

John 19:28-30
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Hampton Baptist
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“The Seven Last Words of Christ Series”

“It Is Finished”

The comedian Flip Wilson, in his characterization of Geraldine, used to say: "Honey, what you see is what you get." I don't know if that is always true, but I do know that what we see is many times dependent upon our *perspective*--the *angle* of our vision. It seems to me that the same thing can be said of the cross. In every age men and women have stood at the foot of the cross and attempted to understand the meaning of what happened there. There are at least fourteen different theological perspectives of the cross presented in scripture. It would seem that the cross is so vast in its meaning that one perspective cannot simply *exhaust* its meaning. So to understand it fully, we must view the cross from many different angles.

During this sermon series, we have sought to examine the words of Jesus from the cross. Our premise has been that we learn much about a person by the way he/she dies. Jesus' words from the cross continue to teach us about his character.

Many today do not like to face the *horror* of the cross, so we *adorn* it and almost *beautify* it. We make the cross into pieces of jewelry, place it atop our steeples, and other decorative places. But we must remember that, for its unfortunate victims, crucifixion meant shame, torture, and a slow agonizing death. (Warren Wiersbe. The Cross of Jesus. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1997. p. 104)

Two weeks ago, I preached from the first two verses of our text which included Jesus' statement, "I'm thirsty." As I mentioned then, Jesus needed some moisture for his last two statements. Dr. Luke recorded "Father into your hands I commend my spirit," as Jesus' last words. John recorded "It is finished" as Jesus' last words. Biblical commentators and scholars offer differing opinions on which was the actual *last* statement from Jesus' lips. Honestly, it doesn't matter. Both were offered; their order is inconsequential.

As I have mentioned, John was the only gospel writer who was also an eye-witness to the crucifixion. Matthew, Mark and Luke all had second-hand information. John's gospel gives great detail of Jesus' last night. Chapters 1-12 detail Jesus' ministry until Maundy Thursday. Chapters 13-17, five full chapters, detail what happened in the Upper Room on the night before he died. Chapters 18 and 19 detail Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Seven out of twenty-one chapters in John's gospel, a third of his entire account, chronicle approximately the last 18 hours of Jesus' earthly life. John must have considered that time to be of great importance to the early Christian community to have recorded such detail. As a matter of fact, the importance is again magnified in the statement, "we learn much about a person by the way he/she dies."

Only John recorded "It is finished." Matthew and Mark state that Jesus offered a shout, and then he died. This shout was probably the one Greek word, *tetelestai*, (te-TEL-es-tai) which is translated "It is finished." He didn't say, "I am finished." It wasn't the lament of a victim overwhelmed by his circumstances; it was the shout of a victor overcoming his enemies. The Greek word *tetelestai* actually means "It is finished; it stands finished; it will *always* be finished."

Jesus had been offered some sour wine or vinegar probably by a soldier. Jesus took the vinegar to moisten his throat, mouth, and lips. He had not had a drink since his supper in the upper room with his closest disciples. Because of the agony of the cross, there was no wonder that he needed a drink.

Although cheap, sour wine is not much of a thirst-quencher, Jesus took it. His purpose was not to quench his thirst for a *long* period of time; he was not seeking *lasting* refreshment. His time was short; John wrote that the mission was accomplished. The project was completed. Jesus only needed enough moisture for two statements that would cover the span of minutes.

Today's focus is truly on *one* of Jesus' seven last words from the cross, for he was able to capture the moment with *one* Greek word. One word was offered as the finale in John's gospel. Warren Wiersbe tells us that that one word was a familiar one in that society.

Servants and slaves used this word whenever they finished an assignment and reported that fact to their master. A servant used this word to indicate that the task was completed the *way* the master wanted it done and *when* he wanted it done. Greek priests also used the word regarding *perfect* sacrifices offered in their temples. When artists completed their work, they would step back, look at it and say, "Tetelestai—it is finished," denoting the picture was completed. The merchants also regularly used this word meaning, "the debt is fully paid." If you had purchased something "on time," when you made your final payment, the merchant would give you a receipt that read, "tetelestai." (Wiersbe, p. 106-109)

In a shout of triumph, Jesus declared "it is finished." *He* was our suffering servant and had followed the will of his Master. *His* mission was completed. He paid a debt he did not owe and declared it paid in full. "It is finished" declared that the redemptive purpose for all humanity was complete. Jesus had done exactly what God had intended for him to do.

