

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

40 Days of Decrease: A Different Kind of Hunger. A Different Kind of Fast.

Sermon Outlines by Alicia Britt Chole

Dear Pastor,

You are brave. Decrease is not among the more popular themes of our age. However, John the Baptist's two-sentence manifesto is more desperately needed now than ever before: "I must decrease. He must increase" (John 3:30). My prayer is that these outlines are helpful as you craft sermons for those you serve.

Alicia

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SERMON

1

Prop: a glass, framed house window; six cut outs with the words jealous, elitist, entitled, offended, and afraid written upon them

Passage ~ John 3:30

Introduction: Our focus for the next forty days as a community is sacred decrease. Decrease isn't among our favorite words. We generally associate decrease with *less* and *loss*. We prefer increase, thank you. But continuous increase is exhausting!

- **Add:** a personal illustration of farming or gardening that shows the need for fields to rest from producing in order to be able to continue being fruitful.

Think of decrease as an interior simplicity movement. Simplicity is valued in our day: many of us have sought to purge our garages and lighten up our schedules. Why? Because we have too much stuff. We're doing too much stuff. And we feel weighed down by it all.

Our focus as a community for the next several weeks is uncluttering our hearts from the stuff that weighs us down and blocks our, and other's, view of Jesus. [Set up the window frame.] [Stand behind the window.] Because much of the reason we're here on earth is to see Jesus and have others see Him through us. Our mentor today on this path of decrease is a wild man in camel's hair.

Read passage: John 3:23-30

- I. About John the Baptist
 - a. Jesus' relative, born 6 months before Him around 5 B.C. in "the time of Herod king of Judea." (Luke 1:5)
 - b. The miracle son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, who are described as, "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly...and they were both well along in years." (Luke 1:7)
 - c. John the Baptist "became strong in spirit and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel." (Luke 1:80)
 - d. John called people to repentance and baptism. His ministry grew strong and "people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ." (Luke 3:15)
- II. About the passage

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- a. John had pointed his disciples to Jesus, identifying him as the “Lamb of God!” (John 3:36) Though some, like Andrew (John 1:40), took John’s cue to follow Jesus, others stayed with John.
 - b. These were the disciples who argued among themselves (John 3:25) and brought Jesus’ seeming success—“and everyone is going to him” (John 3:26)—to John’s attention. Why?
- III. About us and John’s disciples
- a. What is it that bothers us about other’s success?
 - b. How do you feel when someone experiences a “win” in your field?
 - c. How do you feel when you’ve given a shout out, or a hand up, to someone and they wind up surpassing you? **[Insert a personal illustration]**
 - d. The Scriptures do not identify the emotions of John’s disciples, but we’ve lived enough to guess some of the possibilities. **[As they are mentioned, place each one on the front of the window.]**
 - i. Jealous: People always flock to the newest start-up. Maybe if John ditched the camel’s hair...
 - ii. Elitist: We were here first! What right does Jesus have to copycat our ministry?
 - iii. Entitled: Those crowds are *ours!* We began the baptismal work at the Jordan. We deserve their loyalty.
 - iv. Offended: How dare Jesus use John like a stepping-stone to start His own thing! Who does He think He is?!
 - v. Afraid: If all the people leave, there won’t be anyone to baptize and what will become of us?
 - vi. **[Stand behind the window.]** It’s rather hard to see anything through all this heart clutter, isn’t it?
- IV. About John’s response
- a. Listen to the wisdom John offered his disciples. Listen to how John viewed decrease as holy. **[Remove each cut-out word from the window as it is mentioned.]**
 - b. “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.” (John 3:27)
 - i. Anything we have has been given to us.
 - ii. Why then are you **jealous** of what others have received?
 - c. “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’” (John 3:28)
 - i. **Elitism** claims to be the first or be the best.
 - ii. From the very beginning, I’ve told you I’m not the main event.
 - d. “The bride belongs to the bridegroom.” (John 3:30)
 - i. The kingdom of God is about stewardship.
 - ii. **Entitlement** has no place in such a kingdom.
 - iii. The crowds aren’t ours. They are His.
 - e. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.” (John 3:29)
 - i. This isn’t a time for **fear** but for joy!

