

John 12:20-36
(Job 19:23-27; Romans 7:4-6)
“Dying to Live”

Introduction

John has already told us that everyone who went up to Jerusalem for what was Jesus’ final Passover was looking for Jesus (11:56). Some were looking in the hope of that he was the promised Messiah who would restore the kingdom. Others, those in power who had much to lose if there were a political or religious upheaval, were looking for him in hope of arresting him and getting him out of the public spotlight. But there were also those in Jerusalem who had come out of curiosity, interested in religion, and eager to meet anyone in the news. So one such group, who happened to be Greek, found Philip and asked for an introduction to Jesus. They had heard of Jesus, and were fascinated with the idea of meeting him and perhaps seeing him do something out-of-the-ordinary. “Let’s try to interview him and see what he’s like. We’ll have a great story when we return home.” So they say to Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Many churches put that verse as a plaque inside the pulpit to remind the preacher that it is all about Jesus and not about the person preaching. But the question here is whether these Gentiles had any idea what they were asking. Were they ready, if they saw Jesus for who he is, to fall on their face before him, as did Peter, and to cry out, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man!”? Were they prepared, if he was who he claimed to be, to confess with Thomas, “My Lord and my God”? How many of us come to church just hoping for a look, without comprehending what is really involved in seeing the Lord of glory, without having any desire at all to have our lives turned upside down and inside out by the Lord of glory? Is it any wonder we often leave disappointed and unfulfilled?

There was only one person present in Jerusalem who knew what was happening, who had counted the cost and stood ready to do whatever it took to glorify his Father by sacrificing himself for the sins of his people. At the center of the scene stood Jesus, whose response to the expectations of his disciples, to the intrigues of his opponents, and to the curiosity of the Gentiles, was to state what he had entered Jerusalem to do: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” To be glorified? How? He is about to be arrested, tried and convicted, stripped naked, beaten, spat upon, nailed to a cross and mocked as he slowly suffocates. How can he speak of being glorified? Does he plan to ascend Israel’s throne and receive the adoration of the crowd? Does he plan to overthrow Rome? No! Listen carefully to his prophetic words: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). And then these words, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (12:32).

Here, we find the master teacher painting a picture, stating a principle and making a promise.

Body

1. **First, Jesus paints a picture: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit” (12: 24).**

We’ve seen this familiar picture splendidly portrayed in another lovely east Tennessee spring. The earth seems to die, the flowers fade, the trees shed their leaves, but as the earth sleeps, seeds are settling in the soil awaiting the spring rains and the warmth of the sun to call forth new life. The seeds of one flower multiply into many. Thus it has ever been. From this familiar picture, Jesus draws a lesson and states it as a principle that all accept in the world of plants, but that we resist in the world of people, because it calls on us to die.

2. **Second, Jesus states a principle: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (12:25).**

This seems to counter everything we naturally feel and think. We cling to life as a natural response to danger. But Jesus calls us to recognize a spiritual principal at work here. As long as we think that life is all about us, that God and the gospel and other people all exist to help us fulfill our hopes and dreams, as long as we are willing to sacrifice others to get what we want, rather than sacrifice ourselves, our hopes and dreams, so that others might live, until then we are still living out of the old life, a life that Christ did not come to improve, but rather came to put to death in his death. This is at the heart of his call to us here: Unless we are willing to follow him in his death, we can never know the new life he came to give us through his resurrection from the dead.

3. **Finally, Jesus makes a promise: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (12:26).**

This promise is contingent on our following Jesus. We cannot follow him unless we have died to our old life and been raised up in him to newness of life. In the power of the new life, with new desires, new dreams and affections, we follow him into the day. We walk in the light and have fellowship with the one who is this world’s Light.

And here is the greatest wonder of all: the glory that Jesus gave the Father by laying down his life, and the glory he received by being lifted up on the cross in willing obedience to the Father, this same glory he gives to us, his people. Thus, he promises, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (12:26). And so he will later pray in the upper room, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one” (17:22).

We seek honor from one another, and doing so we miss the honor that God alone can give, the only lasting honor and glory, which is given in Christ to the sons and daughters of God by grace through faith in God's Son.

Conclusion

So, what shall we say, what shall we do, in response to this? If we cling to things as they are, we will miss what we were created for. If we are willing to die to our will, our way, die to our hopes and dreams, and trust the Lord to give us better ones, with a new beginning, a new nature, a new power and a new destiny, in other words, a new life in exchange for the old one, then we will find what we've been looking and longing for all our life. And in the process, we will bring life to many others for, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit."

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved