August 20, 2023

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THE CURIOUS LIFE OF A SEED

John 12:23-50

Bruce Cameron is a humorist who often wrote columns about being a husband and father. In one of them he related what happened when he tried to make what he calls a “Paternal Proclamation,” which he maintains should be regarded the way one would regard an edict from a king. It went like this:

I, Wise Father: It has come to my attention that all of you are on occasion leaving a quarter of an inch of milk in the bottom of your glasses. Since milk is an expensive commodity, and we do not own a cow, you are hereby forever more required to finish your milk completely. Are there any comments before this becomes law and goes on the refrigerator?

Son: If we’re throwing up, do we have to finish our milk?

Wise Father: No, if you are throwing up you do not have to finish it.

Son: Well how about if there is a fire and you tell everyone to get out of the house. Should I stay and finish my milk even if it means I’ll be incarcerated?

Daughter: I think you mean incinerated?

Son: What?

Daughter: Incinerated means being burned up. Incarcerated means being arrested.

Son: That’s what I meant.

Daughter: What do you mean, that’s what you meant?

Son: I meant, what if I was arrested?

Daughter: No you didn’t. You said if the house was on fire.

Son: Well what if I started the fire. Wouldn’t I be arrested?

Daughter: You never said you started the fire.

Son: Dad, if I were arrested for starting the fire, would I still have to finish my milk?

Daughter: This is so stupid.

Wise Father: Yes, if you were arrested you would still have to finish your milk.

Son: That’s not fair!

Daughter: It does seem like if you were arrested you shouldn’t have to finish your milk.

Wise Father: How does that make any sense?

Daughter: I told you this was stupid.

Son: What if the only way to put out the fire was to pour milk on it. Wouldn’t you be glad then?

Wise Father: Glad about what?

Daughter: Hey, he’s kicking me under the table.

Son: You’re nothing but a big baby.

Wise Father: Stop kicking your sister.

Daughter: He’s still kicking me (stands up, knocking over glass of milk).

Son: (After studying the white stain) Dad, what if we spill our milk? Do we still have to drink it then?

That reminded me of how things went when Laurie and I were raising our kids. It was frustrating when something that should have been simple somehow became complicated and seemed to get lost altogether. Unfortunately, I feel like we might do the same thing when it comes to living as God wants us to live. Like Cameron’s kids we seem to have a way of making the simple complicated. Because it is so complicated we lose track of some simple truths. Today we are going to look at John 12:23-50 and we will see that there is a very simple idea that lies at the heart of our relationship with God through Christ and what it means for how we live and relate to other people.

JESUS WAS A SEED

When Philip and Andrew brought to Jesus a request from some Greek people, some Gentiles, to speak with him, he had a surprising reaction. He said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” We saw last week that Jesus saw this as a turning point. The time had come for him to do what he had come to do for all people, not just the Jews.

He gave an illustration that depicted what that was going to mean for him. “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.” This sounds like another one of those eastern “Ah, grasshopper” type sayings that has some inscrutable meaning. Why is he talking about a seed all of a sudden? But this illustration has a very simple and crucial meaning. Jesus used wheat in his illustration because it was familiar to people of his culture, but he could have used any plant that has seeds. Laurie and I recently had a delicious watermelon. I love summer because of the warm, long days, but also because of the fruit. Throughout the fall and winter we have apples, oranges and bananas, and those are fine. But in the summer we get cherries, peaches, nectarines, watermelon, all fruit that I love. As you know, all of them have seeds.

These days the watermelons are usually seedless. When I was a kid watermelon was a treat, but you had to spend a lot of time getting rid of those black seeds. It’s nice not to have to do that these days, but it seems to me the watermelons aren’t quite as sweet as they were in my childhood. Maybe that’s just nostalgia playing tricks on me. Yeah, the melons were just better back in the good old days, even if they were loaded with seeds. But the seeds meant you could have watermelon seed spitting contests.

