

# Jesus Preeminent

By Jim Davis

When I was just out of college I began ministry as a youth pastor. My first position was in a small town where there were three active youth programs. There was a memorable conversation that I had with the youth pastor from one of the other churches. He basically admitted to being in competition for the best youth program. At first I reacted in denial but then I submitted to the reality of it. We were raised to compete. It is the American way of life. Measuring success and striving to achieve dominance is what pushes us on to greater heights.

One of the Evil One's greatest tools against the Christian Church is to promote rivalry. Dissention diffuses the power of God's Spirit at work within us. It breaches our fellowship with the Lord and cuts the life source that flows from the vine to the branches (John 15). Our fleshly natures take charge and much of our energies are wasted on our personal ambition. Rivalry is a distraction. It reveals that our focus has been removed from the pursuit of the glory of God to our own personal agenda. The pursuit of the glory of God is the Biblically stated purpose in our life (Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 2:10). Our sinful natures will struggle for the selfish temporal achievements that are seen but we must by faith set our minds upon the things that are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18).

I personally believe that we should be ambitious for eternal things. The Apostle Paul stated, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). In John 3:22-30 we can learn from one of God's greatest prophets some principles for the pursuit of eternal things. Laying up treasure in heaven is a good thing but there are different rules. John the Baptist knew what all who are truly great in God's service must come to understand. We must learn what John the Baptist understood that Jesus "must increase but I must decrease." *Jesus must be preeminent.*

## The Problem of Rivalry

In verse 25-26 a theological argument breaks out between some of John's disciples and a Jew about baptism. Although we are not given details we know that the discussion was about baptism and that they brought the question to John the Baptist with the complaint that Jesus was baptizing and "all are coming to Him." John's disciples are miffed because Jesus, who is from Galilee, "came into the land of Judea" (where they were) and He was baptizing more people than John (John 3:22; 4:1). Perhaps this Jewish man had been baptized by Jesus and felt he did not need to be baptized by John also.

John's baptism was a baptism to national repentance for the Jews (Acts 19:4). They had broken covenant and were called to repentance just as they were called in Isaiah's day (Isaiah 1:16-18). Jesus at the beginning of His ministry was baptizing in the same way. Also, the signs that He and his disciples performed were directed at calling the nation of Israel to repentance. His instruction to His disciples was "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6). Although John had declared that Jesus would baptize in the Spirit this was a future event. Before His ascension He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world...baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It

was not until Pentecost that the New Covenant was ushered in and the baptism of the Holy Spirit first took place.

We do not know the depth of the discussion or the understanding that John's disciples had about baptism. We do know that they did not know God's plan nor could they foresee the future events that included the beheading of their Rabbi and the sacrificial death of the Messiah upon the cross of Calvary. It is a good thing that God does not let us know the future events. No doubt it would overwhelm us.

Here is the question to ask yourself. Has misdirected personal ambition taken control of what I am doing? Competition is for those who are simple in their understanding. In other words God does not much care about whether we "succeed" at having the largest youth group. His heart and attention is upon the youth whose lives are being destroyed by wrong choices and futile pursuits in life. What a shame it is for God's people to confuse our personal ambitions with what God is doing. Christian ministries sometimes become focused on the number of people, or the finances, or the big names to measure their success. But ultimately our success will be measured by our faithfulness in the pursuit of the glory of God.

We may attempt to control what God is doing and how He is doing it but it will never work to God's glory. John did not go along with his disciples. He did not attempt to begin some new programs to pump the numbers back up. Let's consider what John taught his disciples and how he responded to the news that his ministry is no longer effective.

### **The Godly Response to Rivalry**

Beginning in verse 27 John responds to his disciples question with some principles that will be good for everyone who is involved in ministry to understand.

*Ministry is given to us by God.* In verse 27 John teaches his disciples that what they have received has been given to them from heaven. Later in the book of John Jesus told the Roman ruler Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above..." (John 19:11). The reality is that all position and all success is given from God. Knowledge of this truth dampens our tendency toward pride and self-reliance. It will also broaden the potential to be used effectively by God. The influence of John the Baptist has now extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. His counsel to his disciples is still good for us today. But there is more to learn...

*Ministers must be content with God's calling.* In verse 28 John said, "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.'" John was content with his calling and he was not trying to be anything more. He publicly testified that he was not the Messiah (John 1:20) and he was content with the gifts and plan that God had for him. Effective ministers know God's purpose and they do not allow events to distract them from focus upon that God-given purpose. It is a foolish thing for a person to wish or try to be someone else. The Bible teaches that we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. If God has not called us to be a teacher or an evangelist it is futile for us to try to be one.

*Ministers find fulfillment in completing their individualized task.* In verse 29 John uses a figure of speech to describe his relationship with Jesus and God's plan for his ministry. "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. And so this joy of mine has been made full." John's assignment was to announce the coming of the Messiah to Israel.

He had completed his task and he found satisfaction in it. John the Baptist was one of those rare people who could answer the big question, what is my purpose in life? But he was even more rare in that he could say I have completed it and my joy is full.

Ministers must hold Jesus Christ preeminent. I would love to have seen John's disciples when he made this powerful statement in verse 30, "He must increase, but I must decrease." The bottom line is that John was more concerned with God's plan than his own personal ambitions. He recognized that Israel being introduced to their Messiah was more important than how big his ministry was going to be.

## **Conclusion**

When a teacher gives a lecture he often uses a pointer to indicate places on a map or a chart. We do not look at the pointer but at that to which our attention is directed. That was John's purpose and that is the purpose of every minister today. If we desire to lay up treasure in heaven or bear spiritual fruit we must point others to Jesus. He must be preeminent. Jesus must take priority. He must come before our personal ambitions. He must excel upon the throne of our heart. His desires must become our passion. His will must subject our wills. His mind must control our minds. His heart must rule our hearts. His purpose must become our purpose. His strategy must become our strategy. His glory must be our focus and goal in life.

Does your life emphasize Jesus Christ? Are you yielding to God's strategy for your future, your business, your life, your ministry? Are God's purposes your focus in life? Is God's glory your goal in life? If you want to invest in eternal things Jesus must increase and you must decrease.