



# Sermon Growth Guide

**November 20, 2022**

**Humble Pie - I Must Decrease**

**John 3:26-36**

**Key Verse:** John 3:30

“He must become greater; I must become less.”

**Big Idea:** As we make our lives increasingly about God, we'll feel less of a need to make them about us.

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## Foundations

Prior to these verses, John's ministry was on a steep, upward trajectory. His preaching was so engaging that people came from miles away to hear him. Many were so moved by John's words that they professed a desire to change how they lived. John's personality and ministry were so big, some wondered whether he might be the promised Messiah.

When Jesus appeared and John's followers began to dwindle, John's disciples mentioned this, perhaps hoping John might do something to reverse the trend. Instead, John explained his role with an image from Jewish weddings that his followers would have understood.

The friend of a bridegroom arranged the wedding, sent out invitations, and presided over the wedding feast. When all this was done and the groom was finally with his bride, the friend willingly and gladly faded from the picture. Understanding that he'd done what he could to prepare people for Jesus, John for the most part faded from view following today's text.

In the 16th century, Copernicus discovered that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the other way around. John's words offer a model of us revolving around our Lord, rather than insisting that He revolve around us. Few passages better summarize the life that Christ calls us to.

## Understanding God's Word

Together, read John 3:26-36.

Is your natural disposition to want to become greater, or to become less? To what do you attribute this?

How do you think John's disciples were feeling in this moment?

Think how hard it would be to move from being popular and well thought of to being neglected and forgotten about. What do you think enabled John to not only speak these words, but also live them out?

## Applying God's Word

What do you think John had in mind when he said, “He must be greater?” What might this look like in our lives—and how is it impacted by the second portion of John's statement?

As we conclude this sermon series, how can you in humbleness seek to allow God a larger role in your life, while your desires and agenda take on a smaller role?

## Witnessing God's Word

Gandhi once said, “We like your Christ but not your Christians, because they're so unlike your Christ.” How does our humbleness impact our witness to the world around us?

## HUMBLE PIE • John 3:26-36 • Tim McConnell • November 20, 2022

Amen. I want to thank the choir for lifting that song. As I shared with them this morning, it's the right song to sing. It's hard to sing with a check in your throat when you know your city has been subsumed by a wave of evil and darkness and terror, but it's right to give the Lord thanks and praise. It's right to turn to Jesus. You're led in worship by pastors and choir members, and music leaders of tender heart. You see because we are bound together, and we'll talk about that, bound together in a web of relationships, something that happens just 15 minutes from our front door, that changes everything about our gathering. But it doesn't make anything untrue that's true, that the Lord is our God and His name is worthy of praise. And He is the object of our thanks, our worship, and He is faithful and good, so we turn to Him. We lift up the name of the Lord and we receive His word. Amen.

Church, your pastor's having a little bit of a hard time. We've got a message to declare. Amen. We've got a Thanksgiving coming on Thursday and still I stand here knowing I'm the pastor of a large church gathering downtown in a city that's currently on every news station in our country. We're famous right now...Lord, have mercy. Thursday is a day for gratitude. Thursday is a day for Thanksgiving. Thursday is a day to bear witness to the goodness of God, His faithfulness, His justice, His righteousness. That God is faithful, though every man, though every person, be false. God is faithful. He is good. He is true. His purposes are sure. Though we drop every promise we've ever made, the promises of the Lord will stand. And we give thanks to God and to His glory.

I wrote a sermon that was full of laughter, you see, and that happens from time to time that we come to a moment, and we gather for worship in the middle of a city and because we're bound to a city, what's happened in the city has happened to us and our hearts are tied to what's happened to those around us. I know many of you are sitting here and you don't know anything more than what Michael (Thornton) and I have said so far. And I apologize for that and now you're wondering what on earth has happened to Tim, but you'll see as you leave and as you go home and turn on the television screen that we are very much the center of a national discourse. And it's our city where every eye is looking and we are the faithful who have gathered here at 8:30 in the morning to lift up the name of Jesus Christ and so we will, so we will. Let's see if

we can find a way to get into this message, shall we?

