

The Paradox of Life

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March 27, 2021

John 12.1 - 50

The title of my message this morning is, **The Paradox of Life**. Perhaps the place to begin is with defining what is a paradox. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it this way: “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.” A paradox doesn’t appear to be logical, but despite its apparent contradiction, upon closer examination it is actually true.

In the coming weeks farmers and gardeners are going to implement a paradox which Jesus referred to when illustrating His mission on earth. Farmers will take seed, very valuable seed, and they will go to great effort and expense to bury it in the ground. If one wasn’t familiar with the outcome, they would consider it totally illogical. But we all know that the only way to multiply seed is to plant it in the ground where it will germinate, sprout, grow, and over the course of months, a single seed will produce a crop of numerous seeds.

It is that practice Jesus was thinking of when He said:

John 12:24 (ESV) ²⁴Truly, 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.

He used that practice to point to what He would do in only a matter of days – die! While His death would initially be seen by His opponents as victory and His followers as defeat, it would turn out to be just the reverse. It was for this very reason Jesus had come to earth – to die! Jesus looked ahead and He knew the pain and horror that lay ahead for Him. Not just the excruciating physical pain of being flogged and beaten and tortured, thorns placed upon His head as a crown, and after His body was so bruised and disfigured, He would be crucified – one of the most painful ways devised by man to kill people. But eclipsing the physical pain would be the unimaginable horror inflicted upon Him when He bore the punishment for sin and the perfect fellowship He had with His Father was broken.

No wonder His heart was troubled as He thought about what lay ahead, but His response was unequivocal; He must go ahead. That was the mission He came to complete.

John 12:27–29 (ESV) ²⁷“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”

There was no other way to deal with sin. Jesus was not pursuing some misguided fantasy. To remove any doubt which anyone might have, God the Father voiced His approval and affirmation from heaven. God spoke audible words from heaven not for the benefit of Jesus, but for the benefit of you and me as Jesus was about to embark on the defeat of Satan and his realm of evil.

John 12:30–31 (ESV) ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

The crucifixion of Jesus satisfied the punishment due for sin and accomplished Satan's defeat. As a result, that opened the door for the redemption of those who place their faith and trust in Jesus. Jesus needed to die, just like a seed dies when planted in the ground, so He might bear much fruit.

John 12:32–33 (ESV) ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

When Jesus was crucified, He would be lifted up. He had previously told Nicodemus the bronze serpent which had been lifted up in the wilderness to save Israel from the poisonous snakes, pictured Him being lifted up to save people from their sin.

John 3:14–15 (ESV) ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Not only was it necessary for Jesus to die to produce fruit, but He raised a second paradox to expand on the first:

John 12:25 (ESV) ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

What Jesus declared flies in the face of the wisdom of the world which tells people they are in charge of their destiny and can achieve anything they put their minds to. That worldly wisdom encompasses not just people's ability to gain success in worldly pursuits, but to gain God's favor through hard work and commendable deeds. People are led to believe that with enough passion and commitment they will be rewarded by God with a place in heaven. But Jesus' counsel is the reverse – in order to succeed, one must set aside their agenda and surrender to Jesus Christ and His agenda. It begins with giving up the belief that anyone is able to secure enough of God's favor to offset their sin. No one will ever prove themselves worthy of God's love and merit a position in heaven. There is only one way to gain a relationship with God and that is to give up – to lay our lives at the foot of the cross and seek forgiveness from Jesus and believe His claim that He is the only way to eternal life. The route to eternal life requires surrendering our claims on our life and giving control of our life to Him. It is necessary for people to die to self. Paul, when writing to the believers in Galatia, said it this way:

Galatians 2:20 (ESV) ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

That path begins when a person trusts in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and is born-again, and that change will be revealed through a lifelong walk with the Lord. Jesus invited people to pattern themselves after Him to become the people He designed and created them to be:

John 12:26 (ESV) ²⁶If 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.

There has been a great deal of talk about *rights*, particularly in the past several years. Jesus gives us some very helpful insight on the topic. The key to becoming great begins with humility, surrendering our self-directed agenda to one directed by Him – following Him. It means surrendering our *rights* to Him. We must not overlook the result of such a choice – the honor of

God. That is encompassed in the commendation from God Christians long for, “*well done, thou good and faithful servant!*”

Unfortunately, because of our carnal nature even after we are saved, the old self with its focus on *me* and what I want, continues to plague us. With intentionality we need to determine to pattern our lives after the model Jesus displayed to us when He left heaven to carry out His Father’s will.

