



## TIME OF GRACE®

### *Christmas Hype: It's All About Jesus*

#### Study Notes

#### *Summary*

What do you do with a less-than-Christmas? When you are less popular, less known, less loved, and feeling less than, where do you turn? John the Baptist knows the perfect answer to that question, an answer that brings joy back to empty hearts.

- **John 3:22-27:** <sup>22</sup> After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. <sup>23</sup> Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. <sup>24</sup> (This was before John was put in prison.) <sup>25</sup> An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. <sup>26</sup> 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—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." <sup>27</sup> To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven."
- Remember the \_\_\_\_\_.
- **John 3:28,29:** <sup>28</sup> "You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' <sup>29</sup> 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."
- Remember the \_\_\_\_\_.
- **John 3:30:** "He must become greater; I must become less."
- Remember the \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Hebrews 2:9:** But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

#### *Points to Ponder*

1. In what areas of life are you most tempted to compare yourself to others? Which of John's three answers might help you hold on to your joy this week when that comparison tempts you again?
2. The Christians in Corinth were comparing their pastors (and losing unity and joy because of it!). Read Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 and summarize his answer.
3. **Evaluate:** Living for God's glory (and not your own) is a key to experiencing true peace and joy in life.

### *Homework for Next Week*

Read Psalm 73.

Time of Grace Ministry  
**Christmas Hype: It's All About Jesus**  
John 3:22-30  
December 27, 2020

*Pastor Mike Novotny*

We live in a culture that is obsessed with comparisons.

Back in November of 2019, Instagram decided to change what every picture and post would look like on your feed. Let me show you with a picture from my Instagram. It's a goofy picture of my family I recently took. On the bottom, you see that? It says, "Liked by Tom and Others." That's a brand new change for Instagram. They used to for all the years before would tell you how many others liked your picture. Was it five others or 50 others or a million others? Now when you scroll through, you have no clue how many people liked your friend's and family's picture. When the Instagram CEO was asked why they made this massive change, here was his quote. He said, "Our idea was to try and depressurize Instagram and make it less of a competition." Interesting, huh? With all the pressure and all the anxiety about how many people liked this most recent picture, Instagram said, you know what? This isn't good for people. It turns out when you put a number on things, it's not healthy for the human heart.

And I wish I could tell you that life was as nice as the Instagram CEO but it's not. In fact, during this upcoming Christmas season, there are going to be so many opportunities where you're going to come face to face with a number and that number is going to make it so easy to compare. There might be a number of letters that flood your mailbox over the next few days and as you see those family Christmas pictures, the most instinctive thing in the human heart will be to compare that family, that marriage, those kids. And you're going to read through all those Christmas letters about how they're doing and the trips that they went on and the money that they have to afford those experiences and little Junior's doing this and little Sally's doing that and they never meant it this way but what your heart is going to do is compare.

And so here's my question for you: Is your heart ready for the comparison? Like during this crazy Christmas season, are you going to be able to handle that without giving up your joy and your happiness and your contentment and your peace? Are you going to be able to come face to face with someone whose relationship status is a little bit healthier than yours? Someone whose finances are a little bit stronger than yours? Do you think you can see that face to face without giving up all the contentment and satisfaction that God wants you to have?

Now if you're not sure you can handle it just yet, today Jesus' hype man, John the Baptist, wants to help because there was a time in John's life when he was compared to Jesus himself and the truth was he couldn't compete. And John's friends were panicking and they were giving up their joy but John had this incredible heart that held onto his joy and happiness without giving it away. And today, I want to take you back to that day when John came face to face with that comparison and held on to the fullness of his joy. So if you want to follow along with me on the screen, John 3, listen to these incredible words that we find, starting with verse twenty-two.

"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 coming and being baptized. (This was before John was put into 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 - look, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him.'"

That's a problem, huh? John, everyone's going to Jesus! So what would John do? Would he pout? Would he get depressed? Would he go home on the couch and get a pint of Ben & Jerry's Locust and Honey ice cream? I don't know what John the Baptist ate. You know, how would he handle the emotion when he doesn't compare and everyone knows it and everyone's talking? Well, I love John's response. He's going to give us three answers to the comparison trap and here's the first, verse 27: "To this John replied, 'A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.'" That's such a powerful truth. John says to his friends, listen, we can only have what heaven decides to give. We can only enjoy, we can only reach the blessings that our heavenly Father decides to bless. We can't have a bigger platform, a bigger impact, we can't make a bigger change in this world than God himself has decided so what do you guys want me to do? A person can only receive a gift that's given them from heaven. If you're taking notes, write down John's first truth. He says, "Remember the giver." Remember that your blessings are not random; the life that you have didn't just pop out of nowhere. It was given as a gift from the giver.

