

Introduction

Not long ago, I was looking at sympathy cards when it suddenly struck me. Not one used the words "**death**," "**dead**," or "**died**." That's what happens of course that elicits them. There's a death. Someone is dead. Someone died. But not one card used those words, which is typical of public discourse and private conversation generally in America.

Psychologist Lawrence Samuel explains why it is in an article he wrote for Psychology Today magazine: "**Over the past century, death and sex battled it out to be the number one unmentionable in America . . . But death has surged way ahead of sex on a 'forbidden quotient' . . . The former is now firmly ensconced as this country's leading source of uneasiness, discomfort, and apprehension.**"

Death, in other words, is ultimate to people, the defining fact of life.

But based on the words of Jesus in our text, we know better. Death isn't *ultimate*. Far from it, it's *nothing* instead and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Text

We know from the gospels that Jesus was in a continuing state of conflict with who verse 48 calls "**the Jews**." Those Jews included leaders of His day who scathingly denounced Him in that verse. They declared, "**You are a Samaritan and have a demon**." You're a demon-possessed half-breed in other words. Jesus replied in verse 49 that He wasn't either of those things. He cited as proof His constant practice of honoring God. He then stated in the last clause in verse 49 along with verse 50 that it didn't bother Him that they dishonored Him. First, He didn't seek His own glory. So, He was unmoved by the criticism and praise of others. And second, Father God "**seeks and judges**." He was leaving His reputation to Father God in other words.

Having mentioned God as judge in verse 50, Jesus continued that thought in verse 51. Those who keep His word benefit from God's

judgment. They **“will never see death.”** That statement of His was so stunning that the Jews mockingly repeated it in verse 52, citing it as proof that He was demon-possessed and insane.

But He wasn't. It's a fact. Those who keep His word **“will never see death.”** So let's figure out what that means.

Dread Death

We begin with the word **“death.”** Death, generally, is the absence of life. To define what death is, therefore, we must first define what life is. It's the power to perceive, act upon, interact with, and utilize what is around us. So a goldfish acts upon the water around it. It uses its fins to move in it. It also utilizes the water. It uses its gills to extract oxygen from it. It's alive. But eventually it's belly up. It no longer has the power to do those things or any things at all. Its life is *over*. Those terms helps us define when death occurs. It's when life is *over* – when we don't have the power to perceive, act upon, interact with, and utilize.

Now, many people, like acclaimed evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, believe that's what happens when our earthly bodies quit functioning. Our physiologic systems shut down so that we no longer have the power to perceive, act upon, interact with, and utilize. Our lives are over and we cease to exist.

The standard terms people use reflect that belief of theirs. They talk about **“end of life”** care, for instance, or the **“last stages of life”** or **“terminal illness.”** Those terms imply that our lives are over when our bodies quit functioning. We're dead.

That's a devastating prospect for sane objective human beings and Ecclesiastes 3:11 explains why. It's because God **“has set eternity in (our) heart.”** **“Eternity in our heart”** means we long to know that we count, that our lives matter, forever. Death as the end of life, therefore, is an awful thing to people. It deeply disturbs them.

I'll never forget a highly successful business man I met years ago. He confided in me that he awakened with cold sweats in the middle of the

night two or three times a week, overwhelmed by the fear of death. He couldn't stand the thought, he told me, of his existence ending.

It's true. Death as the end of life is an awful thing to people. Two of the primary fears that hover over people's lives are associated with the belief that it is. They're the fears of aging and serious illness. People dread both because of what they think they lead to – the end of their lives. As a prominent New York psychiatrist said it, **"I'm scared to death of dying."**

Never See Death

But you and I need not be and Jesus explains why in verse 51. Those who keep His word **"will never see of death."** The famous words of Dwight L. Moody elaborate: **"Someday you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die, that which is born of the Spirit will live forever."** Moody became **"more alive,"** as he said it, in 1899.

That's what happens when our earthly bodies die if we keep Jesus' word. We don't cease living. We continue living but as never before. Our power to perceive, act upon, interact with, and utilize the persons and environment around us dramatically increases. Think of it this way. The life we now have as the person we now are will continue except that it will be radically enhanced.

Dallas Willard made an insightful comment in that regard. When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the late summer of 2012, he said, **"I think that when I die, it might be some time until I know it."** Some think he was speaking tongue in cheek but he wasn't. It's a profound observation.

It implies the enormity of our experience the moment after we take our last breath on earth. We'll be ushered into the presence of beings

(God, angels, and Christians) and an environment and world that are literally breath-taking. We'll be so enraptured by and caught up in our experience with them that we'll be unaware of what preceded it. But eventually, it'll dawn on us. Our earthly bodies have died and our earthly lives have ended. But it won't matter to us because we'll be moving from one astonishing experience to another in our full lives with God and His people that never end.