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- ii. Open your eyes and be freed by a picture bigger than yourself.
 - f. “He must become greater, I must become less.” (John 3:30)
 - i. Why are you **offended**? My whole purpose is to draw attention to Jesus.
 - ii. My decrease is holy.
- V. Application and response
 - a. **[Stand behind the window again.]** Decrease unclutters our souls.
 - b. In *40 Days of Decrease*, Dr. Alicia Britt Chole states, “John’s longing was to draw his generation’s attention and allegiance to the Messiah. From John’s perspective, the true value of people seeing him was that people would then be positioned to see through him and gaze at Jesus. By willingly decreasing, John increased others’ view of the Savior.” (pg. 11-12)
 - c. Closing prayer and response.

Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week One’s Sermon Outline

1. In a normal day, what kind of clutter most often weighs your heart down?
2. John’s disciples said, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.” (John 3:26) What is your guess regarding what may have motivated their question?
3. Have you ever helped someone who eventually “surpassed” you? What emotions did you experience? Did anyone else feel offended on your behalf?
4. Reread John 3:27-36. Summarize John’s response in your own words.
5. As you begin your *40 Day* journey, in what ways do you hope that a less-cluttered soul might affect those near you?

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SERMON

2

Props: a low table or large pillows on the floor over a large carpet if you have one and a small glass bottle with a cap. Leave them as a set and/or early in the sermon, call for five volunteers who enjoy acting to help you spontaneously illustrate the passage: Simon, 2 Pharisees, Jesus, and the woman. It will be un-staged fun and a great visual for the message.

Passage ~ Luke 7:36-50

Introduction: This week we are continuing our theme of sacred decrease. You may remember that last week our mentor was John the Baptist. This week our mentor is known not by her name, but by her love. [Optional] But before we read the passage, I need five volunteers who enjoy acting! [As they come, have an assistant assign them their roles, instruct them to simply act out what they hear when you read the passage, give them props if you'd like (the bottle to the woman and perhaps funky hats for a modern take on the Pharisees...make it fun), and position the volunteers on the stage.]

Read passage: Luke 7:36-50

- I. About the text
 - a. Each gospel includes an anointing of Jesus.¹ Our focus today is the anointing recorded by Luke, a companion of Paul and a historian.
 - i. This story takes place after Jesus raised a dead man to life in the town of Nain, a southern village in Galilee: "The site today is identified with the Muslim town of Nein (M.R. 183226) in the plain of Jezreel on the Northern slope of the hill of Moreh, North of modern Afula and about 9.5 air miles from Nazareth."¹ [Show the location on a map: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nein>]
 - ii. Soon after this miracle, Jesus accepted an invitation to eat dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee in or near the town of Nain.
 1. Though Jesus honored the poor and ate with sinners, here we find Him accepting an invitation to dine with the economically and spiritually elite.
 2. Picture Jesus reclining at a table, eating the cuisine of a wealthy religious leader.
 - iii. Word spreads that Jesus is at Simon's house and a "woman who had lived a sinful life in that town" learns where Jesus is dining.
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- II. About the woman
 - a. She had "lived": εἰμί (*eimi*), a common verb meaning to *be* or to *exist*.

