys loved John. They were loyal to him. They say, “Everyone is going to him.” Really, everyone? Well, not literally everyone, but that’s how it felt to them. John, we’re losing to the competition!

It’s not hard to figure out why Jesus was starting to get the big market share. Nicodemus had remarked on the amazing things Jesus had been doing. He was healing people, accomplishing literal miracles. John was a charismatic character. But making the blind see and the lame walk is a much better show. If you had your choice, which one would you go see?

These guys believed that John had a message people needed to hear, and they were starting to panic because if everyone started following Jesus, they were not going to listen to what John had to say. Something had to be done! John, we need to advertise more. Maybe you should move your venue closer to town. Maybe we need to start a campaign, try to get every one of your followers to recruit at least one person to come. We need to get some momentum here and get the ball rolling again, right, John?

John’s followers were doing one of the most common of human actions, comparing and competing. It is what we do all the time. We look at what we are doing or what we are and compare it with what we see in others and measure by that. It is constant. Suppose you are a singer, and you sing a song, then another person sings and sings better than you. How does that make you feel? Imagine you own a restaurant, and a new restaurant opens across the street, and quickly your business falls off to a fraction of what it was as people flock to the new fancy place right across the street.

In 1 Corinthians 1:12 Paul said, “One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’” People were comparing leaders and competing over who had the best leader. They tried to suck Paul into that swamp. In 1 Corinthians 4:3 Paul wrote, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.” He wrote that because he was being judged by them, and he knew it. They were putting him in the competition for best, most dynamic leader, whether he wanted it or not.

One of the great dangers of being in ministry is playing the compare and compete game, and it is going on constantly. What if you are a pastor and your church is losing market share? You’d better do something! Up your game. Put on a better show somehow, because if you don’t then the worst could happen. You could fail! How could you live with being a failure?

It’s not just ministry, it’s everything. Kids learn early on how to compete for attention and approval. You compete for grades in school and for success in sports. You compete for popularity, for looks, and as time goes on in careers, money, notice, in just about everything. Unfortunately all the competing and comparing has some negative effects on us. It is going to have one of two outcomes. One of them is that you don’t win, you don’t feel like you measure up very well, and that creates a powerful sense of inadequacy and inferiority. It discourages us and leads to a number of negative thought patterns. One of them is it tends to make us critical of other people. We do that as a way of feeling better about ourselves, even though that doesn’t really work. The other possible outcome is that you win, you deem yourself to have measured up well. That creates a false sense of superiority that is the farthest thing from humility and love. Plus it introduces a terrible insecurity, for what if someone should come along and surpass you? Your superiority is always tenuous, and losing it must be avoided at all cost.

As the internet was becoming a reality and a large presence in our lives, some creative entrepreneurs came up with ideas that they thought would be of great benefit to humanity. They could use the internet to bring people together and to create community. They created programs like My Face and Spacebook followed by the Instachats, WeSnaps and all the rest. They were going to connect us.

How has that worked out? It has had some benefit. Laurie has connected with old high school friends through Facebook and she is in contact with long time friends all over the country. Those are good things. But one of the big problems that has resulted for many people from these platforms is they suck them in to comparing themselves with others. And that has a tendency to cause people to actually become more depressed, to feel more inadequate and inferior.

This has become a big problem with young people. Studies show that 97% of young people are heavily engaged in social media on line. 45% of them are online constantly, and you’ve seen it. When you see a young person, a high percentage of the time they have a phone in their face. A 2019 study showed that using social media 3 hours a day or more puts them at much higher risk of mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression. A study of college students showed that the longer they were on Facebook the more they believed other people were happier than they were. Jean Twenge, a professor at San Diego State, studies these things and says that rates of depression and anxiety begin to increase after one hour of social media use. What’s going on there is that we look at what other people post on line and it feels like they have more interesting lives, are having more fun and appear in a better place. This produces discouragement, disappointment, anxiety and especially depression.

Recognizing the damage that all the competing does, there have been some well intentioned people who have tried to lessen its effects on kids by removing competition. Maybe we’ll quit giving grades in classes, and in sports we won’t keep score. We’ll only give out participation trophies. They might as well go stand on the beach at low tide and command the tide not to come in. That’s how much success they’ll have at keeping kids from comparing and competing.

I saw this when I coached my son’s hockey teams. Because rink time was scarce, we usually had to share a rink at practices. Each team would have half the rink to practice on. Most of the time I’d set up with the other coach a plan that the last 15 or 20 minutes of practice we would scrimmage the other team. I would always remind the kids that it was practice. There were things I wanted them to focus on and work on improving, and I always told them just to have fun. Do you know what the first thing they invariably would talk about after practice was? Did we win the scrimmage? What was the score? I would tell them no one was keeping score, but the kids did.

