

Message #48

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John

11/25/2018

JESUS AND FRUIT PRODUCTION

JOHN 12:20-26

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Julie Rogers was not a Christian and not a churchgoer. She had a friend at work whose name was Kris Workman. The two of them worked in a small town in south central Texas. Kris was a likable enough guy. He was one of those crazy Baptists who spent a fair amount of time at church. In fact, he was the worship leader in a small Baptist church.

One Sunday last year a gunman came in and shot up the church during the morning service. Kris was paralyzed from the waist down. To show support for her friend, Julie showed up at church. She came back again. She kept hearing the message about salvation through faith in Jesus, and it got to her. Last Christmas Eve, she was baptized in that Baptist church.

Good things can come out of very bad things. That is a theme that is central to the Christian message. It is perhaps best illustrated in the life of Jesus Himself. Jesus talks about it in the passage before us this morning. He explains how this theme should work itself out in the lives of those who follow Him.

In our ongoing study of John's Gospel, we have seen that the Apostle John has organized his biographical material about Jesus around seven miracles, which He calls "signs." These signs are intended to show his audience that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God with the intended result that they will believe in Him. Chapter 11 is devoted to the seventh sign, which is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary apparently hosted Jesus and the apostles when they came to Jerusalem to observe the religious feasts.

This seventh miracle happened shortly before Passover. It created a big stir among the religious pilgrims who arrived in the city. So as Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover week, He was

greeted by cheering crowds. We saw last week that the crowds were hoping the Jesus would be the Messiah who would get rid of the Romans. The religious leaders regarded Him as a troublemaker. They wanted to kill Him.

Jesus seemed to regard this reaction as a final rejection by the leading representatives of the nation of Israel. The Pharisees, who were the dominant group among the rabbis, expressed their concern about Jesus in v. 19 of #12: **“You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”** This remark, along with an inquiry from Gentiles seeking an audience with Jesus, seems to be an indicator to the Savior that His death is near.

I.

Thus in vv. 20-23 of #12, which is p. 899 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that GOD’S PLAN FOR US GENTILES REQUIRES THE DEATH OF JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD’S PLAN FOR US GENTILES...) According to vv. 20 & 21, **“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’”** The term “Greeks” here refers to non-Jews, to Gentiles, who are the Greek speaking people of the Roman world.

To understand the crucial nature of this inquiry about Jesus from the Gentiles, we need to understand something about the overall plan of God. God chose Abraham and his descendants to be the object of divine blessing so that His relationship with them would attract the attention of the rest of the world. The Jews, in turn, had a responsibility to be witnesses to the rest of the world about the one true God.

So it was that God instructed Abraham in Genesis #12. (GENESIS 12:2) Beginning in v. 2, He said, **“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (GENESIS 12:3) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** The statement that all of the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s descendants was both a prophetic promise, which would find its fulfillment in Jesus, and a statement of a responsibility.

The same promise and statement of responsibility was repeated to Abraham’s son Isaac. (GENESIS 26:4) In Genesis 26 v. 4, God told Isaac, **“I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”** A similar promise and command was given to Isaac’s son Jacob in #28.

In the following centuries, the Hebrews did not do a very good job of testifying to the world about the one true God. In the time of the Davidic kingdom, the psalmists recognized something of that continuing responsibility. (PSALM 67:1-2) In Psalm 67 the psalmist wrote, **“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.”** (PSALM 67:7-NASV) **“God blesses us, That all the ends of the earth may fear Him.”**

The flourishing of Israel under the rule of David and Solomon did have something of an impact upon the watching world. In 1 Kings the arrival of the Gentile Queen of Sheba demonstrated what effect obedience toward the God of Israel could have upon the nations of the world. But that was a rare exception to the general pattern of Jewish waywardness. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the Divided Kingdom period, the northern and southern kingdoms fell into idolatry and corruption. Even Israel’s prophets had difficulty understanding their responsibility to be witnesses to the Gentiles. When Jonah was told to preach to the Assyrians in Nineveh, he had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to fulfill his responsibility to tell these Gentiles about the true God.