I kind of think of it like this gift. Let's imagine this red gift is a gift that God gave to someone else. And your gift is this one inside. Now do you notice something about these two gifts? One's just a little bit bigger. Do you know what every kid does on Christmas morning? He unwraps his gift and he looks around the room and he counts the number of gifts and the pile of his little brother or his older sister and it's so easy for him to forget about this because he's focused on that. And that's actually pretty instinctual for you to do, too. One of the most natural things for the human heart is to forget about the actual life that God has given us because we're so interested in the life that God has given to someone else. It might be wealth, it might be health, it might be finances, it might be trips, it might be business impact, it might be ministry size, it might be number of children. Sometimes we get so fixated on this that we forget about the goodness of using this. And so today, after I say amen, you're going to have two choices. You can hold the life that God has given you in your hands and spend your life looking at the life that God has given to someone else or you can enjoy the gift.

That's John's first answer to the comparison trap. In verse 28, he gives us our next answer. He continues, "You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but I'm sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend that 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." I love this passage because John's joy like bursts off the screen, doesn't it? He says he is full of joy - not just a little joy - he's filled up with it. That joy is mine, John says, and it's complete, it's whole, it's entire. John is so, so happy, even though the crowds are moving over to Jesus, and here's why - because he doesn't think of his ministry as a numerical

competition; he thinks of it as a wedding celebration. He says to his friends, "Wait, everyone's going to Jesus? Well, that's kind of the point because the people are like the bride and Jesus is like the groom and I'm like the best man and what makes the best man happier than when he sees the bride and the groom together?" Actually, weddings back in John and Jesus' day were a little bit different than they are in our culture. You might know this - Jewish weddings would normally last the whole week, about seven days long. They would start not once the bride had her makeup and hair perfect but once the groom strolled into town and their home was all ready to go at an uncertain time. Can you imagine waiting for the groom for a wedding to start? And scholars would also tell us that one of the things that the friend of the groom would do was wait with the bride until he heard the groom's voice coming into town. And then his job as the best man was actually to bring the bride to his best friend and be the first one to see bride and groom together on their wedding day. That's what John thought about his life. People were getting connected to Jesus and it made him happy.

Now, can you imagine if you went to a wedding and the best man was competing for the bride's attention? Can you picture him there like standing next to his buddy in the front of the church and the bride's walking down the aisle with her father, they share a big hug and a kiss and there's just about to be, you know, the big hand off with the handshake. Can you imagine if the best man like - he sprang into action and shook the dad's hand and tried to grab the bride's arm? That'd be really awkward! Or like if he tried to intrude in the vows a little bit? You know, he's in the back saying, "Oh, I do, too!" Or he's scooching in, trying to dance with the groom's mom? Like, no, that's not his role, that's not his goal, that's not what he wants. What makes him happy on that big day is seeing his friend happy with his bride.

And did you know that in life you were never meant to be the groom; just the best man? You get to be the friend of Jesus, the friend of God, but the point of life is not you, it's God. Remember how the Lord's Prayer ends? For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory. It's yours, God. It's not about me. And so if they don't know me or my name or our church or this ministry or our impact, if we personally don't change the world but people get connected to God, it's all good. In fact, let's practice saying something very, very important. I want you to repeat after me: It's not about me. Let's practice one more time; this is important. "It's not about me." I want you to turn to the person next to you and tell them, "It's not about me." And say it back to them, "It's not about you. And say back to them, "You either." I mean, can you think - some ancient theologians have said that the true key to Christian joy is self-forgetfulness. If we could just forget how we look, how we perform, what people think of us, our reputation, if we could just be free to love people and let God do what God wants to do, it's all good. We don't need to be in the picture; we're the best man. And if God is doing his thing and accomplishing his purposes, it's okay. We don't need to be famous, we don't need to be beautiful, we don't need to be successful, we don't need to be popular. We just serve God and love people. So write down John's key point here. He says to not just remember the giver but, number two, remember the groom. It's not about me. It's about Jesus and his church.

And that brings us to our last verse for today; probably the most famous of the whole bunch. We're going to land the plane with this. John speaks these classic words to his friends. He says, "He must become greater and I must become less."

But the kingdom of God mostly doesn't work like that. Oftentimes, God will do great things over here and we're kind of standing over there. And we pray and we give and God saves somewhere else and friends, that's okay. In fact, we actually pray for that. Did you know that? Any of you know the Lord's Prayer? There's this line in there you might have missed: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come, your will be done - in Appleton as it is in heaven." Your will be done only at The Core. No, what do we pray? Your will be done on earth. On earth.

