

THE CURE TO LONELINESS

by Ray C. Stedman

In our series on the *Treasures of the Parables of Jesus* we have been looking at certain fascinating stories that our Lord told which illustrated some fantastic truths, and have been trying to discover what was hidden away, by divine forethought, in these wonderful stories. But not all the parables of Jesus are stories. Sometimes he used what we might call a *mini-parable*, i.e., a metaphor, a figure of speech, a parabolic illustration. Around this, he would gather certain vital teaching. Because this is Communion Sunday, and a parabolic illustration which our Lord used is very fitting, I want to look at one of these mini-parables. It is the record of the last public utterance of Jesus before he went to the cross, found in John 12, Verses 20 through 26.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. 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. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." {John 12:20-26 RSV}

This was a crisis moment in our Lord's ministry. It came just before the cross, as the opposition to him was sharpening throughout the city. John goes on to record in the next chapter how he took his disciples apart into an upper room and there delivered his last discourse in which he outlined for them the relationships that would obtain in the age of the church, to follow.

In this account of the visit of the Greeks, we have the third of the three occasions when the voice of God spoke directly from heaven, during the life of the Lord Jesus:

- The first was at his baptism. As he came up out of the water, God spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" {Matt 3:17 KJV}, and thus set his seal upon the thirty silent years of our Lord's life.
- The second occasion was at the transfiguration, when Peter, James, and John were with the Lord on the mount and suddenly he was transfigured before them. When Peter, in his impetuous bluntness, suggested that they build three tabernacles and stay there to spend time with Moses and Elijah and Jesus, the voice of God spoke again from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son (not Moses or Elijah); listen to him," {cf, Matt 17:5}.
- Again, on this occasion when the Greeks come to visit Jesus the voice of the Father comes from heaven, "I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again," {cf, John 12:28}.

Now we are not told why these Greeks wanted to see Jesus, though it is not surprising that they did, for the whole city was talking about him at this time. In Verse 17 of this chapter, we learn that the whole city was astir, yet agog over the resurrection of Lazarus.

The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. {John 12:17 RSV}

Men were still stirred by this amazing miracle that had happened just over the Mount of Olives, in the little village of Bethany, and they were talking about it everywhere. Evidently these Greeks, coming up to Jerusalem, perhaps as tourists, and allowed to enter the court of the Gentiles, had heard rumors of this amazing man and wanted to see him. They found the disciples of Jesus and very naturally chose Philip as the one to approach because he bore a Greek name. Philip and Andrew are the two disciples who bore Greek names. John tells us also that Philip came from Bethsaida in Galilee, and Galilee was noted for its strong

Greek influence. Philip may well have been named for Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. At any rate, these Greeks recognized a kindred spirit and came to him and asked if they could see Jesus.

Now they did not merely want to see him as a kind of tourist attraction; they wanted conversation with him. They wanted an interview with Jesus. Philip did not know what to do about that. He was the quiet, mousy one of the disciples. You will find him appearing a little later, in Chapter 14, and there also he reveals a quiet spirit. So he went to Andrew, and they held a committee meeting. This was a very good committee meeting, because they reached a prompt decision.

But, oh, the risks God takes sometimes in carrying out his program! Imagine committing such an important decision to a committee! Most committees merit the well-known definition:

A group of the uncommitted,
appointed by the unwilling,
to do the unnecessary.

But this committee functioned properly. They made a quick decision and brought the request to Jesus. When they reported the request of these Greeks, the Lord replies to them very strangely.

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." {John 12:23 RSV}

This reply must have startled Philip and Andrew. For 3-1/2 years while they had been with Jesus they had heard him say over and over, "My hour has not yet come." You have the first account of it in the first miracle Jesus did, when his mother came to him and asked him to do something about the wine for the wedding feast. Jesus said to her, "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come," {cf, John 2:4}. He did not mean by that that he would not do anything for her, because he did. He went on to change the water into wine. But he meant by it that it would not result in anything significant. There would be no display of his glory through it. No one would understand who he was, no one could see him for what he was, because of that miracle. And so it proved to be true.

