

## **KNOW YOUR PLACE!**

**Today's Text: Jn 3: 22- 36**

### **Extracts:**

**Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, *He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified- behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!*" John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is fulfilled. *He must increase, but I must decrease*" [Jn 3: 25-30]**

*After 86 consecutive draws without a winner in the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes, the prize money reached 741m pesos (US \$17 m) and the odds of winning went to one in nearly 29 million.<sup>1</sup> That was when a Filipino in his sixties who was visiting family from his base in the US decided to try his luck. The man was about to buy his ticket when a woman rudely pushed in front of him on the long queue. He politely let her have her way and he bought the next ticket. In the 29 November 2010 draw, the man won! Quoting the winner when he came a week later to collect his prize, the chair of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PSCO), Margie Juico, told reporters, "How bad for that woman. She could have won the big prize if she had just been patient."*

*A similar thing can happen to anybody who refuses to take his or her place when relating to others. We treat others as if they are inferior to us even when they are superior to or equal in status with us. In the end, just like the woman in the above story, we lose opportunities or blessings that should have been due to us. Many of us have lost perfect spouses or promotion or other benefits because we do not know our place. In this week's Bible text, some people came to John to ask why he was allowing Jesus and His disciples to outshine him. John's answer contains important principles that will assist us to know our place with others. Let us find them out from this week's interesting study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on "Politeness leads Philippine expat to \$17m lottery win," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11969987> ; 10 Dec. 2010

## 1. Background: John defines his place with Jesus

Imagine yourself in the following situation. Your spouse has been away on an official trip abroad. S(h)e has just returned and desires to have a quiet lunch with you alone in an exotic restaurant. As you are settling down to lunch, your phone rings. Your secretary requests that you return to the office immediately because your boss from the head office has suddenly appeared without notice for a confidential discussion with you. He cannot wait because he has to return by the next flight which leaves in less than one hour away. What would you do in the circumstance? Your choice will depend on your sense of priorities. You do not want to disappoint your spouse or your boss; yet, time is not on your side. What you then decide to do depends on the type of place you want to have with your spouse or your boss or both of them.

In this week's Bible story, some Jews and some of John's disciples had a dispute over purification (i.e., *Mikveh* or the Jewish practice of ritual immersion in water<sup>2</sup>). They came to him and challenged him, saying, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified- behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" [Jn 3: 25-26]. Let us get the import of that statement. Remember it was John that had baptized Jesus [Matt. 3: 13-17]. In the eyes of the onlookers, John should act superior and bigger to Jesus! But what they began to see was different. Jesus was outshining and overshadowing John. What was he going to do about that?

Is that familiar to you? How many of us can stand a situation where those who used to look up to us are now towering over us? How many of us can tolerate a situation where we do not monopolize the limelight on every occasion? The reality is that you cannot be the centre of the world all the time. You may be the boss in one place but a subordinate in another place. Unless you can adjust from one to the other, you will have a problem relating well to others. That is why you need to know your place. That is what John wants to teach us in this week's study. John's answer to those who came to him can be examined as follows:

### a) *It is God that determines your place*

John answered the people, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" [Jn 3: 27]. In other words, only God can determine your place for "exaltation comes neither from the east, nor from the west nor from the south, but God is the Judge; He puts down one, and exalts another" [Ps. 75: 6-7]. This is well illustrated in how a successor to King David was picked. Adonijah, one of David's sons who had tried to hijack the kingship of Israel in the evening of David's reign said to Solomon's mother, "You know that the kingdom was mine, and all Israel had set their expectations on me, that I should reign. However, the

<sup>2</sup> "Mikveh," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikvah>

kingdom has been turned over, and has become my brother's; for *it was his from the Lord*" [1 Kgs 2: 15].

Therefore, your place is not determined by your effort or smartness or sharpness. It has nothing to do with your political or royal connections. If it is not yours from God, no one can give it to you. So, it is important that you *put yourself in good standing with God who is in a position to determine what place He has for you*. The Psalmist says, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He will hide me in His pavilion... He shall set me high upon a rock" [Ps. 27: 4-5]. In line with God's place for John, he was a forerunner of Christ but he was not the Christ [Jn 3: 28]. He wanted it to stay that way.

b) *He who comes from heaven is above all*

Just to make sure that they understood that point more clearly, John drew another parallel between the Christ and His forerunner. He said, "He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all" [v. 31]. *The Christ came from heaven*, being the Son of God conceived in the womb of Joseph's wife, Mary. John was the seed of Zacharias the priest conceived in the womb of his wife, Elizabeth. Jesus Himself has said, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" [v. 13]. *Since Jesus the Christ comes from heaven, He is above all and, therefore, superior to His forerunner, John the Baptist*.

c) *Therefore, Jesus must increase and John must decrease*

Having established the perking order between himself and Jesus Christ, John drew a telling conclusion for his listeners, "He must increase, and I must decrease" [v. 30]. That was why John was hesitant to baptize Jesus. When the Lord came forward to be baptized, we are told, "John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?'" Jesus told him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" [Matt. 3: 14-15].

*When you find yourself in a status comparison situation, you should as quickly as possible establish your place. Even if somebody is trying to usurp your place, you can yield it and leave the embarrassment to the usurper!* That a bat can fly does not make it a bird!

d) *John's joy is fulfilled*

John added, “Therefore, this my joy is fulfilled” [Jn 3: 29]. Having appropriately determined his place with Jesus whom he had yielded the pride of place, John felt fulfilled and was glad. Speaking of John later (after he had been put in Herod’s prison), Jesus told His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you, *among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” [Matt. 11: 11]. For knowing his place, John was greater than his forerunners. *But if you will accept your place with God and His Christ, you will be greater than John the Baptist!* That suggests that a great reward awaits you both on earth and in heaven if you know your place in the kingdom of God.

