

## Purity, Position, and Punishment - John 3:22-36<sup>1</sup>

**Before the lesson** – Make copies of the handouts, “Choices” and “Parallels.” Prepare AV equipment to play the 2-minute song, *Purer in Heart*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMQt80KEBrw&t=15s> (Note: There is only a static picture on this video, but it is a nice arrangement, so you may want to play only the sound.)

**Fellowship Question:** (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Who was your best man or maid of honor?

What gives you “pure joy?”

### Information

How would you define the word, “pure” in one or two words? [Write responses on the board.]

Were our definitions stated in the negative or in the positive? Negatively, for example, could include not dirty, not contaminated, unmixed, without other characteristics. Positively, synonyms like wholesome, virtuous, complete, and true to the original could be examples.

Purity was important in the ancient Jewish faith. Laws about remaining pure were given so that the people would be clean for God’s worship and lives would be unstained by the impure world.

“When something is out of place as determined by the prevailing system of meaning, that something is considered wrong, deviant, senseless. Dirt is matter out of place. When people clean their houses or cars, they simply rearrange matter, returning it to its proper place ...There is a proper place for everything...A purity system [is] a system of pure (in place) and impure (out of place). Pure and impure, clean and unclean, can be predicate of persons, groups, things, times, and places. Such purity systems embody the core values of a society and thereby provide clarity of meaning, direction of activity, and constancy for social behavior.”<sup>2</sup>

In John’s Gospel, the theme of purity is hinted at in Jesus’ first miracle in Cana at a wedding. There was no more wine. But there were jars of water. The water was present so guests could wash away impurities. They knew nothing of germs, but dust on hands and feet was obvious. As we know, Jesus had the jars filled to their rims and turned the water into wine. Vessels for purity became vessels for pleasure. And, it was the best wine served at that party.

“The Israelite Yahwism of Jesus’ day provided such [purity] maps of:

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 94.

1. Time, which specified rules for the Sabbath, when to say the Shema, and when circumcision should be performed;
2. Places, which spelled out what could be done in various precincts of the temple or where the scapegoat was to be sent on the Day of Atonement;
3. Persons, which designated whom one could marry, touch, or eat with, who could divorce, and who could hold certain offices or perform certain activities;
4. Things, which designated what was considered clean or unclean and could be offered in sacrifice or allowed contact with the body;
5. Food rules, which determined what was considered clean or unclean, how it was to be grown, prepared, or slaughtered, in what vessels it could be served, when and where it could be eaten, and with whom it could be shared;
6. Uncleaness, which offered guidelines for avoiding polluting contact.”<sup>3</sup>

In today’s passage, John the Baptist’s disciples and Jesus’ disciples are having an argument about purity.

- Have a class member read John 3:22-25.

We know the topic of the argument was baptism, but we do not know what they were arguing about specifically.

What are some issues that the Church has argued over baptism? (mode (dunk vs. sprinkle vs pour); membership (age of baptism, baptism accepted/not accepted from another Christian faith tradition, etc.); meaning (gives salvation vs. represents salvation, signifies discipleship vs. church membership, etc.)

As many arguments as we have had through the centuries, we still may not be talking about the same arguments these disciples were having.

“The relation of the controversy to what follows in vs. 26 is not clear. Are we to think it was about the relative value of the baptisms of John the Baptist and of Jesus? Or, since the word ‘purification’ reminds us of the water ‘prescribed for Jewish purifications’ in 2:6, are we perhaps to think of a dispute about the relative value of John the Baptist’s baptism and the standard of Jewish purificatory washings? Was this Jew posing questions about John the Baptist’s baptism like those put by the Pharisees in 1:25? Or was there a general controversy of all the types of purification by water (the various baptisms, the washings of the Pharisees; Essene lustrations, etc.)?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Malina 94f.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 151f.

Arguments about purity are arguments to define or defend who is “in” or “out” in a society. Thus, lepers had to call out “unclean!” when approaching “clean” people. Menstruation was considered to be “unclean” so there were many laws about behavior of and around women. And since women were unclean monthly, they were not allowed to be part of the religious structure that demanded the highest of pure standards.

Thus, this may have been an argument not merely about baptism, but about the “in-ness” or “out-ness” of Jesus as judged by John the Baptist’s disciples.

