

THE KERNEL OF WHEAT

John 12:20-36

Key Verse: 12:24

“I tell you the truth, 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.”

In today’s passage, Jesus teaches us how to live a fruitful life. We all want to be fruitful, right? We all want to be prosperous and successful. We can learn from a kernel of wheat. Have you ever seen a kernel of wheat? It is smaller than a peanut. We can hold many of them in one hand. Yet contained in this small seed is the secret of bearing much fruit. We can learn mighty, life-changing truth from Jesus through his teaching on a kernel of wheat. Let’s listen carefully.

First, when it dies it produces abundant fruit (20-26).

Look at verse 20. “Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast.” These Greeks were God-fearing, but not necessarily Jewish. They must have been drawn to the Biblical truth that there is only one God, and to the superior moral standard of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps they sensed the presence of God with the people of Israel. In any case, they reveal that they were seeking God. It is because all men are made in the image of God.

Greeks represent rational intellectuals. They were the descendants of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They developed profound philosophy and a highly advanced culture. They also gave us the Olympic Games. Yet they could not find fulfillment in these things. St. Augustine said that God created man with an empty place that only God can fill, and man is restless until he finds rest in God. These Greeks needed to meet God and to worship God. The emergence of Greek worshipers is significant. John tells us that Jesus is the King, not only for Israel, but for the Greeks as well. In fact, Jesus is the Savior King for all mankind.

Intellectually gifted people need Jesus. Only Jesus can give them true meaning and peace in their souls. Shepherd Andrew Lamb has a brilliant mind. Yet when he did not know Christ, his mind was under the power of sin and death. Jesus visited him through one-to-one Bible study with Missionary Grace-Sun Lee. Jesus forgave his sins and gave him new life. Now he has meaning, clear direction, and true happiness. He can use his mind to glorify God. He can be a great Bible scholar or Christian thinker like Francis Schaeffer. Yale students need Jesus. May God have mercy on them to meet Jesus through one-to-one Bible study.

The Greeks that came to the Feast wanted to meet Jesus. So they came to Philip with their request. They said, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” In verse 22 John says, “Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.” Philip was once promising leadership material. He was brilliant and articulate. But he had failed Jesus’ test of faith at the feeding of the five thousand. He did not understand Jesus’ heart (6:7; 11:16). Despite his human ability, he was relegated to the second circle of disciples until he could learn faith. Philip learned to respect Andrew, the man of faith, and coworked to bring the Greeks to Jesus.

Jesus saw through the coming of the Greeks that God’s kingdom was advancing. Yet God’s plan of salvation hinged on what Jesus would do in Jerusalem. Jesus said in verse 23, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” To Jesus, it meant that the time had come for his suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus would be betrayed, mocked and spat upon. Jesus would be despised and scorned by men. Jesus would be whipped and beaten, nailed to a cross, pierced in the side, and die like a criminal. Yet Jesus says he would be glorified. It is because he did what only the Son of God could do. He obeyed the will of God to death, even death on a cross. God never compromises his justice. To save men from sin, God had to make atonement through a ransom sacrifice. Only the death of the Son of God would be sufficient. After his death on the cross, God raised Jesus to life and proved him to be the Son of God.

The Greeks could not understand the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection from the Scriptures. But Jesus taught them in a way they could understand. Jesus revealed a universal truth of God’s world: fruit comes through life sacrifice. We see this in human mothers who virtually give their lives to their children to nurture them in the womb, give birth, and rear them. It is revealed even in a kernel of wheat. Look at verse 24. “I tell you the truth, 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.” For abundant new life to grow, the seed must die. This is true for orchids that Shepherd Chase Akins grows so well. They begin as a small seed. Yet they produce beautiful flowers. Moreover, one orchid can produce millions of new seeds. This is God’s truth, rooted in God’s character, and revealed throughout the natural world (Ro 1:20).