But let’s think about those seeds. A seed is made to have its life as a seed end. Its whole purpose is to be buried, and to cease to exist as a seed. In effect, its purpose is to give up its seedy life and to die. It is only when the seed dies that it can produce new life. That seems kind of unfair, doesn’t it? Doesn’t that seed have a right to live? As long as a seed hangs on to its seedy life, there will never be any more watermelon plants, and no more watermelons being produced. The whole point of a seed’s existence is to produce more plants and more watermelons. But as long as that seed continues to exist above ground it can never fulfill the very purpose of its existence. It only accomplishes what it is intended to do when it is put into the dirt and its life as a seed ends. From the “death” of that seed comes new life.

Jesus was the seed. He had to die, to give up his life on earth, in order for new life to be produced. He had to die so that we could live. In Matthew 20:28 Jesus said he came not to be served, but “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He came to give his life so that others could be set free and live. The idea of a ransom is an interesting one. When a person is held captive by kidnappers, the criminals demand a ransom be paid or the person will die. It is only when the ransom is paid that the captive is released and free to live.

At the beginning of the 20th century writer O. Henry published a short story called *The Ransom of Red Chief*. In the story two petty criminals, Bill and Sam Driskoll, come up with a kidnap plot as a way of getting money to fund a scam they have concocted. They target the son of the wealthiest man in their area, a prominent citizen named Ebenezer Dorset. They successfully snatch his young, red haired son, Johnny, not knowing what they are in for. Johnny was a spoiled terror of a boy. He actually enjoys being kidnapped. Calling himself “Red Chief,” he drives his captors crazy with his pranks, constant chatter and demands.

One scene might give you the idea. Sam narrates the story. He says, “Just at daybreak I was awakened by a series of awful screams from Bill. They weren’t yells or howls or shouts such as you’d expect from a set of manly vocal chords. They were simply indecent, terrifying, humiliating screams such as women emit when they see ghosts or caterpillars. It’s an awful thing to hear a strong, desperate, fat man scream incontinently in a cave at daybreak. I jumped up to see what the matter was. Red Chief was sitting on Bill’s chest, with one hand twined in Bill’s hair. In the other he had the sharp knife we used for slicing bacon and he was industriously and realistically trying to take Bill’s scalp…From that moment on Bill’s spirit was broken.”

The kidnappers lower their demand for ransom from $2000 to $1500, in hopes of getting rid of Red Chief. The father, knowing what his son is like, refuses to pay, and gives them a counter offer. If they give him $250 he will agree to take the terror off their hands. In the end they pay up and give the boy back.

Jesus claimed that for us to be free and to truly live, a ransom had to be paid. He came to pay it. But to whom is this ransom paid? How was his death paying a ransom? Understand that Jesus used the “Ransom” imagery as an illustration. He did not have to literally pay a ransom to someone. The point was he had to pay a price, to sacrifice himself to set us free and enable us to live. But why? Why did Jesus have to die for us to live?

Romans 6:23 says “the wages of sin is death.” That verse asserts that sin is a real thing that requires a punishment, and the punishment is death. This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:17 God tells the first humans, “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” God gave them one rule. Don’t eat the fruit from this one tree. The penalty for breaking the rule is death.

We might think that the death penalty for eating a piece of fruit is way more severe than merely draconian. Eating a piece of fruit isn’t that big of a deal. Why would God institute such an awful punishment for a seemingly kind of petty crime? The punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. It’s way out of proportion. Or is it? The act of eating a piece of fruit is not heinous, but it is what was behind that act that made God’s punishment just. God gave the two humans freedom to do pretty much whatever they wanted. He said there was just one rule, and it was a small one. There are trees everywhere growing tons of fruit. Just this one tree is off limits. Everything else is yours. They deliberately chose to eat from that one tree out of defiance. In so doing they were saying, “We know what’s best for us, and we’re going to have it. We don’t care what you say. We’re going to do whatever we want.” In short, they were rebelling against God. They did not believe he wanted their best. They thought they knew better than God what was good for them, and they were going to get what they wanted without regard for what God said.

The problem is they were rebelling against God, the true good and the source of life. When they chose to rebel against him, they were rebelling against good and life. If you run away from good and life, what do you get? You get evil and death. That is exactly what they got. Any time we rebel against God, which we do by not believing him, by thinking we know better than God, by not trusting that he always pursues our good, we are running away from good and life into evil and death. We are choosing death! The wages of sin is death, because that is exactly what we are choosing.