- Have a class member read John 3:26.

John the Baptist’s disciples saw Jesus as a threat. This is not how John sees Jesus, however.

- Have a class member read John 3:27-30.

“John the Baptist in this Gospel is often said to be purely a witness to Jesus, but this passage says more, mentioning him baptizing and keeping company with Jesus (the one who was with you across the Jordan), and it even adds to the Synoptic picture of John, which has no hint of joy, friendship, celebration, or love. The witness is also a friend.”<sup>5</sup>

What are ways John pictures his relationship with Jesus? (friend, bridegroom’s friend, co-laborer, under the authority of Jesus, etc.)

“The imagery of the bridegroom and celebration not only resonates with love but also recalls the first sign of Jesus, at the wedding in Cana. Further, it invites a rereading of the earlier relationship of John the Baptist with Jesus. The bridegroom’s friend in that culture was responsible for arranging the match with the bride, and John the Baptist introduces his disciples to Jesus, whom they then follow.”<sup>6</sup>

“This is the *shoshben* of Jewish custom, the groom’s closest friend who takes care of arranging the wedding... Because of this special trust any impropriety between the best man and the bride was regarded as particularly heinous... Thus, John the Baptist could never marry the bride; his only function was to prepare her for Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

In a wedding, the focus is not to be on the best man or the maid of honor, but on the bride and groom. Imagine, though, that your best man or maid of honor was a well-known celebrity. Where

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<sup>5</sup> David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 103.

<sup>6</sup> Ford, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, 152.

would people's attention be? John, recognizing this, insists that he must fade into the background.

Here is an interesting bit of religious trivia that you may not have known. We celebrate Jesus' birthday on December 25, although his actual birthdate is unknown to us. Likewise, the Church celebrates John the Baptist's birthday on June 24. Why do you think those two dates were chosen?

“Calendar makers [of Europe] placed the birth of John the Baptist at June 24 (three[/four] days after the summer solstice), on the day light noticeably begins to decrease, and the birth of Jesus at December 25 (three[/four] days after the winter solstice), the day light begins to increase. The notion is also suggested by the fact that the Greek verbs here for ‘to increase’ and ‘to decrease’ are those used for the wax and waning of light from celestial bodies.”<sup>8</sup>

- Have a class member read John 3:31-36.

“‘Earth’ in John does not usually have the implication of hostility that ‘world’ has. It refers to the natural level of man’s existence as contrasted with the supernatural or heavenly. The ‘world’ has the cloak of Satanic hostility about it (1 John 5:19).”<sup>9</sup>

“The issue here is origin. In antiquity people were always expected to act and speak in accord with their birth status. Thus, the one who is from earth speaks about the earth. The one from above can testify to what would be known only by one from there.”<sup>10</sup>

Once again, the Gospel of John speaks of eternal life/death as being a present reality, not something that happens when this life ends.

“Disobedience is greeted here and now with God’s enduring wrath, just as vs. 18 stressed that the man who refuses belief is *already condemned*. The positive side of this realized eschatology is seen in the affirmation that whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life.”<sup>11</sup>

“Notice the present tenses, ‘believes,’ ‘disobeys’; John is not thinking of a single act but a pattern of life. Notice too that the contrast to believing is disobeying; we saw in 18-21 the strong connection between the way a man lives, acts, and keeps the commandments and his belief in Jesus.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Malina, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, 157f.

<sup>10</sup> Malina, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

“The present tense indicates that punishment has begun and will last. The Synoptics use the phrase ‘the wrath to come’ in John the Baptist’s prediction of what will happen when the one for whom he is preparing comes. For John this escatological theme is realized here and now.”<sup>13</sup>

“In the face of evil, sin, refusal of love and compassion, corruption, cruelty...and whatever else constitutes darkness and disbelief, God is not neutral: there is the reality of God’s wrath. God demands decision and commitment: there is no neutrality for us either...There is a crucial decision to be made in response to the witness of the Gospel, one that is ultimately about deciding either for life, love, and joy or for whatever negates them.”<sup>14</sup>

This passage of scripture is often ignored by preachers, lectionaries, and commentaries. Sometimes, it is said that it does not belong in this location in the Gospel of John, because the flow would be more smooth from one conversation between Jesus and an individual (Nicodemus, 3:1-15) and another (Samaritan woman, 4:1-26). Other scholars, however, have noticed links between the encounter with Nicodemus and this story. Take a look at the handout. I will give you a few minutes of silence to read through this chart.

