

“He must increase, I must decrease”

It's hard to be in your shoes, to sit where you are sitting – hearing the same old sermon over and over again – “repent and believe.” Ears fade away – thoughts distracted and engaged elsewhere – shoulders slump, and it's shocking how heavy eyelids can be.

This message I've been given to preach to you is the sermon preached by the prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus Himself. He wants you to hear this message. He wants you to “repent and believe in the gospel.” You NEED to repent and believe.

Okay, but how? Haven't I done that? I said I was sorry and I trust Jesus for forgiveness – now I need to get back to my life. But it's not so simple, so sequestered as that. Here is where St. Mark the Evangelist is so helpful – as is John the Baptist.

St. Mark (known to be the evangelist of few words) simply says, “... after John was arrested, Jesus ...” Now match that up with what John the Baptist says of Jesus in St. John 3:30. “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

To “repent and believe in the gospel” means that Jesus must increase, and I must decrease. It's as if John is saying, “it's not about me, it's about Jesus!” Yes, the Gospel is about Jesus – but, dearly beloved – it is most assuredly FOR YOU!

For the sinner, headed for death and eternal punishment, with all kinds of wickedness and harm along the way – this repentance and Gospel is FOR YOU. Jesus calls you to repentance – that is, He turns you – He converts you from one fixated on the sinful self to one whose life depends totally on the selfless Savior.

Jesus Christ “decreases” you. In the waters of Holy Baptism, you are united to Christ, crucified with Him – your Old Adam put to death, and your sinful nature that just loves to sin is drowned.

What did that look like for John the Baptist? He decreased. Not only were his disciples told to go and follow Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” – but John himself is arrested, and then beheaded because he dared to follow Jesus. John decreased, and Jesus increased.

John prepared the way, and then gets out of the way. Jesus increased – and God created a faith in John that “believed in the gospel” – that looked to Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of all his sin, for the promise of the resurrection of his body, for the gift of life everlasting and the eternal bliss of heaven. “It’s not about me,” John might say, “it’s about Jesus” – but His Gospel is FOR ME.

If you’re still listening, you might be thinking – that’s great for John, but what about me? Again, St. Mark is very helpful – as he records for us the account of Jesus calling Simon (Peter) and Andrew, James and John, to be His disciples.

Simon and Andrew “left their nets and followed Him.” Christ’s Word created a whole new life for them. There was a change in their vocation – in what they would be doing each day. Their fishing nets would be swapped for the Gospel – and their apprenticeship as preachers and apostles begins.

In other words – Jesus increases and they decrease. Their former way of life is left behind – and in the future – when they desire to return to their old way of life, when they become frustrated with the crowds and the task at hand, when they argue over “who is the greatest” --- they must be repented. They must decrease, and Jesus increase.

So also for James and John – “they left their father Zebedee ... and followed [Jesus].” Their new vocation impacts their family – it takes precedence over their family! In all things – Jesus must increase – and all else must decrease.

Okay, we’ve heard about John the Baptist and these disciples, but what about me? For you, Jesus is most helpful. To the Twelve disciples, Jesus will say – “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them” and teaching them. That’s you! Jesus calling you to “follow me.” You too have a new vocation. You are a Christian, one who belongs to Christ. You are a hearer of the Word, who in repentance and faith, follows Jesus.

Following Jesus takes precedence over ALL things – your spouse / children – your hobbies / work – money, sinful desires – your old way of living / your old lord / the devil. It’s a First Commandment issue folks: You shall have no other gods. You are to fear, love, and trust in God above ALL things.

What does this mean? It means that you live 24/7/365 as one who – by the working of God the Holy Spirit – repents and believes in the gospel. It means Jesus must increase, and you must decrease.

Having no other gods – you call upon the name of the one true God in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. When trouble arises – rather than saying you'll handle it your way (justifying your sinful actions to solve the problem) – Jesus must increase, and you must decrease.

He says NO to your sinful plans, and “do this” instead. And when you don't believe that will solve the problem – He must repent you and lead you to believe His Word, trusting and following what God commands.

In your life, you pray that God would break and hinder your evil plans, and that God's good and gracious will would be done in your life. You praise God and give thanks for His good and gracious gifts. Jesus increases, and you decrease.

And so, it goes throughout your life, and throughout the commandments of God. When you despise preaching and His Word – you have increased yourself, and decreased God in your life – living as if there is something greater than God, treasuring something more than His gifts. So, the sermon must continue. Don't despise it. “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

This is how you live each day with your neighbor. It's not about you, it's about Jesus. Rather than living for self, you decrease – and Jesus increases, living in and through you for the sake of your fellow man.

He doesn't despise your neighbor or his scandalous life – He doesn't keep bringing up his sin, which only serves to enslave him once again. Rather, He comes to him, sits with him, eats with him – because He forgives him – He repents him, and gives the neighbor to believe that this Good News which is FOR him.

This is your life – forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Jesus increasing, you decreasing. Forgiveness and life arise FOR YOU – sin and death are buried FOR YOU. You live by faith, following Jesus – a continual repentance and believing in the gospel – living in His Good News FOR YOU, now and eternally. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.