

The Road to the Cross

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's good to be with you. Let me pray. Lord Jesus, pour your Spirit out on us.

Open your Word up to us. Let us see you more clearly. Let us know you better, be more like you, and follow you more closely. Amen. I always love preaching from the Gospels.

I think I say this every time I preach from the Gospels, because it is a chance to stop and look closely at Jesus and study Him. Everything Jesus said and did was catalytic.

It was meant to transform the people who were around Him. And our passage this morning from John 12 is no different. I also like the Gospel of John probably a little bit more than the other Gospels.

I also say this, I'm not supposed to have favorites. John's my favorite. And I think I even read some of our ones that everybody has a favorite Gospel, one that they connect with the most. And some people even try to draw some personality or psychological meaning from why somebody likes this Gospel versus another, what it all means.

[1 : 14] And that's not what today's about, but I just thought that was kind of interesting. But in a big super generalization, Mark focuses on what Jesus did. Matthew focuses on what Jesus taught.

Luke focuses on who Jesus paid attention to. John focuses on who Jesus is. So you can have favorites, but you kind of need them all. And they're all carefully constructed, but John's narrative is especially well constructed in my view.

He communicates a lot of what he says as much restructure as it's actually what he says about Jesus. So there's a lot going on into today's passage. And I want to look at how John brings us to this moment in John 12, to the conversations that happen between different actors, and then what happens within those interactions.

It's always about what Jesus says and does and what he tells us about him. So let's start with how did John get us to this moment. So it all starts back in chapter 11, when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

And that episode starts a pattern that characterizes each scenario that we come across as we make our way to today's passage. It's a pattern of positive and negative reactions to Jesus that are driving him towards the cross.

[2 : 32] It's a pattern of opposite reactions plays out against a general movement of greater and greater visibility and prominence for Jesus.

So let's look at this pattern briefly. So when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, there are two reactions. Some of the crowd are deemed under faith in Jesus, but others quickly head back to Jerusalem to convene an emergency meeting to kill him.

There are really strong opposite reactions. There's no question about the fact that a miracle happened. It's the difference in reactions. And not only that, but if the council didn't already know who Jesus was, they all know who he is now.

And not only that, but after this episode, this is where it went back to Jerusalem, and the crowds in Jerusalem in the temple were gathering for the festival, were all talking about him and looking for him.

Jesus was creating more reactions to himself and becoming more prominent. And in a small way, this pattern repeated.

[3 : 38] There was a quiet dinner of my friends in the home of Martha and Mary afterwards. And Mary adores Jesus by anointing his feet with an extensive ointment. It's a beautiful time of adoration, gratitude, and even worship.

Judas, however, criticizes Mary in front of everyone for her actions. Once again, strong polar opposite reactions to Jesus and who he is.

And not only that, but when the chief priests hear that the crowd is coming to see Jesus and also to see Lazarus, they decide they're going to kill Lazarus too. It's amazing.

Jesus continues to be prominent. Of course, it gets even better. Jesus rises to Jerusalem triumphantly. Crowds come out. They're praising him.

They're waving palm branches. And all of their praise expresses a messianic faith. The Pharisees, on the other hand, all complain how terrible it is that the whole world is going after him.

[4 : 40] Polar opposites. Faith and worship, on the one hand. Resistance to Jesus, on the other. And all in a moment, even greater prominence for Jesus. Every single one of these moments are on this trajectory of greater prominence and of stronger and stronger, polar reactions to Jesus.

And so in this moment in John 12, there's this atmosphere that's charged with the tension between adoration and acclaim, on one hand, and disparagement, even a murderous hate, on the other.

A tension that grows as Jesus' own prominence grows. So, in our passage, there's this hothouse of fervor, both for and against Jesus.

And two of Jesus' disciples, Philip and Andrew, have a moment in this part of our readings. It starts with some Greeks who want to come see Jesus.

Though John deliberately evokes an earlier moment in the gospel for the disciples who came to Jesus at the end of chapter one. And it signals to us that this is really, this passage is really the passage of our discipleship.

[5 : 52] At the end of chapter one, Nathaniel, Andrew approaches Simon and brings Simon to Jesus. And similarly, Philip goes and finds Nathaniel and brings him to Jesus. In this passage, some Greeks come to worship, God fears, and they approach Philip, asking to see Jesus.