Then in the seventh chapter of his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus told his brothers to go on up to the feast at Jerusalem but that he was not going up because "my hour has not yet come" {cf, John 7:6}.

And, in the eighth chapter, as he is speaking in Jerusalem and already the opposition against him is beginning to form, John says, "No man laid hands on him to arrest him, because his hour had not yet come," {cf, John 8:20}.

Yet now, when a handful of strangers come and the report is carried to Jesus that a certain group of Greeks want to see him, suddenly, to his disciples' amazement, he seems greatly moved with emotion and says, "Now my hour has come. The time has come for me to be glorified." This event seems to be to Jesus like a great clock striking the hour, a momentous moment of his life when all that he had lived for shall now find its fulfillment. This reveals two very interesting things about our Lord, things that have helped me a great deal.

First, it indicates how clearly he recognized that the program of his life was in the Father's hands. Sometimes we have the idea that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him before it happened, that nothing ever took him by surprise because he had a kind of preview of his life. But that is a mistaken concept. He did not know anything more what would happen to him during one day, or even in the next moment, than we do. If otherwise, it would not be true that "he was tempted in all points like as we are" {cf, Heb 4:15}, and thus lived on the same level we live. He did not know these Greeks were coming, but he realized when they came that they came in the Father's program, and that everything that happened to him was the unfolding of the Father's purpose in his life.

One of the greatest delivering experiences to me was to learn this truth. I have seen it happen to others as well. When we begin to realize that the Word of God means exactly what it says and that all things that happen to us are planned and brought into being by Another, then we are delivered from anxiety. And therefore we are not

to grumble, complain, or gripe and groan at what happens to us, for it is the Father's choice. That is why Paul tells us, "Do all things without murmuring or disputing," {cf, Phil 2:14 KJV}. It is but God's program unfolding for us.

Our Lord lived on that basis and when these Greeks came he understood that they came because the Father had sent them.

The second thing this reveals is also helpful. Because Jesus knew the Scriptures, he could interpret the meaning of this event. He knew what the coming of these men signified because he knew the Scriptures. He knew that it was predicted by the prophets that when the Messiah came, he would be a light unto the Gentiles, although he was to come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Up to this point, Jesus had restricted his ministry to the confines of Israel's boundaries. Again and again he had announced the fact that he had come but to the Jews. "Salvation," he said, "is of the Jews," {John 4:22 KJV}. But now he recognizes that the hour was striking for the good news to move beyond the confines of Palestine. In the coming of these Gentiles, Jesus sees that the time has come for the promise to leap beyond the boundaries of Israel unto the uttermost parts of the earth. Since that could not happen apart from his crucifixion and resurrection, he knows his hour has come.

Even though we are not personally predicted in the Scriptures, as he was, nevertheless if we know the Scriptures we too can understand the meaning of the events that happen to us. We can see what God is working out in our own lives, if we understand the Scriptures. That is what they are for. We are to take this wonderful book and lay it alongside what happens to us, and so interpret what God is doing. It is one of the most exciting adventures there is, to see how, moment by moment, day by day, through the very circumstances we are living through, if we know the Scriptures, we can, to a great extent, see what God is working out in our life.

In the next three verses the Lord Jesus declares three important things. These are tremendously significant verses. He declares, first, the principle by which he lived his own life. Second, he applies this to others. And, third, he describes the process by which it works.

First, there is his own life principle:

"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." {John 12:24 RSV}

Whenever Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you," it is a red light shining which says, "Pay attention. What I am about to say is of supreme importance. Don't miss this!" It is his invariable formula for indicating an important saying. The important statement follows, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." What does he mean? This is the central parable of this study.

It is clear that he is speaking of himself. He is the grain of wheat. Here he is among men, unique, different. He is the Son of God, compelling, compassionate, living the life of God in the midst of men, and yet wholly as a man. He was a man wholly filled and flooded with God himself. He possessed the unique secret of life, and everyone sensed it who listened to him. One of the amazing things about the ministry of Jesus is the spell he everywhere cast upon men.