God is glorified through the production of much fruit. God made the universe to bear much fruit. God made man to bear much fruit. God’s first word to man in Genesis 1:28a was, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” Our chief purpose of life is to glorify God by bearing much fruit. To bear much fruit, we must know and practice the principle that fruit comes through life sacrifice. We can bear much fruit when we are willing to sacrifice our lives for the glory of God.

Look at verse 25. “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” In this verse, the word “life” appears three times. The first two times it is translated from a Greek word equivalent to “psyche.” The third time, “eternal life,” is translated from “zoen.” “Psyche” refers to the human mind, ego, or self. We Christians often refer to it as the fallen man, or the sinful nature, that seeks its own glory and pleasure above all things. “Zoen” refers to the life that God gives that is everlasting, overflowing, and fruit-bearing. The word “zoen” is also found in John 3:16, referring to God’s gift of eternal life through Christ. We can receive this life through simple faith in Jesus. The man who lives a selfish life will perish. But the man who receives God’s gift of life in him will live forever with God.

Receiving God’s gift of life marks the beginning of a fierce spiritual struggle between the life of God in us and our sinful self. Jesus says that we must hate our lives in this world. This does not mean that we engage in self-condemnation, or torture our bodies in various ways. It does mean that we welcome Jesus into our hearts as King and allow him to rule. Our sinful self resists. It wants to regain control of our lives and faculties. It wants to be the center of the universe and receive all the glory. It wants to indulge the psyche and the flesh to the extreme. We must hate this sinful self. When we hate this sinful self, and keep our eyes on Jesus, Jesus helps us put it to death. As this sinful self dies, the new life that Jesus gives grows more and more in us. We can bear the fruits of the Spirit in our inner man: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22). As these fruits grow in us, we can bear the image of Jesus. We can be a blessing to others. We can enjoy true success in our studies, in our careers, and in every way. St. Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

Shepherd Jim Rarick practices the principle of the kernel of wheat. He dies to himself daily to live for the glory of God. Before he knew Jesus he was a clarinet soloist. He performed well for crowds of people, made good money, and received lots of praise. But after he met Jesus, he decided to crucify his self-glory seeking desire. In fact, he decided to give up music for the sake of his spiritual growth. Then the Lord asked him to use his music talent to raise up a dynamic orchestra. He received lots of humbleness training to learn conducting. When this one man died for the glory of God, a beautiful orchestra was born. Moreover, his family is fruitful, his fellowship is fruitful, and his career is fruitful.

To die to our sinful self is sometimes painful and it requires patient endurance. Our sinful self is so deceptive that it constantly tries to maneuver through deal-making to find a way to survive. It even offers to serve Jesus to some extent if we will let it live. We must say to it, “No. You cannot live. I hate you.” Jesus plainly says that the only way to serve him is to be like a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. Yet, as we do this, Jesus gives us precious words of promise. Look at verse 26a. “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.” Jesus promises that when we give our lives to glorify God, we can have a deep personal relationship with Jesus. We can be with him all the time and everywhere. This makes us truly happy. So many missionaries testify to this truth. They suffer from many dangers and hardships, but they are really happy because Jesus is there with them. Missionary Gideon Kang in Almaty, Kazakhstan faces danger and difficulty every day. And yet, he is always happy and smiling because Jesus is there with him. Where Jesus is, there is the kingdom of heaven. When we are with Jesus we are happy wherever we are.

Look at verse 26b. “My Father will honor the one who serves me.” Jesus also promises that the Father will honor the one who serves him. This applies both to the present life and to the life to come. One example is Eric Liddell. Before going to China as a missionary, he was a finalist in an Olympic sprint event, representing Scotland. It was the

chance for him to win a gold medal. But since the event was scheduled on a Sunday, Eric forfeited the race and went to church to keep the Lord's day holy. A few days later he ran in the finals of another event in which he was much weaker. But to everyone's surprise he won the gold medal. God honored the one who served Jesus. However, our greatest honor is to hear the Father welcome us into our eternal home, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master's happiness" (Mt 25:21). Then we will be invited to the heavenly banquet and sit together with all the great men and women of God (Lk 13:29). We suffer in the present life to be purified and bear fruit for God's glory. But we receive eternal life and everlasting honor in the kingdom of God.

