

I Want to Be in That Thunder: The Gospel as Warfare

John 12:27-43

By [Russell Moore](#)

Would you please turn in your Bibles to the gospel of John 12. I'd like for us to look this morning at verses 27 through 43 in John chapter 12. While you're turning there, let me tell you what a joy it is to be in a place that I pray for all the time, a pulpit that is occupied every week by one of my heroes of the faith, Ligon Duncan, and a congregation that so faithfully is present here. I can tell you, apart from the Lord Jesus, His Church, His Gospel, and my family, there is nothing in the world I love more than Mississippi and it is an answer to ongoing prayer to know that this congregation is standing here in the capital city of this great state proclaiming the blood and righteousness and forgiveness and kingdom and mercy and power of Jesus Christ. So I thank you for that.

Let's read in John chapter 12. I'd like for us to start with verse 17 to set some of the background here. John chapter 12 beginning with verse 17. Would you please stand out of reverence for the reading of the Word of our God?

The crowd that had been with Him (with Jesus) when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet Him was that they heard He had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him."

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My servant be also. If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Your name."

Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it

again." The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to Him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for Mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself." He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die. 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?" 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. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."

When Jesus had said these things, He departed and hid Himself from them. Though He had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in Him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."

Isaiah said these things because he saw His glory and spoke of Him. Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in Him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they 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.

Let's pray.

Our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I ask You this morning, would you silence every spirit that exalts its name over the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? Father, would You silence the accusations of the accuser? Would you silence the deceptions of the deceiver? Would you turn back the destruction of the destroyer? And Father, may we this morning through Your Word overcome through the blood of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ? Would You speak, 'Let there be light'? And we ask this Father, to the glory of our Lord Christ alone and in His name. Amen.

You may be seated.

I could feel the blood pounding in my temples and my hands were shaking there on the steering wheel. I had been driving down the road with a young man that I was talking to about some spiritual things and some issues in his life and apparently I had, as I sometimes do, gotten kind of involved in the conversation to the degree that I wasn't really paying much attention to where I was going and how I was driving. And apparently I was not driving fast enough for the guy who was behind me because he came around in the other lane and kind of lurched over a little bit toward me so that I had to lurch into the other lane to my other side which was right there with the oncoming traffic. The car had veered away just to miss him, hitting me head-on, and I was so caught up in the fury of the moment that before I knew what was happening and before I had any time to even think it through or articulate anything at all, I heard my own voice yelling, screaming, "I'm going to find you and I'm going to sue you!" And then I looked around at this young man that I had baptized and disciplined and "then I'm going to witness to you and share Jesus with you." (laughter)

That bothered me at the moment because it seemed so dissonant from what I had just been trying to do — to encourage him what it is to walk in the way of the Lord Jesus Christ. I've got to confess to you, it also bothered me because it made me feel like a complete wimp. I thought about my dad back here in Mississippi and thought, "What would he have done in a similar situation?" Well, he might have yelled out, "I'm going to find you and I'm going to knock your teeth out!" but I had said something different — "I'm going to find you and I'm going to sue you!" Where did that come from? I've never sued anybody before! And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that without my even knowing it, I had been shaped and patterned by the culture around me, and what was really happening was I had just found what I considered to be a civilized form of warfare. And because I was threatened and I was afraid, I lashed out with the only kind of power that I believed at the time I could have appropriately had because I wanted to be in the right. I wanted things to be made right.

And the more I thought about that and how capable I was at an instinctual level of fighting, I realized that the real problem is not that I was too much of a fighter. The problem is that I'm not nearly enough of a fighter. The warfare that the Lord Jesus had called me to, the very kind of warfare that I had just been talking about with this young, new Christian is a warfare that the Scripture says over and over and over again is entirely different from the way that we want to engage in our little warfares all the time. Now there's probably not many of you who have threatened a lawsuit this week, probably not many of you who have been in a fight or in a brawl, but most of you in this room have had the experience of responding to something that scares you or threatens you with whatever kind of power you can find in a way to prop up and to maintain your own rightness, your own glory. For some of you, that takes place in your household. Some of you will erupt in a fury in your home. Some of you will have a very cool kind of warfare - "Well if you don't know what's wrong, I am certainly not going to tell you." For some of you there is a temptation in your workplace to seethe in fury at a

coworker or a supervisor, to maintain your own position with an almost instinctively primal kind of force. Jesus shows us consistently in the Scripture that the fight and the scrimmage He has called us to is a fight and a scrimmage that is far more ancient and far more primal than any of the sinful strivings that we try to engage in.

