

Addition by Subtraction

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Our congregational theme is “Adding More in 2024.” We serve a God of great love. He wants us to fully experience His grace. Experiencing the grace of God requires our active participation with Jesus. Our theme encourages our involvement through faith. This month, we want to consider an example of someone who recognized how to receive the grace of God through faith in Jesus: John.

The New Testament introduces John by stating, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light” (John 1:6-8).

John’s role was to amass a following for the Messiah. John’s followers were to become the followers of Jesus. As this transition began to occur, some of John’s followers were surprised and confused. Wasn’t John concerned that he was losing his disciples?

John had a tremendous understanding of his role in announcing the Messiah to the world. Concerning Jesus, John told one of his disciples, “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30).

This is a concise statement; yet profoundly insightful. John had a deeply mature understanding of Jesus. If we want to fully experience the grace of God, Jesus must increase in our lives and we must decrease. In other words, we must do addition by subtraction.

No Greater Prophet

Near the end of John’s life, Jesus would say, “...among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). If we want to be great, we must learn from the humble example of John. Consider how Jesus can increase in our lives when we decrease.

1). The heart of John. The statement of John is revealing of his heart. John’s character is admirable. He was selected by God to prepare Israel for the Messiah. He devoted his life to this ministry. He lived a rough and rugged existence in the wilderness. From this harsh place of death, John preached the hope of new life.

John was a believer of great conviction. As Jesus would later indicate, John was viewed as insane by the religious leaders. Their rejection of him did not deter him from his mission. As strong as John was, he was not ambitious or self-interested. He drew attention

to the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). In the end, John would die for his faith in Jesus.

2). We must decrease. As we think about the heart of John, we should be impressed by his faith and humility. From an earthly perspective, his followers are all he had; yet he turned them away from himself and towards Jesus.

“And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:26-30).

While John had nothing, by faith, John gained everything. Pride had decreased in his heart. In its place, Jesus had increased in John's heart. This was his source of faith, conviction, and hope.

We must decrease. Our pride. Our selfishness. Our craving for power. Emptying our hearts of selfish ambition will create space for Jesus to increase. The emptying of self was foreshadowed in John and fulfilled by Jesus. John shows us how to be like Jesus.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:3-5).

3). How Jesus increases in our lives. More specifically consider how Jesus will increase in our lives. First, we must have faith in Jesus. We must look to Him to take away our sins (John 1:29). We must learn to trust His message of change and transformation.

Second, we must sacrifice sin. John could have claimed to be the Messiah. Some would have followed him. However, the claim would not have been true. We sometimes tell ourselves lies. We tell ourselves we can hold onto sin and Jesus. Jesus will never increase in our lives if we refuse to sacrifice sin.

Third, we must implement new attitudes and behaviors. Lust must be replaced with love. Pride must be replaced with humility. Selfishness must be replaced with service. This new way of life is most clearly exemplified in Jesus. We must learn to be like Him. He is to become our life.

Conclusion

We need to experience Jesus to a fuller extent in our lives. John is an example of how Jesus can increase more and more in our lives. Decreasing our ambition may seem counter intuitive. However, this is how our joy, sense of purpose, and hope will increase at the rate Jesus increases in our lives.