By the time of Jesus centuries later, the Pharisees had a dominant position in the religious establishment of Israel. They generally regarded the Gentiles not as a mission field to be reached but as a corrupting influence that needed to be avoided. Even the apostles of Jesus were affected by this perspective. When God sent Peter to present the gospel to a Roman centurion in Caesarea (ACTS 10:28), he told this Gentile, **“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”**

In His instructions to Solomon centuries earlier, God had set apart an area of the temple in Jerusalem as a place where Gentiles could worship the God of Israel. (COURT OF THE GENTILES) We saw earlier in this Gospel that the religious leaders had turned this place into a place of commerce and corrupt business. Merchants were selling animals for sacrifice and bankers were conducting currency exchanges. The smell of animal droppings and the noise of animals and of salesmen selling their wares hardly made this a good environment for worship. Thus it was that one of Jesus’ first actions in His public ministry was to kick these people out of the Court of the Gentiles. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As Jesus’ ministry developed, He encountered opposition from the religious establishment and a reluctance among the general Jewish population to truly embrace Him as their Messiah. At the same

time, it was Gentiles who often showed great interest in Jesus. We saw in #4 that an entire Samaritan village responded in faith to Jesus. In all four Gospels, Roman centurions respond positively to Jesus. By this point in John's Gospel, the religious establishment has made a firm and final rejection of Jesus and His claims. It is at this point in the Apostle John's chronology that Gentiles show up in the temple with an expressed desire to see Jesus.

In spite of the negative attitude of Jews toward Gentiles, there were some Gentiles who were interested in the God of Israel. The Gentiles in our story showed up in Jerusalem at the Passover. Perhaps they had exposure to the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus was baptizing and preaching beyond the Jordan River, He was in or near Decapolis. (PROJECTOR ON--- DECAPOLIS) The literal meaning of this word is "ten cities." This was a Gentile area next to Galilee and Judea. The Gentiles in our story could have come out in this earlier time to check out Jesus.

(PROJECTOR OFF) We are not told about the specific circumstances that prompted them to approach Philip. He and Andrew had Greek names. Perhaps that had something to do with it.

According to v. 22 in our passage, **"Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus."** They were perhaps uncertain how to handle this request. Sometime earlier, Jesus had instructed His disciples (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 10:5-6), saying to them, **"Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."** The first priority was to present Jesus as the Messiah to His own people.

Since then, Jesus had interacted with interested Gentiles. In #10 we saw Jesus tell His disciples that He was the Good Shepherd who had sheep outside the flock of Israel which needed to be reached. (PROJECTOR OFF) So Philip may have asked Andrew about his opinion about what they should do with this request. Together they went to Jesus.

These Gentiles seemed to have serious interest in Jesus. Perhaps they wanted to know what was required of them to be His followers. Perhaps they had heard some of His preaching and wanted to know if they had to become Jews to be right with God.

Verse 23: **"And Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'"** The Apostle John has noted Jesus' use of the term "hour" several times in his biography, and he has used it himself in his own commentary on Jesus' actions. Often it is used to refer to the coming death of Jesus.

In #7 and #8 it was used to explain how Jesus escaped from the attempts of the religious leaders to kill Him. John says that His hour had not yet come. Now, for the first time in this Gospel, Jesus says that His hour has come.

This “hour” involves the glorification of the Son of Man, a term that Jesus often uses of Himself. We saw last week that this glorification involves the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Crucifixion is the beginning of this glorification.

Jesus regards the request of the Gentiles and the rejection by the religious establishment as a key turning point. John regards the unwitting statement of the Pharisees in v. 19 about the world having gone after Jesus as a part of this turning point. It was a bit earlier that Jesus told the parable of the vineyard. He explained the point of it in Matthew #12 v. 43. (PROJECTOR ON MATTHEW 21:43) Jesus tells His Jewish audience, **“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit.”**

God’s plan for the Gentiles requires the death of Jesus. Jesus is not just the Messiah for Israel, He is the Messiah for the whole world. It is His death as the God-man which will pay the penalty for the sins of all of humanity. It is His death which will provide access to heaven for all who will put their trust in Him. It is a salvation that is freely offered to Gentiles as well as Jews by grace and through faith alone in Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We don’t know if these Gentiles ever got to talk to Jesus. The Apostle John’s primary concern is to explain the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leadership and the basis of the interest in Jesus by Gentiles that will soon come to characterize Christianity. Jesus in our text goes on to elaborate upon the significance of His glorification, for which His death is central.

II.

In the last three verses of our passage we find that THE DEATH OF JESUS BECOMES THE MODEL FOR THE COMMITTED CHRISTIAN LIFE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE DEATH OF JESUS BECOMES...) Jesus tells His disciples in v. 24, **“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.”** That death is central to this glorification deal is demonstrated by the illustration that Jesus uses.

“Truly, truly,” remember, is an indicator that Jesus uses to communicate to His disciples that what He is about to say is something that they really need to understand. He proceeds to use an agricultural illustration that everyone in the first century could understand. Jesus is not speaking in literal biological terms. The idea is that a seed has the greatest value when it is buried in the ground. It has no outward sign of life. But burial of the seed leads to the production of life and eventually fruit.

