

THE HEROISM OF SELF-EFFACEMENT

"He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30.

In writing to a friend the late Viscount Grey described his feelings on escaping to the country after months of drudgery in London. He said, "I felt as if having seen the wide fields and free sky I had looked God in the face and been refreshed." Something like that is the effect of the statement of John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease." To come upon these words, in this world which is stuffy with the stale atmosphere of self-interest and self-assertion, is like looking God in the face and being refreshed.

Unquestionably John the Baptist was one of the world's greatest characters. A certain student of history ranks him among the six greatest characters who ever lived. Another who was the ablest judge of human conduct in the world placed John the Baptist in a class by himself. Christ said, "Verily, I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). Greater tribute than this has never been received by any man, and no man can hope to receive a greater one.

John the Baptist appeared on the banks of the Jordan River, a strange figure with a strange message. The character of the man and of his message soon became known to the local residents. Travelers paused to see and hear this man and, when they proceeded on their journeys, carried the news of him to distant parts. Soon there were visitors from all parts of the land coming to see and hear him. His was the first clear voice of prophecy heard in about four centuries. Excitement ran high, dormant hopes were awakened, and people began to question among themselves: "Who is this man? He is obviously a prophet of God, but can he be more than a prophet? Is it possible that he is the promised Messiah?"

Such comments and questions became so prevalent and so insistent that the authorities in Jerusalem decided to investigate the matter and sent a committee to interview John. "Who art thou?" they asked, and John replied, "I am not the Christ." "Art thou Elijah?" they persisted. "I am not," he replied. "Art thou that prophet?" they continued. He answered them, "No." "What sayest thou for thyself?" they finally inquired. We listen with intense interest for his reply. He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way for the Lord."

The preaching of John the Baptist was an outstanding success. Men from all parts of Judea flocked to hear him. His stern, uncompromising messages, his warnings of impending judgment, and his call to repentance had a profound effect upon his hearers. Many responded to his call to repent and "were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:6). A great number attached themselves to him as his disciples. Judged by any standard you like, here was a man who had achieved a huge success.

Then one day Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene, and requested and received baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. He began to preach, calling people to repentance from sins and to faith in God, and the multitudes gathered to listen to His authoritative teaching and gracious words. His amazing power over disease and demons astounded the people, and His fame spread far and wide, bringing ever increasing numbers to see and hear Him. Some of the disciples of John the Baptist became the disciples of Jesus Christ. Those who were strongly attached to John the Baptist were greatly disturbed, for it seemed that he was being eclipsed by the Lord Jesus. They complained that "all men" were attending the ministry of Christ. Disappointed and grieved at John's loss of popular attention, his devoted disciples let it be known that they thought he should continue in first place.

Here John the Baptist reached his maximum height, his full stature and his greatest nobility. How high he was above all littleness of soul! He pointed out to his jealous disciples that the relation between himself and his Lord was not one of opposition or comparison. John reminded his disciples that all along he had consistently represented his mission as one of preparation. He said, "Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him" (John 3:28). He humbly acknowledged his subordinate role. He was not the Bridegroom, but the friend of the Bridegroom. In effect he said to his loyal admirers, "I have had my little day and my light is paling before the splendid orb of my divine superior. Think not of me, but think of Him. I am but a herald to announce the presence of the Christ." He was perfectly satisfied with his commission and having accomplished it, his joy was fulfilled. He mastered his own soul and said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Here is something startling unique and revolutionary! A man was willing to lose his own identity in order to establish the identity of Christ. He wanted to be known only as a "voice" announcing the presence of Jesus Christ. His supreme desire was that the Saviour would fill the thoughts, visions, desires, and affections of the people, and that he himself should drop out of the public view and take his place among the people as a worshiper of the one all-sufficient and adequate Christ.