We all know we aren’t perfect. But we’re not that bad, right? It isn’t like we’re ax murderers or human traffickers or something. Our little sins aren’t that bad, so surely they don’t have to be dealt with so severely. We need to remember that any time we decide to go our own way we are walking away from good and choosing the opposite of good. In other words, we are introducing evil into the equation. The question is, how much evil is worthy of being punished? The answer to that is easy to see when we ask how much evil do we want in our world?

Years ago Laurie and I were invited to a barbecue at a friends house. They had a beautiful back yard and it was a lovely San Diego late afternoon. Our friends had set out appetizers, sodas and lemonade for everyone before dinner. Laurie got some lemonade. She took a drink of lemonade and felt some pulp caught in her teeth. She discreetly pulled the pulp out of her teeth and discovered it wasn’t pulp. It was the leg of a spider! She looked in her glass and was horrified to see a dead spider in it. That was the end of lemonade for both of us. Hey, the overwhelming majority of the lemonade was fine. There was just a bit that had spider in it. Didn’t matter. How much spider do you want in your lemonade? Zero. Even a tiny bit of spider ruins all the lemonade. How much evil does God want in his creation? Zero, because even a tiny bit of evil is horribly destructive and ruins creation and people. So God must remove it. The penalty for it is death.

In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller wrote about a point in his life when he became aware of the corruption in his own soul. He said, “I knew, because of my own feelings, there was something wrong with me, and I knew it wasn’t only me. I knew it was everybody. It was like a bacteria or a cancer…It wasn’t on the skin, it was in the soul. It showed itself in loneliness, lust, anger, jealousy and depression. It had people screwed up bad everywhere you went…It was as if we were cracked, couldn’t love right, couldn’t feel good things for very long without screwing it up.” In other words, the spider leg is there in all of us.

Jesus was the seed that had to die because he was substituting his death for ours. Death had to be paid, and he paid it so we might live. Can he do that? Yes, he can. When our son, Toby, was around 10 years old he and a couple of buddies were out in the street practicing their hockey slap shots. They had decided to practice by hitting rocks across the street. There was a drain hole on the curb across the street. They were working on their accuracy by trying to hit the rocks into that drain hole. What could possibly go wrong with that? Unfortunately, at one point Toby hit a rock way harder than he needed to. That thing rocketed across the street, flew way over the drain hole, over the sidewalk, over the front yard of the house across the street and smacked into the big picture window on the front of the house and shattered it.

The cost of replacing that broken window was $200. Toby might have had about $5. Because I love my son I told him I would pay for the window. I gave our neighbor the money willingly and told Toby he didn’t have to do anything. His debt was paid. I did that because I loved him. That was fine with the neighbor. The debt just had to be paid, and it was.

The message about Jesus is good news. It is good news because he loves us so much that he paid our debt. When I paid for that broken window there was nothing left to pay. It was done, complete. What Jesus did for us is also done and complete. Jesus’ death was the total payment for all that we ever have done or ever will do wrong. There is nothing left to pay. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13-14 that God “forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” Notice he says he forgave, past tense, all our sins. Not some, all. And this is past tense. It is done, finished forever.

Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that what Jesus did for us was make a down payment. Now we have to finish paying off the loan. Laurie and I are a month away from paying off the loan on our car. After we make that last payment, what will we have to do? Nothing. There will be nothing more to pay. Jesus didn’t just make a down payment. He paid off the whole thing. There is nothing left for us to pay. It is completely done.

This means we have reason to rejoice continually. We are free. We are forgiven forever. There is nothing standing in the way between us and God. What is left is for us to rejoice, to continually thank and praise God and in gratitude to love him. That is how new life comes from the seed. To have that debt hanging over us, to try to pay it off by our efforts is to fail, be dogged by guilt and experience death of the soul. But to rely on what Jesus has done is to be set free and have life.

JESUS CALLS HIS FOLLOWERS TO BE SEEDS

What Jesus said next is startling. He said we should follow his example. In verse 25 he says, “Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Then he tells us to follow him, to serve as he served. In other words, to give up our lives as he gave up his in seeking to serve others. We are to also be seeds!