So it will be with the death of Jesus. It will produce the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of the devil. It will open up a way to heaven that is accessible to Gentiles as well as to Jews. All that is required is faith in Jesus. The death of Jesus would lead to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Empowerment by the Holy Spirit would produce the growth of the church, which would be largely comprised of Gentiles.

This pattern of death resulting in life is common in the history of the Christian church. It was true for the church in which Julie Rogers became involved in Texas. First Baptist Church of Sutherland, Texas, had only fifty or sixty regular worshipers prior to this last year. Last November, Devin Kelley, wearing tactical gear and armed with a rifle and two handguns, stormed into a Sunday worship service and proceeded to kill 26 people. The additional injured included worship leader Kris Workman. Half of the congregation was wiped out. It was truly a tragedy and an act of pure evil. Yet today church attendance is about 200 every Sunday. Somehow death resulted in fruit.

Jesus adds in v. 25 of our text, **“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”** Verse 24 could be understood as having only application to what the death of Jesus accomplished. But this verse suggests that there is a principle that has application to the followers of Jesus.

This application is stated even more directly by Jesus in Mark #8. (MARK 8:34) In vv. 34 & 35 we read, **“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (MARK 8:35) For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”**

In our passage, Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point. Many commentators argue that Jesus is using a Semitic idiom, an expression common in the Ancient Near East, to describe a proper priority in life. The follower of Jesus should hate his life in the sense that one should put God and Jesus first in his or her life. A seminary professor by the name of D. A. Carson writes, **“...to love one’s life is a fundamental denial of God’s sovereignty, and a brazen elevation of self to the apogee [the highest point] of one’s perception, and therefore an idolatrous focus on self, which is the height of all sin.”**

(PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus recognizes that there is a battle in which we are involved that has two realms. There is the realm of this world system. In John's Gospel reference has frequently been made to this world which is controlled by the devil. In #7 Jesus said that this world hates Him. Then there is also the realm of God, the kingdom of God. It is led by God and Jesus Christ. Such is the setting for the battle between good and evil. The follower of Jesus has become a citizen of the kingdom of God. But he still has a sin nature. To focus on self is to yield to that sin nature and to incline oneself to the world system.

Verse 25 speaks of the promise that waits for the Christian. A life characterized by focus on God and service for others results in eternal life. Jesus indicated in v. 10 that there is a certain experience of this in the present. Eternal life is granted immediately upon trust in Jesus. In the present there is the promise of a meaningful and abundant life.

This self-denial principle does not mean that we cannot experience earthly success and prosperity and health in the present. These things are often the byproduct of living by Christian values. But they are not guaranteed, and the focus of the Christian is to be upon serving God and other people.

Christians too often get this wrong in our day. A popular Christian author wrote a book a few years ago entitled *Your Best Life Now*. The author says that Christians should overcome obstacles to live in health, abundance, and victory. The focus of Christians is not to be on having the best life now. Jesus said that we are to die to self. Jesus certainly did not live for the best life now on this earth. He should be our model. He focused on serving God and serving others. He died a horrible death in His thirties. He stayed in borrowed homes and rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a British journalist from a generation ago. He became enamored with Communism and lived for a time in the Soviet Union. But he soon became disillusioned with the results that come from governments which seek to establish the best life now in this world. He became a Christian later in life. Toward the end of his life he wrote, **"The efforts that men make to bring about their own happiness, their own ease of life, their own self-indulgence, will in due course produce the opposite. This leads me to the absolutely inescapable conclusion that human beings cannot live and operate in this world without some concept of a Being greater than themselves, and of a purpose that transcends their own egoistic or greedy desires.the man who chooses to save his soul gathers strength thereby to go on living, whereas the man who chooses to save his body at the expense of his soul loses both body and soul. This fulfills exactly what our Lord said: he who hates his life in this world shall keep his life for all eternity, and he who loves his life in this world will assuredly lose it."**
(*Christianity Today*, 9/3/1982)

Jesus continues in v. 26 of our passage, **“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.”** Following Jesus means serving Him and following His example of serving others. It implies the possibility of suffering. For such is the example that He left us. But following Jesus also means eventually being where He is now, which is in heaven. This entails the promise of being honored by the Father. Isn't that something for which we should strive? Imagine that some day we might be greeted by the all-powerful Creator of the universe and told: Well done, you good and faithful servant.

