

Only Dead Seeds Live

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John 12:20-26

Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. 21 Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. 23 But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. 24 Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. 25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

Popularity is a dangerous thing; not that I can speak from experience, but I will do so from Scripture. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." When your goal is to get every person's approval, you get God's disapproval. The Apostle Paul knew popularity was a destructive ambition, and so he said, "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

I've met some who were on the opposite side of the fence of popularity. They seem bound and determined to become famous by making sure someone speaks poorly of them. If Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you," then they mean for no one to say anything good about them. They make a living by saying the outrageous and upsetting the apple cart. They are contentious souls riding the bandwagon of antagonism, shouting a little louder than the other fellow, saying things in a more quarrelsome way. Here again, the Bible has something to say about that, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Timothy 2:24). You know the wise and pithy word that says, "You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." Now that old adage seems odd to us today. Who wants to attract flies? Flies are pesky creatures. I'm not for sure why God made the fly except to ruin a perfect picnic. I hate eating outdoors for that reason. Before you're ready to sit down and eat, someone has to stand guard over the picnic table and keep the flies from infesting the food. I don't want have to compete for my meal.

A woman walked into the kitchen to find her husband stalking around with a fly swatter. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Hunting flies," He responded. "Oh, killing any?" She asked. "Yep, three males, two females," he replied. Intrigued, she asked, "How can you tell?" He responded, "Three were on the refrigerator, two were on the phone."

Before the days of bug zappers, flyswatters, and other modern hazards for the common housefly they made fly traps and baited them with honey. Thus, the saying you can attract more flies with honey rather than vinegar makes some sense. And it's true in life. Kindness is more attractive than bitterness. But when your goal is to "kill them with kindness" and be the life of everyone's party and get the approval of the crowd, Jesus said you are on a different path than God.

Jesus a few days before our text came into Jerusalem riding a wave of popularity. Thousands had come out to hail Him as the Messiah. "Hosanna, Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." Now His popularity was not among the leadership but the populace of Jerusalem. Religious and civil officeholders wrung their hands in a panic because as they said, "Look how the whole world has gone after Him!"

Even Greeks had come to see this Jesus and had a contact among the disciples, Philip. They asked Philip to get them in and see this young radical rabbi who people were saying was the Messiah. Philip consults Andrew, and they both go to Jesus and tell Him about His Greek fan club who had come to see Him. But Jesus does the unexpected; He does the inhospitable thing; He does not accept to see the Greeks but talks about dying seeds and hating one's life. It seems that our Lord despised adulation and popularity built on the premise of winning and not dying.

The Gospels show us that the vast majority of our Lord's followers were nationalistic populists, meaning they were the average Jewish person and not the political class who put their hopes in Christ to restore Israel to its glory and prominence. Sound familiar? Things haven't changed because man in his heart does not change. People, then and now, what a savior who can elevate them out of their poverty and despair and make their nation great again.

But Jesus said that the path to greatness in the economy of God is not the way of the world. It doesn't come by political campaigns or being the star of a reality TV show, or a great ballplayer, or a famous singer. Greatness in the eyes of God is the person who can turn his or her back on the cheers of the crowd, the bright lights of the stage, or the mere approval of his or her neighbor if God's will demands it. That's greatness in the eyes of God. This was our Lord's glory.

He recognized people wanted a piece of Him for what they could get. They didn't love Him. Their praise and adulation of the Lord wasn't because of Him being this holy God sent to take away the sins of the world. No, they wanted Him to lift them up to a new place of prominence and security and blessing.

Friends, popularity is a dangerous thing. Very few can handle it. Jesus handled it well. This is I say is His glory.

I. Jesus' Glory

*"But Jesus answered them, saying, 'The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.'"
(John 12:23)*

He's not talking about the ascension into glory. He's literally talking about the cross. Look at the next verse.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.” (John 12:24)

He's talking about His own death. He's about to die and hence the glory—I'm going to die alone, but in my death I'm going to accomplish more than what I have through my life in the past three and a half years. There's the glory of God.

