

Lenten Series: "I Must Decrease"

John 3:22-30

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I'd like to begin by showing you a picture from a movie called *Oliver Twist* where there was a scene when the main character stood in front of a kitchen server - holding his food bowl, and in front of all the other kids in the orphanage, he said: *"Please sir, I want some more."*



The server couldn't believe what he heard, and so he said: *"What?"* So Oliver repeated the request: *"Please sir, I want some more."*

The context of that scene, was that the boys in the orphanage didn't get enough to eat, and so they drew straws to see who would be the one to ask if they could all have more food. Well, Oliver drew the short straw and so it was up to him to ask: *"Please sir, I want some more."*

Charles Dickens wrote the story of *Oliver Twist* back in 1838. It was a fictional story meant to illustrate the effects of poverty and what it does to society - in particular young children, but even though *Oliver Twist* was not a real person, I'd like to borrow that famous scene and echo Oliver's words, knowing that I'm doing so out of context, because the words that Oliver said at that moment could have been said by anyone, whether back in 1838 or even today in 2021: *"Please, sir, I want some more."*

More food on our plates, more money in our pockets, more clothes in our closets... we want more.

If I go to eat at a buffet, I can never seem to pile the food high enough on my plate. I can't remember the last time I went to a buffet and after one piece of lettuce or one piece of shrimp, I said to myself, "*That was enough.. I'm really full!*" No. When I go to a buffet, I'll keep going back, plate after plate, shrimp after shrimp - like there's no tomorrow, because when it comes to food, "*the more the better!*"

The same is also true when it comes to other things.

More leg-room is better than less leg-room isn't it? That's why a 1st class airplane ticket costs a lot more than coach.

More head-room is better than less head-room. That's why a huge SUV costs a lot more than a sub-compact.

More trunk space, more closet space, more memory, more toilet paper. I think that's why I like shopping at Costco because they have more of everything.

I think you'd agree with me that when it comes to a lot of things, having "more" is better than having "less."

A few years ago, I sat down with a financial investment officer to look at my financial health and to start planning for retirement. (Don't worry, based on my financial health, I won't be retiring any time soon!)

But as we sat down and went over my finances, she asked me a question: "*How much \$ would I need to save up in order to happily retire?*"

I was wondering if that was a trick question because she used the word "happily," but it was also a tough question to answer because I didn't even know how much money I had.

And so she looked at all my documents and records and did some calculations, based on when I might retire and then she showed me a number and then asked me again if I thought it was enough? I replied: *"I don't think so."*

Then she asked me again: *"Well, how much do you think you'll need to happily retire?"* And my answer was very simple - my answer was: *"More."*
"How much more" she asked. "A lot more." I answered.

Whether you're planning for retirement or looking for a new car, whether you're buy a seat on a plane or eating at a buffet, most people would agree that having "more" is better than having "less."

"Less is more."

Well, back in the mid 1950's a German-American Architect challenged that idea and his name was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Ludwig was regarded as one of the pioneers of "Modernist Architecture," and he came up with this idea that when it comes to building homes, *"Less is actually more."* (In fact, the phrase you hear today - *"Less is more"* is actually attributed to this architect.)

Here's a picture of a famous home that was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe which is located in Plano, Illinois and is known as the Farnsworth House.



Perhaps you can see his *"Less is more"* concept, built into the home:

Less structure and more open spaces, less walls and more windows, less clutter and more life !

There's almost a "minimalist" theme going on in his design, which was popular in modernist architecture, but here's the fun irony - in order to live in that home, that home would cost you \$7 million dollars (today) and that's primarily because this is a famous house designed by a famous architect.

"Less is more." The architect was onto something!

John 3:22-30

Well, there was a man who lived many centuries before Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. He didn't have a degree in architecture and he didn't build any famous homes, but the one thing that he had in common with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, was that he too loved open spaces and would agree that "Less is more."

His name was John the Baptist and part of his story is told in the Gospel of John 3:22-30.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now, John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized. This was before John was put in prison. An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan - the one you testified about - well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

To this, John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' 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 is now complete. He must become greater, I must become less."

Today is the 1st Sunday in the Season of Lent.

The season lasts 40 days (not counting Sundays) and it started this past Wednesday on Ash Wednesday and goes all the way to Saturday the day before Easter.