Jamal and Osama were cousins in Aleppo, Syria. (PROJECTOR ON--- ALEPPO MAP 4) After the Syrian revolution broke out, Osama became a key leader of al-Nusra in Aleppo. Al-Nusra is an offshoot of the radical Islamic group Al-Qaeda. Unknown to Osama, Jamal and his wife became followers of Jesus. They sought for an opportunity to share with Osama about their newfound faith. But they realized that the stakes were huge.

Then one day the home of Jamal and his wife was shaken by a violent explosion that came from nearby. Jamal rushed to the scene of the explosion, which turned out to be Osama's house. Jamal found his cousin lying in the rubble. He was seriously injured. Osama was rushed to the hospital. He was unconscious for several weeks. At a certain point, Jamal decided to talk to Osama and tell his Christian story. He did. He could not discern any response. But he began to read the Bible to him during his visits. One day the doctor came in and found Jamal reading from the Scriptures. Jamal was shocked to learn that Dr. Ahmad was also a Christian. Together they prayed for Osama.

Two and a half weeks after Jamal began reading to Osama, the cousin awakened from his coma. He said to Jamal, **“You prayed over me, and the words you read were like nothing I've ever heard before, I want to hear more.”** Jamal gave him a Bible and for the next ten days, he read it for himself. When al-Nusra members came to visit him, he hid it under his pillow.

Osama's mind especially focused upon a passage in the Gospels from Mark 8. What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? One day he was thinking about these challenging words of Jesus, and he uttered a simple prayer: **“I don't want to forfeit my soul. What does this mean? The words haunt me. Give me a sign, Jesus, if You're real.”**

Osama had no sooner uttered that prayer than Dr. Ahmad entered the room. The surgeon had not told this leader of al-Nusra that he was a Christian. His life might be in danger if he did. But Dr. Ahmad said to his patient, **“Osama, you’ve been on a long road, but I’m happy to say you will be released soon. You have been given a second chance at life. We thought we might lose you when you were brought here after the bombing, but He has a path for you. Seek, and you will find it. Soon, you will no doubt be called back into this dreadful war. Al-Nusra is waiting for you, but I wonder, how long can the city be held with all the foreign invaders that have gotten involved? Now here is your physician’s prescription for full health. My recommendation is for the long run, Osama. I ask you: ‘What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?’”** Osama was blown away by the instant fulfillment of his request for a sign. He decided that he must become a Christian.

A couple of months later he told his terrorist cell that he had decided to leave Islam. They did not take that news well. Osama was tied up and beaten--- for three days. He prayed that his newfound Lord would simply take his life.

After the latest beating, Osama lost consciousness and awakened to find himself in a prison cell. His guard Mahmoud was outside of his range of view. Mahmoud told Osama, **“I must say I’m impressed by your faith. I have learned from you, and I sometimes wonder if you are persuading me. You were a rising leader in al-Nusra, and you threw it all away for Him. Why did you even tell them in the first place about leaving Islam? I cannot say that I have ever seen this much resolve in a man. With the beatings you’ve been given, a typical prisoner would confess to anything we charge them with.”** Mahmoud went on to encourage him to recant. Osama refused.

The guard continued, **“Osama, do you even know who I am? Let me tell you, I’m the man in charge of your firing squad tomorrow. Your execution is scheduled for 8:00 AM. You have no more chances. But... this is how it will go: Tomorrow you will be taken in a van to the execution site outside of Idlib. You’re familiar with it, aren’t you?”**

Osama had been involved in administering executions there himself. Mahmoud continued, **“After you’re put in the death position, I will say a few words. When you hear the first shot--- it will miss you--- hit the ground like a dead man and do not move. Do not move a muscle in your body, and breathe shallow breaths. When you hear the van drive away, take off your mask, get up, and walk east. Within a few miles, you will come to the Syrian Army. Hold up your arms toward the lookout hill and surrender. They will not kill you.”**

The next morning Osama was taken to Idlib with a black hood over his head. Mahmoud railed against Osama for his Christian faith. Charges were read against him. **“For me, to live is Christ,”** thought Osama, **“and to die is...”** A shot rang out. Osama fell over and lay still. Several more shots rang out. When he heard the van pull away, he got up and pulled off his mask. He saw the other members of the firing squad lying dead. Osama escaped to the Syrian lines. At last report he was living in a monastery in Syria, studying the Bible. He had not yet been reunited with his family and with his cousin Jamal. He was also wanting to find the guard who had shown him such kindness. (*Standing in the Fire*, Tom Doyle, 2017)
(PROJECTOR OFF)

God’s plan for us Gentiles requires the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus becomes the model for the committed Christian life. **“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. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 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.”**