Notice what the apostle John tells us in this text. He tells us that the crowds are coming after Jesus. As a matter of fact, it's not just the crowds of Jewish people there but you also have Greeks who are coming in from afar. There's attention, interest in Jesus and in His preaching. As a matter of fact, John tells us that much of this interest has happened because Jesus has just done something extraordinary. He has raised His friend Lazarus from the dead and that word starts to ripple through everywhere. Here He is, He is present, and as John tells us, this is the last time that he gives us this picture of the crowds coming around in this very same way because the text is about to get very, very lonely. Jesus is headed toward execution. He is headed toward that "place of the skull," that Golgotha hill on which He is going to be crucified. And as the drumbeat starts moving toward the cross, John shows us that there are those who are declaring war of Jesus and on what Jesus represents. But the interesting thing is that Jesus does not declare war on them. Jesus instead points to another war, a war that is not obvious, a war that is invisible, but a war in which the stakes could not be higher. And they did not want to hear it.

Notice first of all that John tells us here that this way of the cross, the way that Jesus is going, calls us to a crucified fear. All in the background here there is a sense of fear. John says that the religious leaders, that the Pharisees are very fearful of Jesus - "Look at Him, He's getting all of these crowds. The people are going after Him. As a matter of fact, they say the whole world is wanting to follow after Him. We're going to lose our position. We're going to lose our power. We're going to lose everything that is meaningful to us." They're afraid. He says that even the authorities who believe what Jesus is saying, they will not confess Him because they are afraid of being put out of the synagogues. They are afraid of the Pharisees. The fear is pointing them away from Jesus and from the kingdom that He is preaching.

Right now, you and I are sitting in this room with a sign out front announcing that we are here. There is no fear of authorities; there is no fear of being driven away from here. Our brothers and sisters right now in China and in Sudan are gathered together, many of them, waiting for the sounds of boots outside. I wonder what it will look like if, God forbid, fifty, sixty, seventy years from now the children who are now in the nursery here at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi have to worship in a culture that regards them as a dangerous cult? What will fear do to the proclamation of the Gospel and to following after Jesus? The people are afraid and the fear drives them away from Jesus Himself.

But it's not only the fear here of the people and of the leaders, John also points

us to Jesus Himself. Notice what Jesus says in verse 27. He says, “Now is My soul troubled.” Literally, “in anguish” or “tossed about.” Now that’s the very same kind of language that you see Jesus using right before He is arrested in which He is praying out there in that olive garden in Gethsemane. Jesus says, “I am in anguish.” Why would Jesus, the very one who said to us, “Be troubled for nothing,” now say, “I am troubled”? Why would the one who said, “Take no care for tomorrow; don’t worry about tomorrow” now speak about worry, about being tossed about, about being troubled? Is Jesus afraid of death? No. When Jesus confronts these religious leaders He does not back down at all. He has no fear of them. When Jesus goes before the Sanhedrin later on, He has no fear of them. When Pilate brings Jesus before him, Jesus has no fear of him at all. As a matter of fact, He says that “there is not one thing that you can do to Me that hasn’t been given to you by My Father.”

Jesus has no fear of all of these things, but when He looks toward the purpose for which He came, the cross, He says, “I am in great distress.” Why? Because Jesus never told us, “Do not fear.” “A fool is one who does not fear,” the Proverbs tell us. Jesus says, “Do not fear what cannot hurt you. Do not fear the one who can kill the body,” Jesus says — Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, the crowds — He says, “Fear the one who can cast both body and soul into hell.” And Jesus knows as He looks toward the heavens that where He is walking is toward hell. He is walking toward the crossbeams in which He will have laid upon Himself all of the sins of His people, all of the curse that is directed toward them that is on its way at the cross. And Jesus says, “When I think about the judgment of God, I am in great distress and troubled, but what am I going to do, Father, say, ‘Save me from this hour’? No. I came for this hour. Father, do what You will, not what I will.”

John is writing this, the best friend of our Lord, the one who, as he is writing this would have known what it looked like to see those muscles twitching in torture. He would have known what it sounded like to hear that northern-Galilean accent screaming, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” He would have known what it felt like to feel that warm blood spattering against his face as he held the collapsing figure of our Lord Jesus’ mother. He understood something of the horror of what Jesus is facing but Jesus’ troubled mind here isn’t about pain. It’s about knowing the terror of the Lord. The people here are afraid of all kinds of things but what they are not afraid of is the only thing there is to fear, which is the judgment of a holy God. He calls us to another fear.