Lent is the season where followers of Jesus Christ will often observe this time in a posture of self-sacrifice, embracing the journey Jesus was on, that eventually led Him to the cross.

Well, for this year's season of Lent, I wanted to prepare a sermon series, mindful that for many people, this past year 2020 and even going into this new year, has kind of felt like a really long Lenten season where we have sacrificed so much.

And so for this year's Lenten series, instead of talking about "sacrifice" or "giving things up" for Lent, I'd like to borrow the words of John the Baptist who said: *"He must become greater, I must become less"* or, as other translations read, *"I must **decrease**, He must **increase**."*

This is the underlying theme for this year's Lenten series.

A little bit about John the Baptist

John the Baptist is the ideal person to introduce the Season of Lent, and that's because, for starters, John was a "minimalist."

Listen to what the Gospel of Matthew said about him:

"John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey."

The part where it said that John's clothes were made of camels hair, wasn't to say that he was making a fashion statement - sort of like a desire label, and it wasn't to say that he preferred certain kinds of fabrics,

like cashmere or angora or virgin wool, but when Matthew said that John wore clothes made of camel hair - it was almost as if to say that John was making an "anti-fashion" statement because the only folks who wore clothes made out of camels hair weren't into fashion.

Kind of like that Bernie Sander's meme that was really popular right after the inauguration, plain old clothes, plain old jacket, kind of an under-statement. Well, that was John the Baptist. He didn't care what others thought of how he looked.

Then there was his diet which consisted of locust and wild honey. Kind of sounds like an episode from that show called: "Man vs Wild" where the guy ate everything, but the mention of those two things wasn't to say that John had a unique or particular palette, but to say that he had a frugal diet.

The man wore basic clothing. The man ate whatever was available. Then on top of that, listen to what the Gospel of Luke said about John the Baptist:

"He never drank take wine or any kind of fermented drink."
[paraphrased]

This would indicate that John took the vow of a "Nazarite", and if that was true - than it would also mean that John never cut his hair either.

So here was a guy who didn't obsess over his appearance, he ate what was locally available, he abstained from wine and he didn't spend time grooming himself. John the Baptist had a minimalist lifestyle.

Wouldn't that be an interesting goal to have for the season of Lent?
"a minimalist lifestyle?"

Not obsessed with what we wear, not obsessed over what we eat, a "minimalist lifestyle," but for John it wasn't just a lifestyle - for 40 days, some say that John had a Lenten lifestyle 365 days a year!

John was a forerunner to Christ

Now, there was a purpose for the way John lived his life and that was to focus more of his life and more of his energy to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ! John the Baptist was often referred to as the "Forerunner" to Jesus Christ.

In Luke 1:35-36, it tells us that when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to have a baby, that one of her relatives Elizabeth was also going to have a baby even in her old age, and that she was already six months pregnant with a baby that would become John the Baptist.

So, "chronologically" speaking, John the Baptist was born six months before Jesus, which makes John a fore-runner at least chronologically.

There's a neat thing about John the Baptist which I like always point out!

John the Baptist's birthday is celebrated on June 24th which is six months before Christmas and it is always around the day that the Summer Solstice takes place - which this year is June 20th

The significance of the Summer Solstice is that it is the longest day of the year, and after that, the days get shorter and shorter and the light becomes less and less, which connects with John's words when he said: "*I must decrease - He must increase!*"

(are your jaws not on the floor right now?)

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ. He came before Jesus around 6 months or so (give or take a few days) and as a forerunner, John's role was to prepare the way for the Lord. His was the "voice" calling in the desert: "*Prepare the way for the Lord - make straight paths for him.*"

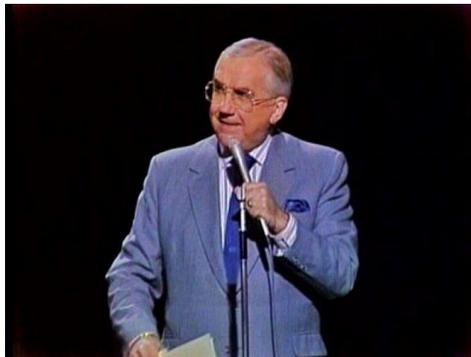
Do you remember back in the 60's - 80's, there was a TV show called "The Tonight Show" hosted by Johnny Carson?