A certain farmer lived halfway between two rural churches. These churches had student pastors who preached on two Sundays in each month. The farmer attended services at both churches, alternating between them. After hearing one of these student pastors preach, he would go away with these thoughts: "He is a brilliant young man and will make his mark in the world. The world is going to hear from that young man." On the next Lord's Day he would hear the other student pastor and would go away with such impressions as these: "That young man has a wonderful Lord! How he does exalt his Saviour! The world is going to hear of his Saviour and Lord."

John the Baptist did not show any self-esteem or self-concern. His concern was the reputation and reception of the Christ. He did not feel any neglect in the turning of the people from himself to the Christ. He rejoiced to be forgotten when he learned that the thoughts of men were absorbed in the Christ. He would not suffer any shadow of himself to dim the vision of the divine majesty of the Christ in the eyes of the disciples. He would gladly decrease in order that Christ might increase. The lessening of John the Baptist was the enlargement of the Christ. John's greatness was in the glad giving of his entire self as a contribution to another's greatness. A man's ability to die unto himself always measures his likeness to God. We become like God to the measure that we pour all there is of us into others.

John the Baptist is to be commended and emulated in his cheerful acquiescence in the allotment of God's providence. He recognized the folly and the sin of attempting to defeat the purpose of God by usurping the place of another. He readily consented to see his own prestige dwindle, while his predestined Superior entered upon his labors and absorbed his influence. The dignity and power which John received gratuitously must be relinquished to Christ, and he did just that without any jealousy or a single complaint. Both he and Christ were invested with the divine power, according to the good pleasure of God the Father. Their relative positions had been divinely appointed. He approved and sanctioned the ways of God as right. He firmly believed that God would do right about everything.

How did John the Baptist manage to efface himself in such a wonderful fashion? John the Baptist was able to do it so effectively because his life was deeply rooted in God. If your life is not rooted in God, it will be difficult for you to see another get the prize on which you had set your heart. If your life is not rooted in God, it will be hard for you to live in a world that sometimes deals out such crushing disappointments of your dreams.

John the Baptist was able to efface himself in such a wonderful fashion because he saw something in Jesus Christ which did not possess. John's preaching had been all sternness and ruggedness and thunder and lightning and denunciation and the fear of hell. But, when Christ preached, men were conscious of a tender and wooing note which they had never heard before. John the Baptist knew that he was a sinner, as were the folk to whom he preached. He stood with all the rest of the sinner's side of the line, but the Lord Jesus was definitely on the other side of the line, for He never had any sin in Him.

John the Baptist effaced himself so effectively because he saw that it did not matter who did the work, as long as the work was done. His whole attitude was this -- What difference does it make about John the Baptist, if God gets the glory? What counts the messenger, if only the message goes right home? Let John's name be obliterated if necessary, if only men get saved, and God gets enthroned in their lives." That was his attitude. How slow we are to realize that it does not matter who does the work, as long as the work gets done! Frequently our attitude is, "I does matter who does the work --it is going to be done by me, in the way I want it done." Those with such an attitude need a thorough self-effacement such as was exemplified by John.

How hard it is to suppress self! Self loves the limelight. Its life is found in success, in flattery, and in the glory of men. When that is missing, the soul is full of misery. Self is not willing to decrease; it is always demanding recognition; it seeks and delights in the first place. The great failure of the Pharisees was that they were unwilling to decrease, and there you have the chief reason why they hated our Lord. They wanted to have the chief places, to be the centers of attraction, to be recognized for their piety and their social position.

Self dies hard even in the choicest believer in Christ. The love of self may be compared to an onion. When stripped of one skin, it is to be found sheathed in another, and as often as you strip it, you will find new layers underneath. So it is with self-love. Beneath each sheath of self-regard and vainglory there is another, and if you think your soul can be stripped of it in a day, you have still to learn the very elements of spiritual experience. The Christian life is a daily dying unto self and sin, and a daily living unto God and righteousness.