On a recent visit to see my oncologist a nurse took my blood pressure. She said, “Wow, you’re like a 15 year old.” That’s the second time that’s happened to me there. I have to admit I had this little burst of thinking, “That’s right, I’m better than your average old dude.” I didn’t choose to think that or want to think it, it just burst into my head before I could even think how dumb that is. Yeah there’s something to prove how great you are. You have good blood pressure. Clearly that makes you an admirable person. It was just one more trivial little manifestation that we constantly compare, to our own detriment. How can we deal with this incessant problem?

JOHN KNEW WHAT HE HAD BEEN GIVEN

John’s response to his followers wasn’t, “Oh, come on guys. You’re overstating this.” Neither was it, “Yeah, I’ve been getting really concerned about the trend lately. We need to think about creative ways to pump up attendance, raise our profile. Maybe we need to up our presence on social media.”

John’s response was profound. “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.” John knew that he had been given a job to do by God. It wasn’t something he had dreamed up for himself. He wasn’t measuring himself by how important that job was compared to what someone else was doing. He was simply focused on doing what God had given him to do.

That attitude is radically different from the one our culture wants to promote. The mantra of our culture is that you can be anything you want. You just have to follow your heart, pursue your dream, if you are willing to work hard enough you can do whatever you want. There’s a positive aspect to that kind of thinking. It enables people to dream, to aspire and in many cases is crucial to their ability to achieve great things. It means there is hope, and keeps people from being trapped in a hopeless situation.

There are big down sides to that message. It tends to focus us on doing something other people think is a big deal. It ties our identity and worth to a job or achievement and that ends up being a deadly illusion. But there is another weakness of this thinking, and it is a fatal weakness This fatal weakness of this attitude is, it is not true. You can’t be whatever you want, because there are some things that you are not going to be able to be or do no matter how hard or persistently you work at it.

In my youth I made some attempts to be a singer and musician. To be honest, I never worked hard and persistently at either. Had I put in enough hard work maybe I could have become an adequate musician, but one thing I know is I was never going to be a great singer. There is a level of natural ability you must have to sing great, and I was not given that. I could only receive what was given from heaven, and I wasn’t given that. Had I stubbornly insisted that was what I absolutely had to achieve it would only have resulted in years of frustration and disappointment, ending with bitterness.

Another area where I see that is sports. As you know I have always loved sports. I wanted to be a great athlete. I never was. It’s funny how there are things you don’t see when you are young that become obvious when you are old. One of those things for me is I wasn’t given that ability from heaven. I can look at my body type and see that even when I was young I should have known that I was not given the size, build, strength and ability to be a great athlete. Ignoring that reality, again, would just end in frustration. I wasn’t so wrapped up in that desire that I couldn’t let it go and get on with life, which was good. But it is one more example that one can only receive what they are given from heaven.

John was saying that he had not received from heaven the role of being the Messiah. God did not call him to that role. Had he aspired to it all he could do is get frustrated, disappointed and get in the way of God’s work in the world. At issue here is our ability to accept what life brings us. It comes down to security. Is our personal security and sense of worth bound up with our ability to “be somebody,” to do something we dream up that we think is great, or can we be at peace, secure and joyful regardless of what we end up being or doing?

JOHN KNEW WHAT MATTERED

John likened his God given role to that of the ancient equivalent of the best man. His job is to rejoice in the groom. In this case, the groom was Messiah Jesus. John talked about him in verses 31-36. He said that he is from heaven and could testify to what he has seen and knows from heaven.

John went on to say that Jesus spoke the words of God. He said he had received “the Spirit without limit.” There were prophets who were given the Holy Spirit who revealed truth to them. They got that for periods of time. But Jesus had all of the Spirit of God in him permanently. Paul would say in Colossians 2:9, “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” John was saying much the same thing. In Colossians 2:3 Paul wrote of Christ, “In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” All we need to know of God is revealed in Christ.

John said in verse 35, “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.” In other words, the groom, Jesus the Messiah, rules over everything. In Ephesians 1:20-22 Paul wrote that God the Father “Seated him (Jesus) at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.”

Finally in verse 36 John said of Jesus, “Whoever believes in him has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life.” The one determining factor in the eternal destiny of every human being is whether they believe in Jesus or not. John was saying this Jesus, whom he came to proclaim, is the ruler of all and the only hope for human beings. He is the most important person in all of creation.

In other words, John was saying, “He’s the one who matters. He’s the only one who matters.” John was very clear that he was not divine. He did not have the Spirit of God without limit. He did not speak the very words of God. He was absolutely certain he was not the ruler of the entire creation. And he knew that believing in him was definitely not the sole determining factor in whether people would gain eternal life. Given that, it was pretty easy for John to accept his subordinate role. He was very clear that people could completely ignore or even reject him, but if they believed in Jesus they would be just fine. So he understood since Jesus is the issue in all of life, Jesus should also be the issue in John’s ministry.