Philip goes to Andrew, and then they go to Jesus with three groups' request. Philip and Andrew have, I know, a good instinct, a well-developed instinct for how to come to Jesus and how to bring people to Jesus.

We see this in the earlier chapter in chapter one. But even so, those instincts, in this moment, need to be developed, refined, and refocused a bit.

With all the heightened fervor and the greater prominence that Jesus is experiencing, the request of the Greeks would have seemed like a good next logical step in Jesus' current trajectory.

Sitting at the pinnacle of acclaim by the crowds in Jerusalem that Gentiles are now also asking to come and see Jesus could signal the beginning of a wider ministry for Jesus to the wider world, a greater platform and a greater reach.

[7 : 04] So Philip and Andrew, as part of Jesus' entourage, as part of the inner circle of 12, tried to facilitate what they thought was Jesus' next phase, a next big step where Jesus would hit the big time.

So Jesus replies, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. And you can all text your hand or to Philip fist bumping each other and saying, I told you so. It's the time for Jesus to be glorified.

This is the moment we read the situation correctly. We were right to do that. But then, and it's a big but then, Jesus reframes the situation. It's kind of jarring in some ways.

He totally upends the whole thinking about what's going on and all that he says next. He says three things about discipleship that needs to unpack you. Before we get into that, I want to focus you on something.

Something I want you to see about Jesus and his response to the disciples. He's not mad at them. He's not angry, disappointed, exasperated, or in any way critical of their response, of the way they're coming to him.

[8 : 15] His words, that reframe the situation, are entirely without judgment. And what I want you to see, the first thing I want you to take away from this morning is that as his disciple, Jesus is the same way with you as he is with them.

He is never disappointed, exasperated, or in any way critical of you when your intentions are right, but you still get it a bit wrong. Jesus, the way he was with Philip and Andrew, he is like this with you right now.

There is no condemnation, not now or ever. Let's look at how Jesus reframes the situation. First thing Jesus says, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. This is the first phrase, the first thing that Jesus said that would have been really jarring. Jesus drops a death metaphor on them. A dying metaphor.

And all the fist bumping probably came to a halt right at that moment. But it's not entirely all about death because Jesus articulates a spiritual principle that it's only through death that new life and fruitfulness is possible.

[9 : 27] This is not the way of the world. It's not the way even of Washington, D.C. Then Jesus says something next and he takes this metaphor and he extends it to people.

Whoever loves his life loses it. Whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. It just keeps getting better. In other words, by letting go of the world and the flesh, by letting go of all that is dark and empty, by letting go of prominence, platforms, influence, and all that narrative of impact on all the world's terms, the very things that Philip and Andrew and likely the other disciples thought was happening for Jesus right now, by letting go of these things, you get a higher life, a whole life, true life and eternal life, a real life that lasts forever.

And then Jesus says this, if anyone serves me, he must follow me and where I am, there will my servant also be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

In other words, the path to this higher real life that lasts for eternity is by serving, following, and being with Jesus. And the disciples would find out shortly that to follow and be with Jesus is to go through death and ultimately new life, his pattern of the cross and resurrection.

So a second thing I want you to see, the words themselves I'll come back to, but a second thing that I want you to see about how Jesus interacts with his two disciples is that as much as he gently but powerfully reframes the situation for Philip and Andrew, you should expect him to be the same way with you.

[11 : 16] We should not miss his gentle nudges and whispers of follow me. In this regard. So already, if this passage had stopped there and the sermon stopped there, there'd be a lot to unpack, but it kind of keeps going and it honestly gets a bit wild.

There's this four-way conversation that starts between Jesus, his two disciples who are listening, God, his father, and the crowd around him. We find out in verse 34 that Jesus and Philip and Andrew are not in a quiet room somewhere trying to talk to Jesus about his next big moves, but they seem to be in the midst of a crowd.

How much of all this conversation between Jesus and Philip and Andrew the crowd could hear isn't clear, but they must have heard some of it. But all that follows definitely happens in the hearing of the crowd and Jesus is every bit as intentional with this moment as he is with his two disciples.

So Jesus drops these heavy metaphors on his disciples, but then he does something. He gets vulnerable. He shares that his soul is troubled and he feels a bit like asking his father to save him from this hour.