The word *glory* is an interesting motif, a reoccurring theme in the book of John. You see it in the very first chapter. “And we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” It comes up again in the second chapter. After Jesus had turned the water into wine, John records:

“This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.” (John 2:11)

All through this book, you see the theme of glory repeating. In fact, in the seventeenth chapter, “Father, glorify Me as I have glorified You.” He's not, once again, talking about returning to heaven and ascending to the throne of God, He's talking about His death on the cross and those three days He was buried and sealed in the tomb. There's His glory.

How could dying be His glory? I think there are many reasons, but let me mention three. In His dying you see many things you could not see in His living.

A. His Enduring Strength.

What man has endured more hostility and torture than Jesus and did it remarkably well? It's not to say other men haven't been tortured perhaps even more than the Lord Jesus or for longer periods of time, but I can say unequivocally no one has ever suffered like Jesus. We're not just talking about the mental and emotional and the physical anguish of our Lord, we're also talking about the sufferings of Christ as He endures the Father's wrath and torture. Through all of that, He endures admirably.

It begins the day before His crucifixion. He's arrested in the evening. He's deprived of sleep, carried from one court room to another, beaten along the way. They pluck hunks of hair out of His face, taking flesh and blood with it. Then they commence the several beatings. Open handed and closed-fist, they strike Him over and over and over again, even making a game out of it. They blindfolded Him and had Him prophesy—“Who was it that hit You?” Then they lead Him to the bloody post, where His body was outstretched, skin taunt, and a man skilled in the art of filleting a man.

I'm sure you've all heard of the cat and nine tails that Jesus was whipped with and if you haven't, let me rehearse it for you. It was a leather whip, made up of several leather straps. That's bad enough but it's worse than that. They embedded those leather straps with sharp instruments like bone, metal, and glass. Not only were there sharp instruments tied into the leather straps, but lead balls, so that those lead balls could literally pulverize the muscle tissue and soften it so that the sharp stones and blades would sink even deeper into His back.

They stripped Him completely. The only thing He is wearing is the leather cord tying His hands up and a leather wrap around the throat so that when the man throws the whip against His body it doesn't catch the jugular vein and rip it out and Him die instantly. I suppose you can use your sanctified imagination and watch this beating that in many cases killed the victim. If not immediately from blood loss and shock, then days later from high fever and infection.

You would watch that leather whip and the sharp instrument pierce the sacred seal of our Lord's skin sinking deep, lacerating muscle, sinew, and blood vessels. The soldier, expert in this gruesome task, would let the whip take hold and would yank and pull the flesh it had cut into. Chunks of it would leave His body. But that's not the half of our Lord's suffering.

From there, they put a crown of thorns on His head. We're not talking about rose thorns, we're talking about 3-4 inch thorns shoved onto His head, making sure it plowed deep, piercing even the skull causing a headache of the most excruciating kind. Then they beat Him more. Then they clothed Him with a purple robe. Later, they would rip that robe off Him and lead Him up a hill where He repeatedly fell, trying to carry the weight of His own cross.

Finally, He made it up Golgotha's hill. There, they slammed Him down once again. They ripped off His bloody clothes, leaving Him naked before the world, and drove iron stakes through each wrist. I don't know what that could have felt like, but just the ulnar nerve that runs through the funny bone to the wrist is painful. You've struck that nerve before and, like we said last week, it's not funny, is it? Can you imagine piercing it with a nail spike? You could multiply the pain by 10 or 20 times, just from that nerve being crushed, not to mention all the other pain of the cross.

There He's crucified. And He endures it. He endures it admirably. And at that moment, that which is on the inside, the germ of life that's within begins to be seen.

B. His Inner Excellence.

Not only do you see His enduring strength but His inner excellence in a way that you could not see any other way. As they begin to break the shell of the man, the body of the Lord, the inner glory begins to show through. Look at how He endures such suffering. He does it in such a way that we stand back and are taken by it. We are captivated by it. We are shocked by it.

