

A Friend of the Groom

John 1, 3

Dr. Jeremiah Ebeling ---- August 11, 2024

“If I had only one sermon to preach, it would be a sermon against pride.” That’s what G. K. Chesterton wrote in an essay called “The Common Man.” He said that if he only had one shot to preach a sermon in church, it would be a sermon on the dangers of ego. The dangers of ego ... this is what he said about why that sermon: **“The more I see of existence ... the more I am convinced of the reality of the old religious thesis: that all evil began with some attempt at superiority; some moment when, as we might say, the very skies were cracked across like a mirror, because there was a sneer in heaven.”**

If he had one sermon to preach, it would be on the power and the danger of ego. Chesterton said that what makes egoism so insidious is that it is so a part of the very fibers of our being, so engrained in us, that we often don’t even recognize it. We can see it in others, but we can’t look in the mirror and see it in ourselves. We miss it. And yet he says that ego, pride, poisons every family and nearly every circle of friends.

I wonder if this resonates with you like it does with me. I’ve spent a lot of my life trying to figure out how to get free from ego, get free from pride. But this is what I believe: that we are all in one of two camps. Either we are addicted to self, or we are recovering addicts to our egos. It’s one of two camps. You get to choose which one you’re in, but you’re going to be in one of them.

C. S. Lewis agreed with that. This is what he wrote. He said, **“If a man thinks he is not conceited, he is very conceited indeed.”** Be careful of that man.

Our ego, our conceitedness, affects us in so many ways. It shows up in so many different ways. Think about jealousy of a friend and their successes that keeps us from celebrating their wins with them. Maybe outwardly we do, but inwardly we can’t do that because of ego, at times. Even the good things that we do are stained by selfish motives. There are good motives in there, for sure. But there’s this selfishness that’s in there too. Even these common Christian refrains that we hear, that we say, of “making your life count” and “leaving a legacy”—there’s this self-serving tinge to them, isn’t there? At least, there certainly can be.

So, my question for us this morning is, How do I stop thinking about me so often? How do I break free from obsession with self, obsession with ego? How do I do that? It's a great day to be at Grace, because today we're going to discover a way out. What I want to share with you today is how to get on the road to freedom from you, from your ego, from your pride. And the irony here is that the person who's going to show us the way out—our guide this morning—was a man who had every reason to be conceited. He had every reason to be proud.

I'd like to share with you a little bit about this man and what was so outstanding about him. I can't share everything, but I'll share a couple of things.

First, I'll say this. This man was a medical miracle. He was born to parents who were years—no, decades—past their childbearing years. And yet, God doesn't keep time based on biological clocks. So, by divine intervention, this couple becomes pregnant. And God made sure that everybody knew that this man was sent from God. That's first.

A second reason that this man had every reason to be proud is that, between the two Testaments of Scripture, between the older and the newer Testaments, God had gone radio silent. He stopped talking. His people stopped listening, and so He decided, I'm going to stop talking. And yet, after four hundred years of not so much as a whisper from heaven, God selects this man and sends him forward to break that silence, to speak on God's behalf. And this man shows up. And as he shows up, he shows up saying this: "Listen, God is on the move again." *Aslan is on the prowl*. "And so, you need to get prepared. You need to ready yourself. Because He is doing something new, something brand new. And you need to start getting ready for it." That's what this man was sent to do by God himself.

Third—listen to this—Jesus himself says this about this man: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than this man." He's greater than Abraham, more important than Moses, more elevated than Moses. That's who this man was—from Jesus' own lips.

And then, finally, this man was a relative of Jesus himself, a relative of the Messiah. He was cousins with the King of Kings.

How about that for a resumé, huh?

Who was this man? What was his name? Why don't you say it? John the Baptist. That's right. John the Baptist—if ever there was a person who could be conceited, who would be conceited, it was John the Baptist.

And yet, what I love about this man is that he is going to be our guide. As we look at John the Baptist's life, as we look at his ministry, as we look at the things that he taught and what he said about himself, and what is said by others about him, what we're going to see is a way out for us, a way out from ego, how to get free from me. That's what we're going to see in John the Baptist this morning.

