

Lifting Jesus Up

If you have your bibles, please turn with me to the gospel of John chapter 12.

I was watching an interesting video about chemists who handle nitroglycerin in the manufacturing of dynamite and I decided I definitely would not want that job – the slightest impurity, the smallest miscalculation, the tiniest spark, could trigger massive explosions.

Nitroglycerin starts out as an extremely unstable substance that degrades over time to become even more unstable. Detonation generates a temperature of 9000 degrees and a shock wave that travels at 17,000 mph. Even small shocks or variations in temperature can set off.

The word that comes to mind when we think of nitroglycerin is volatile. It explodes easily.

The word volatile also seems to describe the times we're living in, doesn't it? Topics that once could be talked about with little controversy now feel like you're handling nitroglycerin. The smallest shock could trigger an explosive conversation. After three months of being locked down, tensions already seemed to be ratcheting up, and then the George Floyd video came out, and we are feeling the repercussions and aftershocks to this day.

Initially there was almost unanimous agreement: what happened to George Floyd was horribly wrong and changes needed to be made. Peaceful protests were even joined around the country by police officers who also agreed changes needed to be made. But heated disagreements quickly emerged: some saying our system and history is permeated with racism through and through, others saying, there's still work to be done, but the United States is not a racist country.

Peaceful protests soon became drowned out by destructive mobs looting and burning property, defacing and pulling down statues, and escalating violence. Some believe this to be a grassroots movement that is sick and tired of the status quo. Others believe this is the work of an ideological agenda that wants to tear down this country and all it stands for.

Discussions quickly become heated arguments. Disagreements too often lead to incendiary words and judgmental labels that not only destroy healthy conversation but also devastate friendships.

In this climate it can be confusing as Christians to know where to stand, what to do, or what to say.

Personally I have been wrestling and weighing what I should say, if anything. I don't want to add to the noise, I don't want the message of the gospel to get drowned out or diluted by other messages.

And I'm aware that we're handling nitroglycerin here.

Jostle things a little bit this way, we could lose some people on that half of the room. Jostle things a little too much that way, boom! A few rows on that side of the room get vaporized. And I've got so much going on in my own heart there is the distinct possibility I may jostle myself too much and explode right in front of you! That would get messy.

So I want to share two reminders for believers in this volatile time: seek wisdom and lift up Jesus. Lifting up Jesus is the point of this message, but I do believe a reminder about the value of wisdom is timely.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding,¹⁴ for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. Prov. 3:13-14

The Bible tells us to seek wisdom more than gold or silver. Wisdom seeks to understand and rightly interpret. A lot of the arguments today try to reduce issues to binary choices: "either believe this or you believe that." Wisdom can and must look deeper and hold many truths at once. Let me share a couple simple balancing thoughts. I don't mean them to be controversial or adversarial.

- It is possible and it's right to be sad and outraged and frustrated about what happened to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmed Arbery and other cases of unarmed black men and women who have been wrongfully killed, and equally sad, outraged, and frustrated by the escalating violence occurring in many cities, including the killing of a 3 year old boy and a 13 year old girl in Chicago and a 25 year old black policewoman shot in her patrol car. All of these deaths are heartbreaking.
- It is possible to believe that there needs to be police reform and better training, as well as a more effective way to weed out bad cops and at the same time believe that the vast majority of men and women in law enforcement are good and decent people who risk their lives for our safety and the safety of our communities, and deserve our respect and appreciation for all they do.
- We can believe that peaceful protests are a foundational part of our nation's history and support the desire to express frustration and the need for change through peaceful protest, and be dismayed and appalled by the looting and destruction of property and the violence we're seeing in so many places today.
- We can acknowledge and teach the failures and sins of our nation's history including some of its founding fathers and believe that this is a great nation whose history stacks up against any other nation on earth's history. We can thank God for how far we've come and admit we have a ways yet to go.
- Wisdom right now will be praying that good and reasonable people will work together to bring real and lasting solutions to the problems we face, because the historical reality is many of the worst things that have happened in history were introduced as solutions to bad things in history.

So church, we are to seek wisdom. And most of all we are to lift up Jesus.

The volatility of this time might lead Christians to think that we need to walk fearfully and timidly, afraid that we might take a wrong step and blow up a landmine. But God did not give us the spirit of timidity but of love, power, and of a sound mind. And God did not give us a message that disappears in volatile times, He gave us a gospel message that explodes in volatile times, only it's an explosion that leaves life and transformed destinies in its wake instead of wreckage and devastation in its wake.

³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. ³⁴ So the crowd answered him, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." John 12:31-36

I want to focus our attention particularly on verse 32 "*I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*"

At the time that Jesus came, there was a ton of political unrest. A world of sin and pain and suffering. The Jews were oppressed by the Romans, including the heavy burden of oppressive taxes. Those who broke the Pax Romana, or Roman peace, were often crucified as encouragement to others to keep the

peace. In 27 BC, the emperor of Rome, Octavian, changed his name to Caesar Augustus, Augustus meaning “worthy of worship” and he was exalted as a god.

There were prejudices and divisions. The Jews looked at Gentiles as racially inferior and wanted nothing to do with them. Jews and Samaritans despised each other. The religious system in Israel had become thoroughly corrupted by arrogant, greedy, power-hungry men.

Jesus came to change all this – by changing men’s hearts.

I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself

Verse 33 tells us he said this to show what kind of death Jesus was to die. He would be nailed to a cross and lifted up from the earth to hang between heaven and earth as the only Savior, the only mediator who can make peace between a holy God and sinful man.

The Bible tells us the worst division on earth wasn’t between people of different races, it was between God and the human race. Jesus died to bridge the uncrossable chasm between us. The cross is the only bridge by which we can cross from death into life, from eternal separation from God to eternal friendship with God.

