

Rev Donald Macdonald - John 19 - Joseph of Arimathea

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read in the Gospel according to John chapter 19 and reading at verse 38.

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus and Pilate gave him permission.

It is always worth reminding ourselves why the apostle John wrote his Gospel.

You find this at the conclusion of his Gospel. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written.

That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and not by believing you may have life in his name.

[1 : 13] These are written, says John chapter 20, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John underlines in this chapter in the context of our text today, he who sought has borne witness.

His testimony is true and he knows that he is telling the truth that you, that as we, as a readership, may believe.

In other words, saving faith is the explicit goal of his witness to Jesus' death.

In the verse immediately preceding our text, he quotes from the prophecy of Zechariah. They will look on him whom they have pierced.

[2 : 11] The prophecy in Zechariah's prophecy goes on to state that they will mourn for him. And so John here gives us an example of two men of whom this becomes true.

Men who experienced saving blessing by looking to the Christ of the cross and responding in faith.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. John recounts for us that after Jesus bowed his head in death, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit and I tend to think of this as a regal act on the part of Christ.

He, unlike us, is not overpowered by death, but he gives himself to death. We may say more of that in the evening.

And note what John tells us about the Jews. Those who had absolutely no scruples about putting an innocent person to death, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 25] Yet they are so concerned that no offence be given by leaving the bodies on the cross going into the Jewish Sabbath.

Apparently the Roman practice was to leave the bodies to decompose in public view. But for those of a Jewish mindset, this would cause grave offence.

If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death and you hang him on a tree, his body, it was all written in the law, shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day.

For a hanged man is cursed by God. That's the way the law looked on someone who was hanged. Now you have to make a distinction here.

Yes Christ was cursed, but it's not that he was hanged that made him cursed. It's that he was cursed and then he was hung as the sin bearer.

[4 : 39] Everyone else who was hung on a cross was pronounced cursed. Christ was pronounced cursed and therefore he was hung on the cross.

You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance. Here are people who quite happily slandered the character of the innocent Jesus.

They brought trumped up charges against him, but now they are so godly that they do not wish to break the law. And so they plead, since it was the day of preparation and that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath, for that Sabbath was a high day.

The Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. And does that not tell us a lot about the heart of man?

You could perhaps give place to their scrupulous observance of their Sabbath, had they not been so ready to bring these charges and get rid of Christ at all costs.

[5 : 51] And so Pilate complies with their request and orders, for one of the better phrase the execution squad, to have the condemned men's legs broken, to hasten the process of death.

And the execution squad went to fulfil their orders, but when they came to Jesus, John tells us, saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and at once there came out blood and water.

And so you find this man, Joseph of Arimathea, approaching Pilate for permission to bury the body of Jesus.

Mark, in his Gospel, tells us that Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had already died. He obviously did not accept the word of Joseph of Arimathea because we are told that Pilate sent for the commanding officer of the execution squad and someone in the sanctuary and he asked him whether Jesus was already dead.

And when he learned from the sanctuary that he was dead, only then did he grant the corpse to Joseph. Now, we do not have a great deal of information about this man, Joseph of Arimathea, but I think that we can build a picture of him from the little information that the Bible gives us about him.

[7 : 31] It's only in the accounts of the burial of Jesus that you find a mention, but the details are quite revealing.

He belonged, we are told, to Arimathea, an otherwise unknown town in Judea. We know from Matthew's account that he was a rich man.

When it was evening, Matthew says, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph. He was also a person of influence and power.

He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Mark tells us Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council.

He also tells us that he was looking for the kingdom of God, which would suggest that he was living in expectation of a coming Messiah.

[8 : 30] Luke describes him as a good and a righteous man, and both Matthew and John label him as a disciple.

It's always useful to collate the information from all the Gospel writers when you are trying to find information about people who are written about in the Scriptures.

If you recap, from the information that is provided, we get the picture of a man of good character, a powerful, influential figure, a wealthy person, a person who was respected by his fellow men.