And there are going to be two key truths about this man that I want to see in the Gospel of John—two key truths that are going to help us to see how John the Baptist walked in freedom from himself, from his ego. How did he do that? And maybe, just maybe, we can walk in that way too. That's my hope. That's my prayer for us that morning, that we might be able to do that as we see these truths.

1. A Friend of the Groom

And the first place we're going to start is actually the last words that John the Baptist will say in the Gospel of John. This is the final thing that we hear from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John. And what he's going to say about himself is this first truth that we need to hear to get free from us. It's what John says about himself. He says, *Look, you want to know who I am? I'm a friend of the Groom. That's who I am. I'm a friend of the Groom.*

He calls himself that in [John 3:29-30](#). If you open your Bibles or your Bible app, look at what John says. He describes his relationship with Jesus this way. He says, *"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. He must become greater; I must become less."*

John says, *Do you know who I am? Do you know what my identity is?* He says, *I'm a part of a cosmic wedding. But I'm not the groom. No, Jesus is the groom. I'm just a friend of the groom. I get to be a friend of that man—I get to be the friend of that groom.* He says, *I have been waiting and listening for Him, and I've heard His voice, and now I get to celebrate, because my work is done. My joy is complete now because the Messiah, the Savior, the Groom, is here. And the spotlight is on Him, not on me. The spotlight is on Him.*

And where did John pull this wedding metaphor from? Where did it come from? It came from the prophets who were before him in the Old Testament. In Isaiah and Hosea and other prophets, what you see over and over again is that God is pictured as the groom and the people of

God are His bride. God will call himself the husband of Israel. You see this metaphor throughout Scripture. And then it's splashed across the pages of the New Testament as well. You see it all over the place, and certainly in John the Baptist and how he describes his mission while he was here on earth.

And what about a friend of the groom? Where did that come from? What did that mean to be a friend of the groom? Well, in a Jewish wedding in John's day, the friend of the groom was the best man and the maid of honor and the wedding coordinator all wrapped in one. Because the friend of the groom—what didn't that friend do? The friend of the groom was part of the preparations before the wedding day even came. That friend would make sure that all the family and the friends of the bride and groom were invited. He would send out the invitations. And then on the actual wedding day itself, the friend of groom was basically the MC, the master of ceremonies. He would tell everybody what to do and where to go and where to stand and what not to do. And then he would communicate important messages between the bride and the groom before the ceremony. And then after the ceremony was complete came his final and most important task. The friend of the groom would stand guard by the bridal chamber where the bride was waiting. And he would wait outside that bridal chamber for the groom to come and show up for his bride. He would wait and listen for the groom. And he was full of joy when he heard the groom's voice because the groom was now with his bride. And so, the friend's job was now complete. That's what it meant to be a friend of the groom. That's what John the Baptist says about himself.

And so, when you understand his understanding of himself, that he's a friend of the Groom, it helps you to read the Gospel of John—particularly when John the Baptist is speaking about himself and where John, the writer of the Gospel, speaks about him, and even what Jesus has to say about him. It puts those things in context. Because what you find out about John the Baptist is that almost every reference to him throughout the gospels, and certainly the Gospel of John, is in light of his relationship to Jesus. You see, John the Baptist couldn't talk about himself without telling and showing off the preeminence of Jesus in his life. It was absolutely clear that he defined himself exclusively in light of the Groom. He was a friend of the Groom. That's what he said about himself. John the Baptist lived life in Jesus' shadow. And as a man of the desert, he thoroughly enjoyed that shade. He loved living in Jesus' shadow.

Let's look and see where that shows up in *John 1:6-8*. John the gospel writer says this about John the Baptist. This is how he introduces him. He says, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light"—that light being Jesus—"so that through Him all might believe. He himself was not the light." John wasn't the light. No—"he came only as a witness to the light."