But the way of the cross also calls us to a crucified power. All in the background here is a discussion of power, of what it means to have power. The crowds are coming around Jesus because of the signs that they want to see Jesus doing something. They want to see something extraordinary. They are hoping that He might be the King that He is talking about as though He is. Why? Because they want His power to do something for them. They want to drive out the Romans. They want to drive out that puppet government. They want to do away with all of the troubles and the travails that they have. And Jesus indeed does speak about

power here, but it's a very different kind of power. He says, "Father, I want You to glorify Your name." If I were standing there I am sure that what I would have wanted is what Jesus' disciples so often want — shock and awe. Bring down the fire from heaven! Drive out these wicked people who are all around us!

But the voice comes back from heaven and says, "I have glorified it, I will glorify it again." And the people there, hearing this voice, don't even recognize the power behind the voice. They turn around and say to each other, "Did you hear that?" "Yeah, umm, it might have been an angel. That is thunder; it was just thunder. They've been talking about thunderstorms. When you haven't slept in a while you just start imagining things. It's just thunder. That's all it is." They reassure themselves. This surely can't really be God because if it is God they have to deal with what God is saying and God is dealing with the kind of power that is very different from the kind of power that they want because Jesus says, "I'll show you the power. Now is the judgment of this world." They want the judgment on Rome. They want the judgment on their enemies. He said, "Now is the ruler of this world cast out." And people must have said to themselves, "Great! Caesar is finally about to be deposed!"

But Jesus is pointing to something that is deeper, something that is worse than Caesar. He says, "There is a ruler of this age who is holding humanity captive. And how is he holding humanity captive? By accusation. Every single man and every single woman is scrutinized by these principalities and powers who bring the accusation — 'You belong with us in the lake of fire devoted to us from before the world was. You share a nature with us. You are guilty. You are guilty. You are guilty.'" And every single human conscience knows that they are right and we slink back into hiddenness, every single human conscience but one. Jesus says elsewhere, "The ruler of this world is coming. He has nothing on Me." And He said, "The power that I am going to show you is a power that comes when I am lifted up." John says this indicates how it is that He is going to die. The power comes in the death. He says, "When I am lifted up, when the blood has silenced that accusation by fulfilling the righteous law of God is fulfilling the condemnation that comes against sin, I will draw all people to Myself."

The Pharisees were worried about Jesus' power and they said, "Let us show you where His power is. We can't do anything because the whole world is following after Him." Jesus said, "No, no, no, no, no — this is nothing. But when I am lifted up, when the Gospel goes forward, then you will see the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes." So that every time that woman in Haiti walks away from Santeria and confesses Jesus as Lord, every time that that Chinese person walks away from materialistic communism and confesses Jesus as Lord, every time that that self-righteous southern Presbyterian or southern Baptist walks away from his own righteousness and confesses Jesus as Lord, every time that happens, rippling out through the centuries and all over the world, Jesus is demonstrating the power of the cross. It is a power that is different than the power they want but it pierces through. And to be honest with you, often it is

different than the power you and I want.

We look at our neighbors. We see those Darwin fish bumper stickers. Have you ever seen those, in which they take the Jesus fish and they put Darwin in the middle of it and they put the little legs coming out of it like it's an evolving fish? That makes us mad. We see our neighbors with those Darwin fish and we get aggravated with them. They're picking an argument with us. So what do we do? We go have our own bumper stickers made with the Jesus fish eating the Darwin fish! (laughter) So we're going to have even more Darwinism than what you have! And Jesus wins the survival of the fittest! We become angry at our neighbors rather than understanding they are just like we were - captives to the blindness that Jesus says comes upon people who cannot see the truth because they fear that the truth is true. You and I were in exactly the same situation. And what is the power that breaks through that? It is not our rage, it is not our arguments, it is not our sophistication, it is not our programs. Is it the simple proclamation of the Gospel that Jesus says brings light, it dispels the darkness, it enables us to walk in the light that is being given to us by grace.

Some of you feel very powerless right now because you have maybe a mother or maybe a son or maybe a friend who doesn't know Christ and you're concerned about. And you say, "I don't even know what else to do. This person already knows the Gospel. I try to talk about the Gospel but he already knows it all or she already knows it all. There's nothing else for me to say." And what we want is some type of an argument that will tear them down, some type of a strategy that is foolproof to get through to them. And yet none of us came to Christ that way. I wonder how many of you in this room were saved the very first time you heard the Gospel. Most of us heard the Gospel over and over and over again and then one day something happened that was different than when we had ever heard the Gospel before. There was a power there that was not there before. And what was the power? Was the power another argument? Wait a minute — so there're five hundred witnesses to the resurrection? You see, I didn't know that. Just as I am without one plea. That's not what happened with most of us. For most of us it was exactly what Jesus is talking about. There is a flooding in of this light so that the blindness that came upon us, the veil that was over our face, is released. The power of God to salvation but it is a crucified power. Your lost son and daughter, your lost mother or father, your lost husband or wife, your lost friend doesn't need any other power than the Gospel. It's crucified power.

