

## UNLESS A KERNEL OF WHEAT DIES

John 12:20-33

Key Verse: 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.”*

In this passage, Jesus teaches us the principle of a kernel of wheat. It is a principle that Jesus applied to his own life. This principle applies to our lives as well. May God help us to know and accept the truth of a kernel of wheat!

### I. WE WANT TO SEE JESUS (20-23)

Look at verses 20-22. *Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.* Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem as a humble shepherd king, riding on a baby donkey. The city was crowded with many people who had come to celebrate the Passover. According to the book, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, by Joachim Jeremias (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1969), about 125,000 pilgrims from foreign countries visited the city for festivals. The city’s population swelled several times during the Passover. Among the many people who were there, some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. So they approached Philip with the request, probably because he had a Greek name. They said to Philip, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew his hometown friend from Bethsaida; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. We don’t know why these Greeks wanted to see Jesus. Most likely, they had heard about the ministry of Jesus and wanted to meet him personally. Tens of thousands people were gathered in the city, but only these Greeks wanted to meet Jesus personally. They were precious in God’s eyes. There are 8,000 students on the SU campus, but only a few students really want to see Jesus. These students are very precious in God’s eyes. We know from the Bible that coming to see Jesus is an important first step to know him and accept him as the Savior. We also know that Jesus never ignores a person who comes to see him. In this passage, Jesus did not even ask the Greeks why they wanted to see him. Instead, he gave them an opportunity to hear a very important message.

Look at verse 23. *Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* Up until this point, Jesus had often said, “My time has not yet come.” He said that when his mother Mary told him about the wine problem at the wedding feast in Cana (2:4), and again when his brothers told him to go to Jerusalem to make a political debut (7:8). But now, Jesus says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Here, the “hour” refers to his crucifixion, through which he would reveal God’s glory (7:30,39; 8:20; 12:16; 13:31). Basically, Jesus told the Greeks, “Thanks for coming to see me. I want to tell you that the time has come for me to die.” I don’t think the Greeks expected to hear this from the Lord. But in saying this, Jesus declared that he would be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And his sacrifice would not be just for the Jews. He would die to save all peoples of the world. So, it was fitting for him to

declare the truth to the Greeks. He told them that the time had come for him to fulfill the will of God to save the mankind from their sin and death by dying on the cross and by rising from the dead on the third day.

## II. UNLESS A KERNEL OF WHEAT FALLS TO THE GROUND (24-33)

Jesus also had an important spiritual principle to tell the Greeks (and us). Let's read 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."* Whenever Jesus says "Very truly I tell you," we must pay special attention to what he says. What can we learn from this principle of a kernel of wheat?

**First, our life is like a kernel of wheat.** A kernel of wheat is a single seed. This tiny seed contains three parts: (1) bran that covers the seed in several layers; (2) germ or embryo that sprouts into a new plant; and (3) endosperm that contains nutrients for the new plant. In other words, the seed has a life in it. Each of us is like a kernel of wheat. God has given each of us a life to live. But there are two choices for a kernel of wheat. One is to remain as a single seed in a barn. It is a comfortable but selfish life. The other is to fall to the ground to die in order to produce many seeds. Likewise, each of us has two choices. One is to live an ugly, selfish life. The other is to live a beautiful, sacrificial life that is a blessing to many other people. So which kind of life would you choose to live? Before answering that question, let us consider a couple of examples.

Many of us know personally Msn. Sarah Barry. She was born in early 1930's to a rich plantation owner in Mississippi. During a Romans campus Bible study in college, she met Jesus personally. And she made a decision of faith to go out as a missionary. In 1955, God sent her to Korea, a country that had been devastated by the Korean War. She was a beautiful, 25-year old, single woman who decided to become a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. She loved God and the young people of the war-torn country. She planted the hope of God in them through sharing the word of God with them. The UBF ministry was born through her prayers for the young people of Korea. She is now in her 80's and still teaches the word of God in Chicago. Her life has been totally dedicated to the work of God. She didn't even have a chance to marry. I asked her why she didn't. She said, "It wasn't my intention not to marry. I just didn't have a chance to marry." She has no human children of her own, but there are over 1,500 men and women of God around the world who consider her as their spiritual mother, including some of us here. God blessed her life to produce many seeds.

Let us consider the life of another woman named Leona. She was born in New York in the 1920's. She worked hard as a real estate agent and became very rich. She and her husband lived in a multi-million dollar mansion in Greenwich, Connecticut. She earned notoriety as a mean person to her house servants and went to prison for failing to pay taxes. She was quoted as saying, "We don't pay taxes. Only little people pay taxes." Finally she made a headline by leaving \$12 million inheritance to her dog Trouble when she died in 2007. This woman's life did not produce many seeds, because she remained as a single seed.

Our life should not remain as a shiny single seed in a storeroom. Our life should not be selfish, but be fruitful and abundant. The Bible teaches us that the main purpose of our life is to bear fruit. God created us in his own image and blessed us to be fruitful. Genesis 1:28 says, *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number...."*

Before Jesus reached out his merciful hand to me in 1976, I was like a dead fish flowing down a stream, with no purpose or meaning in life. Outwardly, I looked fine. But inwardly, I was tormented by my sins of flesh desires and selfishness. Still, I did not think this kind of life was bad. After all, everyone else seemed to be living such a life. But in his great mercy, God did not leave me alone in the darkness of my sin. He provided a Bible teacher for me. Through my 1:1 Bible studies, I learned for the first time that God created me in his image for a purpose. God did not create me to be selfish but to be fruitful and to be a source of blessing to others. By the grace of God, he saved me from my sins and called me to campus mission. He has blessed me to live a life of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with young people in all of my adult life thus far. I thank and praise God for his amazing grace upon this sinner!