Well, if you weren't born yet, let me rephrase it into a statement:
"Back in the day, there was a TV show called The Tonight Show, and it was hosted by a guy named Johnny Carson."

I used to love watching "The Tonight Show" and seeing all the guests that came on the show, as well as the little comedy routines that Johnny did!

Carnac the Magnificent was my favorite where he would play a psychic, and hold an unopened envelope up to his head and come up with answers, to unseen questions!

Well, every night was different and every show had different guests, which is what made it fun, but the one thing that always stayed the same was how the show began.



The show actually began with a guy named Ed McMahon, who would come out and welcome everyone to the show, and when it was time, to introduce the host, he would point to the stage and say: *"Heeeeeere's Johnny!"*

That's really all that Ed role was on the show - to come out on stage and get everyone's attention and when it was the right time, he introduced Johnny Carson.

When Johnny told jokes - Ed was there to laugh at them. He was kind of like a "side kick" but never the main attraction, and in that sense, he was to Johnny Carson as John the Baptist was to Jesus.

A fore-runner but not the main attraction.

Now, in our passage today, we get a glimpse of what it was like to be in John the Baptist's shoes. (sandals.)

The passage tells us that there was an argument that took place between some of John's disciples and an unnamed Jew about ceremonial washing.

There was also a lot of confusion earlier in John's gospel as to who John the Baptist was. Some people thought that he was Elijah - who had come back to life, other's thought that he was the Messiah and ready to lead the people.

And even though John told them that he was not, he was wildly popular and people flocked to him to hear his message of repentance and baptism.

Now, while all of this was happening, Jesus also began His ministry and was coming onto the world stage. Then at a certain point - as we find out in John 3:26, some of John the Baptist's disciples went up to John and said: "*Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one you testified about, well, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him.*"

The passage gives us a glimpse of this transition that was taking place, where John's ministry was being eclipsed by the ministry of Jesus Christ.

This was supposed to happen - this was the purpose for John, but unfortunately, his disciples didn't like it. They said to him: "*Everyone is going to [Jesus.]*"

It's safe to say that for a brief period of time, there was a little competition - a little friendly competition between John's ministry and Jesus'.

We see that in churches today don't we - a little friendly competition?

*"Everyone's going over to that church
because they have a big-screen jumbo-tron"*

*"Everyone's going over to that church
because they have a live praise band!"*

*"That church has really comfortable pews
and they serve Starbucks coffee!"*

"That church has a big parking lot and really clean bathrooms!"

*"That church just hired a new Korean American
middle aged short haired pastor who tells amazing corny jokes!"*

(- said no one ever)

There was a little competition between the two ministries which the disciples alluded to, but notice how John responded:

"A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' 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 is now complete. He must become greater, I must become less."

The MSG translation captures that last part in an interesting way:

"This is the assigned moment for Him to move into the center while I slip off to the sidelines."

This is the perfect way to start off the season of Lent - to slip off to the sidelines and let Jesus take center stage.

To see if there is anything in our lives that is competing with Jesus, for our attention, for our focus and even our devotion.

To let those things diminish. To let those things decrease and to let all those things move off to the side so that Jesus could take center stage, and to kick off the Lenten season and to start the show by saying, "Heeeere's Jesus!"

During this season of Lent, our motto, our theme, and our mantra shall be:

"I must Decrease - He must increase."

"I must become Less - He must become More!"

"Less of Me and more of Christ!"

Jesus told a parable about a rich man (told in the Gospel of Luke.)

Jesus said:

"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

Then he said, 'This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

And I'll say to myself, "You [which is really me] You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat and drink and be merry."

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not reach toward God."

The problem with the rich man wasn't that he had a great harvest or had a lot of crops. (That was indeed a blessing.) His problem was actually himself.

He was so focused on himself - that's all he could talk about "me" that's all he thought about "me." Well, one goal in the Season of Lent, isn't to give away the harvest until we have nothing left, but to take the focus off ourselves and to take ourselves out of the picture, little bit by little bit, decrease by decrease, until all that remains is Jesus!

This is what I hope for all of us for the next 40 days.
Like John the Baptist, let us decrease so that Christ can increase.

Amen