One who looked for a coming Messiah, one who could be tarnished, a disciple of Jesus. Well, I'd like to look a little more closely at what John draws our attention to about this man.

There are four simple thoughts I'd like to place before you. First of all, the condition of this man and his friend.

[9 : 44] He was a disciple in secret. Secondly, the cause of the condition. He was afraid.

Thirdly, the cost of his condition, and finally the cure for it. The condition, the cause, the cost, the cure.

The condition of this man and his friend, and John draws our attention to this fact, a disciple of Jesus, but secretly.

Is John drawing our attention to this detail because there is some merit in being a disciple in secret? Well, in my view, there is nothing to suggest that the Bible favors such a condition.

John paints a picture for us earlier in his Gospel in chapter 12 of a group of Jewish leaders who believed in Christ.

[10 : 50] They had listened to Jesus, and a conviction began to grow secretly in their heart that he could indeed be the promised Messiah, that he could indeed be the Christ.

But because of fear of others and the loss of position, they dare not acknowledge publicly that they believed.

They were afraid of the consequences. Nevertheless, John writes, many, even of the authorities believed in him, but he says, for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it.

So that there would not be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Was Joseph of Arimathea among this group? And it seems to me more than likely that he was.

[11 : 51] Once this group, there was a reluctance to publicly acknowledge Christ as Lord and Savior.

They feared being cast out of the society in which they were comfortable. But Christ demands that we go public without faith in him as Lord and Savior.

What he says is ashamed of me and of my words and this adulterous and sinful generation of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father and with the holy angels.

And so this group of apparently powerful individuals remained discreetly silent. And John states or writes, in my view, rather scavenily, for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Is that not a fearful indictment on any person who accepts that Jesus is Lord and Savior?

[13 : 13] But is so afraid of their fellow man that they will not publicly acknowledge that they believe in him to be their Savior?

In other words, they were more concerned about what man thought rather than what God thought. Is that true of anyone here today?

Would that be an accurate description of you? A disciple secretly but holding back from full commitment to Jesus?

Is that you? In your heart of hearts are you truly a disciple? Would you run willy to publicly acknowledge that fact in front of your fellow citizens in the community?

If you have heard his voice and believed on him, will you not follow the example of the man I used as an example last evening, the man blind from birth?

[14 : 29] Do you remember how he behaved when he was questioned by those in authority? He had received a sight. He stood up before the leaders of the people. He wasn't going to hide the fact for the very simple reason that he couldn't.

Before the change was so apparent. Before blind and now with vision. And so you have this glowing testimony to the power of Christ in changing his life.

One thing he says I know that though I was blind now I see and it's almost as if you can hear behind that I'm not going to hide this ever.

This is what this person did for me and everyone is going to know about it. Do you remember when he was questioned by Jesus?

Do you believe in the Son of Man? Do you remember he hadn't fully understood who Christ was until then? Sad, who is he that I may believe in?

[15 : 34] Jesus responds you have seen him and it is he who is speaking to you said Lord I believe and he worshiped him. And I love that sentence. He believed and he worshiped.

That was an indication of the measure of thanksgiving and praise and sense of indebtedness that was in the life of this man as he worshiped the Lord.

But you know Joseph I suppose didn't have motor vehicles in those days nor long after.

But he was like somebody driving with his brakes on spiritually. He wasn't going very far and when Jesus was judged by those in authority Luke tells us that Joseph refused to give us consent.

He had not consented that is to the decision and action of the Sanhedrin. And the implication that you get is that he abstained.

[16 : 48] In other words he sat on the fence. You often hear it in our parliament at times when there's something contentious people abstain.

You get it in lesser bodies than the August Parliament of the UK and people abstain. They're unwilling to come down on one side or the other of an issue.

Once what Joseph was doing in my view he was abstaining. He didn't wish to be branded or identified on one side or the other.