Of course, we realize that it is not easy to live the life of a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. Who wants to be thrown into the damp, cold ground? Remaining in a comfortable barn as a single seed seems much nicer. So, many people in this world choose to be a single seed that remains single. They would say, "Your life is your own! Live it as you please! Make each day count! *Capre diem!* YOLO--You only live once!" This kind of life bears no fruit. The life of a single seed may be comfortable. You may enjoy some small pleasures here and there. But it is not a blessed life. It is not a fruitful life that God intended for us. The life of a lay gospel worker is sometimes very painful as we experience many rejections. However, this is the way of the cross our Lord Jesus took. He was rejected many times. He told us to expect rejections as well. Besides, what is the alternative to a life of mission? Do we really want to remain as a selfish single seed in a dark storeroom only to be ruined by fungus or eaten by worms? Such a life has no future in the eternal kingdom of God.

**Second, Jesus is the kernel of wheat.** Let's read verse 24 again. *"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 lived the life of a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. He had no material possessions. He had no place to lay his head, not even a one-room apartment. He had no standing or prestige in his society. He lived as a shepherd who took care of the lowly people. As the Son of God, he did not have to live such a life. But he chose to live the life of a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground. He said, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). He chose to live the life of a suffering servant. Finally, he chose to die on a cross so that he might bear much fruit. 1 Corinthians 15:22 says: *"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."* As the descendants of Adam, we were destined to die in sin. But in Jesus, we are made alive, because Jesus fell to the ground and died as a kernel of wheat.

**Third, anyone who loves their life will lose it.** 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.*” Jesus teaches us that there are two kinds of people. The first kind is the person who loves his life in this world. He lives according to his desires of the flesh. He does everything to satisfy his desires. This kind of person seems to be successful in this world, but he loses his life in the end. The second kind is the person who hates his life in this world in order to keep it for eternal life. As a human being, he has the same feelings and desires like everyone else. But he denies his desires to obey the truth of God, even when God’s word does not agree with his own ideas. He denies his desires of the world by struggling with the word of God. He lives a life of mission to serve the Lord. He is a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and bears much fruit. Faced with a choice between Jesus and this world, he chooses to “hate” this world in order to follow the ways of Jesus. Why does Jesus use a strong word “hate” here? The temptation of this world is so strong that we cannot reject it unless we hate it. If we give an inch, the world demands a yard, and before we know it, we will be in the land of compromise.

In verse 26, Jesus says: *“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”* Jesus gives us a wonderful promise in this verse. *“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”* Living the life of a kernel of wheat is difficult. We have to give up many things in order to follow Jesus and serve him. But the reward will be greater than anything we can imagine. Jesus says, *“... where I am, my servant also will be.”* Those who follow Jesus’ way of life will be with him in heaven. God will honor us if we live a life of faith and mission to serve the Lord. We will reign with Jesus forever in the kingdom of God. 2 Timothy 2:12 says, *“... if we endure, we will also reign with him.”*

Look at verses 27-28a. *“Now my soul 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. Father, glorify your name!”* These verses remind us of Jesus’ prayer struggle in Gethsemane. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus’ struggle to obey God’s will was so intense that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Lk 22:44). Jesus was fully human, just like you and me. He felt pain when someone twisted his arm. It was not easy for him to face the impending suffering and crucifixion. He wished that God would save him from the hour of suffering. His soul was troubled. But he did not give in to his desires. Through his earnest prayer, he overcame his desires. He made a decision to follow God’s will. He prayed, “Father, glorify your name!”

What happened when Jesus cried out, “Father, glorify your name!”? A voice came from heaven and said: “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (28b). God accepted Jesus’ struggle in prayer and his decision to obey God’s will. Again, the life of a kernel of wheat is not easy. We must struggle before God in order to deny ourselves and follow Jesus. But God’s name is glorified when we do so.

The crowd who heard the voice from heaven said it was the sound of a thunder or of an angel speaking to Jesus (29). They had no idea about what was going on. Look at verses 30-31. *Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.”* Here “the prince of this world” refers to Satan who is also called the prince of darkness. The time

for his judgment had come. Satan's head was crushed when Jesus died for our sins and rose from dead on the third day (Ge 3:15). Now only his tail is wagging to give us hard time until the day of the final judgment when he will be permanently "thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, ... and will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev 20:10).

Look at verses 32-33. *"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."* He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. To save the mankind from their sins, Jesus would be nailed to the cross and his naked body would be lifted for the world to see. This is the kind of death he was going to die. The purpose of his death on the cross was to draw all people to himself and to God. This verse reminds us of John 3:16: "For 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 does not want even one person to perish in sin. He wants to draw them all to his glorious kingdom. But sadly many people did not accept his teaching. They did not believe in the Savior Jesus. It was a tragedy. We will talk about this in detail next week.

As a conclusion, let's read our key verse (24) again. *"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."* May God help us to accept the principle of a kernel of wheat! May God help us not to live a selfish life, but to live a life that produces much fruit in Christ!