Philippians 2:3–8 (NIV84) ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

If there was anyone in all of history Who could have legitimately raised a concern about His *rights* being ignored, it was Jesus Christ. He had every *right* to stay in heaven where He could have escaped both the restraints that becoming a man placed on Him but also all the agony entailed in the mission He came to complete. If He had refused to go to the cross for the sins of others, no one could have claimed that it wasn’t His *right* to refuse. But fortunately, He set aside His *rights* for the benefit of others. He was other-person focused. That is the mindset He wants us to pattern our lives after.

That is a key characteristic of followers of Jesus – being willing to set aside our preferences and wishes, and often choices that we could claim are rightfully ours. That’s what Jesus did. That’s the point He wants us to get. This quality of putting the interests of others ahead of ourselves is to be woven through our lives. It is certainly a critical ingredient in every healthy relationship. That is the case in a healthy marriage where the essence of love is concern for one’s spouse. Parents set aside some of their preferences and freedoms when they have children. The sphere in which we surrender rights encompasses the workplace where we yield to the will of our employers. And it occurs in our community at large and there is no doubt about the need to be other-person focused in the Church body where we are part of interdependent relationships with others. Surrendering some of our *rights* is essential to having a positive impact on the watching world. Within the constraints of Biblical truth and God’s standards of righteousness, mature Christians will follow the example of Jesus Christ and surrender what they could claim to be their *rights* so as to benefit others.

Devotion Displayed

The newness of life Jesus gives when a person turns to Him for forgiveness is impossible to conceal. Some think eternal life only pertains to the assurance that when a person who trusts in Jesus dies that they will spend eternity in heaven. However, eternal life begins the moment a person believes in Jesus and surrenders his or her life to Him. It is then that He makes them spiritually alive and takes up residence within – He makes them a new creation (2 Cor 5.17).

Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, had experienced the life transforming touch of Jesus Christ. She certainly is an example of someone whose focus and future were dramatically changed. We aren’t given information about her background before she was saved; the glimpses we are given of her are limited to after she placed her faith and trust in Jesus for her salvation.

We can only conjecture what her life was characterized by before she trusted in Jesus; however, Mary's devotion to Jesus and her extravagant response to Him suggests she was very aware of her need to be forgiven and therefore she expressed enormous gratitude for release from her burden of sin. Her worship of Jesus and gratefulness to Him for saving her was uncontainable.

Mary did the unimaginable, when at the dinner for Jesus, she anointed Him.

John 12:3 (ESV) ³Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

We partially grasp how extraordinary Mary's actions were, but we lack the cultural perception of those who were there. First, she would have been expected to be busy as one of the servers for the meal. As well, to touch the feet of another was considered to be degrading, let alone letting her hair down which women did not do in public. A woman's hair was her crown and glory (1 Cor 11.15). Using her hair to wipe Jesus' feet further eroded her public dignity. The ointment Mary used was valued at three hundred denarii (12.5) which was about one worker's normal wage for a year. Perfume of such value likely constituted Mary's dowry, a treasure to be given when she was married, hence not only was it extravagant to use it for this purpose, but having done so it greatly diminished her prospects of a favorable marriage in the future.¹

Mary's thankfulness to Jesus for redeeming her and her devotion to Him because of Who He was (and is), led her to cast aside social customs and perceived norms. She anointed Him and wiped His tear-stained feet with her hair. Perhaps Mary had the perception that Jesus would soon die, and she intended her actions to prepare Him for burial, but more likely it was only Jesus who understood it in that manner when He told her critics, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial." (John 12:7, ESV). Mary's worship of Jesus exemplifies both her profound gratitude for forgiveness of her sins and that He, the Son of God, alone is worthy of worship. It is no wonder that a dominant quality in followers of Jesus, is thankfulness. And accompanying it is the unwavering priority of worship of our God which is woven throughout all of Scripture, both private and corporate worship of our God.

Colossians 3:16 (ESV) ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, **singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**

The Messiah Proclaimed

Two weeks from today is Palm Sunday, the day when the Christian Church gives attention to the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem amid the acclaim of the multitude who shouted, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!*" (John 12:13, ESV). Had the people been silent, Jesus said, the stones would have shouted that the King had arrived (Luke 19.40). Jesus arrived as the long-awaited Messiah; however, He was not the political ruler the people longed for who would take charge and rid them of their Roman overlords. Rather, Jesus came not on a horse of victory but on a donkey in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9. His Kingdom differed greatly from the one the religious leaders looked for. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is not gained through force and power, but

¹ Charles Swindoll, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary – John (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014), 232.

through repentance and humility; it requires giving up on one's demands and surrendering to Jesus.