Let me ask you are you here today living in the fellowship of the uncommitted. Not willing to be branded or known as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you in other words sitting on the fence? If you were asked secretly would you respond that you know that Jesus is the Savior that you need?

[18 : 02] Really have you named him as your Lord and Savior? But all publicly is that a total different story?

Is that you today? Is there a lack of openness about your relationship with Jesus? You know the danger of sitting on the fence is that you fall on the side that you never intended coming down.

It's a big danger. It's a real danger. And God sends His servants to challenge this position. Remember Elijah on Mount Carmel.

Remember how they had gathered there as a nation. How the prophets of Baal and how Elijah taunted them. Telling them to cry out louder.

Maybe their God was asleep and so on. And then you remember how the sacrifice was saturated with water so that it seemed impossible that fire could ever burn.

[19 : 10] And then Elijah called on the God who answered from fire. And the flames came down. And not only was the sacrifice consumed but the altar and the stones and the trench that was around it that had been filled with water.

And you remember how Elijah just said how he challenged those who were gathered there. How long he says will you go limping between two different opinions.

And the same challenge has extended to every person who knows Christ but who is unwilling to profess Him.

Remember Joshua in his own day challenged the people of his own day. Choose this day he says whom you will serve. Whether the God's your father served in the region beyond the river.

Or the God's of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me. Remember what Joshua said. And my family.

[20 : 20] Or my household. We will serve the Lord. And you remember the people responded in that context. I would have thought Joshua would have been ecstatic but he wasn't.

Because he recognized that their initial response was not really true. And so he kept on with them.

Remember Christ's own words whoever is ashamed of me and of my words. Of him with the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of the Father and of the Holy Angels.

Well the condition a disciple in secret is a very dangerous place to be. Secondly the cause of the condition.

John tells us he was a disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews. The same thing is told us in chapter 12.

[21 : 22] The cause of the condition is fear. They feared being excluded from the synagogue. And the cause of the fear if you were charitable you might say it was understandable.

The cost of publicly following Christ was too great. And you notice that fear is too full. Yes they feared reprisal.

They feared expulsion from the society in which they moved. But they also craved human praise.

They wanted popularity. Let's face it none of us want to be unpopular. Who wants to be made a scapegoat by other people?

None of us. And undoubtedly given this man Joseph's reputable reputation he had enjoyed worldly accolades for much of his life.

[22 : 23] How difficult then for this man to publicize faith in Jesus Christ when he could lose the approval for which he had worked so hard to gain.

And what is at stake here is this you have to decide whether to fear man more than to fear God.

And that's what I believe Jesus was challenging people like Joseph of Arimathea with. For at the heart of secrecy is this that he was ashamed of Jesus.

That's what caused the secrecy. Why should anybody be ashamed of Christ when you read of what Christ has done and accomplished on behalf of sinners.

It's extraordinary that anyone would be ashamed to be known as his disciple. And yet there is that inner sense of shame.

