

## The 'Kernel Principle'

### John 12:20-33

Every once in a while I'll be reading a novel where an author has written something like this: "And a faraway look came over him/ her..." It seems funny to me because I always think, "Oh, I know what that means" but I'm not sure if I really do. I mean, what *does* a 'faraway look' look like? If I saw one probably would wave my hand in front the person's face and ask if they were ok.

But if there was ever a 'far-away look' in Scripture, it was sure there when the two brothers Andrew and Philip went to Jesus and told him about the desire of some Greek speaking Jews to see Jesus. These guys first went to just Philip, who then went and discussed this request with his brother. We don't know the details of that conversation, but we can imagine that it had something to do with who is 'part of us' and who isn't? Who is welcome and who is not?

See, these guys were one step closer to Gentiles – they were called proselytes, Gentile converts to Judaism. That word, 'proselytes', is a Greek word, and it means 'stranger'. So that says something about their thoughts about this right from the start. "Do we let these 'strangers' in?" "Shall we even bother Jesus by introducing these 'strangers' to him?"

Well, they decide the answer is 'yes'. And they take their request to Jesus...who responds with a 'far away look'. (See, *you* know what it means!) And when he speaks, Jesus doesn't seem to answer the question that's 'on the table'. I mean, Philip and Andrew were expecting to hear, "Yes, of course, bring them to me!" or even, "No, this is not about non- Hebrews". But they get neither one.

Because Jesus realizes in this simple question that everything is now coming together for him – his purpose, his future. The clock has started ticking. And Jesus answers them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

If we were reading this in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, we might have a better idea of what it meant for Jesus to 'be glorified'. And it would be in the natural way that we would use that word –

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when someone is glorified, we think of them being 'lifted up', exalted, given special attention, even worship.

Kind of like Jesus on the mountain of Transfiguration, where he revealed himself as 'God' before those awestruck disciples. *That* was being glorified as we would think of it – becoming so bright, powerful, they couldn't even look at him.

But, you see, John uses the word 'glorify' differently. When John writes about Jesus being 'glorified' he's talking about his death. John's Gospel is focused on Jesus' awareness that this was the point of his coming – he was going to die, for *us*. That death is his 'glory'.

And there was something about these 'foreigners', these 'strangers' wanting to see him that made him realize that the moment he knew was coming was in fact, very near. And he begins then, to explain what this means to his disciples (and to *us* as well). And, hopefully, we will find out tonight/ this morning that it actually has a lot to do with all of us, right now.

Jesus says some things next that are a little hard to understand, but we *can* understand them, and they are important. So let's take a look:

*"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*

First, Jesus uses an illustration from nature to help us understand why he had to die for us. (show pic #1, wheat) I don't know if you've ever stood in a wheat field, but it's pretty impressive – especially out west, where they just go on and on like, forever. One kernel of wheat is a very small thing – especially in the context of an entire field. If you try to bake some bread out of one kernel of wheat, you are going to be mighty hungry! But, if you 'plant' that kernel, and allow it to grow, it will multiply. You'll end up, eventually, with something like this (show pic #2, wheat field).

Now let's look at what Jesus says next:

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<sup>25</sup> *Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* <sup>26</sup> *Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.*

Sometimes Jesus spoke in extremes to make a point. He uses big contrasts. And we always need to be sure we think about *all* the things that Jesus said when we read one of those extreme statements. This is a good example of that – folks, Jesus is not telling us to *hate ourselves!*

Jesus once said that all the commandments can be summed up in just two statements:

1. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, *and*
2. Love your neighbor *as yourself.*

That presumes that it is not only OK, but it is normal to *love* ourselves – normal to take care of ourselves, and so forth. If we hated ourselves and treated our neighbors *that* way, we'd end up with a lot of angry people, a lot of hurt, and crime, hate, and wars... kind of ... like our world, huh?

Jesus doesn't want us to hate our self! His point is being made in contrast to love for God. And it's not so much that our love for God is so powerful that we 'hate' ourselves by comparison - I've heard people say that, and I don't really know what that means. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me, frankly. I love my wife and my children intensely, but that doesn't make me 'hate myself' by any stretch of language.

I think Jesus here is talking more about directions and focus – he is talking about turning our focus *away* from ourselves, and *toward* God. And he is saying that this is exactly what Jesus did for us: he turned completely away from his own priorities, his own agenda, *even his own life*, in order to be obedient to God. And God's purpose for him was that he would die for the sins of the world.

So, 'hating self' in this context means to put ourselves, our agendas, our own ideas of what is right or wrong, what we think need to do and don't need to do, on the 'back burner' and taking on God's priorities for our lives – and following that wherever that might lead us.

