

**“Dying as a Way of Life”**  
**John 12:23-26**  
**December 4, 2011**  
**Faith Community Church**

Two weeks ago we began exploring the topic of dying. At that time, I asserted that dying well was a worthy goal to which we should aspire. And further, that dying well is part of our discipleship as Jesus’ followers, a demonstration of our faith, and a way we can glorify God. I also said that dying well doesn’t begin when we get the bad doctor’s report. Instead, dying well begins now, however far off death may be. We ought to spend our lives preparing for death, and by corollary and of greater importance, preparing for eternity. We then looked at a number of different passages, from which we drew lessons about preparing for death. We looked at four aspects: constant awareness of our mortality, trust in God’s sovereign control, looking beyond death to what God has promised will follow, and remembering God’s constant, loving presence. Today we’re going to continue along that theme of preparing for death, but with a bit more narrow focus on one aspect of it.

First, let’s ask ourselves, Why is thinking about our death so hard? Why is dying well a challenge? There are several reasons, I suppose. One is the pain and suffering that so often accompanies death. This is a real issue, which we don’t want to brush off lightly. But hopefully we are comforted by what we talked about two weeks ago regarding God’s faithful presence with us all the way up to and beyond our deaths. He will give the comfort and grace and strength we need, and furthermore, he has promised to use suffering in our lives for our sanctification. Another reason death is hard is the fear of the unknown. For Christians, this element should at least be alleviated, if not eliminated. We spent three weeks talking about what awaits the Christian after death. These wonderful truths should ease our anxiety, even if there are still things about the afterlife that we don’t know.

A third reason that thinking about and facing death is difficult is that death involves surrendering ourselves. It involves relinquishing something that most people hold very dear: our physical life in this time and place. And it involves relinquishing, or letting go of, all that comes with our life: family, friends, experiences, possessions, status, hopes, goals, and so on. Now as we’ve seen, at death, what the Christian gains in return is so much greater than anything and everything we have now. The overriding truth is that we gain God himself, in unhindered relationship. We know this, and we look forward to it. But still, it is hard to let go of our lives, and of all the things we’ve become attached to in this life. Yet that is what’s required of us at death: to let go. That’s a given. The question is, how will we let go? Will we do so kicking and screaming, making God rip these things out of our hands, so to speak? Or will we be holding these things loosely, so that we find letting go easy, trusting God for his goodness and provision? If it’s the latter, we glorify God in our deaths, because we show that at the very end, we love him more than we love anything or anyone else; he is worth more to us than anything or anyone else, including life itself.

How do we get to such a point of so easily letting go of our life and its accoutrements? We do so by embracing dying as a way of life. This is our “big idea” today. Obviously, I’m not talking about physical death itself. I’m not suggesting we go seeking death. What I’m talking about is developing the habit now of letting go, of relinquishing, of surrendering, of dying to self. The passage I’ve chosen for today is a short one, found in John 12. Jesus has come to Jerusalem, where he knows he’ll soon die. Some God-fearing Gentiles who are there for the Passover

festival have heard about Jesus, and through Andrew and Philip, they seek an audience with him. They wish to “see him,” verse 22. Read with me beginning in verse 23 [READ]. This passage speaks to the embrace of dying as a way of life. First, it gives us **Jesus’ example**. Then it gives us **Jesus’ call**.

First, **Jesus’ example**. Up to this point in John, Jesus’ “hour” has been future, yet to come. But with the request of these Greeks to see Jesus comes a signal that the hour is now here. The Jewish leaders and many of his fellow Jews have rejected him, but here come God-fearing Gentiles who want to know more about him. His earthly ministry is almost over. John doesn’t say whether he granted the audience or not; it doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that the time has come when these Gentiles, along with the Jews, will see Christ glorified. And it’s not just Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation that Jesus speaks of here. Jesus will also be glorified in his death, for it’s in his death that the riches of God’s grace and love and salvation are shown. It’s in his death that his perfect righteousness and obedience to the Father are on display. Not only is Jesus glorified at the cross, but so is the Father. Jesus goes on in verse 27 to say, “**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. Father, glorify Your name.**” He came to die, and through his death, he would glorify the Father, and the Father would glorify him. And this glory would be shown to mankind, verse 32: “**‘And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.’ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.**” And of course the Cross is the symbol of the Christian church, and a source of our praise to him to this day.

But let’s zero in on verse 24, one of Jesus’ “truly, truly” statements: “**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.**” Jesus gives an agricultural picture of what is about to happen in his death. He will die, and he will go into the ground. But as we know, he was raised, and because of that, he is able to produce a crop of new life that is still growing and expanding throughout the world. And thus in producing this fruit, he is further glorified.