Pilate, the man who ordered Jesus' execution said of Him that He was a "just man." Peter, who watched his Lord die from a distance, records the event:

“Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.” (1 Peter 2:22-23)

Have you ever known anyone who was unjustly treated as Jesus was, who did not give into the rage? The Bible says He was crucified with two other criminals, one on His right hand and one on His left. Even in their pain, they had enough wits about them to mock Jesus and join the crowd that was tormenting our Lord with their insults and blasphemies. They both said, “If You’re the Messiah, get us down along with Yourself.” But something happened in the ensuing hours as they watched the shell of the seed of God break open. As they looked inside, one of the two saw the moral excellence of the Son of God. He watched Him and heard Him pray, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and surely he was surprised. He knew what he was felt about his tormenters and here this Man prayed with such compassion for those who were killing Him.

He sees them wag their heads and jut out their jaws, a very severe Jewish insult, at Him, but Jesus never once does it in return. He watches the glory and the excellence of God shine through all of this suffering and pain. Again, one of the crucified men starts up the tormenting and the jeering and says to Him, “If You’re the Son of God, save Yourself and us with You.” And the one criminal who watched the glory of the Son shine through the blood and gore said to the other,

“And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. 42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” (Luke 23:41-42)

The man in charge of the crucifixion watched the Seed die and saw the glory, the inner excellence, of Jesus Christ. The Bible records his reaction to what He saw.

“Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, ‘Truly this was the Son of God.’” (Matthew 27:54)

C. His Cleansing Fountain.

They saw His moral excellence but they also, thankfully, saw the cleansing fountain. They saw the fountain that flowed, where, when sinners are plunged beneath, they lose all their guilty stains.

We, too, see the river of blood issuing forth from His body by which we have been washed and our sins have been carried with it as far as the east is from the west, this seed was broken and the life of God from within flowed in forgiveness and mercy and grace.

Like Mary’s alabaster flask, which had been broken releasing the fragrant torrent of perfume, so Jesus’ body is broken releasing the life giving fountain with its beautiful aroma of life.

Before the cross everything God had done had not changed the human heart. He gave His law in lightnings and thunder and earthquake. He had performed countless miracles. He had sent powerful preachers and prophets warning of catastrophic judgment. He had even displayed those terrible judgments and man still continued on his hellish bent to rebel against God.

But Jesus on the cross has been the only thing that has changed the eternal destiny of millions upon millions. Not lightnings and miracles, not crossing the Red Sea, not prophetic voices from the past, but the blood of the Lamb of God. The blood. The blood that washes us and removes the stain of sin and leaves us white as wool. The blood—the cleansing fountain.

“who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree”

My sins He bore. Hundreds of years before it took place, the Prophet Isaiah said,

“Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows . . . But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed . . . the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Jesus is not just our sacrifice but He is our standard; He isn't just our Messiah but He's also our model, and He isn't only our emancipator, He's also our example.

II. Death Gives Birth to Life

If you want to produce life, you must give yourself.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.” (John 12:24)

Jesus is teaching a new principle, so radically different than what generations before—all the way back to Adam—had heard. Death gives birth to life. In the garden they had heard the curse. The curse of death. But even in the pronouncement of that terrible curse, God is establishing a new order—that only by death can come life.

A. An Illustration.

One grain of wheat can produce eight or more heads with over 40 seeds per head. That equals 320 grains of wheat from one wheat seed. From one you get 320. But the next spring, you take those 320 grains of wheat and plant them, the following year you will reap 102,400 grains of wheat. The next year you plant those 102,400 seeds and you will reap enough seed to plant 32 acres the next year—one million seeds an acre. That will produce enough wheat to make flour for bread for one family to last 10 generations. All that from one little seed.

“Except a seed die it will not produce, but if it dies it will produce much grain.”