Someone has said there were more lost work days during the time when Jesus preached in Galilee and Judea, than there had ever been recorded before!

We read that crowds everywhere left their work and followed him. Why? Because they sensed that here was a man who possessed the secret of life. He had nothing that men thought was necessary to living. He had no material possessions. He did not even have a place to lay his head. He had no standing, no prestige, no status, no influence with the authorities. Yet, everywhere he went, men sensed that he understood the secrets of life. He knew something unique. He understood what life was all about. So he was like a grain of wheat, alone amidst other grains of wheat, but independent, unique, sharing nothing with the others, isolated from them and unique in their midst.

Now he could have remained that. This is what he is telling us here. He could have remained what he was. He did not need to die. He was no martyr to a failing cause. He himself said that he did not need to die. "No man takes my life from me," he said, "I lay it down of myself, and I take it up again of myself," {cf, John 10:18}. He was not forced to the cross, as some writers suggest. He had no need to lay down his life for he could have returned to the Father, as on the Mount of Transfiguration he returned to the glory instantly without passing through death. There would have been no blame attached to him if he had. He could have chosen to return to the Father, having demonstrated before men exactly what God wanted man to be, and left us with that demonstration and gone back to heaven. No one would have blamed him if he did. But, as he says, if he had done that he would have remained alone. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." For the rest of eternity, though he would have been thronged with angels and all the other created beings of God's universe, he would have been alone, undeveloped, unfulfilled. There would have been no one else like him in all the universe.

This is very important because it gives us our first clue as to what our Lord is really unveiling here, the problem that affects so many of us -- loneliness. There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. One can be alone and not be at all lonely. One can have no one else around and yet be so satisfied and content, so enjoying oneself that you do not need or miss anyone else. Or you can be in the midst of a crowd, with people all around you doing many things, and be utterly lonely, your heart eating itself out because of the wretchedness and misery of loneliness. This is what our Lord is referring to. He is not talking about being alone; he is talking about being lonely. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," he says, "it is lonely."

That gives us our clue to what loneliness is. It is unfulfilled life, an unshared life. It is not being developed. It is an incomplete life that stops short of what it is intended to do. That is loneliness. Dr. F. B. Meyer once said,

Many people complain of lonely and solitary lives. They account for their condition by supposing it to be due to the failure of other people. It is however attributable to the fact that they have never fallen into the ground to die, but have always consulted their own ease and well-being. They have never learned that the cure of loneliness comes from sowing oneself in a grave of daily sacrifice.

There he puts his finger upon the cause of this distressing thing that bothers so many today. It is as the Lord suggests here, an attempt to hold on to life, to cling to it, grasp it to oneself, and satisfy oneself, and this results in an undeveloped life.

Our Lord knew what would happen. He states it plainly. "If the grain of wheat does not die, it abides lonely." And he knew also the craving of the Father's heart; that he might bring many sons to glory.

But to do that it was necessary that he die. There was no other way by which what he was could be given to us.

Remember John 1:12? Many of you perhaps entered the Christian life by virtue of that verse. "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God," {John 1:12 KJV}. As many as received him, to them he gives the power to share his own existence, his own life, to be a son of God. But how is that life made available? Only by dying.

When Major Ian Thomas was with us he taught us a little formula which I have found very helpful. He said of Jesus, "He had to be what he was in order to do what he did." He could never have died and rose again had he not been what he was -- God become man, indwelt by the Father. Then, "he had to do what he did in order that we might have what he is." We could never have what he is if he had not done what he did. That is the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. But, finally, "We must have what he is in order to live as he lived." That is what Christianity is. It is not you and me struggling along, trying to be like Christ, but Christ himself living again through us in these days. That is Christianity. We must have what he is in order to live like he lived.

Thus, in this 24th verse, our Lord has given us the secret of his own life. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." There will be a reproduction of all that is hidden away in the grain of wheat, when it dies.

Now, in Verse 25, he applies this to others.