And you see these words "witness" and "testify." They mean the same thing. They're from the same Greek word. They're used seven times. That's a significant number, isn't it? They're used seven times to describe John the Baptist's role. What was he here to do? He was here to be a witness to Jesus. He came as a testifier to Jesus. Seven different times that's said, because John the Baptist was always pointing to the Groom. He was always wanting Jesus to increase, and he was happy to decrease in order to see that happen.

And in continues in *verses 19 and 20 in John 1*. It says this: "Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'"

He says, "I'm not the Messiah, I'm not the Groom." He says, "I'm here to prepare the way for the Groom, that the Groom might come and meet His bride." That's what he says. That's what he does. That's what others say about him. And then when he's finally forced to introduce himself, when they press him—*Who are you? Tell us who you are. Tell us your name*—he still can't even say his own name. He won't do it.

In *verse 23*, he says, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

John says, *Look, I'm just the voice. That's all you need to know about me. Because I'm here to serve the Groom. And I came to call people to repentance, to call them to baptism, that their hearts might be ready to meet the Groom. Because He's here. And I am full of joy because of it.*

You see, John the Baptist was a friend of the Groom. And that determined everything that he did. It determined everything that he taught. Do you know what? John the Baptist was so busy tending to the Groom that he forgot about himself. His thoughts were so constantly Christ-ward that he didn't have time to think about himself, to be egotistical. It just didn't occur to him.

If you want to get free and stay free from your ego, here's how you do it. Become mesmerized by the Groom. Stay focused on Him. Because all of life is a wedding. And I'm not

the Groom. Jesus is. What are we? We are friends of the Groom. That's who we are. That's who we get to be.

And we can have confidence that what's true about John the Baptist, that he was a friend of the Groom, is true about us as well. And we know that, because if you turn the pages of the Gospel of John, you find that He says that about His disciples. He says, *If you're a disciple of mine, if you put your faith and trust in me, I call you "Friend." I don't call you a servant, I don't call you a follower. I call you "Friend."* You are a friend of the Groom. That's what Jesus says about us as believers.

So, like John the Baptist, that's our identity. That's who we are. We all get so creative about how we find our identity, the different roles, especially, is where we'll turn to find our identity, how we would name ourselves, who we are. We can look to those different roles of being a husband or a father or a wife or a mother, or a software engineer or a teacher or a straight-A student or a dancer or a football player. But that's not who we are. That's not our identity. That's what we do—what we get to do. But it's not who we are—no, absolutely not. Instead of that, no matter what happens to you in life, no matter how your roles change and shift, what will never change is that you're a friend of the Groom. The Groom has called you His friend and He's invited you into that. Your security, your significance, come from Him and in that title: A friend of the Groom.

And so, as your roles change in life and you get hired or you can get promoted, you can go into that new role, that new job, and you can say, *You know what? This is where God led me, and I'm just a friend of the Groom. I can't wait to see how I get to serve Him in this new role, in this new job.*

If you get fired, if you lose your job, you can say, *I may be without a job. But I am not without the Groom. I'm a friend of the Groom. And He has led me to this place, and He has something else planned for me, and I trust that He's going to provide for me in the meantime. Because I'm a friend of the Groom.*

When your oldest or your youngest moves out and starts college or finds a job or chooses whatever comes after high school, you could say this: *You know what? I'm a friend of the Groom. And the Groom is going to help me to grieve and persevere through what will very likely be a tough, emotional time. I can't wait to see what adventure He has next for me and how my*

relationship with my son or daughter is going to change. He'll be with me. I'm a friend of the Groom.

When your marriage comes to an end—if that happens to you—you know what? You can say, *I may be divorced, but that is not who I am. I'm a friend of the Groom. And you know what? He's with me. He will walk with me through this valley. I'm a friend of the Groom—that's who I am.*

You see, our roles will come and go, but do you know what role won't? Our friendship with the Groom. It will never go anywhere. That's true about us now, it will be true about us into eternity.

And John the Baptist knew, he believed, he set his feet on this truth: that he was a friend of the Groom. That's that first truth.

