

LIVE SELFLESSLY

John 12:24-36, 44-50

Walt Kelly (the creator of the comic strip character Pogo) observed that with regard to concerns about the environment “We have met the enemy and he is us.” If there were a “Gospel According to Pogo,” then this quote would be a key verse. In fact, “We have met the enemy and he is us” sums up a lot of the messages of the New Testament. Admittedly, Walt Kelly did not have a “spiritual message” or agenda in this particular saying; however, each of us could apply this idea to ourselves and the internal spiritual warfare – that lifelong inner struggle against those soul-destroying tendencies we have variously called passions, desires, or whatever.

In the past several decades, we have seen an increasing interest and emphasis on self esteem and its importance concerning a person being able to function in a world where relationships with others are essential. We cannot think of many situations in which interpersonal relationships are not essential. It could be in family, work, church, school, the neighborhood as well as national and international politics. A balanced perspective of self, an understanding of basic human needs regarding self, and a knowledge of what our Creator intended for us can help us function effectively in whatever culture or situation we may find ourselves.

Since the issue of “self” is so important, we would do well to know how to deal with this important issue. In our study of the life of Jesus as presented by John we can find the answer to how to live selflessly. We pick up the narrative of what happened following the resurrection of Lazarus in the twelfth chapter of John’s Gospel.

Upon His arrival in Jerusalem after the ride on the donkey colt (the Palm Sunday event), a seemingly insignificant event occurred. Some non-Jews were visiting Jerusalem during the time of the Passover and they requested to see Jesus. However, this request seemed to be a signal that this was the time for Him to offer Himself. In most other situations we find Jesus saying, “My hour is not yet”; but, in this instance, He said, “The hour is come.” Then he went on to tell why it was necessary for Him to die.

Accept the Principle – 12:24-26

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. ²⁵ “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.

²⁶ “If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. John 12:24-26 (NASB95)

Using the illustration of a seed of grain, Jesus stated an unobvious principle of successful living and that is “we win by losing and we live by dying.” Jesus realized that for the full potential of the Kingdom of God to come about it was necessary to have Kingdom people to make up the Kingdom. But for that to happen it was necessary for Him to be “planted” so that others would be able to participate in the true life that He came to reveal. Jesus literally gave up His life and we are called to follow Him.

One of the popular phrases we hear so many times with regard to Christians is that a person is described as a “follower of Christ.” We used to say that a person is a “Christian” or that a person is “saved” or maybe that the person is a “believer.” Apparently, the trend setters and observers of what is happening in our culture thought that a more descriptive term or phrase was needed to communicate a proper description of our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

The fact that Jesus stated that a person “must follow Me” gives a lot of credibility to the use of the descriptive phrase “follower of Christ.” The problem with using such a description is

that there are various shades of meaning to whatever word we may use. We may be a follower of some famous personality in that we keep up with what they are doing, we may be interested in his or her successes but we are not really associated with that person to any meaningful extent. In fact, in Jesus' days on earth, many "followed" Him. Most people followed from "afar." They were merely interested or curious observers. The only benefit they received was the entertainment value of watching or maybe they participated in benefits of one of Jesus' miracles.

How would we describe what Jesus meant when He said that we must follow Him? Perhaps the most obvious way to state it is that we must follow His example or emulate Him. In other words, we need to do what Jesus did. Additional insight into what He meant is in the phrase that we need to be "where Jesus is." Look at second part of verse 26: "and where I am, there My servant will be also." If we are literalists, then we might say that He is talking about a physical location. Or we might think of a "spiritual" location as in what Jesus said in John 14:3 where we see that He was going to prepare a "place" for us that "where I am, there you may be also."

So, what does it mean for us to be where Jesus is? Do we not use the term "where" to mean something other than location in our common discourse? For example, we may ask "Where do you stand on a particular issue?" Or we might ask, "Where are you coming from in making such a statement?" If we go all the back to the Garden of Eden, we find God asking Adam, "Where are you, Adam?" In none of these cases is the location the issue. To be where Jesus is would mean that we see things from His perspective, that we are motivated by what motivates Him, that our purpose is aligned with His purpose, and that we would take the same actions that He would take.

From a practical standpoint, we are called to take up our cross daily and to put to death the old nature – the self life – so that the life of Christ can be manifested in us. In this way, the genetic imprint is passed on from generation to generation as others see Jesus in us and are drawn to Him as a result of our lives. There is a promise given here that God will honor the person who follows Jesus by serving Him in such a fully committed way.

This was an emotionally trying time for Jesus. The personal anguish had already begun.

Consider the Cost – 12:27-33

²⁷ "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour." ²⁸ "Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ So the crowd of *people* who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." ³⁰ Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes." ³¹ "Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out." ³² "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." ³³ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. John 12:27-33 (NASB95)

How do we approach personal anguish and emotional pain? Do we want immediate relief and deliverance from it or can we see that "in the anguish" the process of putting to death the old nature? Is it not our "self" that hurts when things go badly for us? We need to turn our anguish over to the Lord for Him to use to bring about the changes in us that are needed. Jesus suffered the emotional pains of separation from God for our sake. In doing so, He made the way open for us to approach God. As we go about the process of taking up our cross and putting to death the sinful nature we open up ourselves for free communion with God because the veil of the "flesh" (or our basic carnality) is taken out of the way.