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." {John 12:25 RSV}

The principle of life out of death is not only true of him; it is true of you, and me, and every other person who ever lived in this world. It is the principle by which life is truly lived. "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal." Now follow the parallel here. He is still talking about a grain of wheat. When he says, "He who loves his life, loses it," he is drawing a parallel between the grain of wheat refusing to fall into the ground and thus abiding alone. That is "loving your life." The parallel to losing your life is being lonely. To be lonely is to have lost life. That gives us our second clue in this story, and answers the question, "What causes loneliness?" The answer is, the hoarding of life; the seeking of self-fulfillment.

Since friends are what makes life complete -- we all sense this -- then self-fulfillment is usually expressed by holding on desperately to other people, by becoming possessive, dependent, demanding, wanting others around all the time and being afraid to be alone. It is demanding always the presence or companionship of some other human being. That is what Jesus is talking about. He who loves his life like that shall remain lonely. That is the primary cause of loneliness.

And, says Jesus, he must learn to hate his life in this world. Now do not misunderstand that. Our Lord is not saying your present earthly existence is all wrong, that you must go around hating yourself because you are alive today. That is not what he means. What he is saying is, "you must hate the life which the world lives." Any part of your life which is like the life the world lives you must learn to hate. What is the life the world lives? Well, it is basically self-centered, is it not? Listen to the philosophies echoed in the words of those around you, or even your own thinking. How often do you hear the echo of this philosophy, "Me for me! Number One first. What's in it for me. Take care of yourself, because nobody else will." That is the life the world lives. Now, says Jesus, you must learn to hate that life. Learn to recognize that any part of your life lived on those terms is a life that will wreck you, leave you lonely, abandoned, derelict, unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

Dying means repudiating the indulgence and security which depending on or grasping at others gives us. But we fear such dying, do we not? We are afraid to give up our dependence upon others. We are afraid to spend time alone. Watch yourself when you are alone, and see how desperately you go to any extreme to avoid spending time alone. We all know how it is. "Call someone up, arrange something, get in the car, go somewhere, do something, turn on the TV, turn on the radio, anything -- just don't leave me alone." That is the life the world lives. What the Lord Jesus is saying to us is that there will be no deliverance from the loneliness and boredom and emptiness of the world's life until we learn to renounce and repudiate that kind of living. We must not allow ourselves to live at that level; that is what he is saying.

In Verse 26 he gives us the description of how this process works. It is very important, for here we come to the cure of loneliness. There are three steps:

First he says,

"If any one serves me, he must follow me;" {John 12:26a RSV}

That is, he must be willing to take the steps that I am taking, and go in the direction that I am going. What direction was that? To the cross. He must be willing to allow the old life, this way of dependence, possessiveness, and demand on others to disappear. He must be willing to follow me.

The second step is:

"... and where I am, there shall my servant be also;" {John 12:26b RSV}

What does that mean? That means that, when we take that step of following him, when we allow ourselves to be alone and do not permit ourselves to make demands upon others for satisfaction, we can expect to find these words to be true, "where I am, there shall my servant be also." A divine companionship will come in and take its place. But we can never find that divine companionship until we are ready to face human loneliness. We cannot constantly be satisfying ourselves with other things and expect to discover the reality of Christ's companionship. This is why it is so important that we find time to be alone and allow occasions when we do not have something else ministering to us, that we might let the Lord Jesus himself minister to us. Those who have done so discover that his words are gloriously true. There is a wonderful sense of his power, his presence, his reality which comes into your life. You discover that you do not need others, that Jesus Christ means it when he says he can meet every need of the life, and satisfy the heart to the full. At first it will be a bit painful, but as you progress you will discover he sets you free from the need of human companionship.

Then the third step will be:

"... if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." {John 12:26c RSV}

In what way? Well, in the way that he has suggested in this parable. The grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies -- and what then? It brings forth much fruit. So the Father honors the life that is willing to cast itself upon the divine supply and find the companionship of the Lord Jesus, by bringing out of that life an abundance of fruit, the reproduction of his life, the satisfying ability to become a blessing to others.