Only as we are ready to cultivate the spirit of humility and are willing to take second place can we experience true joy, freedom and fruitfulness in our Lord's service. To be nothing, to decrease more and more that Christ may be glorified, is the secret of heaven's best blessings. Self, with all its pride, its desire for preeminence, is our greatest hindrance to fruitfulness, and makes the soul restless and unhappy. The happiest and most fruitful Christians are those who are ready to be nothing if only Christ can be glorified. The love of Christ expells the love of self. The measure of progress in the Christian life is how far self has been displaced by Christ. There is a

daily dying to be done. It is never easy to get rid of the old self-righteousness and the old self-conceit of unregenerate days.

There are various ways by which we can foster the spirit of humility and destroy the spirit of pride and self-glory. It will help us if we will remember constantly that all we are or ever will be we owe to the love of Christ. Paul was saved from self-boasting because he knew he owed all to the "grace of God." He often thought of Christ's death for his salvation, and to him it was a deeply personal thing. He stood at Calvary and with gratitude spoke of "the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). The revelation of God's love in Christ so captivated him that his supreme glory was in the cross. He said, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Galatians 6:14). When the love of God truly invades the soul, it sweeps away all desire for self-glory, and one is filled with a desire to glorify Him in body and spirit, which He bought with His own precious blood.

Then self will diminish as we remember that we owe our gifts to Christ. There was much self-glorying among Paul's converts in Corinth, as there is among church members in our generation. Some possessed spiritual gifts which were counted far superior to others, and this led to much boasting and self-exaltation. To put an end to this Paul asked those who were glorying in their gifts, "What hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7). Remembering our indebtedness to God for whatever talents we possess keeps the soul humble. When we are ready to give Him all the glory and praise, then He will be able to use us as channels of blessing to others.

Let us make these lines of a well-known hymn our daily prayer, and seek the grace to live them out:

"Oh Jesus Christ, grow Thou in me,
And all things else recede;
My heart be daily nearer Thee,
From sin be daily freed.

Make this poor self grow less and less,
Be Thou my life and aim;
Oh, make me daily through Thy grace
More mete to bear Thy name."

Our mission as individual Christians and as a church can be fulfilled only by this formula: "He must increase, but I must decrease." Christ must increase in our thoughts and fill our consciousness. He must increase in our affections and fill our hearts. He must increase in our concepts of life and fill our visions. He must increase in our energies and engage our talents and powers. He must increase in our prayers and fill our praises. He must increase in our worship and fill our souls. As He thus increases, we ourselves shall decrease. Old things shall pass away, because new things have come into our lives to crowd the old out. We must decrease in our love of sin and its practices. We must decrease in our selfishness and pride. We must decrease in our jealousies and prejudices. We must decrease in our contentions and strife. We must decrease in our self-will and disobedience. If we will follow the formula of John the Baptist, Christ Jesus

will grow larger and larger in our consciousness, so as to fill us and envelop us and empower us and inspire us and direct us.

If these words are to be the motto of our outward service, they must first be the keynote of our inner life. In God's children there is something of self and something of Christ. And what God wills is this, that that bit of self progressively contract and be superseded, while the God principle is to grow and expand and take control. He — the indwelling Christ — must increase; and I — the self — must decrease. This is the epitome of the Christian life. At what stage have you arrived in the process? Is Christ gaining ground in you? Is self retreating from the field? "He must increase, and I must decrease. Is it happening in you?"

"O the bitter shame and sorrow,
That a time could ever be
When I let the Saviour's pity
Pleade in vain, and proudly answered,
'All of self, and none of Thee!'

Yet He found me; I beheld Him
Bleeding on the accursed tree,
Heard Him pray, 'Forgive them, Father!'
And my wistful heart said faintly,
'Some of self, and some of Thee!'

Day by day His tender mercy,
Healing, helping, full, and free,
Sweet and strong, and, oh, so patient,
Brought me lower, while I whispered,
'Less of self, and more of Thee!'

Higher than the highest heaven,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, Thy love at last hath conquered;
Grant me now my supplication,
'None of self, and all of Thee!'