

Opening Words

We must realize that any ministry we have is only because God gives it to us. Be faithful to what he gives you.

OSL 023 The Humble Prophet 1

In John chapters 2 and 3 we read about Jesus at a Passover festival where one night he had a conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Nicodemus asked many questions. Jesus provided many answers. Nicodemus was deeply moved by all that Jesus said. His message of being born again, of a fresh start by the Spirit of God was something that stirred deeply within his soul. It satisfied a hunger and quenched a thirst that had been growing within. The prophets had spoken about this. The prophet Ezekiel in 36:26-27 said:

“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.”

The Passover festival was now over. Jesus had performed mighty works of power. He had healed several people, and many saw his works. But Jesus would not openly commit himself to the people’s wishes. He backed away from their words of praise because he did not trust them or believe their words. He shared openly about himself with one man only, Nicodemus the Pharisee.

Where, now, would Jesus go? He and his small band of followers – Peter, Andrew, John, Nathanael, and Philip went into the countryside of Judea with its villages. They were not far from where John was still preaching, but now Jesus would lift his voice to all!

His message was repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand. God was beginning to work among his people as he foretold by the prophets. Turn from your sins, all those things that enslave you. Give your heart freshly to God. The reign of God is coming to you with joy, with compassion, with mercy, and with power. But you must be ready, and you must be watchful for it comes in a way and in a time that you may not expect.”

The multitudes thronged to Jesus to hear him preach, and John 3:22 and 4:1-2 tell us that he even allowed the disciples to baptize the people just like they had seen John baptize people. They did not yet know that a greater baptism awaited, the baptism of the Spirit and the baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. All that would come later, and they held on, for a while, to the practices they had learned from John, but all that would change in time.

As the people listened to Jesus preach, they must have thought that no one preached like him. Not even John! And there was another difference, Jesus healed people! Jesus did not just talk about the power of the kingdom, he showed it in acts of mercy and compassion to those in need.

Every day Jesus would preach and heal, and without a doubt, every evening he would gather in private with his disciples, reviewing what had happened that day, and shaping their minds to understand what the kingdom of God was about and how it would come into the world in a way that would surprise many. But how much did they understand? Only time would tell.

Not far away and to the north of where Jesus was, in a place called Aenon near Salim where there was much running water for baptizing, John was continuing to preach. This was not far from the province of Samaria. It was east of Mt. Gerizim and the ancient village of Shechem. There, John the prophet continued to labor in the ministry God had given him. He continued to proclaim that the Messiah was now among them and the kingdom of God would soon be revealed to all.

A man was listening to John preach, and he had a question. He approached some men who were John's helpers, and he asked a question about purification. This was an important question for the people of that day.

Purification rules were core values. Purification rules gave meaning to ethnic or religious groups of people. When people lived according to the values of the group, they are considered "pure". When they did not, they were considered impure. If you were in this group following their rules or core values, you were clean. If you were not, you were unclean.

Purity could be defined by time and place – if you rested on the Sabbath you were clean. If you sacrificed, you must do it in the Temple in Jerusalem. And there was purity regarding the objects used in worship – certain things were consecrated for service in the temple.

As you can see, purity before God was of immense importance to ancient people. It was also important for this unnamed man we read about in John 3:25. He was talking with John's disciples about purity. What made a man pure before God? How did John's baptism purify people? And now there was another person who was baptizing people. Jesus was preaching now, his disciples were baptizing people, and they were drawing larger crowds than John! You can read about that in the Gospel of John, 3:25-26.

I wonder if this was the first time John the Baptist's disciples heard about Jesus' crowds. Remember, when John saw Jesus, after his temptation, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God! There is the One who is the Messiah!" Two of John's disciples followed after Jesus, and then, John never saw Jesus again and heard no report about him until this man comes and says, "The one that you baptized. The one whom you said is the Messiah, He is now preaching, and we have learned that he has bigger crowds than you have!"

They must have noticed that their crowds were becoming smaller. And I wonder if they were jealous for John. We read in 3:26 that they said, "Rabbi, the one that you baptized, he is now preaching. His disciples are baptizing. And they now have larger crowds than we have!"

John’s response to his disciples and to this man who had the question about purity is one of my favorite passages in Scripture, and it contains a famous statement that many quote. Let me read for you the amazing words in John 3:27-30.

²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”

I want to explain what John said to those men that day. Its lessons are important for all of us.

First, he said, a person can only receive what has been given him from heaven. In this statement John tells us that he, and any of us for that matter, can only serve as God commissions and empowers us. We do not do this in our strength but only by God’s. John was prepared for his mission from his birth. It was a mission God gave, and he tells us that any task we perform only has value if it comes from God in heaven. For John, it meant that if crowds were big or small, it did not matter. What mattered is that he was faithfully fulfilling what God gave him to do. If he was to preach one more year, or month, or day, that was up to God. Whatever service he performed was only because it was a gift from heaven. And we might add, it is this kind of humility and obedience to God that purifies a man!

Second, John reminded them that he was not the Messiah, and that his mission was to go before him and prepare the way for him. If John was not the Messiah, then, ultimately, people would stop following him and start following Jesus! That was his mission, to point the way to Jesus.

Third, John used an illustration from life. He spoke of a wedding, and the friend of the bridegroom. This person was called a shoshbin. He was a formal witness, contributed financially to the wedding and was there to ensure its success. That was John’s role. He was the Shoshbin, the friend of the bridegroom, or what we call in our culture, “the best man.” It is a position of great honor, but when the wedding vows are completed, it is the groom who receives the bride, not the best man!

John went on to say that this person who helped at a wedding rejoiced when he heard the voice of the groom. The Greek text says, “He rejoices with joy!” In that culture, it was mandatory to rejoice at a wedding. Some rabbis would say that joy was so important at a wedding that bridegrooms were free from most daily prayers, and if a wedding was during the Feast of Tabernacles, they did not have to live in a shelter made from branches. In other words, they were exempt from many mandatory religious duties so that they could fully experience the joy of the wedding.

And John is saying that this is his experience. Are the crowds going to Jesus? Great! That brings him joy! That is what should happen!

Finally, John says, “He must become greater. I must become less.” Another translation says, “He must increase. I must decrease.”

What words these were from John, and what lessons they teach us! First, we must realize, with John, that any ministry we have is only because God gives it to us. As John said, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.” What has God given to you? What has he not given? Are you jealous if someone seems to have a greater gift from God? If someone seems to have a bigger, more prominent ministry? If someone seems more important in the kingdom. Don’t fall into the trap of comparing and don’t fall into the trap of jealousy or doing ministry for self-fulfillment. Be faithful to what he gives you.

Second, we must remember that we are not the Messiah! We are not the Savior of the world! People do not come and bow to us! Our job is to point people to Jesus. Our job is to prepare the world so that they can come to know him.

Third, we must remember John’s wedding illustration. We are not the bridegroom. Jesus is. The bride, God’s people, are for Jesus, not for us.

And fourth, we must remember that while our influence on people and on the world may grow and become greater, the purpose is so that Jesus can eventually have the greatest influence on them. We must and should fade as Jesus becomes brighter for them. The attention on us must decrease so that the attention on Jesus can increase.

I love this passage! It contains vital lessons for us. May we have the heart of John, the heart of the humble prophet who served Jesus faithfully and pointed people to him!