John 12:24–26 (ESV) ²⁴Truly, 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. ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If 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.

Salvation is a paradox where the way up begins not when an assertion of how capable and worthy one is, but just the reverse, how incapable and unworthy one is – it begins with surrender and a plea to God for help.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV) ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The Great Divide

As the day of the crucifixion of Jesus neared, the polarization increased between those who turned to Jesus and trusted in Him and those who rejected Him and His claim to be the Son of God and Source of eternal life. Judas, one of the twelve, took great exception to Mary anointing Jesus with extravagantly expensive perfume. He feigned his concern for the poor when he said the perfume could have been sold and the money given to them, when his real motive was to steal the money for himself (12.4-6). Despite listening to Jesus' claims for the previous three years and witnessing innumerable miracles and signs authenticating Jesus and His claims, Judas stood on the threshold of betraying Jesus. He displayed the depth of depravity and the gravity of unbelief and exemplified the saying, *"There are none so blind as those who will not see."*

A large crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover, the third Passover mentioned in John's Gospel. There was much talk about Jesus and news about Him having restored life to Lazarus (12.9). The religious leaders couldn't tolerate all the attention given to Jesus. They wanted to be the center of attention but that had become a losing battle as people sought after Jesus. Rather than stop for a moment and consider what restoring life to Lazarus implied about who Jesus was, controlled by bitterness and pride they decided to kill Lazarus (12.10-11). The triumphal entry by Jesus into Jerusalem amid the acclaim of the gathered crowds only infuriated the Pharisees more (12.19). They were content to be held in the grip of their hardened hearts and remain blinded to the truth.

But among that massive crowd that day were some Greeks; they were not constrained by preconceived beliefs about the Messiah. They had heard about Jesus and the signs He had performed, and they simply wanted to see Him. "So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, '**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**'" (John 12:21, ESV). They had arrived with receptive hearts, and they would not be content until they met Jesus. While Scripture doesn't tell us any more than Andrew and Philip told Jesus, it is very likely Jesus responded to their request and they met Him that day.

Those who sought the truth, discovered it, while those who believed they already knew the truth remained blinded in unbelief convinced they were OK and had no need to fear the future. Those who were unwavering in their belief they didn't need Jesus had no idea how deceived they were. Anyone following their pattern should listen carefully to Jesus' words.

John 12:35–36 (ESV) ³⁵So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.

A Final Appeal

Over the course of nearly five decades, I have made the observation that people must be attentive to listen to the voice of God and not ignore His invitation to repent of their sins and place their trust in Jesus for their salvation. Every time a person hears the claims of Christ and His invitation to believe, they make a decision – a decision to either be receptive to that invitation or their resistance and rejection becomes more pronounced as they look for reasons to justify their unbelief. Some persist with the delusion that they are OK on their own, or they have plenty of time to decide to surrender their lives to Jesus at the foot of the cross.

Perhaps it is my age or maybe my role that makes me notice the very unexpected deaths of people; I’m talking about people who are usually much younger than me, but irrespective of their age, people who thought they were very healthy and had many more years on earth ahead of them and without warning they were summoned to give an account of their life – *ready or not!* They had no more opportunities to get their house in order, to consider Jesus’ invitation to repent and believe, or for those who professed faith in Christ, to get serious and walk with the Lord. Jesus concluded His message to the crowds.

John 12:46–48 (ESV) ⁴⁶I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.

Jesus restated His words from John 3 with the reminder that His purpose in coming was not to judge the world, but to offer salvation. He came to provide an escape from an eternity in hell – a destiny without any hope and where they would forever be removed from the presence of God. Jesus will not need to judge anyone; it will be His words that will serve as judge. As always, what God has said will be the final arbiter of truth, not the latest opinion poll, nor the position that is the current fad, or the belief that has the most followers. It is summed up in John 8:31b–32 (ESV) “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

The paradox of life is that the way to an abundant life on earth and for all of eternity is gained by dying. It first necessitated the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary followed by the death of His followers when they died to self and placed their faith and trust in Him for salvation.

Christ Our Hope in Life and Death (Official Lyric Video) - Keith & Kristyn Getty, Matt Papa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oibli1rz7mw&ab_channel=KeithandKristynGetty