- [23 : 29] I believe perhaps dormant in some hearts and it only becomes alive when you are challenged in a very public situation and you realize that that seed is in your heart.
- Perhaps you never thought it was there and you reluctant to admit where you are standing and who you belong to. Well the mark of secret discipleship living constantly consistently with quiet godliness for Jesus.
- Facing the challenge of a godless world to use another illustration you're not to hide your light under a basket but you're to shine for Jesus.
- That doesn't mean that you're to be in everybody's face every time. In other words trying to prove to them that you're a Christian. You're to let your life and your actions and your mannerisms and your speech demonstrate what you are and who you are that you belong to Christ.
- But as I've already said the symptom of this fear is this. What will people think more than what will God think?
- [25 : 04] The cause of the condition is fear. To fear wholehearted obedience to Christ. To come right out for Christ.
- To burn your boat so to speak. And people think that that is going to cause great loss.
- They are blinded to the huge benefits to be found in union by faith with Christ.
- And they're prepared to see life with Christ publicly in a negative light. That's the devil's lie. Because there is true freedom and true joy and true riches that are found in living with Christ.
- Spurgeon warns that when a Christian begins to question what will people say rather than what will God say?
- [26 : 08] Can you have introduced a weakening element into your life? Can you have confidence that you are really born again if you don't come out publicly on the side of Christ?
- If anyone would come after me let them deny himself. Take up his cross daily and follow me. The cause and the condition.
- What about the cost? Must there a cost? Well I believe very much that there was a cost. As Joseph of Arimathea looks back over the past three years he must have thought what he had lost by his hesitant half-hearted discipleship.
- No doubt in my mind that he lost the blessing of fellowship and wholehearted commitment to Jesus for three years.
- Jesus had been among the people of Judea teaching, performing miracles, setting hearts free. We don't know from the Bible when Joseph first encountered Christ.
- [27 : 24] But we do know that his friend Nicodemus had met with the Lord in the early days of Jesus ministry.
- John reminds us in this very context in case we have forgotten about that earlier encounter Nicodemus also who earlier had come to Jesus by night.
- And the implication is that he came by night because of the fear of being seen publicly with Jesus by day. But there is more than that I believe in the statement.
- There is also implied in it that he was still in spiritual darkness. As becomes very obvious from his ensuing conversation with Jesus in that early encounter.
- That he came by night is a fact that John continues to mention each time he mentions Nicodemus in his Gospel.
- [28 : 27] You can't help but wonder why John always appends this description to Nicodemus. And you remember it was in that some of the most powerful statements were made by Christ in the conversation between himself and Nicodemus.

One of the statements that gave Browneau Northe, famous evangelist, the text of a lifetime, you must be born again. You probably all heard the story and he was asked why did he always take the same text for the sermon.

And of course the answer he gave was because you must be born again. It's very logical. You must be born again. There is no getting away from it.

He never tired of proclaiming it. And it's in that conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus that we find perhaps what is one of the best known and most frequently quoted texts in the Bible.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. I suppose a verse that is the closest summation that you can get of the Gospel if you are asked to put it in one verse.

[29 : 42] Well they lost the blessing of serving the Lord Jesus Christ. They lost the personal experience of the treasures that are in Jesus Christ.

And no loss in so many ways is so sad as the loss experienced by a man or a woman, a boy or a girl who goes so far but then drives with the brakes on.

Joseph and Nicodemus had forfeited the fellowship that comes by living boldly for Christ in the world.

They forfeited the blessing of Christian fellowship that they should have with other Christians. The late Jim Boyce, the minister in America, he died at a comparatively young age but his writings are very warm and if you are not familiar with Boyce and you are looking for a book to read, get a book by Boyce and you will find that his books are very devotional and wholeheartedly warm and they will help you in your Christian life.

And he makes the observation about other Christians they are with Christ. But if you are like Joseph or Nicodemus, you are not with Christ and by extension then you are not with other Christians.

[31 : 16] And the old illustration of the lump of coal or peat falling out of the fire and it loses and some of the days when people are open fires and not so common today, it loses its glow, begins to smoke and it ultimately becomes dead ash.

They sit back on the fire and it begins to glow again. Christians need the fellowship of other Christians. They need to be together.

You know, when you want the best of both worlds, my belief is you get the best of neither. Christ spoils for you the world around you and you spoil that world by holding back from Christ.

Now, you might be here today and you might be saying, ah, but minister, Christians don't live up to that calling. And in my view, that objection assumes that you are yourself superior to Christians.

And although you might not stated in such blunt terms, if you realize that Christians are sinners, then you should realize that you too are a sinner in need of the same grace that Jesus bequeaths to every person who trusts in him.

[32 : 37] You need to be with other sinners who are growing in grace through their open profession of Christ and says the Reuter to the Hebrews.

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

How much better if your secret discipleship come to an end and you begin to live openly for Jesus, giving him the glory of your life.