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- b. a “*sinful life*”: ἁμαρτωλός (*hamartōlos*), *sinner*.
 - c. “in that town”: Her sin was locally sown and locally known. “Sinner” was part of her personal and communal identity. For whatever reason, she couldn’t just leave town and start again.
 - d. “learned” that Jesus was near: ἐπιγινώσκω (*epiginōskō*) to *know, recognize, observe*
 - e. Imagine this woman. Everywhere she went, her reputation as a sinner shadowed her.
- III. How she can mentor us
- a. She committed herself to generosity. Her gift was pre-meditated. She brought the perfume with her.
 - i. Do we tip God with our generosity? Only giving as a post-facto thank-you?
 - ii. She came to give before Jesus ever said a word to her.
 - iii. She spent her riches with no promise of gain.
 - iv. [Add: a story from your life or church about someone who gave with no strings attached.]
 - b. She refused to let communal shame intimidate her worship. She dared to come uninvited not knowing if she’d be turned away at the door.
 - i. Are we allowing our past to intimidate our future?
 - ii. She decided that she wanted Jesus more than she feared shame.
 - iii. [Add: a story from your life or church about someone who refused to let shame keep them from pursuing God.]
 - c. She stood behind Jesus at His feet and wept. Imagine this. Why was she weeping? Scriptures don’t record any prior interactions. She didn’t know of His coming crucifixion. Could these be tears of repentance? Could she simply have become soul-sick of being a sinner?
 - i. Are we withholding tears of repentance? Are we editing our confessions to avoid the whispers of the religious? Would we have sent Jesus a lovely card instead of boldly showing up, overcome by tears of repentance?
 - ii. She didn’t care anymore who saw or what they believed. More than anything in the world, she needed to shout, “I’m a sinner! Forgive me!” to a Savior.
- IV. And now it’s our turn
- a. This woman didn’t stay home and just send positive thoughts Jesus’ way. She showed up. She stood up. And she wept at Jesus feet.
 - b. Join me today in doing the same. This space/this place/these altars are not for decoration. [Feel free to tailor this response time to your worship context. But, encourage a response of some kind.]
 - c. Like this unnamed woman, as we repent from the depths of our souls we too will hear Jesus’ words: “Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:48, 50)

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Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week Two's Sermon Outline

1. Think of someone whose name is relatively unknown but whose love for you is legendary. Tell a bit of their story.
2. What stood out to you the most from this week's sermon?
3. What is the difference between tipping God with occasional generosity and truly living a generous life?
4. How can shame intimidate our worship?
5. Jesus forgives and tell us to "go in peace." (Luke 7:48-50) How does receiving forgiveness produce peace?

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SERMON

3

Props: None

Passage: Luke 15:11-32

Introduction: One of the reasons our leadership team chose *40 Days of Decrease* was because of its emphasis on heart-fasts. This week in your daily readings you'll encounter invitations to fast apathy, appearances, revisionism, leavened bread, premature resolution, and sound. And today we are studying a passage that in some way touches on all of the issues these fasts address.

Our focus today is the story of the Prodigal Son: it's a familiar passage but we're going to examine it from what may be a less familiar angle.

Tell the story of Luke 15:11-32 via "Prodigal Son: a Social Media Retelling" video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNW-dZ8Gom0>

- I. The text
 - a. Included by Luke in a series of parables and teachings (Luke 14-19) that precede Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we commemorate as Palm Sunday.
 - b. One in a set of three parables (The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Lost Son) spoken in response to the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law's criticism of Jesus that he "welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2).
 - c. Three primary characters (father, younger son, older son), a pig farmer (Luke 15:15), and the father's servants (Luke 15:22, 26).
 - d. In this familiar story, we most often focus upon the wayward son and welcoming father. However, in context, the religious leaders would have heard the story of the elder brother as—if not more—loudly.
- II. Consider the older brother's perspective
 - a. Little brother had taken off with his rightful portion of their father's estate. It was premature, it was rude, but it was his share.
 - b. The elder brother is angered not by the return of his little brother, but by the **father's response** to that return. If the father had accepted the youngest back on his stated terms—"I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men"—my guess is that the elder brother would have thought, "fair enough."
 - c. But, to receive him back as a son, and as a son with all the honors and privileges, that was too much: that was painfully unfair.
 - d. Dr. Alicia Britt Chole calls this "Big brother bookkeeping: spiritual and moral

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accounting that is precise and accurate and one dimensional. It records actions but not attitude, deeds but not heart. Debits and credits are made and paid through works alone. But Father God's bookkeeping is not limited to one dimension: it records actions *and* attitudes, deeds *and* hearts, works *and* motivations. By the father's books, both sons were in the red."

