**JESUS THE KERNEL OF WHEAT**

April 30, 2017

John 12:20-28

Key Verses 12:24 “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.”

Right before he died, Napoleon said, “Alexander, Caesar, and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded his empire upon love, and to this very day millions will die for Him…What a conqueror!--a conqueror who controls humanity at will, and wins to himself not only one nation, but the whole human race. He claims the love of men--that is to say, the most difficult thing in the world to obtain; that which the wisest of men cannot force from his truest friend, that which no father can compel from his children, no wife from her husband, no brother from his brother--the heart. Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Louis XIV struggled in vain to achieve this. They conquered the world, yet they had not a single friend.” Jesus Christ conquered the world, not by force, but by winning the heart. He conquered the world by dying on the cross. He conquered the world by becoming a kernel of wheat. If Jesus came into the world and nothing but a good teacher, if Jesus came into the world and was nothing more than a moral example, if he did nothing but just talk to us about God and tell us how to live, and show us the best that a man could be, and went right back to heaven, he would stay there forever alone because none of us could get there. And when these people come along and say, “Well he was a wonderful teacher, and he was a good man. He was a moral giant.” If that is all he was, then he will spend forever in heaven alone. If he ascended into heaven like Enoch without dying, he would be a golden kernel in heaven alone. Without death, nothing happens. There is a spiritual harvest only through death. This principle of the kernel of wheat is the truth even in this world. General Yi Sun-Shin was 16th century general in the time of Japanese invasion. Once he had only 12 ships to face 133 large enemy ships. His soldiers were trembling in fear. Then he told them, “Those willing to die will live, and those willing to live will die.” They fought without fear, and amazingly Yi Sun Shin won the victory with only two dead. Let’s learn the principle of the kernel of wheat from Jesus.

The Jewish Passover festival was approaching. All Jewish men, who were scattered all over the world, were required to come to Jerusalem. Among them were some Greeks who had come to worship. They must have been Gentile converts to Judaism. Perhaps they were tired of Greek myths and philosophies, and moral corruption. They perceived that the God of truth was in Israel. Somehow they had heard about Jesus. They must have been shocked when they heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. They wanted to know who Jesus was. It was more than mere curiosity; they wanted to solve the problem of death and find the way of eternal life. They were truth seekers. So they came to Philip, who had a Greek sounding name, and requested, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” Philip hesitated to bring them to Jesus, perhaps because Jews did not associate with Gentiles. So he asked Andrew’s opinion. Andrew did not hesitate; he, together with Philip, brought them to Jesus right away. When Jesus heard this, he replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (23). Until now Jesus had repeatedly said, “My hour has not yet come” (2:4; 7:6; 8:20). But here he said, “The hour has come.” It meant God’s set time for his death on the cross. To die on the cross was very shameful and painful. It seemed to be failure and defeat. But Jesus saw this as glory and victory. The way of the cross is the way of glory and victory. Jesus explained this in three ways.

First, Jesus explained his death through the analogy of the kernel of wheat (24). Look at verse 24. “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.” Jesus foresaw abundant fruit coming forth through his death and resurrection, like a kernel of wheat that produces many seeds. The fruits would include Greeks, like those who came to him, who were representative of the Gentiles. Why did Jesus use the analogy of a kernel of wheat? It was to communicate the meaning of his death in a way that everyone could understand. Take a kernel of wheat, a grain. That grain has in it, life principal, reproductive capability. But it is encased in a shell. As long as that shell holds that life principal inside, nothing happens. What happens when you put that seed into the ground? The chemical in the soil acts on that outer shell, and it rots and decomposes. And when the outer shell is decomposed and rotted, it breaks away. And the life principal inside is free to reproduce. But the seed has to die. That is what Jesus is saying. He had to be buried in a sense, a shell of life, rotted and decomposed so that out of it could spring life. A ripened head has 80-120 new kernels in it. For simplicity, let’s say it has 100 kernels. If the harvested kernels are replanted over five growing cycles, 10 billion kernels will be produced. An average Canadian consume 180 pounds of wheat per year, and one pound of wheat is about 12,000 kernels. So it can feed more than 4,600 people for a year. This all comes from one kernel of wheat which fell to the ground and died.

Actually, the death of the seed is transformation into an abundant new life. Just as a kernel of wheat dies and produces many seeds, so through the death of one man Jesus Christ, innumerable souls have received salvation. However, if Jesus had not died for us, innumerable people would not have life, just as a kernel of wheat that remains only a single seed does not produce any fruit. Jesus did not bring salvation by his perfect life; he did not bring salvation by a military coup; he did not bring salvation by social revolution; Jesus brought salvation only by his death. That is why the author of Hebrews says that he went to the cross “for the joy that was set before him,” because he could see past the death to the life that was coming.

Second, Jesus applied the principle of the kernel of wheat to everyone (25-26). We cannot apply this analogy to our lives exactly as Jesus did. Namely, we cannot die for others’ sins. Yet there is a principle at work here that Jesus applies to all people. Look at verse 25. “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Here to love one’s life means to love it more than God. Hating one’s life in this world does not mean torturing oneself day and night. Rather it means to deny oneself and to love God wholeheartedly. This involves commitment to Christ and sacrifice to do his work. It is a personal matter for each one which we refer to as “God’s calling.” God’s calling is crucial to do God’s work. Without God’s calling no one can commit to God and bear fruit. Everyone wants to bear much fruit, but many people don’t like commitment. These people misunderstand commitment as a kind of bondage. Yet the main reason they don’t commit is that they love their lives in this world and want to enjoy them without hindrance.