*We can conclude that there is a perking order wherever you find yourself. Before God, we are all inferior. Among humans, we may sometimes find ourselves as bosses or equals or subordinates in our relationships with others. If we do not know our place, we could offend God or others.* So, how do you know your place?

## 2. Knowing your place is a spiritual matter!

The word of God says, “If anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” [Gal. 6: 3]. Nobody likes to believe that s(he) thrives by self-deception. That is why you need to know your place as you play different roles in your church, family or society. Let us examine how to know your place among the following groups of people:

### a) Among subordinates

Sometimes, you may find yourself as a boss or supervisor over subordinates. You may be a parent or teacher or pastor or political or administrative leader. By definition, you are already occupying a position of power conferred on you by law or convention. You can do and undo by virtue of incumbency. As a political leader, you can beat all traffic regulations without being penalized! As a pastor, you can come late and still preach the sermon. As a parent, you may not be able to pay school fees for your children but you continue to be called their parent. But what should be your proper place in such circumstances?

First and foremost, you must *behave according to authority, not power*. In other words, *you should do only what the law or rules and regulations or conventions allow you to do*, not according to the fact that you are the incumbent. Accordingly, you will only spend resources entrusted to your care in accordance with the accounting rules in place. You will obey organizational rules of punctuality and attendance like everyone else. For example, during the reign of king David, officers and others “cast lots for their duty, the small as well as the great, the teacher with the student” [1

**Chron. 25: 8].** *When you behave that way, people will see you as humble and they will respect you much more.* For example, when there was a dispute among His disciples as to who was the greatest, Jesus their big boss told them, “I am among you as the one who serves” [Lk 22: 24-27].

In addition to being humble among your subordinates, another quality that can establish your place with them is to *seek to uplift them*. It is true that familiarity breeds contempt; that if you are humble before some subordinates, they think they can ride you uncaringly. However, the bulk of them may respect you, especially if you always seek to uplift them beyond their limitations. For example, when David asked for the son of Jonathan to be brought before him so he could show him kindness for his father’s sake, Mephibosheth was “lame in his feet.” As he struggled to fall on his face to greet the king, David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father’s sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually” [2 Sam. 9: 1-7]. Later when David was driven into exile during Absalom his son’s rebellion, Mephibosheth refused to shave or wash “from the day the king departed until the day he returned in peace” [2 Sam. 19: 24]. He rewarded David’s uplifting him with his loyalty.

b) *Among equals*

Equals are *people that you can neither punish nor reward and yet you need their cooperation and/or resources for your own success*. As a result, many of us have a problem dealing with equals. Some people cannot work in groups that they cannot dominate. Some people fear to participate because they do not want their inadequacies to be exposed. Yet, *you need to work with others through collaboration, consultation or cooperation to achieve your own goals. Therefore, to succeed with equals, you must be ready to give and take. You must give mutual support and show mutual respect*. You must be ready to learn from your equals who know better than you do.

For example, his original name was Joses but it was the apostles who named him Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” He sold his land and gave all the proceeds to the apostles [Acts 4: 30-31]. When everybody was afraid of Saul (Paul) after his conversion, it was Barnabas that took him and brought him to the apostles and attested to his authentic conversion [Acts 9: 26-27]. Even though Paul was an elite among the apostles (most of whom were fishermen), he deferred to the Jerusalem Council (led by Peter, James and John) and sought its clearance and approval on crucial doctrinal matters, such as justification by faith, not by circumcision [Acts 15: 1-27]. *Respect begets respect*. Peter in turn respected Paul whom he addressed as “our beloved brother” [2 Pet. 3: 15].

c) *Among superiors*

A superior is *somebody of a higher rank than you are*. Those looking for favours or avoiding punishment can easily give way to their superiors. However, surrender cannot give you joy. You have done so because the odds are against you. That was not what John the Baptist felt when he said, “Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must decrease, but I must increase” [Jn 3: 29-30]. As the dutiful best man to the bridegroom, he willingly yielded to the superiority of Jesus because he was convinced that that was the right and best thing to do! ***Those who accept God and His Christ must do so willingly.***

That is not a common thing. Most of us value our independence and will not let it go. One way we show it is by rebellion. Satan rebelled against God in heaven and he was thrown out [Rev. 12: 7-10]. Korah and his colleagues rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, saying, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy ... and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?” For their rebellion, God caused the earth to open and swallow them up [Num.16: 1-32].

From the forgoing, we can conclude that *it is easy to know your place if you are willing to accept it. If you can uplift those who are of a lower status than you are or respect and cooperate with your equals, or defer willingly to your superiors, then you know your place. It can only happen if you are Spirit-led and not carnally-minded “because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be”*[Rom. 8: 6-7]. You will be honoured both by humans and by God if you truly know your place.

### 3. Conclusion: Let Jesus prepare your place for you!

It was not robbery for Jesus to make Himself equal with God because He and His Father are one [Jn 10: 30]. Yet, in human form, He humbled Himself before God and man, even when the latter always sought to humiliate Him. He willingly gave up His divinity [v. 18] in order to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. So, because He knew His place, God has also highly exalted Him. Now, at the name of Jesus, every knee is bowed in heaven, on earth or under the earth, and every tongue will ultimately have no choice but to confess that Jesus is Lord to His Father’s glory [Phil. 2: 5-11].

So, when you give your life to Jesus, He will prepare a place for you in His Father’s house. Know your place and your joy will be fulfilled.