Jesus didn’t mean we should hate our life in the sense that we might use that expression today. A couple of weeks ago I had a massive allergy attack. My sinuses were pretty much blocked, my nose kept running and I was sneezing quite a bit. And then it got worse. I was miserable. I hated my life. Is that what Jesus meant? No, He meant that we would love something else so passionately and deeply that how we lived our life in comparison looks like hate. For the example, look at Jesus. He lived for the will of his Father, and he did so with such commitment and passion that it overwhelmed any sense of self-preservation and self service he might have had. That’s what Jesus is calling us to do.

He’s calling us to be seeds the way he was a seed. Be willing to give up the life of serving self, living for our own fleeting desires and seek to follow and serve him, regardless of the cost. This is how seeds fulfill their purpose, their reason for existing. Seeds are made to give life, and they do it by giving up their seedy life. Jesus wants us to do the same thing.

There is a principle in these verses that is crucial for us to keep in mind. Anyone who loves their life will lose it. The one who “hates” his life in this world, meaning loves serving God more than serving self, will keep it for eternity. Jesus said something similar in Matthew 16:25. “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” All over the world people are desperately scrambling to try to find life. They want to get the best life possible. We all pursue that by getting for ourselves whatever we think will give us real life. Jesus made the astounding statement that the way we find real life is by denying ourselves. Quit living for self and live to serve Jesus, following the example he set for us. Be willing to die for the good of others if that is God’s will.

We need to remember what we saw about seeds. The purpose of their existence is to give themselves up to bring new life. Jesus said the purpose of our lives is to give ourselves up to serve God and love other people. He said we will only find the life we all want when we fulfill our purpose by giving ourselves up to serve. That’s when we truly become alive. In verses 49-50 in John 12 Jesus said, “I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life.” He is repeating the message. This is how you find life. Serve God. Don’t speak on your own, don’t do just what you want to do, don’t seek to get what you want. Say what the Father commands, do what he says, because that’s what leads to eternal life, true life.

There is a principle at work in this picture of the seed. The death of one thing leads to something much greater. Frankly, a seed is not an especially impressive or glorious thing. But when it dies as a seed it gives birth to a plant. That plant grows and begins to bear delicious fruit that is far more wonderful than that seed ever was. The same is true for us. The death of our life serving ourselves leads to something much greater. The death of self leads to fullness of life, eternal life.

It is crucial that we keep that truth in mind and tie it in to what we learned about Jesus’ dying for us. When we hear a teaching that we must die to self, we all know we fall short. So we can easily start to feel guilty. We can beat ourselves up, get discouraged, think we have to do better to get God to love us. That’s where we must remember two things Jesus has told us in these verses.

First, his death has paid the whole price of failures. All of it. We can add nothing to what he has done. The debt has been completely paid, right down to the last penny. So we don’t have to do the hard thing of denying self in order to get God to accept and love us. That is a settled issue. We will fail every day, but those failures are all paid for and there is nothing left for us to do but thank God and love him. If we forget that, this command will bury us in the wrong way. It will kill our hearts. When we remember the truth we are set free and filled with joy and gratitude.

Second, the big reason why we live giving up self to serve him is that this is what brings life. This is why we exist. We will only feel truly fulfilled in life when we are giving up ourselves in order to follow Jesus and love others as he has loved us. That is when we find life. A few months ago Laurie and I left after church on Sunday for a much anticipated vacation. We had a 6 hour flight to Honolulu that left from LAX. I was very tired and wished I could sleep on a plane, but I can’t. When there was maybe an hour and a half left I needed to use the restroom. I found that the restroom was in use, so I stood by it to wait. I was right by the galley where a couple of flight attendants were working. I greeted them briefly, then waited. When I was done in the restroom I went back to my seat. Shortly after that Laurie decided she needed to use the restroom. She also had to wait. I could see her from my seat and I watched what happened. She greeted the flight attendants, just as I had. But it didn’t end there. In a few minutes she was engaged in animated conversation with them. I thought this was a classic illustration of the difference between us. I go there, say hello to some people I don’t know, and that’s it. Laurie sees the same people and in minutes is conversing with them like they are lifelong friends. She just connects with people, pretty much wherever she goes. We have a friend who says Laurie brings joy everywhere she goes. Laurie is not perfect. Actually I say that because I know theoretically no one is perfect, but after 44 years of being married to her I still can’t find what the imperfection is. But I bring this up because of how it relates to what Jesus told us. A big part of the reason Laurie connects so well with people is that she dies to self. She is not focused on what people think of her or on doing what she wants to do. She just cares about people. She has often told me the thing that changed her life was when she put her faith in Jesus, he freed her from herself. In that freedom she is secure, and instead of being all about Laurie, she is all about loving others. By dying to self she becomes free, she finds life, and she brings life to other people.