Serve the Bride

And that led him to this second truth that is true about us as believers, as Christians. And that was that he knew that the Groom had called him to serve the bride. That's the second truth that we need to see to get free from us. The Groom called John the Baptist to serve the bride.

He knew that he was sent as a friend of the Groom to serve the bride of Christ, the Church, the people of God. And we see that in [verse 29 of chapter 3](#). John says, [“The bride belongs to the bridegroom.”](#) *The bride is His, not mine.*

And if the Groom loves His bride, his friends will too. His friends are going to follow suit with that love. And that's why all of John's ministry was spent preparing the bride for her Groom. That's what he cared about in life. And that's why he called people to repentance. That's why he invited them into a baptism of repentance—because he was a friend of the Groom, and he was going to have the bride ready to meet her Groom.

And you can see this commitment that God had to serve the bride in that he was never possessive of the bride. It wasn't “my bride.” *It was the Groom's bride, and I'm just a friend of the Groom.* You can see that in [verses 29 and 30 of John 1](#). John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, [“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”](#) And he tells the people with him, [“This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.’”](#)

He says this again the next day. “Look, the Lamb of God,” when he sees Jesus. Two of John the Baptist’s followers leave him. They desert him and begin following Jesus. And do you know what John says? He says, *Mission accomplished. This is awesome. This is what I came to do.*

Sometime later John had other followers that went over to Jesus as Jesus’ ministry was picking up. Others left John and began following Jesus. And John still has disciples that are with him. John’s disciples say, *John, look what’s happening!* They’re kind of freaking out. *Look, you’ve got people leaving you and going to Jesus.* John says, *Yeah, that’s what I’ve been about. That’s why I’m here. I’ve wanted to introduce the bride to the Groom. I’m not here to build a following for me. I’ve been here to build a following for the Groom, to prepare the bride to meet her Groom. That’s what I’ve been here to do.*

So, for us as believers, as Christians, as friends of the Groom, with John the Baptist we’re called to serve His bride. We are here to serve the bride of the Groom, to serve the bride of Christ, to serve the Church, to serve the people of God. Because we’re friends of the Groom, so that’s what we get to do. That’s the calling He has for our lives as well.

And what that means is every time we walk into church on a Sunday, we’re walking into a wedding rehearsal. This is not just church. This is a wedding rehearsal. God himself has invited us as friends of the Groom to be part of His wedding party. We get to serve the Groom as part of His wedding party. And this is a wedding rehearsal. We all have a hand in serving the bride and introducing her to the Groom.

So, since you are friends of the Groom, there are three points that I want to share with you about the bride that I want us all to remember.

We Are Gifted by the Groom to Serve His Bride

The first one is this: that we are gifted by the Groom to serve His bride. The Groom has given us everything that we need to serve His bride effectively. We are gifted to serve. As we’ve talked about for the last year and a half, we are gifted to serve by the Groom that we might be part of His wedding party; that we might introduce the bride to the Groom; that we might prepare her, serve her, equip her, and help her. And that’s what we get to do as believers.

And so, I want to ask you, have you had a chance to get in on that yet? Have you found a place where you can be a friend of the Groom by serving His bride? Maybe you’ve been out of

the game for a little while. That's okay. What if you jump back in? Come on. You're part of the wedding party. Let's all be involved in serving the bride together. Because church is a weekly wedding rehearsal, and there are no observers at a wedding rehearsal, right? No, everybody's working. Everybody shows up and they've got something to do. And more importantly, nobody shows up to a wedding rehearsal and says, "Hey, where's the bride and groom? I'd like to speak with them. I want to find out how they can serve me. I'd like to see how the bride could do something for my family. I've got a checklist of things here that I'd like her to do, that I'd like the groom to be doing." People don't show up to weddings like that. That's just pride talking. That's ego talking. No, if you do that at a wedding rehearsal, you're probably going to be asked to leave pretty quickly.

