

The Gospel of John  
Lesson 7 – John 3:22-36  
**Connecting with God**

This section of John contains a conversation (vs. 22-30) and a discourse/explanation (vs. 31-36). The context of the passage is conversation about purification between John the Baptist and “a Jew/the Jews”. Purification within the Second Temple period (100 BCE to 70 CE) was a distinct practice of Jews ritually bathing (often but not always in *mikva’ot*, or stone pools such as the Pool of Siloam – John 9:7,11) in order to be ritually pure before entering God’s presence, usually in the Temple at Jerusalem. These *mikva’ot* can be seen at Qumran as well as other places. In some ways then, baptism, as immersion by John the Baptist, can be connected with this ritual bathing. The people were coming to John the Baptist to be prepared to enter into God’s presence. The debate between John the Baptist and “a Jew/the Jews” would have been over him baptizing/immersing people in non-traditional *mikva’ots*. This brief one sentence observation sets the scene for the bookends of the story, meaning, how one becomes “ritually pure” before God.

**Lesser/Greater:** The issue in the conversation between John the Baptist and his disciples (notice that “the Jew/the Jews” have vanished from the scene) concerns the Baptist’s slowly waning popularity. In the beginning of his ministry everyone flocked to him to be baptized. Now the tide has turned, and even though John the Baptist is still popular, Jesus is the one to whom all are going. John the Baptist responds to this concern by once again pointing out the difference between the lesser and the greater. He is the lesser. He is the lesser first because God has only given John the Baptist a limited quantity of people to baptize. John the Baptist is the lesser second because he is not the messiah. He is merely the friend of the bridegroom, or the *shoshben*. The *shoshben* had the responsibility for arranging the wedding, sending out the invitations, and presiding at the wedding feast. Though the role of the *shoshben* was important, it was secondary to the bridegroom. This is the Baptist’s role; the role he had been given by God.

**Heavenly/Earthly:** The concept of lesser/greater continues in the discourse/explanation, though the analogy shifts from bridegroom/*shoshben* to that of heavenly/earthly. The writer wants to make sure that people understand why John the Baptist is correct in his observation that he is the lesser and Jesus the greater. This has to do with origins. Jesus is the one from heaven. John is the one from earth. Jesus is the one who can speak of heavenly things. John is the one who can only speak of earthly things. What this means is that Jesus has both greater insight into the mind of God than the Baptist could ever have, and that Jesus can do things that John cannot do. This is demonstrated by the fact that Jesus the Messiah speaks God’s truth, and shares God’s Spirit. In addition, the writer returns to the image of Father/Son by reminding readers that Jesus is the Son to whom God has entrusted the work of salvation.

**Connecting with God:** Where these observations lead is back to how one becomes ritually pure before God. Rather than ritual purity happening in ritual bathing, it happens by believing in Jesus. This belief is what gives eternal life. Eternal life here does not mean life in heaven vs. life in hell. Eternal life means participation in the “life in the age to come.” Or perhaps, life fully lived in the presence of God in God’s coming Kingdom. So, rather than entering God’s presence in the Temple through ritual bathing, persons enter God’s presence in and through Jesus.

Questions:

1. How do you see the concept of greater/lesser played out today?
2. How should the concept of greater/lesser inform our faith journey?
3. What do you think about the connection between believing in Jesus and eternal life?