And you'll notice finally that this way of the cross calls us to a crucified glory. See, everybody here on this page is seeking after some kind of glory. They're seeking after some kind of way to be applauded and some way to be made to be seen to be in the right. And Jesus says, "No, no, no, I'm not concerned about that. I'm concerned about the Father glorifying His own name. I'm concerned about the glory that Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple, the very same glory Jesus says will soon be crucified on wood, high and lifted up." "The crowds," the Scripture says, "are not willing to follow after Jesus."

Verse 43 — and why? “Because they love the glory that came from man more than the glory that came from God.” They loved their own glory so much that they could not see the glory that was right in front of them. They could not see the weightiness that is right there in front of them. They were blinded just as the prophet had announced. They were deaf just as the prophet had foreseen. And they could not see and embrace what is glorious — the Gospel.

Most of us, when we think glory, think of fame and celebrity and for some people that is what glory is. The glory that you could be seeking could just as much be - the stability of your family apart from Christ, your faithfulness to your job apart from Christ, your service to the church apart from Christ. You can be seeking glory as a homeschooling mom or as a salt-of-the-earth plumber just as much as these Pharisees were and just as much as someone who is craving after power is. But what does Jesus say? The glory must be crucified in order to be seen. The glory comes through the way of the cross.

There're some of you here this morning who may still be strangers to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. You may still have a conscience that speaks to you and indicts you with the certainty that you will one day stand in judgment if you will stand alone. The voice of warfare speaks to you and the voice of warfare that Jesus speaks, the declaration that Jesus makes of war is not against you, it's against those principalities and powers who are holding you captive right now through your own desires and through the fact that they are able to bring against you that bill of indictment and because they are right Jesus says to you, “If you will acknowledge God's rightness in His judgment against you, if you will cry out for mercy, if you will count the blood of Jesus as enough to pay for your sins, and if you will count the resurrection life of Jesus as enough to send you into the future of rightness before God, you will be delivered, you will be freed, you will be liberated from the very thing that perhaps you've never even known is holding you in captivity.”

And for the rest of us in the room, those of us who have come to know Jesus, are we as confused as the people who were around Jesus all the time, who saw Him washing His beard out in the morning, who knew the color of His eyes? Are we as confused as they can be? Are we too afraid to fear what Jesus feared? Some of you in this room fear exposure of your sin more than you fear God. Repent. Are we too powerful to see the power of the cross? Are we seeking some way to make our own way in life rather than being willing for the sake of the Gospel for God to crush all of our own dreams if He will be faithful to Himself and to conform us to the image of Christ? Are we too glorious to see the glory of Christ? Do we, instead of looking toward what it is that God has accomplished in defeating our enemy through the Gospel, are we too concerned about our own reputation and our own privilege and our own standing? In the middle of all that confusion a voice cries out. The voice that cried out from the heavens — “I have glorified My name and I will glorify it again” yells out again in the Word He has breathed out to us. “Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heaven laden, and I will give you

rest. But to the serpent who stands to accuse you, I will crush his head.” That's just thunder. It's just thunder, isn't it?
Let's pray.

Father we pray and ask this morning that if there are those in this room who are at war with You rather than at war with You, Father I pray and ask that You might stir their consciences to see that. Father I pray for those this morning who are too prideful to admit a need for the Gospel. And Father I pray for those who are too despairing to think that the Gospel can save them. Father we know right now that in this room are idolaters and fornicators and thieves, murderers. Father we know that right now in this room there may be women who have had abortions, men who have paid for abortions, people who have broken up marriages, ruining the lives of children. Father, there are things that we could list on and on and on and on and we know that the demonic spirits would love nothing more than for the people who are guilty of such awful things to shrink back in fear of You rather than to see what You have done in the cross of Jesus. And Father I pray that every single one of those people in that situation will know that if they are in Christ there is no condemnation, judgment has been handed down already and is over. Father, for those of us who know what it is to walk with You, would You remind us that we are not in peacetime, we're in war. And Father, would you help us not to war against each other and certainly not to war against You, but help us to wrestle with principalities and powers in the heavenly places and with ourselves that we might see the cross. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

(Dr. Duncan) We've been called from peace to a fight, from the wrong war to the right war, from dependence upon ourselves to the crucified power, so let's sing a song for the fight. Would you turn with me to number 570 and we'll sing the first, third, and fourth stanzas of *Faith of Our Fathers*.

(Dr. Moore) In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God and all things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was light and the light was the light of men and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Go in His grace and go in His truth. Amen.

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