CONCLUSION

The idea of denying self, dying to self, can be tricky to apply and live by. For instance, a very religious person with a fragile conscience could easily destroy themselves trying to live by this principle. I need to sleep, I need to eat, I need to have clothes, but Jesus calls me to deny myself. So I deny myself sleep, I deny myself food, I deny myself clothing. In short order I will be arrested for being in public without clothes and will see my health crumble because I’m not eating or sleeping.

That doesn’t seem to be what Jesus intended, so how are we to apply this idea? There is clearly an element of common sense that must come into play as we seek to follow this teaching. But that leaves a vast gray area. What one person thinks is common sense when it comes to denying self can be wildly different than what another person thinks.

So the best principle that can guide us in this is to follow the example and teaching of Jesus. Jesus ate, slept, wore clothes, enjoyed down times, fellowshipped with friends, but all in the context of doing whatever the Father told him to do. So do what Jesus did, listen to the Father, live by his word.

Second remember that you do not deny self to earn or maintain God’s acceptance and love. Jesus died as a seed to give you life. Your life comes from his death and resurrection and nothing else. You can add nothing to what he has done. The debt, our debt is completely paid. If we ever lose sight of that for even an instant, living as a seed, dying to self, becomes unbearably hard.

Third, always remember this principle. Serving self will rob you of life, serving God will give life. Make your choices based on how much you want to experience life. I don’t want to sugar coat this. Denying self, dying to my desires and ways, sometimes is going to be hard. I recently had to have a needle biopsy done on a nodule of my thyroid gland. The doctor who performed the procedure told me he was going to start by injecting lidocaine, a pain killer, into the site. He said, “This will hurt a little. It will be the hardest part of the procedure.” I told Toby about that and he said, “Yeah, I tell my patients the same thing.” There was a problem with that statement. It absolutely was not true. I know the lidocaine was supposed to kill the pain. Maybe it did, but the biopsy procedure was way more difficult than the pain killing shot. I don’t want to tell you something that is not true. Dying to self sometimes will be hard. You have to make difficult choices you would prefer not to make. It’s not natural to humans. Laurie and I have found humorous the way many people are freaking out about the approach of the tropical storm that is now hitting us. We’ve probably been a little cavalier about the whole thing. Friday our son in law, Michael, showed us what could happen and said it is entirely possible that we are going to lose electric power at some point. We realized we are the classic example of unprepared. We have one very small flashlight that works. That’s not good. So we decided we should probably get another flashlight just in case. We have lived in this area 44 years and have gone through this many times. The news people inform us that the perfect storm is coming, that it may not be the end of the world, but it will be good practice for it, so get ready. Pretty much every time it ends up being way less of an event than we were being told, which is why we are not hyper about preparation. But it would be a smart thing to have a couple of flashlights. Well, we did get one yesterday. It was the last flashlight in Encinitas and Carlsbad as far as we can tell. When we checked out at the store the girl at the cash register said, “Yeah, people are going crazy. There was a guy in here this morning who bought 6 flashlights.” People in the stores were buying all the water they could fit in their carts. There was a sense that people were going to get what they thought they needed without regard to anyone else. **That’s human nature. I’m taking care of me first. Here’s the Jesus way of living. It is, “I’m taking care of you first.” That is totally contrary to our nature.**

I’m not going to tell you it’s not so hard, only for you to find out I’m just telling you that to lull you into attempting it. But here’s what we all must remember. It is what we were created to do. We were born to be seeds. That means, as Jesus said, it is how we are going to find life. Never lose sight of that. This is why we’re here, it is where we will experience fullness of life. Let’s live the curious life of a seed, dying to self to bring life, only to find this is the way to experience life ourselves.