Dying to self by self denial can become an end in itself. Jesus wanted, and we should also want, the outcome of selflessness to be that God is glorified. This desire was reflected in the brief prayer that followed. It was important to Jesus that the proper interpretation be placed on

the events of His being offered up as a sacrifice. It needed to be done in such a way that people would glorify God.

What can we learn from the account that after Jesus prayed aloud that there was a “voice out of heaven” that spoke? There were at least two other instances where something significant was happening that evoked a heavenly response. At the baptism of Jesus and on the Mount of Transfiguration we have reports of words being articulated from an unseen source. The Jews were comfortable with the idea of angels communicating with men in words that could be understood by some but, not necessarily by everyone. In the Damascus Road account of what happened to the Apostle Paul, those who were with him heard the voice but did not understand the words. The response from those in the crowd was typical of what we encounter today. Some will attribute everything that happens to a natural phenomenon with no spiritual significance and others will attach spiritual significance to whatever happens. We can find an entire spectrum of acceptance or denial of spiritual reality and significance among those whom we encounter today.

Jesus clearly told them what they heard was for their own benefit. According to *John Gill's Expositor*, the Jews had a rule regarding how they would validate and decide who they would listen to when it came to religious matters. “No man is to be hearkened to, though he should do as many signs and wonders as Moses, the son of Amram, unless they hear with their ears, that the Lord speaks to him as he did to Moses.”

What is the lesson for us in our everyday living experiences? It is sometimes hard to realize that good can come from our problems. It is hard to realize that the very things in life that seem to defeat us will provide us with ultimate victory. Something of this paradox is found in the meaning of the cross.

By His death on the cross, Jesus would overthrow the satanic control of the world. After the fall of Adam and before the Cross, Satan was the prince of this world. After the Cross, Satan has no claim on the world because he is a defeated foe, he is cast out. The devil and his followers committed the grand error of putting an innocent man to death. Since Jesus was not born of the seed of Adam and since He never sinned, the devil had no authority to cause His death. In the crucifixion, the devil was openly shown to be the rebel and sinner he really is. This is why the “virgin birth” is such a significant truth.

It is ironic that the very instrument of death that Satan's forces used to cause the illegal death of the Son of God became the rallying point for all that would join with God in claiming the victory for the Kingdom of God. The voluntary, selfless sacrifice that was motivated by love (as demonstrated by Jesus in His death) is what draws us to him and ultimately to the Father.

Realize the Urgency – 12:34-36

³⁴ The crowd then answered Him, “We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. ³⁶ “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. John 12:34-36 (NASB95)

The reaction of the crowd in verse 34 showed that what they clearly understood that the “lifting up” (a euphemism for being crucified) was incompatible with the eternal character of the Messiah. The question *Who is this ‘Son of Man’?* shows the uncertainty in the minds not only of the hearers in Jesus' day, but of the readers in John's day and has been a matter of debate ever since.

The Jews were familiar enough with the Scriptures to know that in many places the

Messiah was mentioned as coming into the world and that His reign would be forever, that He would be victorious. They had failed to realize that the Scriptures also spoke about the Messiah as being the Suffering Servant Who would be our sin bearer. Jesus was talking about dying and also giving indications that He is the Messiah and the people were confused because they had a preconceived notion of what the Messiah was to be and do.

While Jesus did not directly answer their question, He used the same imagery as was used of him in the first chapter of John's gospel; *i.e.*, that he was the *light*. Once again, we have the characteristic contrast between *light* and *darkness*. The darkness represents the world without God. Walking in the light means following the light. Jesus spoke of his followers becoming *sons of light*, but this comes only through trust. Such trust will be necessary after the cross as well as before it.

How can we apply these truths to our lives today? Jesus essentially told them that they should be using that time to learn while He was there to teach them. To walk in the light while the Light of the world was there among them was the greatest opportunity that they would ever have. The same is true for us. We must walk where there is light by following in the path that Jesus walked.

Decide to Follow – 12:44-50

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. ⁴⁵ "He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me. ⁴⁶ "I have come *as* Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ "If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. ⁴⁸ "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. ⁴⁹ "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment *as to* what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ "I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me." John 12:44-50 (NASB95)

Jesus came and reached out to people. He ministered to their needs and while He had their attention He taught them principles of the Kingdom of God. The resulting interactions and relationships with people cause them to have confidence (belief) in Him. Once they had believed (in) Him, then He could point them to the Father. He was the visible dramatization of the character and nature of God. When people saw Jesus (His conduct and character) they saw the conduct and character of God the Father. Prior to His coming, people were in spiritual darkness regarding the true character of God, but Jesus put light on the subject.

We must live our lives in such a way that we reach, minister, teach, build relationships and then lead others to God through Jesus Christ. When people see us, they should see Jesus in us.

Jesus had already spoken of those who hear His words but do not do them. He likened such people to a house built on the sand. The judgment is a practical outworking of cause and effect coupled with the realities of life. There will be problems (realities of living in a fallen world) and a life built on an inadequate foundation will not stand up!

We can hear many philosophies of how to live our lives and we should wonder how valid these are. Since the words Jesus gave us are those directly from God, then we can have perfect confidence in the effectiveness of following what He told us. If we do what He commands us to do (the Gospel), then we will live in such a way that we experience eternal life.