John put it this way in verse 30, “He must become greater; I must become less.” In other words, John told his followers, this whole thing has been about Jesus all along. I’ve just been given the job of pointing to him. We are not in competition. Now that he is here and is launching his own ministry, I’m not needed much any more. My job is to fade out of the picture. I’ll keep pointing people to him, but I want their loyalty, and yours, to be to him, not to me.”

He must become greater, I must become less. That is a realistic and beautiful way to live. Consider, is creation made for me? Do the heavens declare the glory of Rick Myatt? Absolutely not. They don’t declare much of anything about Rick Myatt, and when I live as though they do, as though all of creation is about me, it is stupid, selfish, petty and ugly. As part of creation I should live to declare the glory of God. I should say with John that my life, everything I think, say or do, is aimed at Jesus becoming greater and me less.

Consider the sun and the moon as an example. What does the sun bring to our world? It produces light and energy that are beamed to our earth. Life on this planet is utterly dependent on the sun. How about the moon, what does it bring to our planet? Well, it’s kind of beautiful at night to see it up there and it gives a little bit of light at night. But the truth is that the moon is actually dead. It produces nothing. All it can do is reflect the sun’s light. Should the moon be upset when the sun comes up and its brilliant light washes out the moon? Yes, sometimes the moon is up during the day, but you barely notice it because the sun is so brilliant. So should the moon sulk because it is not getting the notice it wants? That would be absurd. Without the sun we would never see the moon, night or day, because it doesn’t produce anything. We are like the moon. We reflect the glory of God. We don’t produce that which is essential to life. We can’t. So we rejoice in God as the source of life, we rejoice in his glory, and we seek to reflect his glory to the world around us. What we don’t do is try to replace God, because we couldn’t do that anymore than the moon could replace the sun. If somehow the moon replaced the sun, everything on earth would die. When we try to replace God by being the center of all things, things on earth start to die.

IMPLICATIONS

MAKE LIFE ABOUT JESUS BEING GREATER AND YOU BEING LESS

Over the past 43 plus years of ministry as a pastor I have been asked to officiate at a lot of weddings. One of the things I learned early on is something I usually emphasize with wedding parties prior to the ceremony. That is that the bride is the star of the show. I tell them if they’re not sure how they should be standing, they just face wherever the bride is. Laurie and I have also attended weddings just as guests. One of them was memorable in that it bothered me. I wasn’t sure why, but Laurie later identified the problem. She is biased and tells me often she much prefers the weddings I do to what others do. But in this case she was quite clear on why. She said the pastor somehow put the focus on himself. He made it about him. A wedding should first be about the Lord, then it should be about the bride and groom, because it is the biggest day of their lives. He made it about himself and it was kind of jarring.

Life is not about us. Your life is not about you, my life is not about me. Our lives are about Jesus. When we make life about ourselves it is even more dissonant than if we were to try to make a wedding about ourselves rather than the bride and groom.

When you have a disagreement with a spouse, your goal should be “Jesus must become greater, I must become less.” When people don’t notice you and you feel hurt, your goal should be, “Jesus must become greater, I must become less.” When life isn’t going the way you wish it would, the goal should be, “Jesus must become great, I must become less.”

We have a neighbor who once was on our homeowners association board and is the kind of person who you don’t want there. She would have fit in well as a Nazi. She’s off the board now, and often will bend your ear on what’s wrong with the current board, which in her mind is pretty much everything. At one point when she was no longer on the board, fortunately, she brought up to Laurie the fact that our regulations stipulate that one is not allowed to run a business in one’s home and Laurie was teaching music in our home, thus running a business. The woman failed to notice that she owned a consignment store and constantly was moving merchandise in and out of her garage. How do you deal with prickly people like that? Jesus must become greater and I must become less.

ACCEPTING WHAT GOD GIVES DOES NOT MEAN NEVER SEEKING CHANGE

John’s secret was knowing that whatever he had, he had received it from God. Therefore, he could accept gladly the role God had given him and not feel frustrated by not having some other role. That is a secret we need to live by in our lives as well. But that could raise the objection that doesn’t that doom us to never seeking anything better in life? If we try to change it, to better our place in life, or to better ourselves, aren’t we saying that what God has given us is not enough? Aren’t we rejecting what he has given us?

That is not necessarily the case. Taking that attitude would be a little like if I said in my current situation, “Well, what God has given me includes having a potentially deadly disease. I need to accept that this is what God has for me.” It is not being disobedient to God to seek treatment that might be able to cure the disease.

How can I seek to have better while still accepting what God has for me? That’s not too difficult to figure out. It involves not insisting that I get what I have what determined to be something better. In other words, it leaves the outcome to God. If I see a way that I would like to be better, to have my life be better and say, “I *must* have that. I can never be happy, fulfilled, at peace if I don’t get this,” then I am not accepting what God gives. I’m telling him what he must give me. But if I say, “I would like to have something better, and I will seek it, but what he decides is what matters, not what I want,” then I am accepting whatever God gives.