John Hick summed it up well: **"Jesus used symbols to point to eternal life as limitlessly enhanced life, as a state of being more intensely alive in an existence which is both perfect fulfillment and yet also endless activity and newness. For beyond death we will not be less alive but more alive than we are now."** Grasp what that means. Our life begins the moment we're born and never ends. It changes drastically, for the better, but never ends.

That's a death altering reality. How many of you are concerned about being injured in an NFL football game? None of you are at all because you'll never experience that. So, it's nothing to you. In the same way, I'm not concerned at all about death because I'll never experience it. It's nothing to me. It's absolutely a non-factor in my life.

And it'll be that for you as well if you do what Jesus said in verse 51, **"keep"** His word. His **"word"** refers to **"what He says."** We **"keep"** it by doing three things.

Learn What Jesus Says

First, we learn what He says. That's obviously the first step in keeping His word. We can't keep it unless we know it. So, we learn it by reading and studying what He says in Scripture.

It's critical in doing so that we descend into the details of that. I'm doing that today with what He says in verse 51, **"If anyone keeps My word he will never see death."** I'm concentrating on that, carefully interpreting it, and correctly applying it.

What I'm doing with what he says in verse 51, we should do with

everything He says. I've challenged you over the years, for instance, to master His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. I've even written and made available a commentary on that text to assist you. Begin there and over the course of your life, master as much of what He says as you can.

Believe What Jesus Says

We keep the word of Jesus by doing a second thing. We believe what He says. Knowing what He says isn't very helpful unless we're convinced that it's perfect sanity, that it's reality.

Let's be honest here and admit it. Many professing Christians don't consider it that. They consider it cheerleading instead. My high school basketball team wasn't very good. We were usually behind but that didn't dull the enthusiasm of the cheerleaders. So we're down 65 to 40 with two minutes left in the game and they're still urging us on to victory. Many Christians perceive Jesus and what He says that way. He's in to cheerleading – to encouraging us in our fallen world and life. He says things like **“don't be anxious about your life,” “good overcomes evil,” “inner beauty trumps outer beauty,”** and the most insane thing of all, **“you will never see death.”** He says those things to make us feel good. It's all nice talk and pretty words, not rooted in reality.

On the contrary, it is. Jesus isn't whistling in the dark when He says the things He says. He isn't cheerleading. He actually *knows what He's talking about*. Let me ask you. Do you believe that Jesus *knows what He's talking about*? You must in order to keep His word.

Belief, as I've explained before, is based on understanding. We understand, which then enables us to believe. So understand Jesus. Build a purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of Him. You'll recognize Him as utterly lovely, competent, and smart if you do. You'll recognize that He *knows what He's talking about*, which creates faith in His what He says as perfect sanity. We're doing just that in my Sunday school class this quarter, building a vision of Him. If you'd like the manuscript, I'd be glad to give it.

Do What Jesus Says

We do a third thing to keep His word. We do what He says. There are many particulars but He sums them up well in Matthew 4:17, **“Repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand.”** He explains what that means in Matthew 11:12. The kingdom of the heavens is at hand and we need to take it by force. I like the way Dallas Willard describes it. We **“live strongly and creatively in the kingdom of the heavens.”**

We do that in a practical way. We intently and routinely direct our minds and bodies to it. We think and act consistently with the realities that comprise it, the primary of which is our utterly lovely and competent God. Take the specific reality of our text as just one example of what I mean. Suppose I’m diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given **“three months to live”** to quote the oncologist. Living strongly in the kingdom of the heavens though, I think in entirely different terms than he or she does. I think that I have **“three months until I really live.”** I can honestly say in light of that, **“Blessed are those with pancreatic cancer.”** That point of view shocks people or even offends them. But it’s normal, sane, for those living strongly in the kingdom of the heavens.

Living that way changes us in the core of our being. It forms our inner dimensions so that we become increasingly eternal in our nature. Our mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily processes become increasingly suited to the eternal life and world that await us. As a result, when our earthly bodies die, we’re completely at home there.

Conclusion

I leave you with a statistic. According to a recent study, 35% of adults say that they would fight for life no matter what. They would tell their physicians to do anything possible to keep them alive, even if there were no hope of improvement and they were experiencing a great deal of pain. Their point of view reflects that death, to them, is ultimate. But based on what Jesus said in our text, we know better. Live strongly and creatively in the kingdom of the heavens. Death is nothing if we do.