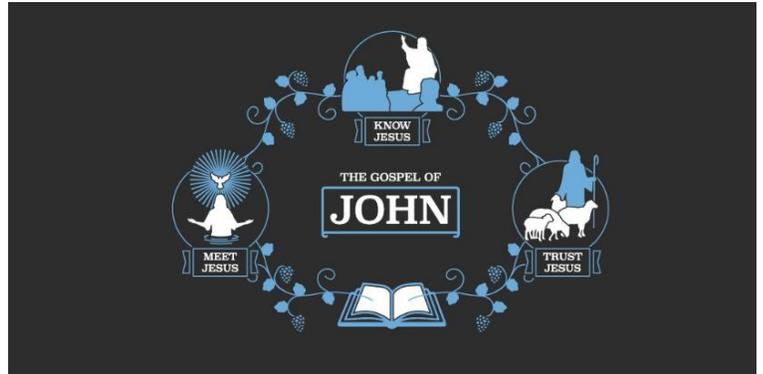




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## The Secret to Success The Gospel of John Matthew 11:11, John 3:22–36 Tim Badal | October 10, 2021



Please take God's Word and turn to the Gospel of John. We've been looking at the story line of Jesus told by the greatest friend He had in His earthly ministry. The Apostle John loved Jesus and loved to speak about Jesus and all Jesus had done. Today we're at the end of John 3, starting with verse 22. This passage comes on the heels of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. In that conversation, we learned that we all must be born again. We've learned that we must be born of the Spirit in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Now that John has explained what it means to be born again—through believing in Jesus Christ Whom God sent to save us from our sins—the question we must answer is what does this new birth look like? What implications does it have for our lives?

I believe that the little interlude we read about today, focused on the life of John the Baptist, will show us what the new birth looks like in the context of real life. We'll be looking to see what made John the Baptist so great. This will help us understand that when success comes our way, we can use this for the glory of God alone.

I want to begin, however, by turning to a passage in Matthew. When we talk about success and greatness, we naturally ask who is the greatest? Jesus says this about John the Baptist in Matthew 11:11: *"Truly, I say to you, 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."*

John the Baptist was a great man. He was a phenomenal human being. As we'll learn though, he wasn't great from the world's perspective, but from God's. As people, we have a yearning to be successful, no matter our age or where we are today. We desire to be successful in our work, our schooling, our relationships, our marriages. We want our kids to be successful. That's not just true for us as believers, but it's true for every human. We want success. The problem is that the world's definition of success is very different from God's definition. So as believers, we need to ask God to give us His definition. What kind of success does He desire us to have, then how do we get there?

Our pursuit of success can take us to a lot of different places. A simple search on Amazon's Kindle page under the heading "success" will bring over 50,000 books written to help us find success. One question that comes to mind is who has already been successful? We might think, "If I could learn from them, maybe there's a certain strategy or list of actions they took that I can follow as well."

This is exactly what I hope we'll do this morning when we're done looking at our passage in John 3. If Jesus Himself considered John to be one of the greatest and most successful men ever, then what was there about John that made this true? What can we do to follow his model and his beliefs so we too can be successful?

Let's look now at our text in John 3:

<sup>22</sup>After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. <sup>23</sup>John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized <sup>24</sup>(for John had not yet been put in prison).

John is giving us a time stamp here, because at a future date, John the Baptist will be imprisoned and then beheaded for his faith.

<sup>25</sup>Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.

This was probably referring to baptism with the questions probably coming from the Pharisees. They were wondering what right John the Baptist had to do baptisms and preach this repentance message.

<sup>26</sup>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."

What's going on here was a conflict between two ministries. For some time, John the Baptist had been center stage as the reformer of Israel. He had developed a following that grew larger and larger because God had blessed his ministry. It had brought countless people to repentance and prepared them for the coming Messiah. Then at the peak of his ministry, it began to trend downward. Fewer people were coming. There were fewer baptisms. John's followers were concerned, so they came to John to ask him about it. They were aware that there was another Rabbi Who was drawing people to Himself. It looked to them like there was competition. But it's here that we discover the greatness of John the Baptist in his humility.