This is illustrated for us in nature. It is true about a grain of wheat. Did you ever think of a grain of wheat facing the possibility of death, of dying, of falling into the ground? It looks at itself and seems to be so self-satisfied. "Why should I give up myself? Why should I die? Here I am, so brown, so firm, so fully packed, so smooth and easy on the eye." It wants to continue, because it is unpleasant to think of dying. "Why should I give up myself and lose my identity in some dark hole under the ground?" Yet it is lonely. It senses it is unfulfilled. There is a restlessness about it. So it consents at last to die, to fall into the ground.

What happens? Soon it begins to feel strange sensations. There is a strange tickling feeling which runs up and down its back. It does not know what is happening to it. After a bit it feels something pushing out at the back, and it looks back and there is a little white thing sticking out. It says, "Where in the world did that thing come from! I never had anything like that happen before." (You start living on this basis and a lot of things will happen that never happened before!) Then it has to hold a committee meeting to determine which way that white thing is going to go, but while it is still debating, the thing turns and goes up, and another white thing appears and starts growing down further into the ground. Before that grain of wheat quite realizes what has happened, it discovers that when it dies there is a hidden lordship that begins to take over and direct the affairs of its life. Without realizing quite what is happening, things begin to happen over which it has no control. But it soon is quite content to let it happen. After a bit that white thing thrusts up out of the earth into the sunlight and turns green, and becomes a blade. Then it grows into a long stem, and begins to form a head with new kernels of wheat, each like the original and yet each one different; no duplications, and yet the reproduction of one life. At last that grain of wheat finds itself fully developed, becoming what God intended it to be, because it consented to the process of dying.

Dear friends, there are many Christians today that are living shallow, mediocre, indeterminate Christian lives because they have not yet discovered this divine Lordship at work. They do not know the power of it to take and direct the life, through pain, heartache, and difficulty, and to bring it out into fulfillment and fruition. It is because they resist dying.

I remember in my own experience how true this was, how painfully for many years I was dependent upon others, and wanted to have friends constantly around me. I was only satisfied when I could be in the company of my friends, and felt that life was hardly worth the living if their smile was not on me, and I was so distressed and hurt when it was not. At last, God, in his grace and mercy, forced me into a situation where I had to learn to be alone and to rest upon him. He opened my eyes to see that the constant demand for others

was really selfishness on my part. It was the manifestation of a life he had cut off in the cross, and had no right to live. When I agreed with him and began to open my heart to the ministry of the divine companionship, I found that the Lord Jesus was able to do what he said -- to fill my life to the full. At first it was somewhat painful, but gradually, over a period of time, I found that my need for others was disappearing, and I could satisfy myself with the Lord. Then I discovered something. To my amazement, I discovered that I was able to be a blessing to someone else, a help to another person, that rivers of blessing were beginning to flow out of my life -- unbidden, unpremeditated, and certainly not to my credit at all. They were the product of the life of the Lord, the hidden Lordship at work within, bringing a new thing into being that could never have been there apart from my consenting to die to dependency upon others. When that took place, God began to bring fruit into my life, and has been doing so ever since, in increasing degree.

I must die again and again in many situations and many places, and it is still the same painful struggle at times as it was at first. But there is never a time in which I renounce, repudiate, give up, willingly submit to the condition which takes me from dependence on others, and to cast myself upon the fullness of supply in the Lord, but that there does not come out of it eventual fullness, fruition, blessing, and satisfaction to my own heart.

That is what the Lord is saying to us. Here is the cure for loneliness. It is not merely to lay down your life in some sacrificial act; it is to learn to rest upon another life, a hidden Lord, another supply. Out of that resting will come the sacrificial acts. It is not sacrifice for others that cures loneliness. You can give yourself to many kinds of good causes to try to cure a lonely heart, and you will be just as lonely as ever. But it is the discovery of another relationship, the possibility of fruition from other sources. That is what our Lord calls us to.

This brings us to the table of the Lord. It is fitting we should close with the table of the Lord for here we have that which expresses what we have been talking about. Here are the symbols of the corn of wheat which fell into the ground and died, that it might not abide alone but could share its life with us. This is the principle upon which all Christian life must be lived.

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[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#) | [Series Index Page](#)

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