III. The elder brother's attitude/heart

- a. He saw himself as over-worked and under-rewarded
 - i. The father called him, "My son" (Luke 15:31) and said, "everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31).
 - ii. Yet he considered himself a slaving laborer who "never disobeyed orders." (Luke 15:29).
 - iii. When obedience isn't inspired by love it feeds resentment, self-pity, and stinginess.
- b. He determined his value comparatively
 - i. For the big brother, the injustice was not solely that the father celebrated the younger son's return. He felt that the father had never celebrated him even though his works account balance was certainly higher.
 - ii. The father cooked up the fatted calf for the sinner but hadn't offered even a young goat to the self-identified saint. (Luke 15:29-30)
 - iii. When we determine our value comparatively, we'll be quick to envy what we don't have (e.g., the feasts others are enjoying) and slow to treasure what we do have (i.e., the Father's continuous presence as mentioned in Luke 15:31).
- c. He resented his father's generosity.
 - i. Since he kept one-dimensional records, it seemed entirely unfair for the father to even remotely show favor to a wayward son before that son had at least "made good" on his debt through restitution.
 - ii. Receiving him coolly as a slave would have been just. But embracing and giving gifts and celebrating the return of one with an impossible debt seemed shockingly unfair, unjust, weak, and inconsistent.
 - iii. Big brother bookkeeping has never, will never, make the acquaintance of grace.

IV. The elder brothers listening to Jesus' parable

- a. The Pharisees
 - i. The elder brothers' anger no doubt appeared reasonable to the religious leaders, some of whom also adhered to big brother bookkeeping.
 - ii. Perhaps what was bothering the Pharisees, whose question the parable addresses, was not only that Jesus was choosing to eat with sinners, but that Jesus was choosing to eat with sinners *instead of with them*.
 - iii. Why was Jesus celebrating the presence of hopelessly indebted sinners more than the presence of the obviously "righteous" religious?
- b. And us
 - i. Application questions:
 1. Do we view ourselves as over-worked and under-rewarded by God?

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- [Add: an example/illustration]
 - 2. Are we determining our personal value comparatively? [Add: an example/illustration]
 - 3. Do we question the just-ness of God's generosity to others? [Add: an example/illustration]
 - ii. If so, let us remember that we are sons, not slaves. All He has is ours. God's presence is our true treasure on earth.
- V. [Conclude by reading Psalm 16]

Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week Three's Sermon Outline

1. Think of all the characters in the parable of the prodigal son. With whom do you most identify?
2. If you are an oldest or a youngest among your siblings, share some of the challenges (or seeming injustices) associated with that birth order.
3. In your own words, what is meant by the phrase "Big Brother Bookkeeping?"
4. We start volunteering with joy and sometimes hit a wall. What motivations eventually sour our service? Conversely, what motivations can keep our service fresh?
5. In what areas of life are you tempted to view your value comparatively?

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SERMON

4

Props: movie clip from *Tomorrowland* if desired

Passage ~ Matthew 26:36-46

Introduction: *Tomorrowland* was among the biggest movies of 2015. The story line demonstrated the dangers of despair and the healing power of hope. In one scene Frank asks Casey, "If I could tell you with exact certainty the exact time of your death, would you want to know?" Casey replied, "Who wouldn't?" [Perhaps show the clip from the movie.]

Would you? Would I? If we knew, how would we spend our last months or weeks or hours?

Today we turn our attention to Jesus' last hours before He was arrested. He knew the end was near. As Dr. Alicia Britt Chole states on page 47 of **40 Days of Decrease**, "Last steps and last stops are weighty indeed. What we do with our final breaths reflects the values we hold dear in life." So how did Jesus choose to spend His last steps?

Read passage: Matthew 26:36-46

- I. The context
 - a. Immediately before Jesus and His disciples entered Gethsemane, they had endured an awkward supper together. Jesus' talk about impending death and burial had only increased in recent weeks. Those who confuse faith with optimism would have struggled with Jesus' words in this space.
 - b. At the supper, Jesus had announced the soon-coming betrayal of one disciple, served communion, and predicted how all the disciples would "fall away" (Matthew 26:31).
 - c. With this disturbing news ringing in their ears, Jesus led them into the Mount of Olives—a thick olive grove—in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- II. The place: The Mount of Olives [select all or some of this study to share]
 - a. [show an image of the Mount today from <http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/MountOlives.html> or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_of_Olives]
 - b. "According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will appear here and bring the dead back to life. Therefore, the hillside became the most holiest cemetery, and the hillside is covered by thousands of grave stones."
<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/MountOlives.html>
 - c. When Absalom staged his coup, King David left the city and, "continued up the

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Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot." (2 Kings 15:30) Jesus wept where King David had wept.