If there's anything I want you to walk away with from this message, it's that the only path to real success in God's eyes is through humbling ourselves. John the Baptist was one of the humblest individuals who ever lived.

## **True success in life involves eradicating your envy of others.**

This means there are certain things we have to get rid of. First, we need to eradicate any envy we have of others. As we see in these verses, the glory days of John the Baptist are coming to an end and some of his followers have become envious of this new ministry that has come on the scene.

What is envy? It's been defined as the emotion which occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement or possession. He either desires it for himself or wishes others didn't have it. Aristotle offered this truth about envy: "It is the pain at the sight of another's good fortune."

We are sad or hurt or angry because someone else has been blessed by or is achieving something we wish for ourselves. Envy says, "I should have that," Or, "That person should not have that. If I can't have it, nobody should."

In today's story, the followers of John are envious of the followers of the new Rabbi. We see this in several ways. Verse 26 gives us these words to John: "*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's disciples had disdain for Jesus.**

First, these disciples of John's revealed their disdain for Jesus. They couldn't even speak His name. "Rabbi, that nameless dude..." His name didn't even matter to them. "That guy—he's doing what you're doing."

Time out. If we go back to John 1:29, when John saw Jesus, he uttered the words, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" That wasn't something he'd ever said before. You would think the followers of John would have keyed in on this. Then he said, "I should not even be touching His sandals." He went on to say in verse 34, "*This is the Son of God.*" John had baptized thousands of people and never had made that kind of statement about anyone else. But with Jesus he declared, "This One, Who is in the water with me right now, is in fact the Son of God."

We also read in other Gospels that when Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said, "This is My Son, in whom I am well pleased." It wasn't an ordinary baptism. But out of their envy, these men referred to Him as a nameless guy who was out there doing "ministry."

When we're envious, we have disdain for those who are doing better than we are. It might even be a friend or someone in our family. We don't want to mention their names out of our envy and jealousy.

### **John's disciples looked with desire for what others had.**

Second, when you're envious, your eyes aren't on your own ministry and what God is doing through you. You're not thinking about being grateful for all God has done. Notice where the attention of these men was. "Rabbi, He was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, He is baptizing." These men were more focused on Jesus and His victories than they were on what God was doing through them. They're more concerned about His converts than the ones God's Spirit was giving them.

Envy causes us to look with desire and covetousness for what others have. Instead of looking at our spouse, we look at the spouses of others and they look better to us. Instead of looking at our own kids, we focus on someone's kids who are on the honor roll, who performed well in the ball game, who starred in the big musical. We might do this with people around us at work. They got that promotion or award, but we got nothing.

Envy takes our eyes off what God is doing in our lives and puts them on what God is doing in other people's lives, but our response isn't to cheer them on. "Praise God, look at how He's blessing that person!"

### **John's disciples exaggerated what Jesus was doing.**

Envy also causes us to exaggerate wins and losses. "*Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.*" The Greek word here simply means everyone. In other words, from the point of view of these disciples, their own ministry was now bankrupt. They went from the pinnacle to nothing.

Can I tell you, that in their exaggerations, they are lying? John—an objective observer—says in verse 22, "*After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.*" Exaggerations always contain a nugget of truth. John the Baptist's disciples said Jesus was baptizing. That was true. Where they exaggerated was when they said "all"—that everyone was going to Jesus.

Look at verse 23: "*John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there...*" John needed lots of water. Why? Because he was baptizing lots of people. The verse goes on to say, "*...people were coming and being baptized.*"

The disciples said, "We have nothing." But John, the observer, tells us not only where they were baptizing people, but that they were baptizing a lot of people and needed a river for that many people. Do you see? Their envy elevated what Jesus was doing—that He was baptizing "everyone"—but they overlooked what John was still doing.

This is what we also do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We start going through Facebook or other social media, then become envious of others' lives. "Oh, it must be nice to be able to go apple picking on a Saturday. It must be nice to have your teenagers smile and want to be with you. My children don't want to be with me. Must be nice that your kids are on the honor roll or have the lead in the play." We start to think, "Everything is going well for them. They have no problems at all, but all I have are issues and struggles." Am I getting close here? We all are tempted to exaggerate: "Everything goes their way. Nothing goes my way."