[Distribute the handout, “Parallels.”]

Any reactions or insights on seeing these passages in parallel?

### **Transformational Exercise**

In today’s lesson, we have focused on three words that begin with the letter p: Purity, Position, and Punishment.

We have choices to make for each of these topics.

[Distribute handout, “Choices.”]

We will have a time for silent reflection as you ponder these questions. After a time of silence, I will play the hymn, Purer in Heart. The lyrics are on your handout. Then, I will close with a prayer.

Purity - What is “out of place” in my life? What choices can I make to “be clean?”

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<sup>13</sup> Brown, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Ford, 105.

Position - What is my relationship with Jesus? Am I in competition or in line with what Jesus' plan for the world is?

Punishment - Am I choosing the way of eternal life or eternal death? How does my life reflect these choices?

*Purer in Heart* on YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMQt80KEBrw&t=15s>

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *You are pure love, pure joy, pure peace, O Lord. We are sinners and can not be pure as you are. But we hope to be closer to pure. We cannot do this on our own, however. Spirit of God, live through us. Take us closer to what you made us to be. Forgive us of our sins. Give us holy hearts and holy lives. Amen.*

## Choices

Purity - What is “out of place” in my life? What choices can I make to “be clean?”

Position - What is my relationship with Jesus? Am I in competition or in line with what Jesus’ plan for the world is?

Punishment - Am I choosing the way of eternal life or eternal death? How does my life reflect these choices?

## Purer in Heart<sup>15</sup>

1 Purer in heart, O God,  
Help me to be;  
May I devote my life  
Wholly to Thee.  
Watch Thou my wayward feet,  
Guide me with counsel sweet;  
Purer in heart,  
Help me to be.

2 Purer in heart, O God,  
Help me to be;  
Teach me to do Thy will  
Most lovingly.  
Be Thou my friend and guide,  
Let me with Thee abide;  
Purer in heart,  
Help me to be.

3 Purer in heart, O God,  
Help me to be;  
Until Thy holy face  
One day I see.  
Keep me from secret sin,  
Reign Thou my soul within;  
Purer in heart,  
Help me to be.

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<sup>15</sup> Source: Baptist Hymnal 2008 #591

## Parallels<sup>16</sup>

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, we now offer a description of the parallel patterns in which the author develops his scenes (after Neyrey 1980). The parallel scenes develop rather identically both as regards contents in general and as regards interest in the person of Jesus in particular. First the parallel contents:

3:1-21	3:22-36
1. Occasion a) a Pharisee b) born of water/spirit c) with Jesus	1. Occasion a) a Judean b) over purification c) with John's disciples
2. Address: "Rabbi . . ."	2. Address: "Rabbi . . ."
3. Christology: "A teacher from God"	3. Christology: "He who was with you . . . to whom you bore testimony, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him"
4. Reply of Jesus a) unless you are born <i>anōthen</i> (from above/again) b) metaphor of wind (spirit) (v. 8)	4. Reply of John the Baptist a) unless it is given him from the sky b) metaphor of bridegroom (v. 29)
5. Nicodemus and his eminence: "You a teacher of Israel do not know this?" (v. 10)	5. John the Baptist and Jesus' eminence: "He must increase and I must decrease" (v. 30)

As for parallel themes, largely focused on the person of Jesus:

3:1-21	3:22-36
1. Born <i>anōthen</i> (from above) (3:3, 7)	1. the one coming <i>anōthen</i> (from above) is above all (3:31)
2. Jesus: the one who came down from sky (3:13)	2. Jesus who comes down from sky (3:31b)
3. opposing types of people—flesh and spirit (3:6); earthly and celestial (3:12)	3. opposing types of people—earthly and celestial (3:31)
4. "We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not accept our testimony" (3:11)	4. "He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony" (3:32)
5. God sent the Son (3:17)	5. the one whom God has sent (3:34)
6. "that whoever believes in the Son may have eternal life" (3:15, 16)	6. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" (3:36)
7. Judgment (3:19-21)	7. Judgment (3:36)

<sup>16</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 93.