- d. Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem had passed by the Mount of Olives: "When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen." (Luke 19:37)
 - e. Luke places Jesus' ascension at the Mount of Olives. After Jesus ascended, Luke states, "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives." (Acts 12:1)
 - f. And according to prophecy, Jesus' return will touch the Mount of Olives: "On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south." (Zechariah 14:4)
 - g. On the eve of His rejection, Jesus chose to spend His final hours in a place that was deeply meaningful to Him. The Mount of Olives hosted His triumphal entry into Jerusalem and would host His betrayal and arrest, His ascension, and His return.
 - h. Jesus' pain in his final steps cross-ward is bookended by the triumphal entry and the triumphal return.
 - i. We need to remember that Jesus' triumph also surrounds our pain.
- III. The people: Jesus' disciples
- a. Jesus spent the evening, not with strangers, but with His closest friends.
 - b. The Eleven accompanied Jesus into the olive grove.
 - c. Jesus invited three to join Him further in.
 - d. They weren't the best of company. They fell asleep "exhausted from sorrow." (Luke 22:45)
 - e. But their presence was meaningful to Jesus. Otherwise why would He have requested, "Stay here and keep watch with me?" (Matthew 26:37)
- IV. The purpose: preparatory prayer
- a. Jesus could have held one more meeting or preached one more sermon or healed one more person.
 - b. Instead, He invested the time in raw, honest, agonizing prayer.
 - c. Honest prayer needs space. Honest prayer is messy and intense and heard by God.
- V. In our day of trial what can we do? As we journey cross-ward in these final weeks before Resurrection Sunday, let us:
- a. Choose meaningful places over meaningless activity.
 - b. Remember the triumphs of the past, and in faith declare Jesus' triumph over your future.
 - c. Surround yourself with dear friends.
 - d. Pray. Pray honest, raw prayers, knowing that God hears. **[Invite those in need of prayer forward and surround them with support as a community]**

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Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week Four's Sermon Outline

1. If you knew the exact time of your death, how do you think you'd spend your final days and hours? Why?
2. What stands out to you the most in this story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane?
3. Jesus' prayer were raw and agonizing in the Garden. What adjectives would you use to describe your current prayers?
4. What trials are you currently facing?
5. Think of others who are currently also facing trials. How can you this week practically stand watch with them?

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SERMON

5

Props: In your preparation, read http://www.ehow.com/how_2149113_thresh-winnow-harvested-wheat-hand.html or http://www.ehow.com/how-does_4925686_farmers-sift-wheat.html and consider illustrating how wheat was sifted in Jesus' day. The process is intentionally unsettling but the results feed the world. You may also want to show this video from 00:46 – 2:15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMa7l28uFyQ>

Passage ~ Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

Introduction: I respect how the Bible does not hide or spin the failures of leaders. This is a rather unique quality of Christianity. In our day, PR scrambles to do damage control when a leader falls. But in the Bible, failure is openly admitted and discussed.

Peter's failure was epic. Jesus saw it coming when Peter thought it impossible. Our focus today is two-fold: the purpose of testing and the power of turning back to God.

Read passage: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

- i. The context
 - a. As you may remember from last week, during the Last Supper, Jesus revealed that one of the Twelve would betray Him and that all of them would fall away. The disciples were incredulous—Jesus' words seemed unbelievable.
 - b. After the Last Supper, Jesus had taken the disciples into the Mount of Olives and then asked Peter, James, and John to go further into the grove with Him to support Him in prayer. Their hearts were so heavy, that they fell asleep instead of prayerfully watching with Jesus. Jesus response was not neutral: "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" He asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Matthew 26:40-41)
 - c. After Jesus' time of prayer in the olive grove, Judas showed up with "the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders" to arrest Jesus (Luke 22:52-54).
 - d. Matthew 26:55-56 records that, "all the disciples deserted him and fled," and Luke adds, "Peter followed at a distance" (Luke 22:54).
 - e. We know the story well: warming himself by the fire in the high priest's courtyard (John 18:15-16), three different people associated Peter with Jesus. Peter denies knowing Jesus all three times, even to the point of swearing and "call[ing] down curses on himself" (Matthew 26:74).
 - f. Luke records that Jesus "turned and looked straight at Peter" and that Peter,