This is what John's followers were struggling with. So they went to their leader and asked him, "What do you say about this? This is unfair. We were the ones who were given the command by God Himself to go. You are the voice in the wilderness, John. You were the one called to prepare the way, but now this new guy is getting all our fans. What are we going to do?"

## **True success in life involves eliminating any hint of a God complex.**

It's here that John the Baptist proves his greatness. He teaches us that not only do we need to eradicate envy from our lives in relationship to others, but we also need to eliminate any hint of a God complex. I want you to know something. John the Baptist was an incredibly awesome individual. Like out of this world awesome. Here's why. People thought he was God. Did you know that? He kept being asked, "Are you the one?"

That's pretty impressive. I have never been asked, "Are you God?" Never. I preach some pretty good sermons. But I walk down from the stage and no one ever asks me, "Are you the one? Are you the one who came from heaven?" It never happens. My wife hasn't even asked me that.

But John got asked this over and over again. People thought he was God. People thought he was the one. He had followers. Be careful when you have followers. Be careful when your followers fight for your name, for your renown. John had a lot of followers and they were jealous for the reputation of their leader. So they came to him and said, "We don't want to even name this rabbi. He seems to be getting some glory, but you're the one who should be getting that."

If anyone would have had a God complex, it could have been John the Baptist. Let's not forget that John would have heard over and over again, "You know how great you are? God so badly wanted you in this world that your aged parents, who were infertile for decades, had you in their old age. You were filled with the Spirit before you were born. Nobody can say that about themselves—but you can. And now you've got this great ministry."

If anyone had the right to say, "I'm the guy," if anyone could have been arrogant, it would have been John the Baptist. But let's look at what he says in verses 27-28:

"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.'"

If you want to create an atmosphere of humility in your life, two realizations need to take place.

### **Humility recognizes I am not God.**

First, you and I need to wake up every morning and utter the words John just said: "I am not the Christ." It would help us greatly if we would say, "I am not God." You need to say that to yourself right now: "I am not God." But we act like we're God, in what we demand of people, in the disdain and frustration we have.

I'm preaching to myself right now. When other people don't live up to my expectations, I can easily think, "How dare you let me down? Don't you know who I am? Don't you know what I'm all about?" Our frustration, anger and vitriol comes out. "If you speak against me... If you don't show up on time for an appointment with me... Don't you know how important I am?" A little bit of a God complex is coming in.

What John the Baptist is showing us is that every follower of Christ needs to get through our thick skulls that: we are not the Christ. So when people start propping us up—"Wow, you're amazing. Everything you touch turns to gold"—you need to say, "Listen, I am not the Christ." That's our first response.

### **Humility realizes that everything I have comes from someone else.**

A second realization is that everything you have comes from someone else, not yourself. Your job. Your spouse. Your family. Your money. Your advancements. Your opportunities. Your possessions. Everything, everything you have, everything you will ever have, did not come because in your infinite wisdom, knowledge and abilities you made it possible.

Everything we have, everything we are comes from the hand of a benevolent God Who loves us and has lavished His grace upon us. Everything. So what in the world are we thinking when we say, "I created that. I achieved that. Look at what my great mind came up with. Look at what my persuasive skills have wrought"?

None of this is possible because of my giftings. I am nothing apart from the God Who loved me and saved me. You see, in our pursuit of success, we hit brick wall after brick wall. Then at some point, we find a victory. We find success. I think one of the reasons why God doesn't give us all the success we could have is because He knows it would go to our heads. We go about our lives—in our workplaces and in our families—willing for things to take place. When they do, we are struck with awe and wonder about how great we are. "Look at what I've done. Look at all I've accomplished with these hands. It is quite remarkable. I must be an amazing individual." Little do we know that we played such a small part in those achievements. Our Heavenly Father behind us has graced us with what we have.

To illustrate this, I'm going to show you a car commercial. I want you to put yourself and your pursuit of success into this little boy. I want you to watch what happens when he finally finds success, little knowing that it is his dad who's the one who made it possible.