That's some interesting trivia, but there is a point to it—life comes out of death. We wrongly think death produces nothing and that it is the cessation of life. But Jesus says differently. Think about it: life is sustained by death. Something has to die for you to live. The worm gives its life to feed a bird and the bird is killed by a cat who eventually dies in a farmer's field and feeds the worms, which fertilize the soil that supplies nutrients to the wheat we planted, harvested and made bread from a moment ago.

It's death that produces life. Jesus gave His life, not only that we might have life, but as an example that we are to do the same. And we wonder why we experience so little of the life of Jesus. The answer is we don't have enough dying around here. We've got too many of us trying to live rather than die, therefore, we have so little of the life of Jesus.

The principle of our Lord that He has established is that if you really want to live, you first have to die. You have to be willing to give yourself a way. Let's look at this in verse 25.

“He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Again, Jesus is using illustrative language, figurative speech. He doesn't mean for you to literally hate yourself. He doesn't mean for you to mistreat yourself, to let yourself go, let your health decline, do nothing to preserve your wellbeing, no, that's not what He means.

What He's doing is reducing life to two basic motives.

B. Love and Self.

In life there are only two motives, two reasons to do what you do—love for God and others and love for yourself. Those are the only two. Love is living for others while self is living for you. Jesus is saying to us, His people, if we want to experience the dynamic of His life, the miraculous provision of His grace on an ongoing basis, then there has to be the process of death, the ongoing denial of self.

Something has to die in me in order for life to come from me and be a blessing for others. To see God work in the lives of others there has to be this process of death and it is not physical it's spiritual. This is not about the initial death to self that occurs at conversion, you've already died with Him and been resurrected to new life; it is the process of self-denial, rejecting love of self for love of God and others. That's the choice. That's the only two motives by which you can live.

If we are to be fruitful, and all Christians are fruitful, some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, some a hundred fold, but all are fruitful, there is some part of self-denial and rejection of self daily. Here's where the difficulty is, is it not? Jesus knew it. He has these Greeks that want to see Him, He has all these people who want to crown Him king, and what does He do? He publicly acknowledges none of that. He said, “No. My glory is in My dying. It's on Calvary's cross.”

That was an example for you and I. How is that so? We're most likely not going to die on a cross. We're not going to die for the elect, only Jesus can redeem by His death. How then, therefore, shall we die? We die by being willing to do one of the most disgusting things a Christian can do. It's one of the most difficult things a Christian can do.

One of the most difficult things a Christian can do, is not go to the mission field. One of the most difficult things a Christian can do is not some great act of sacrifice. There's been a lot of great people on the mission field who have created great acts of sacrifice and it was all in vain. God didn't tell them to do it. The most difficult thing a Christian can do is to see his sin the way it really is. That's it. To look within your own heart and find what you will always find—nothing pretty, nothing good, nothing beautiful.

With each self-discovery of your own person, of your own selfish nature, there is a little more death. God will do the work of plowing so you will see it and uncover every selfish vein that dwells within. He does. That's His work of plowing. He breaks up the selfish ground and He reveals it. He excavates until that thing is exposed and it seems so difficult. The Christian life, just in this area of sanctification seems so hard, you feel like you are making progress by the inches.

Often you have to look the other way. You see your own corruption, your own unmasked selfishness is ugly, it's vulgar, it's grotesque. It's the very thing that put Jesus on the cross—selfishness. It doesn't matter what kind of selfishness it is. It doesn't matter how it manifests itself, it's still the same ugly thing and it's still in me, still in you, His people. Jesus said the only way out of the death of your self nature for life to come is to deny that nature. You have to deny its right to rule. Again, He's not calling for self-mutilation. He's not asking you to do things that are difficult just because they're difficult. He's asking you to turn away from selfishness to loving Him and others. He's asking you to deny yourself so that His life can break through you.

As you're being broken, as you're being weaned from the nurturing of self, God's life can profusely come through and flow from you. You won't even know. You won't even be able to explain what it is. Listen to me, I've experienced this. You can say words to a person and it has no impact and you can say the exact same words to another person and it has powerful impact. You scratch your head and say, "I don't know what the difference was." The difference was the first time you were saying it for your own credit and glory and the second time you were saying it because you love that person.