But when Jesus said “when I am lifted up from the earth” he wasn’t *only* referring to the cross. He was also talking about his ascension. Jesus was lifted up from the earth to the right hand of God, where he rules over all creation. Jesus is Lord of all and ruling over all!

And Jesus was also talking about the church’s mission and message to lift up Jesus to a lost, broken world! Jesus told his disciples, wait for the Holy Spirit to empower you to lift my name up and light the fuse to an explosive power that will literally turn the world upside down!

That’s what we need, that’s what the world needs, that’s what young people need – Jesus lifted up. He lit the fuse 2000 years ago, let’s pray for the explosion to reach the church today! We need revival today!

The 1960’s was an incredibly turbulent decade – in many ways far more turbulent than today. The United States came to the brink of nuclear war with Russia during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The older among us remember having drills where we’d sit under our school desks in case of a nuclear bomb explosion. We literally lived in that fear. President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. Martin Luther King, the great civil rights leader, was assassinated in April, 1968. Two months later John F Kennedy’s brother Robert was assassinated as he ran for president. Anti-war protests, police brutality, hatred for cops, drugs and free love, and many other things made the 60’s an incredibly turbulent and troubled decade.

But out of that turbulent time, God brought a powerful revival to young people we call the Jesus People movement. I got saved near the end of the Jesus People movement. In the early 70’s Chuck Smith gave a 19 year old named Greg Laurie the opportunity to lead a bible study of 30 people. Before long he was seeing a hundred young people getting saved every week. That 30 person bible study became The Harvest Christian Fellowship, one of the largest churches in the United States.

That’s yesterday’s news – we can’t go back to the 60’s and we don’t want to. But it reminds us that in the midst of turbulence God can move and do great things. Let’s pray and hope for that today!

Jesus said, *I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.*

Notice Jesus says *all people*. He will draw all people. He doesn’t mean every single person because many people will reject Christ and by their own choice enter a Christ-less eternity.

He means all people groups. He said this at a time when the Jews couldn't imagine God reaching out to Gentiles with the same good news available to them but the gospel broke down the walls between Jews and Gentiles and the vision in Revelation 7:9 is a beautiful picture of the multi-ethnic nature of the church:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. Rev. 7:9

That's God's vision, and God's heart for the church: every nation, every tribe, every people, every language. There are no dividing lines. No barriers to certain peoples. No one is inferior or superior.

Those dividing lines might get baked into policies and institutions and systems, but they don't come from those things – they come from our hearts. And they don't stop at nationalities. Wealthy people can look down on poor people. Educated people can look down on uneducated people. We can come up with so many dividing lines.

Jesus didn't do away with the lines. Whatever our nationality or ethnicity we can celebrate it as a gift from God and a blessing to the world! God made you who you are, He loves who you are, He offered Jesus freely to every nation, tribe or tongue. Jesus didn't do away with the lines, he did away with the dividing lines. He has made us one people, one bride, one nation.

Jesus draws *all people* to himself.

Now, how can we be a part of that? What can we do to lift Jesus up?

Notice we don't draw people to Jesus. He does that. *I, when I am lifted up...will draw all people to myself.* We don't draw people, Jesus draws people. Jesus has given us the mission of lifting Jesus up. And then let him do the rest.

So let me encourage us to do two things that are particularly needed in this volatile time.

1. **Pray for revival**

Now to be honest, I usually shy away from the word revival. For me it conjures up images of tent meetings and revival services, often with crazy things going on. On Long Island churches would have week long revival services with some big name evangelist come in. Honestly, I don't like that.

Revival isn't something we do, it's not a meeting we hold, revival is something *God does*. Revival is when God moves so powerfully that it's obvious it is God. There's no other explanation for it. It's not some big name preacher made it happen, it's not some amazing program made it happen, it's not that the mood was set and the environment so perfect that it happened. Revival is when God moves so powerfully, and so beyond natural explanations, that the only way to explain it is, God moved.

Pray for a revival among young people. Sadly some young people are deconstructing their Christian faith now. It's sad but not surprising because that's what the Bible says will happen. Jesus said the last days will be characterized by a great falling away. People will choose to leave Jesus.

What we need to pray for, what this nation needs, is for young people to meet Jesus, to experience his power, to be saved by grace, and then to influence others to meet Jesus and be saved by his grace and power. That out of this turbulence God raises up Daniels and Danielles who will stand for Jesus when society says bow down to the sacred cows of our culture.

Prayer is calling on God to meet our lives, our church, our community, and our nation, right where we need Him most. Let's pray for a move of God because that's what this nation needs the most.

2. **Shine the light of Christ where you are**

While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. Vs. 36

Jesus is the light of the world, but he then says we become children of light. We are to be light and salt who influence our world, our culture, our neighbors, our friends, away from sin and towards Christ.

We may feel like, what can one person do? What can I do? I get that, but here's my encouragement to us. Shine the light of Christ wherever you are and that will make a difference.

Not long ago I bought a headlamp so that when I'm working in tight places with minimum light, the light will shine wherever I'm looking. Most of us probably won't shine a light that will affect nations. I doubt very much that GCC will shine a bright international or even national light. But we can shine the light right where we are.

- Let's be bold about our faith in Jesus. People need a strong witness for Jesus, not a timid one. The Holy Spirit gives us power to be Jesus' witnesses. Let's pray and stand up!
- Let's look for ways we can make a difference for God. Relational bridges we can build. Good we can do. Conversations we can have.
- To the degree God calls you – be involved in what's happening in our culture, our politics, our nation. Definitely vote. Be informed. Be wise.
- Love people. There's a lot of anger out there. Jesus calls us to love people.

Jesus said, *I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*

Let's lift Jesus up, and pray he draws many, many people to himself.