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Now notice this part of what Jesus is teaching us: next, he says,  
“*Whoever serves me must follow me*”

Since he just spoke about his death, he's likely referring here to our following him in a similar way... doing what he did; not literally dieing, but being willing to deny ourselves and follow God. And when we do that, that same spiritual principle he just mentioned (I'm calling it the 'kernel principle') will be at work in us!

When Jesus died, and then was raised back to life, a door was opened for all people to have a living relationship with God. Through Jesus' death and life, the very presence of God would be available *in every* human heart. So this one life, broken, results in a multiplication of life: not only life for more people, not only 'length' of life (i.e., forever), but also in quality – abundant life! One life exponentially multiplied!

And now – here's the thing – Jesus is calling *us* to 'follow him' – to do what he did, i.e., turn from ourselves, and turn toward God. And whenever we do this, the result is a varied and bountiful 'harvest' of goodness.

Let me give you an example or two. This should be really easy for you to get here on this Saturday night. There are a lot of hungry people in this room right now! And that's because many of us haven't eaten in the past 30 hours. We have voluntarily turned away from our own desire to eat for a greater purpose than ourselves over this weekend. Our purpose is to serve God. To raise awareness/ solidarity in our own hearts for what is actually going on 24/7 in our world today...to think in a deeper way about what it means that every 3.6 seconds someone in our world dies of hunger, (and 75% of them are children)... to collect food for a local food bank... and to raise funds for hungry people.

You may not realize it right now, but this self-denial – just a little thing, really, for us – is creating ripples from this place. Things are going to happen in this word because you turned from yourselves, and turned to God. Like the seed that 'dies', brings about a harvest. (The kernel principle.)

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We can even know, in this case, what some of the results are going to be –

1. Hungry people will be fed (locally, and internationally). There will be more food on someone's table because of this weekend. In places and in ways that we will never really know completely.

2. (Which may end up even more important in the long run) You will be changed. If you experienced this hunger over the past 30 hours with an openness to God, you're eyes will be opened to things that God will reveal to you – a deeper compassion, hope, maybe a better understanding of the importance (or lack of importance) of so many things that we sometimes think we can't live without.

It's a dangerous thing to turn away from ourselves and turn to God! Because when we do that we open ourselves up to a much bigger universe... and a whole new way of living that is wonderful, but often *hard*.

3. Someone outside of this group will very likely be touched by your sacrifice, and who knows where that could lead? Maybe a parent or a sibling... or someone whose door you knocked on this afternoon, or someone here tonight – but I'm sure, God will speak to *someone* through you, through your obedience. And they're going to hear it. Like ripples in a pond.

*... unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*

See, that's the way this thing works. Turn from self... turn to God... and the seeds multiply into something much greater than just us.

Let me give another example... we have a number of different churches represented here tonight (between the 30 Hour Famine and Walk to Emmaus group). But this applies to all of us. We all know that financially, things are tough for a lot of folks right now. And most churches are feeling the pinch. I know *we* are. Budgets are getting tight, pastors all over the country are waking up wide – eyed at 3 am... !

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It's a scary time, but it's kind of an exciting time too, if you think about it. Giving to a church in the past, for some, may have been just something that people do; you know, a routine. But we're now in a period of history where giving for many is truly becoming *sacrificial*. It is costing us something, more than ever before. A lot of people are having to decide whether to give to God (through the Church) or do something for themselves. These decisions are being made all the time.

And the Kernel principle applies here too! When we turn from our own agenda, our own life, our self- rule, and turn *toward* God, taking on God's priorities and obeying Jesus' commands... the result is a *bountiful* harvest. God is going to bless those sacrifices in a powerful way, I truly believe that! Something exciting is going to happen!

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One more thing. . .

Let's turn this whole thing around now, and look at it from a different perspective. You see, that 'bountiful, plentiful, rich, full harvest' we've been talking about is not only in things that happen *outside* of us, it is also something that happens *inside* of us.

Someone might say (if they were really honest), "So, stuff can happen in the world – even good stuff – if I 'turn away from my own self and turn toward God.' OK... But, *why* would *I* want to do that? I'm doing just fine, I'm happy, I like where I am. That's too bad for everybody else...but in this life, if you don't take care of yourself, nobody else is going to!"

Now, I don't know of too many people who are *so* in touch with their own inner motivations that they would actually say something like that out loud; but I do think that this is the bottom line for many people. And, really, it's a good question: "Why bother with God's way?" "Why should I?" especially when we know that so much of the time, going that way is going to mean 'swimming against the current' of our world, our culture. Who wants to be left out, different all the time?

I think this 'kernel principle' applies here, too. And I have two quick illustrations to try and explain...