Our friend, John Ortberg, has a new ministry of daily videos, BecomeNew. Me. He is leading us through a gratitude exercise. Thanksgiving. He said there's a biography of Abraham Lincoln by John Meacham celebrating Lincoln as a combination of persistence and humility. In 1863, Lincoln issued a proclamation for a national day of fasting and prayer: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." The next year, 1864, he issued the Thanksgiving Proclamation naming a national holiday. Thanksgiving stuck. Fasting, not so much.

Let's not forget God this Thanksgiving. Let's not forget God ever. In our simple recipe for Humble Pie, let's live into gratitude. Three little ingredients: curiosity, service and gratitude. This is a week for gratitude. That's pretty obvious. It's called Thanksgiving! You might think it's called "Food-giving" or "Expectations-giving" or "Political Conversations with Crazy Uncle-giving" but it's not. It's called Thanksgiving, and we celebrate it every year. Can you imagine if Lincoln's National Fast Day had actually taken root? If our kids grew up drawing pictures of Bibles and praying hands and hungry looks instead of turkeys and pilgrims and Native American chiefs?

So, in our search for increasing humility, we look today at John the Baptist and this remarkable moment in John 3. John, for all his influence and voice, says from the very beginning, "It's not about me. I am not the groom; I am at most the best man. I am only here to point to another. That's all. That's it. And he is worthy of it." When Jesus'

## HUMBLE PIE • John 3:26-36 • Tim McConnell • November 20, 2022

ministry began, John's ministry emptied out. "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.' To this John replied, 'A person can receive only what is given them from heaven'" (John 3:26–27). What does that have to do with anything? John is talking about contentment. Peace. He knows his mission. It isn't about him, his rise, his ascendancy, his pride, his reputation, his influence, his future...that's not the mission. The mission is Jesus. "You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah 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 it is now complete" (John 3:28–29). Peace. Contentment. John calls it joy. Not to be the center of attention, but to push attention to Jesus.

"He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Or, as I first met this verse as a boy: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30 RSV). It is the "must" that captures me. I must decrease. I'm not surprised that a man like John, or anyone with a thimble-full of spiritual sense, would recognize that Jesus is more important than he. It's the "I must decrease" that captures me. Must. I have got to get smaller. I must! How do I escape this selfish gravity? I have got to get right-sized in this universe. How can I? How do you do it? If I focus on developing my virtue of humility, I am still just focused on myself. On me. How do I actually break the orbit and get out of a self-centered life? I must decrease—or what? Or I will collapse in on myself. I will lose it. I think for John it was truly, "I must decrease or I will not fulfill my purpose. I'm here to point to Jesus." But I hear the need, the necessity. The "must" comes through, and, maybe in our times more than his, it is desperate.

We heard last week, an authentic pursuit of the Christian life inevitably leads to life together, life lived with others in relationship. We live in a web of relationships; Jesus too. Think about the web of relationships Jesus built. You can't sustain the same level of relationship with everyone you know, so look at how Jesus did it. Peter, James and John seemed to be His closest friends. Then the other nine disciples and, also, the women of Luke 8 are fellow travelers: Mary Magdalene,

Joanna and Susanna. Mary and Martha of Bethany and their brother, Lazarus, are listed as dearly loved friends. There were others. What about family? There is Mary, His mother, James, His brother, and others. You start to see this web of relationships emerge in a growing circle. We are all in webs of relationships like this.

Now, a relationship is both responsibility and dependency. There is responsibility. You have a responsibility to others with whom you have relationships. You feel this playing on a team or in the band, or, as we grow older, at work; eventually most have this in a family of your own, a spouse, and kids, or else in our adult friend network for the single. You are responsible to the people around you, even here in church. And this morning, if I can say, we feel it as citizens of one city. We are Colorado Springs. You are Colorado Springs. And we have a responsibility toward every fellow citizen of this city. And we feel that responsibility going outward, don't we. How you treat them is how their life goes. Love one another. Bear one another's burdens. Laugh with those who laugh; grieve with those who grieve. Love like Jesus. There's a reason the Scriptures are full of this stuff. You are responsible to those around you. These Christians, see how they love one another! There is also dependency. You depend on those around you. How they treat you is how your life will go. You need them. You are not an island—not emotionally, physically, spiritually or mentally or anything else. For all those characteristics of yourself, you depend on those around you. I know a pastor who briefly forced all the lyrics of hymns and praise songs to replace "I" with "we" in every instance! You are not alone. You are in a web of relationships marked by responsibility and dependency.

