The One Verdict that Matters
John 3:22-36

We're looking at the Gospel of John, one of the four accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in the Bible.

Now, as well as reading John, I'm reading another book at the moment with a friend, and in the chapter we were looking at this week the author quotes an interview that the pop-star, Madonna, gave back in 1991. And in it Madonna describes having 'an iron will'. But listen to how she directs that will: 'All my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy… My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm *Somebody*. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.'

But what Madonna describes is not unique to her, is it? Or even to our own cultural moment. Ever since Eden, people have felt this need to prove themselves, to win the approval of the gods, or God, or others, or even ourselves, that we're ok, that we're somebody.

But as Madonna describes, that search for a verdict on our lives leaves us fragile. And if you noticed, John the Baptist's disciples are experiencing just that fragility in today's passage. So, in that search to know you're ok, we're going to look at two ways that leave you fragile, and one that leaves you secure.

The Religious Route
Look at v25: 'Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification.' Ok, so why has someone come to John the Baptist's disciples to debate, and to debate about purification? Where's that come from?

Well, look at v23 and what comes before. 'John also was baptising at Aenon new Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptised.' And John was baptising people as a mark of repentance. Under his preaching, they're being convicted of their sins, they want to turn away and be washed clean of them, and John's baptising them as a mark of that.

But he's not doing that in a cultural sterile environment. John is Jewish, and his disciples are Jewish, and the man coming to debate is Jewish. And within Old Testament Law, and subsequent Jewish culture, there were multiple ways in which people could seek cleansing or purification for sin.

We've already seen a number of them going through this gospel.

At the wedding in Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine, John tells us that the water was contained in 'six stone jars there for the Jewish rites of purification' (2:6). Wash your hands before the meal and God will bless you and the meal. Jesus entered the temple at Jerusalem, and John tells us Jesus 'found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons' (2:14). Why? For the sacrifices that could cleanse and purify people of their sins.

And when Nicodemus came to Jesus in chapter 3, right before today's passage, Jesus told him, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (3:5) - and he's drawing on God's promise, through the prophet Ezekiel, to wash his people clean of their sin.

And so, probably, this Jewish man has come to debate John's disciples because he wants to know, what's your baptism got to do with all the other cleansing rituals we already have. How do you fit into this??

Ok, but think what lies behind the washings and the sacrifices and the baptisms - why they're doing all this. It's that they know they're not ok, but want to be. It's that they want to know they're clean, forgiven, accepted by God. What they're after is a stamp of approval.

It's like those packets that syringes or needles come in. Somewhere there'll be a date, or a mark, telling you when it was sterilised, or passed the test, and it's good to go. And when you become aware of all that's wrong in your life, you can want that kind of verdict for yourself. That in-spite of everything you're ok, you're approved of, you're good to go.

The problem comes when you think you have to earn that, by your religious acts. Because how can you ever know you've done enough? Think God's approval of you depends on your religious attendance and you'll feel bad about not being at every church meeting, or find yourself going to Mass daily. Think that God thinking good thoughts about you depends on you reading your Bible every day and you'll feel lousy about yourself when you don't. Think you have to earn God's smile and you won't just feel bad about your sin, and confess them, you'll beat yourself up over them as a kind of penance, or find yourself praying prayers that your heart's not in.

But all the time there's this nagging sense of guilt hanging over you. Guilt, and insecurity. Because could you have done more?

It's one of the reasons why the Pharisees - men like the one coming to John the Baptist's disciples - devised all these extra regulations about purification, just so they could be sure they *had* done enough.

But what John the Baptist makes clear is that none of these cleansing rituals, or any other religious ritual, can give you the verdict, the inner cleansing and inner security you're searching for. Because none of them are permanent: whether it's John's baptism, or water for washing at a wedding, or animals for sacrifice in the temple, they're all pointing to Jesus and find their fulfilment in him.

But, of course, you might hear all that - especially if you're not particularly religious - and think, 'I do not live with this need to have God's approval!' Sure. But whose approval are you after?

The Success Route

And something about this debate with the Jewish man bothers John's disciples. Verse 26: "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan [that's Jesus], to whom you bore witness - look, he is baptising and all are going to him."

And maybe the man had pointed that out to them - 'look, it's not just you who are baptising. This guy Jesus is as well, and you are clearly losing followers to him.' Now if you were being charitable, you could take their comments to John as being positive - 'hey John, isn't it wonderful, this guy who you plugged, who you promoted, is drawing the crowds away from us to himself. That's such a great thing.'

But that's almost certainly *not* what they're saying. It's that Jesus' crowds are growing and John's are shrinking. And with it, so is their prestige, their standing. And that's unfair, because 'he's only doing well because you, John, promoted him. And you sent people his way, so he should return the favour.'