Look now at verse 25. Jesus says, “**He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.**” Earlier in our series, we talked about what a wonderful gift from God our physical lives are. So why does Jesus talk about hating life? Well, he’s using a Hebrew figure of speech in order to demonstrate contrast and preference or priority. You must love something else so much and prioritize something else so much that in comparison, it seems like you hate your life. Of course the “something else” is a “someone else.” It is God—whom we are to love heart, soul, mind, strength. It is Jesus. He made a similar statement in Luke 14:

<sup>26</sup> “**If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.**”

Obviously, since love is the mark of the Christian, we are to love our family, not *literally* hate them. But our love for Christ must be so much more, and we must put him as a priority so far ahead of even family, that our love for them seems like hatred in comparison.

Now, what he’s saying here is obviously a call to those who would be his disciples, and we’ll get to that in a bit. But if we think about it, he has demonstrated this in his own life. The immediate context is his impending crucifixion. In the words of this Hebrew idiom, by going to the Cross, Jesus is indeed “hating” his present life in this world relative to the Father, relative to the life that’s to come, relative to obedience to God, relative to God’s glory, and relative to the salvation of sinners. We focus on Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross, and rightly so. But if we think about it, Jesus “hated” his life throughout his life. We’re in the Advent season, as we look forward to Christmas and the celebration of the Incarnation. That God the Son should

condescend to take on a human nature is itself amazing. But it's made even more amazing by *how* he did so—as a baby. We would think that the Son of God coming as human would come dropped onto earth as an adult, and as a great and powerful king, against whom no one would prevail and before whom all would bow, either in love or terror. Now, he will come that way the second time, but he didn't the first time. Instead he came as a helpless infant, born in the usual messy way to a poor family, his glory veiled. That's "hating" his life. Further, the Son of God "hated" his life by submitting himself to parents and teachers, when by all rights, it should have been the other way around. He "hated" his life by living in obscurity as a carpenter until he was thirty. He "hated" his life by refusing the Devil's temptations to earthly power and glory. He "hated" his life by choosing and putting up with a bunch of thick-headed disciples. He "hated" his life by teaching eternal truths to crowds, many of whom just wanted to see a magic show. He "hated" his life by healing and loving and serving and blessing all the way down to the dregs of society. He "hated" his life by suffering the rejection of his family when they thought he had lost his marbles. He "hated" his life by enduring the opposition of the religious leaders, who rightly should have been sitting at his feet taking it all in. And so on. Jesus' whole earthly life was an exercise in "hating" his life, relative to his love for and obedience to God. To say it another way, Jesus embraced dying as a way of life. Each of the examples given were in a sense, instances of Jesus dying to himself, in order to glorify God and achieve the purpose for which he came. And by dying to himself even before the cross, he bore much fruit in his own life and in the lives of others. And let's not make the mistake of thinking that all of this was somehow a cakewalk for Jesus. Yes, he was fully God, but he was also fully human. The devil's temptations were real temptations. He wept over people's hard-heartedness. It must have hurt to be rejected by the leaders, the people, his family. Now that the hour has come, in verse 27, Jesus declares that his soul is troubled at the thought of his coming death. And we know of his struggle in Gethsemane. And to our point today, I think we can accurately say that the practice he gained of dying to himself throughout his life helped prepare him for physically dying on the cross. There's at least a hint of this in Hebrews 5:

<sup>7</sup> In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.

<sup>8</sup> Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. <sup>9</sup> And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation,

The struggle in Gethsemane is primarily in view, but as we've seen, Jesus suffered his whole life. And this says that as a result, he learned obedience. It was practice for the ultimate suffering of the Cross.

As I've already alluded to, Jesus doesn't only talk about himself in this passage; he goes on to talk about those who would follow him. And so we come to **Jesus' call**. Not the call that he received, but the call he gave. We've already seen it in verse 25, but I'll read it again, since this is the heart of the message today: "**He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.**" In verse 26, he goes on to talk about "serving" him and "following" him. Jesus speaks similar words in the synoptic Gospels, after Peter confesses that he is the Christ. We'll look at Matthew's version, chapter 16:

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man

if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

He's talking about what a life of faith as his disciple looks like. His words in both John and the synoptics make clear that this is first and foremost a salvation issue. Saving faith in Jesus Christ involves dying to self and surrendering to Jesus as Lord and Master. For each Christian, that happens at some initial point in our lives, whether or not we can identify exactly when it occurred. But also for each Christian, the initial commitment expresses itself in ongoing acts of commitment each day, each hour. In Luke's version, Jesus adds the modifier "daily" to the action of taking up one's cross. We are called to die to ourselves and live unto him daily, in every aspect of our lives. Notice that there's two parts to that. It's not just die to self; it's also live to him. In Matthew, Jesus says to live for his sake. And in our John 12 passage, he gives us a bit of a picture of what that looks like. To die to self and live to him is to serve him, rather than ourselves. It is to follow him, rather than our own desires or the ways of the world. It is to follow his example of "hating" his life. And it is to be where he is, rather than where we want to be, which may take us into some uncomfortable situations. Jesus' call is to embrace dying to ourselves as a way of life. Jesus' call is to "hate" our lives relative to our love for him. Jesus' call is to practice dying to and letting go and relinquishing the attachments of this life.