And maybe a third thing I want you to see and notice about Jesus apart from his words. He's vulnerable, open, and emotionally expressive. The way he is with Philip and Andrew is how he is or at least how he wants to be with you.

[12 : 44] You should expect him to be vulnerable and emotionally accessible to you when you talk with him. And then Jesus seems to raise his voice a little and prays out loud, Father, glorify your name.

And this all by itself would have been an encouraging and an inspiring example of a righteous person making the right choice in a hard moment, but more happens. an audible voice comes from heaven affirming that the Father has glorified his name and will do so again.

The crowd around Jesus heard this. They heard his prayer to the Father and then they heard this noise coming from the sky. Some thought it was thunder, some said, well, they thought it was a voice, but they thought probably an angel.

Jesus heard it as a voice and he understood whose voice it was. And even further, he discerned that the voice was actually for their sake, not his.

It confirmed all that Jesus said to Philip and Andrew prior to this and maybe even to some of the crowd around him. And then Jesus makes the full connection between his statements and how the path of death leads to new life.

[13 : 57] Jesus draws this four-way conversation together by foretelling to the crowd what kind of death he was going to die. Though the crowd doesn't seem to pick this up right away.

Jesus states that his death, the death he's going to die, will result in the ruler of the world being cast out, the one who is ultimately responsible for all that is wrong with the world.

And it will also result in all people being drawn to himself. Jesus' death will bring new life. So there are things to see in this passage.

Jesus related to his disciples in a certain way and we should take some learning from this about who he is. And he said some things that should challenge us.

Jesus is never angry or disappointed with you. Come with your good intentions and don't worry if you might get it wrong. He's very, he's interested in the conversation with you. He will not judge you.

[14 : 54] You can expect him to reframe and direct you on things. It doesn't mean he thinks you got it wrong. He just wants to set you straight because he loves you. So be open to him.

Be open to who he is and how he is. And more than just open, actually ask him to let you experience him in these ways. Jesus' three statements to his disciples should challenge all of us but honestly, they challenge me personally.

Probably like some of you, my day job has a lot to do with strategy and building partnerships and communications. There's getting leadership and getting the organization on platforms, having a more prominent voice on policy debates.

There's a lot of messaging and talking points and trying to influence people and power to make the decisions that you want for the cause that you're trying to advance. And in some ways, when I read this passage, I recognized what Philip and Andrew were doing because I look for ways to do the same thing.

It's kind of my daily bread. Like some of us in this room, I work hard at all of these things. Changing the world is what gets many of us out of bed in the morning.

[16:11] And I can make a clear connection between my kingdom values and my day job. But as valuable and important as all those things are, they are in the end not the ways of the kingdom.

They're not going to work when it comes to how I follow Jesus. So, I'm not about to quit my job. None of you should either. So don't go away saying, Rob thinks I should quit my job.

It's not a kingdom job. That's not what I'm saying. Keep your jobs. But we should all have the spiritual sensitivity and the discernment that Jesus walked in in today's passage to be able to see the kingdom and the ways of the Father at work around us.

I think it means recognizing that for all our efforts to be successful in changing the world, there are limits to what we can do. It means recognizing that in the end, it's the Father who will glorify his own name and that he will change the world in his own way and in his own time to a level and a depth that our best collective efforts probably can't achieve.

That's a humble posture. It also means that if we are serious about serving Jesus, about following him and being with him, we should expect him at times to ask us to walk the path of death to have new life.

[17:27] Are we open to that? It might mean that when we're out there doing what we do to change the world, praying that God works through us and gives us the wisdom to do it, that we have the heart posture of John the Baptist who said, he must increase, but I must decrease.

It's hard. So I want to give us a moment now to reflect quietly on Jesus' words from this passage. I want to ask you to ask Jesus, what are you saying to me right now through these three statements that you said to your disciples?

So let's just take a quiet moment and then I'll close us in prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, as I prayed at the beginning, pour your spirit out on us.

We want to see you more clearly, know you more deeply, be more like you, and follow you more closely. And as always, if you want to talk about any of what I talked about today, if you feel like the Lord is stirring things up in you and you want prayer, please reach out.

Any of us would love to talk with you or pray with you. Amen. Amen.