And they're annoyed, even bitter. Because as Jesus' stock rises, theirs falls. And when John was the one drawing the crowds, when he was talk of the town, and *the* up and coming star, to be his disciple was to be someone. But when your man is yesterday's man, there's not quite the same kudos, is there? No-one looks at you quite the same way anymore.

Now, imagine you have a start-up, and so does a friend. And his flourishes, and the investors start coming in, but yours stalls. That hurts, doesn't it? And not just because yours doesn't fly - it's because yours doesn't fly and his does. And you can't help looking sideways and comparing. And you feel worse because he's doing better.

Or think about your kids. And you feel good about your kids, until you have coffee with or get the Christmas newsletter of your friend and hear all the amazing things her kids are doing, and suddenly, you don't feel quite so good about your own.

Or think of your end of year bonus, if you get one. Last year, I was talking to a friend, who earns a lot, and when he told me how much his bonus was, I was gobsmacked. You get *that in addition* to your salary? It was a staggering sum. But it left him feeling undervalued, hurt and angry. Why? Because it wasn't as big as his colleagues'. And my friend realised, it wasn't just the money - it was the money in comparison to others. It was the money and what it said about how his colleagues valued him.

Needless to say, he made sure he was appointed to the rewards and remunerations committee for this year's bonus.

And so whether it's John's disciples, or you and me, how we feel about ourselves can rise or fall on our success. But that success is frequently comparative. And that's what makes us fragile, because we have no control over how others are doing.

Two weeks ago I sprained my ankle while running. And I don't think I was ever aware of my ankle before that. I mean, you do not spend your day admiring your ankles, do you? But when it's hurting, you notice it all the time.

But the same is true with our ego - you don't notice it until it's hurting, until it's taken a hit. And the egos of John's disciples - their sense of worth and value - of whether they're doing ok or not - has taken one. And because their sense of worth is built on success, and what others think of them, and because that's comparative, they resent the success of Jesus, because of what they think, feel, it says about them. They're fragile.

You see, if how good you feel about yourself is based on you being on top, then your whole identity takes a hit when your success falters. If it's based on what others think of you - on them thinking you're the best - how can you cope when they pass you by because suddenly there's someone more dynamic, more talented, or more pretty, who's come along?

You see, whether it's pulling in the crowds, or making the deals, or publishing more papers, or earning a bigger bonus, at the root of feeling ok about ourselves based on our success is pride. The pride that says we're *doing* better, or *are* better, than others. But the problem with pride is that we think we are better than we actually are. And so when someone comes along and shows us that we're not quite as good as we thought we were, the world of our self-worth collapses and we can become angry - at them, at ourselves for having failed, and at God. Because why does he allow that person to do better than me? Because if I were on the throne of the universe, that would not happen. But what's that if it's not pride?

So we want to know that we're ok. We want that verdict. But seek it through religious effort and winning the approval of God, or through success and the approval of others, and it will leave you fragile.

But John the Baptist shows us a better way.

The Way of the Gospel

And in comparison to his disciples' fragility, and barely concealed bitterness, look at John's response: v30, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease." And he's not saying that out of an attitude of resignation or defeatism, but joy, as right before, in v29, he says "This joy of mine is now complete."

Now, in the past, self-promotion was seen as a vice. But today, from resumes to social media, to make much of yourself, and promote yourself, is seen as a virtue, a sign of your self-confidence, and it's low self-esteem that's the problem.

But here, John is demonstrating something very different. Because far from feeling threatened by Jesus' success, it brings him joy.

Now imagine if your sense of worth was so secure, so grounded, that you could genuinely enjoy someone else doing better than you, in the very thing that you think of as your thing. Imagine if your joy, your inner strength, your feeling ok about yourself was not tied up in your performance at all- religious or secular - or in what others thought about you? Wouldn't that be freeing? Because that's what's happening with John.

So how does he get there?

Firstly, ***he understands all of life as gift***. His disciples come to him, saying, everyone's leaving us and going to Jesus, and he says, v29, "A person cannot receive *even one thing* unless it is given him from heaven."

And when you understand that any abilities you have, have been given you as a gift of God's grace, it humbles you. Because if you find yourself winning in the success game, you know it's not because you're better than anyone else; it's because God has been kind and gracious to you.

But it also enables you to handle with peace and poise those times you're you're not winning, when you're watching the crowds, or the applause, or the job go to that other person. And you realise, their success is also a gift from God. And that can kill the jealousy in our hearts.

You see, the apostle Paul knew this danger of comparison, and of finding your significance in success or others' opinion of you. Because if here John's disciples are unhappy at people moving into Jesus' orbit, in the church at Corinth groups were dividing into 'I'm with Paul', 'I'm with Apollos', or 'I'm with Peter'. And when you're living in that kind of atmosphere, it's all too easy to root your value in how many are in your camp, or in what nice - or not so nice - things people are saying about you. But listen to Paul writes, 'With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself… It is the Lord who judges me.' And he goes on, that 'none of you may be puffed up in favour of one against another… What do you have that you did not receive? If then your received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?' (1 Cor 4:6-7).