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- gripped with remorse, “went outside and wept bitterly.” (Luke 22:61-62)
- g. As Dr. Alicia Britt Chole says on page 154 of **40 Days of Decrease**, “Peter wept because Peter loved. Peter’s illusion was not that he loved Jesus. Peter’s illusion was that he loved Jesus more than he loved his own life.”
- II. Peter’s triple failure
- So really, the failure in the courtyard was Peter’s third failure that day.
 - Previously he had failed to watch and pray with Jesus, and then he ran away instead of standing with Jesus at His arrest.
 - Jesus had not only anticipated the epic fail, He had prepared Peter for it via one explanation, one encouragement, and one exhortation.
- III. One explanation: a trial was coming that would test Peter’s faith
- Jesus said that Satan asked to *sift Peter as wheat*.
 - Wheat is first beaten to separate the kernels from the stalks. [Add: illustrate the process on stage or play the video linked in the intro] More than pure grain is released in the process so the wheat is then sifted so that the grains are further separated from the chaff.
 - Satan’s goal for sifting is destructive. He hopes we will abandon our faith in the beating.
 - Jesus’ usage of sifting is redemptive: He knows that the process of sifting separates “chaff” from our faith and yields food that can feed others.
 - Which brings us to the encouragement.
- IV. One encouragement: Jesus Himself is praying for Peter
- While Peter’s head was still spinning trying to make sense of Jesus’ statement that Satan had targeted him personally for a spiritual attack, Jesus says, “I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22:31)
 - Imagine! Do we believe that Jesus prays for us? That He wars in intercession over us that our faith may not fail? [Consider reading Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34b]
 - Then in confidence that Jesus’ prayer for Peter would be answered, Jesus issues Peter a command.
- V. One exhortation: Jesus’ charge to Peter
- Imagine Peter hearing these words!
 - Hey Peter, Satan is preparing a direct assault upon your faith in the hope that it fails. (WHAT?!!!)
 - But I’ve been praying for you and you’re going to make it. (WHEW!)
 - And there are two things you need to do on the other side. (ANYTHING—TELL ME!)
 - Jesus exhorts Peter to “turn back” and “strengthen your brother.”
 - I find it interesting that Jesus mentions turning back because wouldn’t that be obvious? But not everyone who experiences a faith trial turns back. Some are so rattled by the experience that they question God’s goodness or their ability to believe. Others are so ashamed by their failure that they define themselves as failures. Jesus says, “Don’t let the failure deflect you or define you: turn back to Me.”
 - And further, Jesus commands Peter in his weakness to strengthen his

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brothers. This initially sounds counterintuitive to us. But it's in line with what Jesus said about how those who have been forgiven much love much. (Luke 7:47)

- iii. And as I mentioned earlier, on the other side of sifting is fruit that can feed others.
- VI. So what about us? What does this story have to say to us today?
- a. For starters, Satan hasn't retired. He still is working to choreograph trials with the agenda of seeing our faith fail.
 - b. Thankfully, Jesus also hasn't retired. He is still interceding for us that our faith will stand firm.
 - c. On the other side, we have two responsibilities: turn back and strengthen others.
 - d. [Call to turn back to Jesus and accept our assignment to strengthen others not as the perfect, but as the forgiven.]

Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week Five's Sermon Outline

1. Why do you think that the Scriptures consistently do not gloss over or hide the faults and failures of people of faith?
2. When the rooster crowed and Jesus made eye contact with Peter, what expression do you guess Peter saw on Jesus' face?
3. How do you normally respond to personal failure?
4. In your own words, what is Satan's agenda when he tries to sift us like wheat?
5. Read Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34b. In a time of trial, how might the knowledge that Jesus is interceding for you affect your choices?

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SERMON

6

Props: a seed, soil, in a clear bowl

Passage: John 19:41-42 *“At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”*

John 12:23-24 *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”*

Introduction: Next Sunday, we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection! My hope is that this **40 Day of Decrease** journey is preparing us to live in awe of that resurrection year-round. Today we will examine the most disillusioning space in the disciples’ lives: the days between Jesus’ death and resurrection. **40 Days of Decrease** addresses this experience on Day Thirty-Eight. We live this experience daily.