The cost of half-hearted discipleship that remain secret because of fear, fathed in, the blessing that could be used.

Finally the cure for it on my time has gone. Is there a cure? Yes. For Joseph, the cure came this day that is spoken of by John.

[33 : 42] It's worth noticing how they honored Christ. You know they did so when most had forsaken and flared.

They did so, they honored him when it was perhaps dangerous to do so. No doubt, both incurred great personal danger by being associated with Jesus in this way at this particular time.

Yet they took in hand the burial of Jesus when there was no possibility, humanly speaking, of being rewarded for doing so.

There was no expectation of payment when they did it. Have you thought about that? Because I believe it's a demonstration of love and action on the part of these men.

Strangely there is no further mention of them in the Bible. Where they ostracized as they feared. I don't know.

[34 : 59] What was the cure? I'm going to suggest that the cure came about by what they saw at Calvary.

Their minds had previously accepted the truth about Jesus, but the reservations were conquered only by the majesty of his atoning death and the love of God that it revealed.

And it seems to me that at last they grasped the significance of what Christ was about. Because as John writes in his letter, and this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Spurgeon makes the comment, is it not a remarkable thing that all the life of Jesus did not draw out unopened? I think the word he used was above unopened acknowledgement from Joseph.

When you think of the Lord's miracles, his marvelous discourses, his poverty, his self-regnunciation, his glorious life of holiness and benevolence, all which may have helped to build Joseph in his secret faith.

[36 : 23] But it wasn't sufficient to develop in him the bold acknowledgement and public confession of faith.

The shameful death of the cross had greater power over Joseph than all the beauty of Christ's life.

He begins to recognize that his suffering is for sinners. And you remember how the hymn writer put it, when I surveyed the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my riches gain like I count but loss and pour content on all my pride.

He began to recognize something of that love and it reached into his heart. And so they come to Pilate with the request and in doing so they are making a statement, I believe.

What's the statement? They are saying to Pilate, we are Christ's man. Now, how do you find yourself in a passage like this?

[37 : 43] Here we have striking proof of the declaration that Jesus makes prior to his crucifixion. I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

None of us know the heart of the person sitting next to you today, but deep down in the secret places of your heart, how is it between you and Christ?

Is there a divided spirit? Is your vote to abstain? You know one day there will be no room for abstentions.

Are you driving with your foot on the brake? Your eyes somewhere else spiritually. I am going to conclude with this little note and as way past my time I will be in trouble.

Stan Telfshan, perhaps you have heard about him. He was a Jew. He wrote a book and the title of the book was Betrayed.

[38 : 47] His daughter Judy came to faith in Christ and Stan felt deeply betrayed by his daughter.

He was absolutely enraged. What she said to him, I believe in the Bible, I believe it is the word of God and I believe that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah and so this man resolved to read the New Testament.

He already had the Old Testament. To disprove his daughter's faith in Jesus Christ became a futile resolution. That's what the book is about because he too came to faith in Christ.

Joseph of Armafia, disciple for Jesus but secretly for fear. Or if that is you, are you persuaded to go public?

For listen to what Jesus says. Truly I say to you, there is no one. I think of what he says, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many more times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

[40 : 15] No, he is not asking you to abandon your duties as a husband or a wife or a mother or anything like that. He is not asking you to dissolve family ties but what he is asking you to do is to put Christ at the very foremost of your life so that you are subservient to him above all else.

So if you are persuaded in your heart and in your mind that Christ is your Lord and your Savior, why don't you publicly acknowledge him as yours?

And you do that by coming to the table of the Lord. The condition of this man, a disciple in secret, the cause of his conditioned fear, the cost of it, the loss of many blessings, the cure for it, of the Christ, of the cross.

Let us pray. O Lord we thank thee for thine own truth again today and we pray that we may hear it as your truth and hear your voice addressing us and the glory shall be thine.

In Jesus name we ask it.