So Paul understands what John understood - that the opinion of others is a weak foundation to build your life on. But so too is is a self-esteem that's self-validated. I do not judge myself, Paul says. Instead, when you know that all of life is God's gift, including success, including seeming failure - which is also in his hands, it brings a deep stability and security to your life.

But secondly, ***John knows who he's not***. Look at v28, "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ.'" John knows he's not the messiah. But what if you think you are, or need to be? That to earn God's favour, or the approval of others, you've got to be constantly working, and be everywhere, doing everything, and having all the answers - it's exhausting. And whether you're a parent, or a boss, or a doctor or nurse or pastor, you cannot fix everyone's problems, because you're not the Christ. And when you understand that like John understood it, it can be incredibly freeing.

Thirdly, ***John understands who Jesus is***. Look at v29, "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete."

Imagine you're at a wedding, and the best man, the friend of the bridegroom, is getting annoyed because all the attention is on the groom, and not on him. And he's getting upset , he's feeling threatened because the photographer keeps wanting the bridegroom in the pictures and not him. And the guests are queuing up to shake the groom's hand, and the gifts and presents are for the bride and groom and not the bride and him. What would you think?

You'd think, 'Err, I don't think you quite get it - who you are and who he is.' But John knows, it's Jesus who's the Bridegroom. And, if you know the Old Testament, you'll know that God's people are the Bride, and God himself is the Bridegroom.

So John has this profound understanding of who Jesus is. He's not just a younger cousin, he's God come for his bride. And while it's not clear from v31 onwards, if it's still John the Baptist talking, or John the writer of the gospel, the message is the same. John is merely human, Jesus is from above and so above all. And while John speaks merely human words, Jesus, v34, 'utters the words of God'. And John is not the Christ - he's just a man with all the limits of a man, God has given to Jesus v34, 'the Spirit without measure' because there's no limit to Jesus' capacity for the Spirit. And so, v35, 'The Father loves the Son and has given *all things* into his hand.' So how could it possibly bother him, that the crowds are going to Jesus and not to him?

You see, imagine you enjoyed kicking a ball around in the back garden with your kids or your friends kids. But one day you got to meet a Messi or a Kane or a Ronaldo. You wouldn't brag about putting three goals past a five year old, would you?

And it's the same for John. He's not getting his sense of worth - that verdict on his life, that he's ok - from his success, or the crowds he draws, because he has encountered true greatness. And it's deeply humbled him. It's the comparison that relativises every other comparison.

Fourthly, ***John understands his purpose in life***. A few years back a friend took me to see Michael McIntyre, the stand up comedian, live in London. And before McIntyre came on, another comic took the stage as the warm up act. And he was ok, except he wasn't that great, and I remember looking at my watch, thinking, this could be a loooong night. But then McIntyre came on the evening flew by. What if the warm up act had thought the evening was about him and wouldn't quit the stage?

That was not a mistake John was about to make, and that's despite the fact that John *was* great. Later on, Jesus will call him, 'A burning and shining lamp' (John 5:35). And Jesus said of him, 'Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.' (Matt 11:11). Yet John knows he's not the main act. Verse 28, "I am not the Christ, *but I have been sent before him*."

Your role in life is not to make yourself look great, or get the applause of others. Think it is, and you're always going to be fragile; you're always going to be unnerved by competition. But when you know, as the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith knew, that your chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, it frees you from the need to be a Somebody, and the obsession of how you're doing in the eyes of others. And instead you can rejoice at anything that's making much of Jesus, or that's working for the good of others through the gifts of his grace.

But fifthly and finally, ***John understands the one verdict that does matter***. Look at v36, 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.' And that contrast between 'eternal life' and 'the wrath of God' tells you, we really do stand in a courtroom awaiting a verdict. But the judgment is not based on our success, or the opinion of others, or even our opinion of ourselves. The one opinion that counts is God's. But you don't get that favourable opinion by religious washings or any of the ways we might try to make ourselves acceptable to him.

John tells us we get it through faith. By putting our trust in Jesus and not in ourselves. You see, here the crowds are going to Christ, but at the cross the crowds deserted him and he was left utterly alone. And rather than being applauded, he was mocked. Why? Because he was taking upon himself the wrath of God that was ours to bear, for all the sins we need cleansing from. And he took our punishment, that we might get his righteousness, *and* the verdict that all our hearts long for: that you are not guilty, you are more than ok, you are loved by the Father. Not because of what you've done, but because of what Jesus has done for you.

So, this morning, put your trust in him, and he will give you stability and security in place of fragility. And a verdict far greater than trying to prove you're a somebody.