Read passages: John 12:23-24 and John 19:41-42

- I. The context
 - a. After Pilate confirmed that Jesus was dead (Mark 15:42-45), he gave Joseph of Arimathea the body of Jesus.
 - b. Joseph was “a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to [the Council’s] decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 23:50-51)
 - c. Joseph “bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock.” (Mark 15:46) (Matthew 27:61)
 - d. He then rolled a stone over the tomb’s entrance, all of which was witnessed by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joseph/Joses (Mark 15:47), the “women who had come with Jesus from Galilee” (Luke 23:55), and Nicodemus (John 19:39).
- II. The disciples’ challenge: obedience led them to a tomb
 - a. Imagine what it might have been like for the disciples to watch Jesus die and see Him buried.
 - b. Jesus had silenced storms, walked on water, delivered the demonized, raised the dead...and now His lifeless body hung on a cross.
 - c. Perhaps some thought He would rally in His final moments and silence His critics. But instead they all heard, “It is finished.” (John 19:30)
 - d. Finished. Surely they were in shock.

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

- e. Remember, later when angels would tell the women disciples that Jesus rose from the dead, the guys didn't believe it. They buried Jesus assuming they would never see Him again in this life.
 - f. The disciples buried their dearest dream in that tomb.
 - g. How did they feel? What were they thinking? Did they question their ability to "hear from God"? Did they rewind Jesus' words and fear they had somehow misunderstood Him? Do you think one or two were scrambling mentally to come up with a fallback career since the whole rule-with-Jesus gig didn't turn out the way they planned?
 - h. [Relay a personal story when obedience led you to unexpectedly painful places.]
- III. Jesus' provision: Learn from a seed
- a. [Reread John 12:23-24 as you illustrate by planting a seed in a bowl of soil. If you can, plant the same kind of seed weeks earlier and be prepared to show the plant that emerges at the end of your message.]
 - b. Kernels—sometimes called wheat berries—are the seeds from which wheat plants grow. Once planted, their original form is sacrificed in the process of germination as from one seed many more are produced.
 - c. In another of Dr. Alicia Britt Chole's books, ***Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours***, Alicia states the following: *Consider the growth of a plant. Before a gardener can enjoy a plant's fruit, she must tenderly and strategically attend to its root. So a plant's birth begins with its burial. The gardener commits a generally unremarkable seed to the silence of the soil, where it sits in stillness and lightlessness, hidden by the smothering dirt. Just when it appears as though death is imminent, its seeming decay reveals new life. The seed becomes less and yet more of its former self, and in that transformation takes hold of the darkness and reaches for the sun. All that is to come rests greatly upon the plant's ability to tightly and sightlessly develop roots in unseen places.* (p. 13)
 - d. Jesus' illustration is a clarion image of His death and resurrection, and it also holds wisdom for us when obedience leads us—as it did the disciples—to tombs.
- IV. Two truths we can hold on to when we're standing graveside
- a. The pain of the tomb cannot void the power of obedience.
 - i. Obedience is not sown in vain:
 - ii. It "is never a waste; it is an investment in a future we cannot see." (page 205)
 - b. God attends every burial and will be faithful to water every seed we sow in obedience. Invisible to us is not forgotten to Him.
- V. The rest of the story
- a. The disciples at their lowest point were unknowingly hours away from their greatest joy.
 - b. The distance may be longer for us, but God is the same.
 - c. Our job is to be faithful and to entrust what grows from our obedience to Him.
- VI. Our call today
- a. Will we trust Him in between the cross and the empty tomb?
 - b. As Jesus said after His resurrection: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

Five Discussion Questions for Life Groups from Week Six' Sermon Outline

1. What do you think might have prompted Joseph of Arimathea to ask for Jesus' body?
2. Have you ever buried a dream that you thought was inspired by God? If so, what questions did you have graveside?
3. Reflect on the quote from *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours*. What is meant by the phrase, "a plant's birth begins with its burial?"
4. Practically, if we do not see any fruit, in what ways is obedience still valuable?
5. Share any areas in your life currently in which you are walking by faith and not sight.

EASTER SUNDAY