The life of Jesus will not come through you and me until we both recognize that nothing we do for God has any grace and power in it. It has to be Him in us. You've heard me say this before but we are so terrible at it. The Pharisees were really good at doing the will of God. They really were. Even Jesus said they sit in the seat of Moses, do what they say, just don't do what they do. They were really good at being good people. They tithed not only on their income but also on their herb garden, they fasted twice a week, I mean, they had their Is dotted and their Ts crossed. But, friend, they proved one thing—you can have your Is dotted and your Ts crossed and still misspell the word.

They missed it. They missed what it was really all about. All they did was out of the power of the flesh, out of themselves, out of their own strength, wisdom, and understanding. God doesn't need your strength or understanding. He needs your weakness. He needs your brokenness. He needs your willingness to let Him take you as Mary took that alabaster flask and to break you open and let what's on the inside come gushing out as God directs, not as you and I direct.

Sometimes the worst thing we do is get "Christianized." There was nothing conventional about Jesus. Here they wanted to make Him king, certainly that would be a plausible solution to Israel's problems. You could see why that would be a great temptation to the average man, but Jesus saw it for what it was: not God's way. There He was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, "If You're really the Son of God, take these stones and turn them into bread." The temptation was to not rely on God the Father, rely on self. Don't be God-centered, be self-centered. Jesus resisted that every time. He took the way of death every time. Self denial. And that is the example I want to model. I want to follow after that.

I've said many times, there is a benefit in getting older, you learn what doesn't work. You learn by your failures what doesn't work. I don't care what new ideas you have or how you try to do it, it just doesn't work. Beloved, God has given us a task to produce much grain, much fruit, and the only way it will work is through weakness.

I could not ask for a better illustration than the testimony you heard earlier. "Through physical blindness I'm seeing more of Jesus than I've ever seen before." Now you tell that to a man who is spiritually blind and he doesn't get it. He thinks you're crazy. It doesn't compute. But God doesn't worry about your calculator. He isn't interested if it calculates and tabulates the way you want it to. He's out to prove one thing—out of death comes life. If you want life, you must first go to the cross and die and let God end you and there begin Christ in you. It's the only way.

So here we are, this Palm Sunday, as we remember what Jesus endured as a grain of wheat planted in the ground all alone and the outer person broken so the inner goodness of God can flow. I am dealing with this example this morning and I'm saying, "Lord, make the cross ever more true to me. Help me to see it clearly." We all love Easter Sunday. We all love the message that out of death comes life, this resurrected power, we love the overcoming and victories and adulation and glory, we love that part. But, friends, there's no way to the resurrection but through the cross. You have to die in order to be resurrected.

I pray that you will let God do whatever He has to do to break you so that His life can flow through you and touch others.

If you're not His child this morning, I'm asking you to seriously consider what Jesus has said today. Seriously consider. Don't just hear me and know that as soon as you leave you won't have to hear this or contemplate it any further, I'm asking you to make a commitment to your own self for your own self's sake.

Isn't that odd? I just preached against living for self but I just appealed to it. It's the only thing a preacher has when he's talking to a lost person. It's the innate desire to preserve and protect self. Listen to me, Jesus said it, if you try to save your life in this world you're going to lose it. He appealed to that same selfish preservation. You try to protect yourself today and say to the Lord God, "I hear what this man is saying but I don't want to, I want this and I want that, I want my life to turn out this way, maybe someday I'll do that when I've done all these other things." Friends, it is self-destruction. It's suicide, ever so slow but death nonetheless.

If you want to live today, Jesus says, "Renounce yourself, pick up your cross and come follow Me." What you heard this morning can be true for you. The peace that cannot be explained. A peace that surpasses all understanding. A contentment that will center you and you won't be like a reed shaking in the wind, there will be a stability and a purpose to your life. The purpose will be that you will die so that He might live through you and your life will produce much. That's God's promise and that's the hope of the cross. Amen.