Now, if you are like me, that can feel a little heavy. I want to say this now, but I have the warning light going off in the back of my mind that says, "Don't do therapy in the pulpit." I'm not saying this to do therapy up here, but I want to say something a little personal in hopes that knowing my experience gives you a little more room for your own. It is easy for me to examine my web of relationships and think, "I don't think I have given any one of these relationships what they deserve, what they need, or even what they require. I can't think of anyone I haven't disappointed." Maybe everybody feels that way. "I don't think there is a single strand, a single relationship that has received what it should. I'm failing all of

## HUMBLE PIE • John 3:26-36 • Tim McConnell • November 20, 2022

them.” Relationships are responsibility and dependency, but that can’t be all. In Christ, there is also grace and forgiveness. You need grace to accept that there is a gap between perfect relational wholeness and the current relationship as it sits. Grace fills that gap. It’s not up to you to satisfy every person in your web. Grace needs to fill you up, and fill them up, and fill up all those gaps in between. And it does. Grace and forgiveness. No relationship, no matter how small or light, or how deep and personal, no relationship endures without forgiveness. The counterpart to responsibility and dependency: grace and forgiveness through Jesus.

Back to John. Responsibility. Jesus loved His cousin John. Did Jesus take responsibility? It’s hard to find a man in history who seemed to bear more responsibility for those around Him than Jesus. What about dependency? Did Jesus depend? Jesus’ ministry launched off John’s platform. John’s preaching and baptizing seemed to turn the soil over and prepare hearts. Yes. Jesus depended on others too. The Lord of the universe asks a Samaritan woman to give Him a drink, allows His feet to be washed, His head to be anointed, and fish to be prepared for Him to eat. Jesus demonstrated the importance of dependency. Look at the cross, when Jesus looked down at another John, the gospel-writer John, standing next to His mother Mary and said, “‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:26-27). “Mom, please take care of John. John, please take care of my mom.” Responsibility and dependency.

So, what should we do? What is our exercise this week? Go eat a bunch of turkey and pie! Here’s what I want us to do. Remember, we have talked about three ingredients to Humble Pie: curiosity, service and gratitude. Week one we just said, go be curious. Exercise your curiosity muscles. Go learn to know what you don’t know you didn’t know. Last week, Jennifer said go and serve. Nothing huge. As her daughter encouraged us, something simple. Hold a door. Help with homework. Bring a drink or share a snack. Serve. Go out and be servants this week, love on those around us in this community. But do it quietly. In Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes, “The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service.” What I want to ask you to do this week is a little harder yet: write a thank you note. Think about your web of relationships.

Think about responsibility and dependency. Who has helped you? Who has supported you? Do you assume that they know how much it meant to you, how much it helped? They don’t. Take a pen, scratch it across paper, and write a note. If you want (extra credit) you can write what is called a gratitude letter. Go all the way in. Write a full letter to someone who truly increased your life, helped you in that key season. If they are already gone to heaven, you can still do it. It will be good for you. This is our exercise in gratitude. Write it out. Say “Thank you for what you did for me—I’m dependent. I could not have made it without you.”

Later on, John the Baptist was arrested and thrown in prison. While he was in prison, Jesus sent him a note. Not a note, but a notice. Jesus never put pen to paper that we can find. John’s friends came and asked Jesus, “Are you the One, or are we still waiting?” “So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor’ (Luke 7:22). Tell John that. He’ll know.” I’d be stretching to call that a thank you note, but it’s close. “Look at what is happening now, John.” There is responsibility. There is dependency. There is love.

And there is grace and forgiveness, the likes of which John the Baptist uniquely could understand. “For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (John 3:34-36). Where is grace? Jesus won an endless supply. Now in the web, in the love of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit poured out without limit, there is grace enough, forgiveness enough, love enough for you and for me. It is in humility we come to Jesus our Savior. You can only approach the throne by bending down the head. The door is small, you bend down to enter. But the Lord is the lifter of your head. He will restore you, forgive you, and lift you up to eternal life if you are humble enough to admit today you need a Savior. He is yours.