Now, it's one thing to say this and to agree with it. It's another thing to do it. Anyone who has tried to live faithfully to Christ by trying to die to self knows how hard it is. Everything in our natural environment wages against us in this effort. We have three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. And all three tell us and tempt us to the opposite of dying to self: love yourself, serve yourself, worship yourself, stand up for yourself, indulge yourself, please yourself, magnify yourself, seek gain and advantage and honor and wealth and possessions for yourself. Thankfully, as hard as it is, we have not been left to our own devices. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us to empower us to reject the way of the self and to embrace the way of the cross, the way of dying, the way of relinquishing, the way of letting go. And as we develop a pattern of dying day-to-day now, it will equip us for when our time to physically die comes then. We'll be prepared to let go, and we will die well. And we will glorify God.

By the way, Jesus' illustration about the grain of wheat dying in the soil and bearing much fruit doesn't only apply to his death. That's what's primarily in view, and it's the ultimate example of this truth. But it also applies to us. If we embrace dying as a way of life, the result will also be much fruit. First in our lives, as we discover the joy of obedience and the better way of life God has for us. And ultimately in our lives as we physically die and enter into the reward God's prepared for us. At the end of verse 26, Jesus mentions this: "if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." And our embrace of dying as a way of life will also bear fruit in the lives of others as we love and serve and teach and give.

Now, I want to leave us today with some practical application. With a message like this, it's tempting to walk out of here saying, "Yes, Lord, I want to die to myself and live to you in everything." And that's good. But it's also somewhat abstract. It's fuzzy. So it's helpful to get down to brass tacks, some everyday situations where God is calling us to embrace dying to self. Earlier, I gave a brief rehearsal of some of the ways that Jesus "hated" his life. We could read through the Gospels and find many more examples. In fact, that would be a good exercise—to read the Gospels and noting how Jesus died to himself in his life. But the list I gave is a good place to start in thinking about how we might "hate" our lives, how we might embrace dying. I'll drill down some, but each of us needs to listen to these examples and to the Holy Spirit to drill down even more to situations in our lives now.

- We can love our lives by claiming the rights and respect and honor and place and privilege that we think we are due. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by following Jesus' example of humility and servanthood and laying aside of rights and respect.
- We can love our lives by doing what we want to do. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by submitting to parents, employers, church leaders, the government, and others in authority over us
- We can love our lives by seeking fame and fortune and power and praise of men. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by seeking glory for God instead.
- We can love our lives by giving in to the temptations of the devil, the flesh, and the world. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by practicing Spirit-empowered self-control.
- We can love our lives by surrounding ourselves with and loving only people who are easy to get along with or who serve our purposes. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by loving and serving people we find difficult to love and serve, even to society's outcasts.
- We can love our lives by ministering only when there's great fruit. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by teaching and witnessing and serving even when there's not much response.
- We can love our lives by seeking to please people. Or we can hate our lives and die to self by proclaiming Christ even if it means rejection and hatred and persecution by others.

I don't know about you, but as I consider that list, I'm convicted. I see how much I cling to my life rather than letting it go and dying to self. Especially as we prepare for the Lord's Supper this morning, I want to give us the opportunity to do business with the Lord. I know silence can be uncomfortable, but I also know it's something we need to get more used to for our own spiritual health. So I'm going to give us the next few minutes to pray silently, asking God to show us where we fail to die to ourselves, and to ask his forgiveness, and to ask his help to embrace dying as a way of life. I began today speaking about physical death, and preparing for it. I maintain that learning to die to self now will indeed help us physically die. But embracing dying as a way of life isn't just about dying well; it's also about living well.

[TIME OF SILENT PRAYER]

CLOSE:

Lord, we want to live well. We want to live for you. We want to follow Jesus' example and Jesus' call to die to self. We confess that we don't do this, in so many ways. We ask your forgiveness and cleansing. And we ask that you would continue to show us ways we love our lives more than we love you, and to show us ways you call us to die to ourselves. We confess too that we are incapable of dying to self in our own power, so we ask for the Spirit's empowerment in our lives to do so. And since this started with the idea of preparing for our eventual physical death, we also ask that by dying to ourselves now, we would prepare ourselves to die well then. We ask all of it in Jesus' name. Amen.