At Jesus' baptism, God's voice boomed from heaven saying, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased." God was pleased with Jesus at the outset of his ministry and certainly was pleased at the conclusion as well. Jesus had been faithful even in death, even when feeling all alone, even when wondering if God had forsaken him. Through all that transpired those last hours of his life, Jesus remained true to his calling, faithful to God in all things. So now, in his *last* word, Jesus said a mouthful with his one word of ten letters, and then he bowed his head.

The word John used for bowing his head actually was a word used when someone settled back on a pillow. For Jesus, the strife was over, and the battle was won. Even on the cross, he knew the joy of victory and could rest. Jesus had completed his task and now could lean back content and at peace. (William Barclay. The Gospel of John, vol. 2. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 258) While suffering for the six hours on the cross, he had seen the darkness fall. Jesus had heard the mourners' cries and the hecklers' hurls. He had smelled the stench which resulted from crucifixion, felt the pain, and tasted the vinegar. Jesus' senses, all five of them: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, had experienced the cross. But it was over. He victoriously shouted his one word and bowed his head in peace. Close the book. Turn out the lights. His life and his mission were over. And finally, he was at peace.

Dr. Viktor Frankl, author of the book Man's Search for Meaning, was imprisoned by the Nazis in the Second World War, because he was a Jew. His wife, his children, and his parents were all killed in the holocaust. The Gestapo made him strip. He stood there totally naked. As they cut away his wedding band, Viktor said to himself, "You can take away my wife, you can take away my children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can EVER take away from me -- and that is my freedom to *choose* how I will react to what happens to me!" Even under the most difficult of circumstances, contentment is a choice which transforms our tragedies into triumph. (Adapted from Robert Schuller's The Be-Happy Attitudes, New York: Bantam Books. 1985 p. 199.)

Jesus had done *all* he could do; he had fulfilled the will of his heavenly Father. After victoriously exclaiming, "It is finished," he bowed his head knowing that he had done a good job. Even in the midst of the tragedy called crucifixion and the agony of the cross, Jesus was content knowing that he had completed the journey which God had intended.

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John then wrote that Jesus gave up his spirit. Again, remember that John was meticulous in his account of Jesus' last few hours. There is a marked difference between *dying* and giving up one's spirit. Although Jesus had been arrested, beaten, and killed by human hands, he *still* could have stopped the process. Although a human, he was also fully divine. Jesus could have terminated the course of events anytime he wanted. But if he had done so, his mission would have been thwarted.

Instead, he gave up his spirit *willingly*. Sure *people* killed Jesus; soldiers drove the spikes through his flesh. But he *willingly* gave his life. He did so not because he was a wimp; not because he did not want to fight back; not because he was scared of their prowess; and not because he thought they were mightier and more powerful than he. He willingly gave his life, because he loved us. In the upper room, Jesus declared to his disciples, "Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." He told them he was going to die for them; he told them that there was no greater love. And he not only *said* it, he *did* it, even though it was painful, humiliating, and shameful. He did not tell his disciples, "Greater love hath no man than this: that someone be a martyr, that someone die for some strong belief or value system, or even that a person would allow someone to take his life." Instead he willingly *gave* his life.

So again, how do you respond to Jesus' words from the cross? Today we have focused on Jesus' final word; his shout of one Greek word summed up the moment. What one word would sum up *your* life? Daunting question, isn't it? What one word would you like folks to say about *you* when you die? Are you living your life knowing that one day you will have to say a final word? What will it be?

What do you need to finish? Jesus knew that he had done what had been required of him. What do you **need** to do? What in your life is still unsettled? Do you need to reconcile a relationship? Finish a process? Make good on a responsibility you might have shirked? What do you need to finish? Important plans for your future? Unresolved grief? Nagging guilt over a past mistake?

How about your level of contentment? Jesus could bow his head in contentment knowing that God was pleased with him. Are you chasing contentment and finding it elusive? At the end of your life, will you be able to bow your head in contentment with no regrets?

Finally, the most important fact of this passage is that Jesus *willingly* gave his life for us, because he *loved* us. Our response to that love is ongoing. Most of us have made a decision earlier in our life to accept the love of Jesus and have invited him into our heart. But, that decision continues everyday by how we respond to others. The love of God as expressed in Jesus Christ is our model. How is your love life? How are you responding to the love that caused a man to give his life for you?

I would guess that many of us have unfinished business because of our *love* lives; many of us have not loved our neighbor as we should. Jesus died for you and me, because he loved us. Our lives are indicators of how we respond to that love. What do you do with the seven last words of Christ?