“UNLESS A KERNEL OF WHEAT”

John 12:1–50

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 chapters 10–11 we’ve learned two amazing things about Jesus: Jesus our good shepherd came to lay down his life for us; and Jesus the resurrection and the life came to save us from death. Now in chapter 12 his beautiful public ministry comes to a close. This chapter depicts Jesus as our King whom we all should honor and welcome. Yet, though he’s our King, he came to be a kernel of wheat. His goal was not to survive as a single seed; he came to be a seed that falls to the ground and dies. It seems sad, but through his death he would produce many seeds. It’s a principle we see in nature, and Jesus applies it both to himself and to his followers. Nobody likes to die; everybody wants to live, for as long as possible. Even our Lord Jesus struggled with this. But his words in this passage show us how we can follow him practically and live very fruitful lives for God’s glory. As we meditate on his words may God speak to us today.

In verses 1–11 Jesus is anointed, just a week before his own death. In these verses the author mainly contrasts two people: Mary, and Judas Iscariot. The context was a dinner in the town of Bethany given in Jesus’ honor for raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus, who’d been dead for four days, was sitting at the table with Jesus. His sister Martha was serving the food. But his sister Mary did something that so many people never forgot. What was it?

Read verse 3. In that society it was shocking. No decent woman ever let down her hair in public. No decent woman touched a man’s feet in public. What’s more, the smell of the expensive nard perfume was very famous and very strong. Mary didn’t use just a few precious, fragrant drops; she poured it all out on Jesus, from head to toe, until the jar was empty. What she was doing could so easily be misunderstood. Why did she do this to Jesus? It was to show her deep thanks and love; it was also an act of worship. It wasn’t just for his raising her brother, but for all the amazing things Jesus had done and said. Mary now could see who Jesus really was, and she gave her best treasures, her perfume and her hair, to honor him. Her act of devotion has become an inspiration to Christians down through history, all over the world, on what it really means to serve Jesus: Honor him with our best—no calculations, no reservations, no holding back anything.

And then we see Judas. He speaks out against what Mary did: “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages” (5). He tries to make what Mary did look reckless and irresponsible, and himself look wise. Look at verse 6. Here the author exposes Judas’ real motive. He wanted Mary to donate the proceeds of that perfume to him, so that he could secretly take some of it himself. While Mary gave purely and wholeheartedly, Judas was always trying to take. Judas was so smart. He could put on an act of being a good disciple, but behind the scenes be a different person, and even steal. It shows he was following Jesus for the wrong reason, for his own personal profit. Despite his being around him so closely, for so long, Judas had learned nothing from Jesus. He’d been using his smart mind but not his heart. This contrast shows us we all have a choice to make: We can either be smart and clever like Judas, or genuine and wholehearted like Mary.

What did Jesus say? Read verses 7,8. Publicly, it was an awkward moment for Jesus, Mary pouring perfume on him, and even using her hair on his feet. But Jesus saw a deeper meaning in what Mary did. Though she didn’t know it, she had anointed his body in advance for his burial. In this way Jesus protected and defended her. He also responded to Judas’ insincere criticism about not caring about the poor. Jesus said we will always have opportunities to help the poor and needy, but opportunities to serve him are special and should take priority. Of course, by serving the poor we are serving Jesus (Mt25:40). But in some sense, serving Jesus himself is distinct from and even more important than helping people. Jesus is the only one worthy of our worship.

In verses 9–11 John describes a large crowd and the chief priests. The crowd was there not to learn from Jesus but to see the spectacle of Lazarus. On the other hand, the chief priests were so sick with jealousy that they were even thinking of killing Lazarus, who’d just been raised from the dead. These verses underscore that only those close to Jesus can really understand him.

In verses 12–19 Jesus makes his final entrance into Jerusalem as King. But again, people were doing things to Jesus that they didn’t really understand. Read verse 13. The people were quoting Psalm 118:25,26: “LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.” The Jews customarily sang these words every year at their annual feasts. But this time they added, “Blessed is the King of Israel!” They were acknowledging that Jesus had come to them in the name of the Lord, that Jesus was their promised Messiah. Moreover, although they didn’t know it, they were asking Jesus to come and save them. As we saw back in chapter 8, Jesus came to save us and set us free from the devil’s rule. But like the Jews in that passage, many people get offended by this and don’t think they need saving. Many even think they’re doing God or others a big favor. But in fact we all desperately need Jesus our King to save us from our sins (Mt1:21b). We may be full of sins and mistakes and so many weaknesses, but the best thing we can do is to welcome Jesus wholeheartedly as our Savior King.

Then John adds another detail. Read verses 14,15. Jesus intentionally fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9,10 of how the Messiah would enter Jerusalem. Jesus chose to ride into the city on a young donkey. The other Gospels tell us it was a baby colt. For a king it was a really odd way to make an entrance. Most kings would ride into their capital cities on horses, ready to conquer by force. But riding a young donkey signals that Jesus is a different kind of king. He’s not intimidating or imposing; he’s gentle and humble in heart, and accessible to all kinds of people. He came as the King of peace for all peoples.

Read verse 16. The disciples must have been so excited that Jesus was finally being welcomed into Jerusalem by a great crowd. For them, it was the moment of glory they’d been longing for. But this desire blinded them from the spiritual meaning of what was happening. It only seemed like it at this time that Jesus was being glorified. But Jesus would truly be glorified only by his death and resurrection. The disciples could understand only after that happened, and after they received the Holy Spirit (7:39).