Second, Jesus practices the truth of a kernel of wheat (27-28).

Though Jesus knew and taught the principle of the kernel of wheat so well, it was not easy for Jesus to practice it. Look at verse 27. "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." Jesus' heart was troubled because he did not want to die. To most people, the desire to live in this world a little longer is indeed strong. Recently, a man who was hiking in the wilderness suffered an accident in which his arm was pinned down by a boulder. After struggling for a while to get free, he found it impossible to get his arm out from beneath the boulder. If he remained there he would die. So he broke his own bones and cut off his own arm to escape and live longer. This is how much we want to live. Jesus had the desire to live in this world and enjoy his life longer. This desire to live caused his heart to be troubled. In that struggle, there was a temptation for Jesus to pray, "Father, save me from this hour." If he did so, God would answer his prayer and save him. Jesus' life would be preserved. But he would remain a single seed that did not produce fruit. Sometimes, when God brings his servants to the brink of real self-sacrifice, it surprises us. We can feel that God requires too great a sacrifice. Then there is indeed a strong temptation to save our lives by any means. How did Jesus deal with this temptation?

Look at verse 28a. "Father, glorify your name!" Jesus cried out to God with a clear prayer topic to glorify God's name. Even though it meant that Jesus would die a cruel and shameful death on the cross, Jesus was willing if God's name would be glorified. When Jesus had a supreme prayer topic that God's name be glorified, he could overcome the temptation to save himself in the time of spiritual crisis. Jesus did not say, "I will glorify God's name." But Jesus cried out to God in prayer. Jesus absolutely depended on God to help him glorify God's name as a matter of life and death. We learn from Jesus that when we reach the moment of crisis, we must pray, "Father, glorify your name!"

Look at verse 28b. "Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.'" God affirmed that Jesus had lived for the glory of God up to that time. Here we see that Jesus did not suddenly try to practice the principle of the kernel of wheat at the crucial moment. Jesus had been living by this principle daily. Jesus always did what pleased God, no matter how inconvenient or risky it was. Jesus taught the truth of God to a wayward Samaritan woman when he was tired, hungry and thirsty. Jesus taught the truth of God to the religious leaders even though they wanted to kill him. Jesus healed a man born blind at the risk of his life. This miraculous sign required a life-giving sacrifice from Jesus. In this way, Jesus revealed the glory of God. Now God acknowledged Jesus' sacrificial life and received it as his glory. This was all that Jesus wanted. God also assured Jesus that his prayer had been heard. God would enable him to go through the upcoming ordeal successfully to the end and reveal the glory of God fully.

Third, Jesus' victory and vision (29-36).

Jesus had a sense of victory in his soul. Moreover, Jesus knew that God would win complete and final victory over the world and the devil. Look at verse 31. "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out." Satan wormed his way into the world when he deceived man in the Garden of Eden. By means of temptation he planted doubt about the love of God in people's hearts. But at the cross, God revealed the depth of his love. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God loves sinners so much that he did not withhold even his one and only Son from us. When we realize the love of God at the cross, all our doubts disappear. The devil loses his foothold and has to flee in defeat and disgrace.

Jesus saw the vision of abundant fruit through his death. Look at verse 32. "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Whoever beholds Jesus on the cross, dying for the sin of the world, can see the love of God and the kingdom of God. Through the cross of Jesus we find forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Innumerable souls have received eternal life at the cross of Jesus. Jesus made a final appeal to the acquiescent crowd

in verses 35-36: “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

In this passage we learn that fruit comes through life sacrifice. We can bear fruit when we let our sinful self die and God’s life grow in us. We must also pray like Jesus, “Father, glorify your name.” Then Jesus gives us true joy. The Father gives us everlasting life and honor in his kingdom. May God help us to live as a kernel of wheat, like Jesus.