But Jesus said that anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. This is paradoxical, but it is the truth that Jesus taught. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:34-35, NIV 1984). ‘Loses his life for me’. We are not conditioned to want to give away; to let go of. We are conditioned to get; to grab hold of. Even at church. A typical mindset would be to come to get fed more than to feed. Come to be served more than to serve. But in life we need to seek to become losers. We need to adopt the premise of becoming the ‘biggest loser’: The TV show turned what would normally be negative into something sought after. The contestants in the show have one goal—to lose weight. What benefit is there for them to be losers? If they lose weight they will overcome health problems, feel better, look better, improve their quality of life and live longer. They become a whole different person inside and out. And they put themselves through rigorous training and food disciplines in order to achieve their goals. We too have a lot to gain by being willing to lose. If we lose our devotion to pleasing self we will shed off the weight of sin and ungodliness. We will feel better, look better (because we’ll look more like Jesus), we will improve our quality of life and we will live longer too. And we too will become a whole different person inside and out. (26).

Most people think, “If I deny myself in this selfish world, who will take care of me?” They also think that if they love their lives in this world, preserve them, and take good care of themselves, they will be happy. But this is not true. Instead they suffer from guilt, anxiety and fear, and in the end they lose everything when they die. Although many seeds get planted every spring, not all seeds actually sprout and grow. That is due to the seed’s coat called the testa: the harder the coat of the seed, the longer the germination process. Seeds with harder coatings may take a longer time to germinate simply because that hard coating of the seed can prevent expansion of the embryo inside of it. That hard coating may block the entrance of water. And many of us come to Jesus with hard coatings. What is the hard coating we have that is preventing us from dying to self? Is there hardness surrounding our heart that is preventing the germination process? Pride, anger, lust, greed? These need to die in order for there to be a harvest. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, author of Cost of Discipleship, said, “When Christ calls someone; He bids them to come and die.” Jesus died so that we could live. We need to die to self so that he can live through us. We need to start dying so that we can start living. A seed looks a certain way, just an ordinary, simple seed. But, once it dies, what it produces is something beautiful like a flower or something useful like wheat. Unless we die to self we will remain unfulfilled in purpose. However, if we bid ourselves to come and die what will result from that will be something more beautiful and useful than we could ever imagine.

In verse 26 Jesus said, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” This is a great promise to his servants. As we follow Jesus he is with us always. When we serve God he does not leave us alone. When we need comfort, he comforts us. When we need encouragement, he encourages us. When we need wisdom, he supplies it. When we need strength, he gives it. He always provides for our needs. He loves us with unfailing love. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres (1 Co 13:7). And that’s not all. Those who serve Jesus will receive honor from the Father. At the end of their lives on earth, they will be welcomed into his glorious kingdom and hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and be adorned with the crown of righteousness (Mt 25:21-23; 2 Ti 4:8).

Third, Jesus explained the impact of his death on the cross (27-33). Though Jesus decided to die like a kernel of wheat, it was not easy for him as a human being. He expressed his agony, saying, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’” (27a) This is John’s version of Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer. Jesus was troubled when he thought about being betrayed, tried, condemned, mocked, insulted and crucified. More than that, he was troubled by the thought of being cut off from God on the cross because of our sins. He felt every pain, every torn piece of flesh, every grasping for breath. He felt the flies in His face; He felt the dripping blood that he couldn’t wipe away. He felt the naked shame, the dried mouth, the cracked lips - He felt it all. Maybe that is why in all the New Testament, Jesus never laughs; He only cries. But in that moment Jesus decided to obey God’s will, saying, “No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (27b-28a). Jesus remembered the purpose of his coming into the world (Heb 10:7). By accomplishing this purpose, Jesus would glorify God. Jesus had glorified God through his life and now he would glorify God through his death. The Father was pleased with Jesus’ prayer and said, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again” (28b). The Father would not abandon the Son Jesus to the grave, but would raise him from the dead and exalt him as the Lord before whom every knee would bow. Through this he would proclaim his Name—the one who has almighty power and glory—to all creation.

We need someone who can be a kernel of wheat for the University of Toronto so that many students may have life through him/her. Missionary Jose Ahn was a diplomat in many countries in Central and South America and Spain. Wherever he went, he taught the Bible instead of enjoying his life as a diplomat. One time Chicago UBF was making a newsletter, and Jose Ahn was asked to collect photos for the newsletter. Then Dr. Samuel Lee rebuked Jose Ahn because he was in all the photos, showing himself off. Dr. Samuel Lee asked someone to cut him out from all the photos, and said that he should be a fertilizer, namely to die to give life to others. He repented sincerely, and decide to become a fertilizer. God is still using him greatly in his work.

Let’s accept Jesus’ words about a kernel of wheat and practice this truth in our lives. Then God can make us more fruitful than we can even imagine.