You know what too many Christians are doing right now in America? We're forgetting about the earth. We're panicking like Christianity is an endangered species. As billions of people on the earth worship Jesus, we're so concerned about the next generation of people in this country that we forget this is not the only country. And when we pray, God, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in China and in Kazakhstan and in Nigeria and Argentina, South America and the Far East, Christianity is exploding just like we prayed for. And so we know the goal is not us, it's not Pastor Mike, The Core, 922 Ministries, or Time of Grace. The goal is the glory of God and wherever it happens, we will celebrate. So God save them here or save them here; do it through me, do it through him. What matters at the end of the day is not our platform or our impact; what matters is what people think of God.

And brothers and sisters, when we believe that, the pressure is off. We can do our best, we can use our gifts, and whatever God does, it's all good. We don't have to hold our breath and wait to see if we grow. We don't have to see if people really like us more than other people. We can just be faithful, which is what God has always wanted. So write down this last important point. John the Baptist today encourages us to remember the goal, remember the Giver and the gift he's given, remember the groom that we're trying to get the church to, and remember the goal - connecting people to God.

And if that seems pretty hard for you, if being less than the person next to you is just too emotionally difficult, let me leave you with one last thing. You Bible nerds out there might appreciate this. When John the Baptist said, "I must become less," he used a verb in Greek that's only used in one other chapter in the entire Bible. John said it's okay if I become less because Jesus will become greater. In the other chapter of the Bible, do you know how that verb is used? That Jesus became less so that you could be greater. Let me show you this shocking passage, Hebrews 2: "But we see Jesus," here's the verb, "who's made lower than the angels for a little while now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Jesus became less - a little baby in a manger, helpless, less; a Jewish man hanging on a cross less. Why? So you would always be greater. So that at the end of the day, your value and your worth would have nothing to do with what the kids at school think about you. So what you think of yourself when you look in the mirror would have nothing to do with how many wrinkles or rolls or what your boss thinks about your most recent performance. Jesus became less so that at the end of the day, you would always be great in the sight of God. And if that thought fills your heart, if you're captivated by the thought that God has made me great, of whom shall I be afraid? What can man say about me? You don't like my picture? God likes me. No disrespect. And the true joy of Christmas, what John the Baptist knew, was that he faithfully served God and God thought he was great and so that's our prayer today. God, whatever you want to do, grow this church or shrink it, make us famous, make us

nobody, use us to change the world, use someone else. God, we're praying, we're serving, we're loving. However you want to make it work, we're yours.

And if you believe that, you can have the kind of joy that Amy Carmichael found. This is an old picture of Amy Carmichael. She's a young Christian woman who went to India and spent her entire life there until she died in 1951. After her death, after decades and decades of faithful service, her family and friends started to page through her journals and her collections of pictures that she had taken. And they saw in the journal entries proof that Amy sometimes struggled with comparison. She worked and she served and her ministry didn't have the big results that she sometimes prayed for. But she held onto the fact that God did not call her to be successful; God just asked her to be faithful. And there's something else her loved ones noticed. As they paged through picture after picture after picture after picture that Amy had taken, do you know what they couldn't find a single picture of? Amy. She didn't take a single selfie in decades of pictures. She was willing to become less and she tried to make Jesus great. I think it's cause she believed that Jesus already became less so that she would always be great.

And brothers and sisters, he did the same thing for you, too. So enough with the comparison; you're already great in the sight of God and you always will be.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, the devil loves to use your blessings for other people to make you look bad. But we know that's a lie; we know you're a good, good Father and that every gift is hand selected for each one of your children. God, help us not to think that if we just had something else or a different life, we'd be happier. We wouldn't. You have prepared good works in advance for us to do; no one else but us. And I pray today you'd open our eyes to see them and we could pursue them with all of the love that you've put in our heart.

I'm so grateful, God, that our identity is secure in Christ. We have value as your sons and daughters. We are already recipients of the greatest gift - your own Son. We are already the bride of Jesus who has been loved unconditionally by the groom. So God, help us to be content with you and help us to serve others in love.

Father, you know that we live in a culture where people are panicking. They're giving up their peace because they don't look like those other people online. Help us to see ourselves through your eyes today and know that you delight in us, your face is shining on us, you're always gracious to us, and may that give us peace. We pray this, Jesus, in the name that is above every name, your name, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Lamb of God, and the Savior of the world. In Jesus' name we pray and all God's people said, "Amen." Amen.