[Follow link to [Commercial](#)]

Do you get it? Locked in? When we get that big deal at work, when that new opportunity arises, when that relationship comes to fruition, we stand back and think, "Look at what I've done!" Little do we know that is a God complex and that God in His infinite love and mercy has given us the ability to enjoy it.

## **True success in life involves exercising a Kingdom agenda.**

We need to eliminate the God complex. John the Baptist did. And once he eradicated the envy in his life, and once he eliminated the God complex, he was enabled to exercise a Kingdom agenda. Looking again at our text, what John begins to explain is this: "My job, my purpose in life, is like being a best man in a wedding." Here's what he says, beginning in verse 27:

<sup>27</sup> John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease. <sup>31</sup> He who comes from above is above all."

John the Baptist knew his place. His place was to be the best man. His place was to be an attendant at the groom's wedding. I've been part of a lot of weddings in my line of work, both as a pastor and as a caterer. There is nothing more tacky than an attendant who tries to take over the wedding. Have you ever been part of a bad best man speech? It just goes on and on and on—and it's all about him. It's like, "Dude, we're not here because of you. We didn't come to hear you talk. Okay, you play a small part, but we're here for the celebration of the bride and groom."

Far too many of us as Christ followers think it's about us. It's our show. We're supposed to be in the spotlight. There's nothing more tacky in this world than a Christ follower who makes more about themselves than about Jesus Who saved them. Don't ever forget that. There's no worse thing we can do in this world than make much of us and less of Jesus.

### **This means pointing people to the real star.**

John the Baptist said, "I know my place. My job it to point people to the Star of the show. Everything I do, in victory and defeat, is to point the spotlight to Jesus." Oh my goodness, if we would just hear that, receive that and do that, the outreach we could have would be mind blowing.

If we went to work, if we went to school, if we engaged our neighborhood with the focus of, "It's not about me; it's about Jesus, Who saved me, this Jesus Who has given me everything I have," the impact we would have would be amazing.

John says, "I know my place. My place is to rejoice and declare the One Who has come from above. He is, He was, He will always be above all." Can you say that this morning? Jesus is first, Jesus is above any pursuit, any desire, any accolade we might gain.

### **This means practicing an "I am second" posture.**

In order for this to happen, you and I must practice what I am calling an "I am second" posture. He must increase; I must decrease. People came from far and wide to hear John the Baptist speak. They obeyed his call to repent and be baptized. He changed a nation and prepared the people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This man had so much going for him, but all of that happened before John the Baptist was put in prison (John 3:24). John would lose his crowds. He would lose his fame. He would lose his standing among his friends and community. He was thrown into prison, put in solitary confinement, then on a day of someone else's choosing he would be drawn out of that cell, held down, then beheaded for his faith. Talk about decreasing. Talk about being made low. But John said, "If that gives Jesus the greater spotlight, praise be to God."

How many of us—and I include myself in this—are willing to lose everything so that the name of Jesus might grow? That is humility. That is success. That is greatness. I think it's been far too long that the people of God and the preachers of God's Word have made it about themselves, rather than making much of the One Who saved us.

I wrote this down recently and trust it will be blessing and benefit: "Success isn't found in the grandeur of one's resumé."

But we work on that resumé, don't we? We polish that resumé up. We make sure our name is in the spotlight. That's not where success is found. The world says that's where you find success. But for the Christian, success is rather found "in the grace one receives from God." So rejoice in what God has done in your life. You and I don't deserve it, but He gave it.

Thank God for what He's given. Thank God for the opportunities. Thank God that He allowed you to have the gifts and abilities to do what you are doing. But be so desirous of God and His glory, that if it means you have to lose everything, it would be worth it. You and I should consider this joy, because if it expands the Kingdom of God one inch, it was worth it all. So humble yourselves and find greatness in humility. How do we do that? We need the strength of God. We need the Spirit of God to move in us. We need the Lord each and every hour, because without Him you and I can do nothing. Without Him, we will become prideful and arrogant. However, with the Spirit moving in our lives, there and only there will we find humility.