In verses 17–19 the author John again concludes with the crowd and the Pharisees. The crowd continued to spread the word about Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead, and their ministry brought many others to Jesus. On the other hand, the Pharisees were frustrated by Jesus’ growing popularity. Their words contain an ironic prophecy: “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” Though his own people were about to reject him, Jesus would indeed become the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world (1:29; 4:42).

In verses 20–36 Jesus predicts his death. It all starts with the coming of the Greeks. Look at verses 20–22. These Greeks could have come from anywhere in the Roman Empire, even as close by as the Decapolis. Greeks lived everywhere. It says they had come to worship at the Passover festival. As the Book of Acts shows us, Jews also had scattered to live in many places around the Mediterranean Sea, and their devout lives and study of the Scriptures had influenced many Gentiles around them to become God-fearing people. These Greeks had not converted to Judaism, but they definitely were seeking God. They also had heard of Jesus and really wanted to meet him. They were not like ordinary Jewish people who came hoping Jesus would perform miracles. These Greeks had been intrigued by Jesus’ teachings. In those times Greeks highly valued wisdom (1Co1:22). They came to Jesus’ disciple Philip, probably because he had a Greek name. Philip told Andrew about it, and they both brought these Greeks to Jesus. They were hoping for a very interesting conversation.

How did Jesus respond? Read verse 23. This seems odd. Jesus doesn’t even acknowledge that these Greeks were there. What does he mean, and why does he say this? When he says “the hour has come” for him to be “glorified,” he’s referring to his death. He means the time for his public ministry is over. But he does give these Greeks some important words. Read verse 24. It’s like a mysterious riddle. Greeks were so fond of secret wisdom, and his words must have piqued their curiosity. But his words here are not just an esoteric philosophy; they are intensely practical. Read verse 24 again. In one sense Jesus is referring again to his own impending death. In his humanity he could try to avoid it, but if he did that he would remain only a single seed; he would not fulfill his life purpose. On the other hand, going through with his death meant Jesus would fulfill God’s purpose for him. And only after his death would there be many other “seeds.” It means many other people who also would be changed by the power of his gospel. People’s change and their coming to spiritual understanding would not happen by mere words; it would happen as they witnessed his death on a cross. This is the mysterious power and wisdom of Jesus’ cross (1Co1:23,24). Through his cross we open our spiritual eyes to see the great love of God, who gave his one and only Son for us (3:16).

In another sense, Jesus is telling us how to follow him. He emphasizes that he has to die, but he’s also saying that if we follow him, we too have to die. What does he mean that we have to “fall to the ground and die”? We may not have to become literal martyrs, but we do have to surrender our lives fully to him. We have to make a full life commitment to him. It also means we have to let go of trying to just enjoy my life in this world, according to the world’s standards. Jesus explains this further. Read verse 25. What does he mean? He’s talking about self-love and love of the world. Jesus is saying that loving ourselves and loving the world are incompatible with following him. We can’t have both; we have to choose. If we’re going to follow Jesus, we have to let go of living for self and for the world. Apostle Paul wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal2:20). He went on to say, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal5:24). And finally, he said personally: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal6:14). Falling to the ground and dying means dying to self-reliance, dying to living for my own passions and desires, dying to the world and to boasting about the things the world boasts about. In one of his letters the author John explained that living as a kernel of wheat involves what we love. He said, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1Jn2:15–17).

Practically, it’s hard to follow Jesus’ example as a kernel of wheat. To help us, he gives us some very precious promises. Read verses 25,26. He says if we follow him as a kernel of wheat, we’ll keep our lives for eternal life. He also says God the Father will honor us. Some people want to serve Jesus, but they don’t want to really follow him and become kernels of wheat like him. Jesus says following his example, living as a kernel of wheat, is truly serving him.

One of the powerful life philosophies in our culture is “me first.” We’re taught to put ourselves first, even ahead of our families, our marriages, our children if we have them. People get obsessed about saving their lives in this world, trying to prevent their aging, keeping all their money, expressing their “true selves,” etc., etc. They become so selfish they’re not even aware of it. But those who live as single seeds find out in the end that they lose everything. They die lonely and unfulfilled, and their lives have no good influence. It’s a tragic reality. On the other hand, those who follow Jesus’ example and invest their lives fully into God’s purpose for them, even though it means self-denial and self-sacrifice, find abundant life in Christ, and their lives are an inspiration and a great blessing to so many people. It’s hard, but it’s the best way of living.

How could Jesus fall to the ground and die as a kernel of wheat? Read verses 27–28a. In his full humanity he didn’t want to die, either. But he could overcome himself by praying that God would be glorified through his life. Though it’s so hard to follow Jesus’ example of death to self, we shouldn’t calculate this and that; we need to pray like him, “Father, glorify your name!” In verse 28b God confirms his answer to Jesus’ prayer. The crowd that is there can’t fully grasp what is going on (29). But Jesus sees the ultimate meaning of his death. Read verses 31–33. The death of Jesus on the cross brought judgment on this sinful world in rebellion against God. It also drives out the devil, with all his lies, temptations and pride. On the other hand, the cross of Jesus draws people from all nations to God’s wonderful saving grace in him. The crowd doesn’t like what Jesus is saying (34). So he makes a final invitation to them. Read verses 35,36. In verses 37–50 John explains why the Jews so tragically refused to believe in Jesus. Even their unbelief was part of God’s sovereign plan. We also learn in these verses how much we need Jesus’ words to help us believe.

Today we mainly thought about Jesus’ teaching of the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. May God help us to experience the power of his cross to really change us and enable us to live fruitful lives for God’s glory.