So, why would we do that at church? Why would we do that at the weekly wedding rehearsal that we get to be part of as friends of the Groom? Certainly, we wouldn't show up here and say, "Yeah, how can the bride and groom serve me?" No, we'd say, "What needs to be done? I'd love to find out how my giftings could match a need that's happening somewhere on a Sunday morning or in the middle of a week. I want to do that. I want to serve Him. I want to serve her in that way." We can do that. We can choose to do that. That's what God would want us to do. So, let's do that here as part of the bride of Christ.

The fall semester is kicking off. It starts now. It starts today. It may not feel like it outside, but it's the fall. And what that means is that this is a great time to look around and say, *You know, Groom, Jesus, how can I serve Your bride here at Grace Covenant Church? What can I do to serve You and to serve the bride of Christ here at Grace Covenant Church?* Let's ask that question. Let's not ask what Grace Covenant Church can be doing for me. That's just ego talking. No, how can we serve the bride?

Where do you start if you're wanting to do that, if you want to jump back in? Well, we've got a spiritual gifts assessment that's on our website. You can go to the "Serve" tab and take that assessment and begin to figure out how the Groom has gifted you. How has the Groom prepared you to be able to serve His bride? *Because I want to be able to do that.*

And then while you're on that "Serve" tab there's going to be a list of all the different ministries here and different ways that you can jump in and serve the bride here at Grace. Click on that. You can send us a copy of the online form and shoot that our way. We'd love to help you get involved serving the bride here at Grace.

Today's our Connection Fair. So, if you're already connected, or you get connected today somewhere, that's awesome. Wherever you are, whatever community or group that you end up in, just look around. There's going to be a way that you can serve the bride right there. It's going to be in arm's reach. If nothing else, just ask. *What can I do to help here? I'm part of the wedding party. I'm excited to serve. I'm excited to help the bride in whatever way I can.*

I want you to remember this. There is no small job at a wedding. Every role matters, doesn't it? The cellist, the hairdresser, the bulletin designer, the usher ... every role matters. And if any of them don't show up, it's going to make a mess of things. It's going to make for a really stressful wedding rehearsal or wedding itself. The same thing here at Grace. The same thing at church. Every job matters. There is no small role. So, if you're holding the door and you're greeting the bride warmly as she walks into the wedding rehearsal, you know who sees that? The Groom does. He sees you doing that, and He appreciates that. When you brew a carafe of coffee or you mentor a small group of four-year-olds or fourteen-year-olds, do you know who's watching? The Groom is. He loves seeing you serve His bride. He is so thankful for that. If you run a soundboard or you teach a lesson so that the bride of Christ might be built up and dig into the Scripture together and grow closer to the Lord and to each other as they get to know the Word of God, how amazing. The Groom knows that you are doing that. He says, *Thank you*. He appreciates that.

We are gifted by the Groom to serve His bride. And He will never miss when we do that, when we serve the bride as a friend of the Groom. So, let's enjoy doing that together.

Jesus Cares About How We Treat His Bride

A second point that I want you to know and remember about the bride is this: that Jesus cares about how we treat His bride. He cares deeply about that.

Because the reality is that we never interact with just another person when we're interacting with another believer, when we interact with somebody here at church who's part of the bride of Christ. No, we are communicating with, we are talking with another member of the bride of Christ. And do we share the Groom's love for the bride? If we don't share His love for the bride, then He would want us to change our attitude. He can help us to do that. The Groom cares about how we treat His bride. He'd ask us to be kind, to be generous, to be thoughtful, to

be respectful, to be gracious with His bride, with each member of His bride that we get to talk to, that we get to interact with.

We wouldn't show up to a wedding and gossip about the bride, would we? We wouldn't show up to a wedding rehearsal and be rude to the bride or hold onto anger or unforgiveness towards her. We wouldn't do that. So, when we come to church, when we come to this wedding rehearsal, let's treat the bride of Christ the same way we would treat a bride at her wedding. Let's be loving. Let's be gracious. Let's be thoughtful. The Groom cares about how we treat His bride.