LIVING FOR JESUS’S GLORY BRINGS JOY AND FREEDOM

Pay attention to what John said in verse 29. He understood and accepted the role God had given him as Jesus’ best man. As a result he said, “That joy is mine, and it is now complete.” John found great joy in the role God had given him, and that joy was full, complete. It turns out that we can experience the same thing. As we accept what God gives us to be and do, as we live seeking that Jesus become greater and we become less, we will be freed from our slavery to self and will find great peace and joy.

There is a great lie that is believed by almost everyone. That lie is that I will have more joy, I will be happier and more fulfilled if I can have bigger success, more notice, more approval, more money.” We need to get hold of the profound truth that none of that is true. More of that kind of stuff that happens outside of us will not produce true, lasting joy.

It is easy to understand why we buy that lie, because when we have some great success, we are given approval, we get more money, we get joy. That is natural. Joy is a response to something good happening to us. But the key question is, how long does that joy last? Typically it doesn’t last very long. It is a temporary bump in our level of joy, but it will at some point fade and we will be back to where we were before.

I was thinking recently about the day Toby graduated from medical school. That was in June, 2018. What a happy day. There was great joy for Toby and Anna, and for all of us in the family. He had made it through a long, arduous ordeal, and it was cause for great rejoicing. However, a few weeks later he began his residency. That proved to be another long grind that lived up, or down, to the reputation that residency has. During all those times the joy of that day didn’t make any difference at all. Its effect was temporary.

That kind of joy is a wonderful thing, but it cannot sustain us, because it doesn’t last. We need a joy that is deeper and longer lasting. We need the kind of joy John had. There is tremendous joy and freedom in being who God has given you to be and doing what he gives you to do. It is a joy that lasts and sets us free.

I had a conversation some time back with a friend who has had to deal with some hard things in life. I’ve spent a lot of time talking to this friend, mostly listening, but I also have had occasion to seek to help him, to give him perspective on how to deal with some of those things. In this particular conversation he shared how there had been significant change in his life. As he talked it became apparent that he had grasped some of the ideas I had shared with him. It had caused a revolution in his thinking and living. But the interesting thing is that he told me about how some things he had heard and read from other people had opened his eyes and let him to finally grab these ideas. He evidently did not recall these were things I had told him repeatedly.

That was a moment when I applied John’s motto. He must become greater, I must become less. In other words, it’s not about me, it’s about Jesus. If I’m living about Jesus then I can rejoice in the fact that the Spirit of Jesus has worked in my friend’s life. Whether I had a role in it or not is utterly unimportant. It is irrelevant. If I don’t have that attitude what happens? I can have some hurt feelings because my friend doesn’t attribute his revelation to my efforts in his life. I can get down on myself because somehow I apparently wasn’t able to get through to him the way someone else did. None of that is helpful, good or joyful. But when I’m about Jesus being greater and me being less, then I get to rejoice in what he has done in my friend’s life. In short, I am freed up from me, which frees me up from lots of hurt feelings or getting down on myself thinking I am a failure.

More than 40 years ago when I was in seminary and then my very earliest years as a pastor I got to know quite a few young pastors who, like me, were just starting out in ministry. At the time I thought that two of the men I met during that time were likely destined to lead very large churches because they seemed to me to be particularly gifted. Among the others there were two other guys that seemed fine, guys I figured would do all right in ministry, but they were both guys I didn’t particularly click with. I didn’t have any problem with them, I just didn’t find them particularly warm fuzzy guys. It has been interesting to see what has happened in the many years since. One of the two guys I thought were headed for greatness totally flamed out due to moral failures. The other one never really went anywhere in ministry, in fact, he kind of failed. Those other two guys, the ones that I figured would do all right but didn’t think much of beyond that, went on to lead two massive megachurches.

I had high hopes when I started out in ministry. I never had the kind of results that those two megachurch pastors had. God did not choose to give me that role. That has been all right with me. In the past few years I’ve gained even more perspective on that. I have had friends who have had some encounters with both of those megachurch pastors, and in both cases they came away with some rather negative impressions. They saw things in those men they really didn’t like. Would I want to be like those guys if that came with their “success”? For me the answer is no. In fact, as measured by the world’s standards, the past 12 years of my ministry have been the least “successful.” And yet, they have been the happiest, most joyful years of ministry in my life. That makes it very easy for me to accept what God has given me and not compare myself with others.

For peace, for joy, for fulfillment in life, for being the people God wants us to be, what we most need to do is accept what God gives us and live with our focus being on Jesus becoming greater and us becoming less in every situation, every relationship.