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One you may have heard before. I've read that if you catch a small fish and raise it in a fish tank until it is an adult, and then release it into the 'wild', it will continue to swim in the same little area that marked the size of the tank it was raised in. You get where I'm going here? Sometimes we *think* we have everything we need, that our lives are very 'full' and 'rich'... but we have no clue as to what is really available for us.

Jesus told someone once that he came to give Life; not life as in simply 'being alive' but LIFE, with a capital 'L'! He called it abundant life! Turning from self, and turning to God gives us a perspective that we will *never* find on our own. Turning to God doesn't diminish us, doesn't make us *less* of ourselves, it actually gives us the ability to *be* who we were created to be! Keeping our own little inward perspective might sound brave and noble, [I gotta' be 'me'] but it just as limiting as that fish swimming in little circles in a big lake. It keeps us small.

But there's more... see, there's a deception in goes on here, too. We so often think that we're 'all together' and all that, but if we ever get to look at ourselves in an 'honesty mirror', (something that typically happens in a time of crisis) if we ever see ourselves without all the self-deceptions and wishful thinking that goes on in our heads... we'd realize that we're not meant to live under our own rules. Because whenever we do, we make a terrible mess of it. Every time. And we're *all* broken. All of us.

When our first child was born (Brian), I decided that next Christmas to buy a Coo-Coo clock for my wife. I had good memories of being really young, and my grandfather holding me up so I could see his Coo-Coo ... do it's thing. You know, small things make a big impression on kids! I wanted us to be able to share something like that with our children.

So I did, and this clock lasted about 22 years. I had it fixed once, but last summer it stopped again, and the repair guy said that it basically hit its lifespan. (It wasn't a 'high end clock'.) So, I was thinking about getting the 'innards' replaced this Christmas, but then I thought... Brian has been married for almost a year, Kim is getting married in a few months... its time to start a new tradition.

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So, I searched the internet and came up with a beautiful clock at a reasonable price. I had to order it from the Black Forest, in Germany. I ordered it on Thanksgiving weekend, and it said that it was going to take 6 weeks to get here, so I had to tell Dianna that she wasn't going to get a Christmas present until mid-January. But she was as excited as I was about this clock.

Well, it turned out that it arrived early, and to Dianna's surprise, I gave it to her on Christmas morning. We hung it up right where the old one had been. And, I have to say, it was even more beautiful than I thought it would be – hand carved, dark, a very 'laid back' coo- coo sound. The bird wears sunglasses, its very cool.

So, fast-forward to a few weeks ago. Kim and John have started a college/ young adult fellowship group, and they often meet at our home, and this particular Friday night was their meeting night. Dianna and I are under orders to 'vacate' the premises whenever this group meets, at least in the beginning. (I guess they're afraid we'll learn the secret handshake or something.)

So, we planned to go out to dinner with two other couples. And that happened to be a long day at work, I blew home about 5 pm, and had a short window to make the house presentable for company, and get ready for the dinner (we live in the real world, too!)

And I'm vacuuming dog hair from along the edge of the foyer in our house, which I have done 100 times at least. But this night I'm in a hurry, and it was the perfect storm of bad things... Dianna whizzes by and winds the clock, so the chains are almost to the floor. And I come around the corner with the Dyson... and on the backstroke, I catch a chain in the wheel well of the vacuum.

There's no place for it to go, it's just been wound. And not only do I yank the thing so hard that I strip and bend the gears inside, but I pull the entire clock off the wall, where it crashes to the floor with a horrible... sound...and splinters into a bunch of pieces. I just stood there looking at it. I couldn't believe it.

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Well, we gathered it up and put it in shoebox. And went to dinner. I really didn't want to go, but we were committed. Had reservations and everything.

Jay and Carol Taylor were two of the people we were eating with that night. And after about 30 seconds they said, "What is wrong? [What's that far- away look in your eyes?]" And I told them. They said, "When did this happen?" I said, "About a half hour ago!"

Carol tells me, "We know a guy who fixes clocks. He's a passionate clock guy." Out in Hatboro, he has a shop and the next day she took the pieces to him. Well, to bring a long story to an end... not long after that, Jay and Carol show up at our front door. With this: show pic of clock on wall.

It has been completely fixed, restored, inside and out. And you know what, as much as we appreciated that clock before, I think we value it even more now... it has been re-made by a master, it has been given new life. And it is very precious to us.

There's a chorus we sing once in awhile that goes like this:

*Something beautiful, something good  
All my confusions, he understood...  
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife  
But he made something beautiful out of my life...*

You know, friends, all we really have to offer God as we turn to him is our brokenness. But in turning to God, we will be remade into a glorious, new creation. Beautiful... bountiful. Fruitful. It's the kernel principle.

Amen