When I rejoined the Grace staff back in 2009, I came back and joined the student ministry and was youth pastor here. Those first few years were really hard years. It was hard at home. Dayna and I had very young children who needed help with everything. And then, work was even harder, because there were hard but important decisions that needed to be made in those first couple of years. And it was really hard to be here. And I would show up to church on Sunday, and as I drove into the parking lot, my blood pressure would just start rising, slowly but surely. It was a tough place to be. And what I found was that, more often than not, I didn't have a smile on my face as I greeted the bride. It was more often than not a frown. And if wasn't on my face, it was at least in my heart. And Jesus, the Groom, put up with me for a time. He put up with that. And then, at some point, He stepped up and He spoke up, and He convicted me, and He said in as gentle a way as I think He could have, "Why are you serving my bride with a frown on your face? Why would you do that? Why aren't you full of joy? Because the Groom is here. And you get to serve my bride as one of my friends." He changed my attitude that day. And it was a slow but sure transformation that took place after He said those words to me. And since then, I love this place. I love getting to be here. I love getting to be with you. But God had to change my heart in that.

Because the Groom cares about how we treat His bride.

If You Ever Have to Leave a Church, Leave Quietly and Alone

And then there's a third point that I want you to know about the bride. And that is this—it's a little bit of a tougher one. But if you ever have to leave a church, leave quietly and alone. I hope you never have to leave a church. But if you do, I would ask you this. I would ask you to leave quietly and leave alone. Please don't leave loudly. Don't gather a following. Don't try to

take people with you. He said, *It's my bride. I want you to love her, even if you have to leave. I want you to love her in the way that you leave.* May we never divide a church. May we never injure and hurt the bride of Christ in that way.

There's a wonderful book called *A Tale of Three Kings* by Gene Edwards. Edwards writes in a very creative way. He writes about the kingships of Saul and David and Absalom. And he tells this story, and one of the most powerful lessons in the book as I read through it was what he had to say about King David. When David left the kingdom, when he left Jerusalem after Absalom and revolted and rebelled against him---listen to what he writes. Listen to what Edwards says: **“David did not split the kingdom when he made his departure. He did not take part of the population with him. He left alone ... There's only one way to leave a kingdom: all alone ...”** And why? Edwards says, **“This particular kingdom is different from all others. This kingdom is composed of God's people. It is a spiritual kingdom. I tell you emphatically, no rebellion in the kingdom of God is proper.”**

Heaven forbid that you would ever have to leave a church. But if you do, as a friend of the Groom, out of love for the Groom, I would ask you to please leave quietly. Please leave alone. There is no rebellion in the kingdom of God that can be proper. Let's treat the bride gently. Let's treat her delicately.

Friends, as you read through the pages of Scripture from beginning to end, what you discover is that all of human history is funneling towards one final glorious event. And do you know that that event is? It's a wedding.

And John the disciple who wrote the Gospel of John wrote another book, and it's Revelation. And in [Revelation 19](#) this is what John wrote. This is what he exclaims: **“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.”**

The Groom is coming back for His bride. And do you know who you are? You're a friend of the Groom. And as a friend of the Groom, you're part of the bride of Christ. But you also get to help ready the bride of Christ for the return of the Groom. We get to do that together. Let's all jump in on that. Let's enjoy serving the bride and being a friend of the Groom together.

Would you go with me to the Lord in prayer now?

Heavenly Father, it is incredible that You would call us Your friend, that You would say that we are a friend of the Almighty Creator of the universe, our Lord and Savior. And yet, that's what You've chosen to call us. That's who You've said we are to You, that we have this relationship with You, that You would call us Your friend.

And as Your friends, as a friend of the Groom, I pray that for each one of us You would put it on our hearts that we would love You; that we would be faithful to You by serving Your bride, by lifting her up, by making her all that You would want her to be and that You have made her to be. We want to have whatever role, whatever small task or role You give us to do in that. We want to be faithful in doing that very thing. Because Lord, You must become greater, and we must become less. I pray that in Your name. Amen.