

TAKING SECOND PLACE

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

This text certainly has the effect of a tonic. To come suddenly upon such words, in a world that is too often stuffy with the stale atmosphere of self-interest and self-assertion, is like looking God in the face and being refreshed.

If John the Baptist had never spoken another word in the Bible but this, it would have marked him down as a saint. And I want to speak to you about it now, for I am sure there are some present for whom the great battle of life is just to bring themselves to say what John here said.

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, and the ablest judge of human conduct the world has ever known, places John in a class by himself. Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist." Greater tribute than this no man has received; no man can hope to receive.

John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord." There must always be such voices. They are the heralds, the pioneers, who make possible the better day and the grander era. Usually their lot has been opposition, scorn and finally persecution. In the old days their usual reward was the headman's axe, the stake or the dungeon cell.

John the Baptist foretold the coming of the Christ. He was the morning star that ushered in the Sun of Righteousness. He called on the people to repent and declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Great crowds came to hear him preach and were baptized of him in the Jordan River. Some who came surmised that John himself was the promised Messiah. To such John said, "I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance; but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire."

To John baptizing in the River Jordan came Jesus to be baptized and John would have hindered Him saying, "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" But Jesus answering, said: "Suffer it now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." And then John baptized Him.

Then descended the dove, symbol of the spiritual endowment of Jesus, and the Divine voice spake, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased."

This is the culminating point of John's ministry. Henceforth John pointed his disciples to Jesus, "the Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sin of the world." Jesus' popularity began to wax. John's began to wane.

Consider the circumstances. Here was a man who, judged by any standard you like, had achieved a solid success. His name was on every lip. He had the crowd in the hollow of his hand. And then one day Some One else appeared on the scene--a young Carpenter from Nazareth--and forthwith the crowd was gone. And John stood and watched them go. Witnessing this fact and jealous for their leader's success, some of John's followers came to him, saying: "Rabbi, He that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to Him."

John's reply is superb. All he said was--"He must increase, but I must decrease." He thus became the supreme exponent of the fine art of taking second place for the good of the cause. But three other characters in the Scriptures deserve honorable

mention along with him. Samuel, the last judge of Israel, gave way to Saul, the first king, and stepped down and out from high office unembittered and with the best of wishes for his successor. And there is Jonathan, the knightliest soul of the militant days of Israel, jeopardizing with superb abandon his succession to the throne; and all because in honour and love he preferred David to a crown. Likewise Barnabas, the big-hearted disciple, who in the beginning of Paul's career as a Christian stood sponsor for him, introduced him, endorsed him, and then stepped into the shadow of one destined to be the greatest of the Apostolic group.

Remember the amazing extent of the success which John had till then enjoyed. Let us apply some tests to it.

1. The test of numbers.

"Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan."

He did not have to beg them to come and be evangelized. He did not have to announce sensational, topical subjects or intriguing themes flavoured with a dash of current politics. He did not have to advertise that the services would be brief and bright and hearty. They were not bribed or enticed: they just came--tens of thousands of them.

2. The test of the range of his appeal.

Look at that motley throng again. There were soldiers there; also publicans and masses of common sinners; but at the other end of the scale, there were Pharisees, that is to say, the leaders of religious orthodoxy, great names in the theological world, and Sadducees--the scientific intelligentsia, who had reacted from creed and churchgoing into open scepticism--they were all there, swelling the crowd, and clamouring for the baptism of the remission of sins.

3. The test of results in character.

It was no cheap excitement. Men were really being converted for life, turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to serve the living God. So whatever test we apply, John's movement was a huge success.

Then, this young Nazarene, Jesus, appeared, and John's high hour was done. This must have been a very difficult experience for John the Baptist because----

I. He had given up everything for his life-work.

He was a homeless dweller in the desert. Comfort, ease, security, human love, the faces and voices of the children who might have been his--he had sacrificed all. And now, only failure seemed his reward.

II. He realized that the crowd had gone for good.

He might have consoled himself with the reflection, "They will come back again. I have only to bide my time and they will come flocking back." Something told him that that would never happen. They were gone for good.

III. His best friends and disciples had left him and joined Jesus.

Andrew and John the beloved disciple amongst them--and he was left alone. It must have been terribly hard. He might have disliked Christ. He might have gone about belittling his rival's achievement. He might have allowed himself to have been torn with jealousy. Thousands have done it with far less cause. But he stood there, and mastered his own soul, and said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." That is heroism--the heroism of self-effacement.

How did he manage to do it?---

1. His life was rooted in God.

If your life is not rooted in God, it is a terrible thing to see other people get the prize on which you had set your heart. If your life is not rooted in God, it is hard to live in a world that sometimes deals out such crushing disappointments of our dreams. If you have no roots in vital religion, it is hard to keep your poise and equanimity when the heart is just one big restless ache of unsatisfied desire. To have your life rooted in God does not make life easy, but it does give you a foundation for your feet to stand on while the inevitable fight for your soul is faced; it does give you a strange serenity and peace in the very midst of the fight; it does help you to get through the storm. John the Baptist's vital personal religion, his grasp of and grip on God, was one secret of his marvelous victory.

2. He saw something in Jesus which he 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 Jesus preached, men were conscious of a tender and wooing note they had never heard before. John had one theme only--"Repent, Repent." Jesus led them beyond that and actually opened up the road to heaven for them. But the deepest difference of all was this. John knew that he was just a common sinner like the folk to whom he preached. He stood with all the rest on the sinner's side of the line; but Jesus was definitely on the other side of the line--He had no sin about Him.

3. 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 only men get saved, and God gets enthroned. That was his attitude. And there is a great principle here for us; it does not matter who does the work, as long as the work is done. How slow we are to realize this. How often our attitude is, "It does matter who does the work--it is going to be done by me." And thus Christian service gets mixed up with questions of precedence, and Christian people grow sensitive about these personal things, and Christian love forgets the first essential--which is thorough-going self-effacement.

And this applies to our individual service too. Suppose you are trying to help another soul who has been finding life tangled and difficult. It may be that, to begin with at any rate, that other soul's hold upon God is bound up with you, and with what it sees of God in you. And so you twine your life round that other life, to help it through the difficult place. But the point is this, that when you have brought that other face to face with Christ, and nothing less can be your ultimate aim, then He will take charge. From that point on, Christ is to increase, you are to decrease. And the question is, When you reach that point, where Christ is really seen, will you have grace to step back?

Our Christian service may be diligent and keen and zealous, but it is ruined without self-effacement. And, on the other hand, our service may be unseen, and our very names forgotten; but if one dear soul we love has discovered Christ, the work will have been done.

And so we come finally to this--that if these words are to be the motto of our outward service, they must first be the keynote of our inner life. I suppose

that in every one of us there is something of self and something of Christ. And what God wills is this, that that bit of self in me is progressively to 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.

That is an epitome of the Christian life. And I wonder--what stage have we reached in the process? Is Christ in us gaining ground? Is self in us retreating from the field? "He must increase, but I must decrease." Is it happening?