

GOD ON MY TERMS

Expositional Study

John 12:12-19

Written By

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I want to begin this study by showing you a clip from the life of Jesus; namely, His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Believe me, there is nothing better than sight and sound to give you a good idea of what the written text is speaking about. All too easily we read the historical account of the life of Christ and fail to realize how real these events were. That's where audio-visuals come in. So let's remember that wonderful day for just a brief moment as we watch this short video lead-in.

Using a pen and a papyrus, the Apostle John captured this magnificent moment in Jesus' life with these words:

¹²On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and *began* to shout, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel." ¹⁴Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, ¹⁵"FEAR NOT, DAUGHTER OF ZION; BEHOLD, YOUR KING IS COMING, SEATED ON A DONKEY'S COLT." ¹⁶These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him. ¹⁷So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify *about Him*. ¹⁸For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him" (John 12:12-19).

Having both seen and read these words, one thing is readily apparent: As Jesus approached Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover, there were varying responses to His person and work. I don't know about you, but I see three distinct ones.

First, there is what I'd call **The Fickle**. You just saw them. They were the ones throwing palm branches down in front of Jesus based upon Zechariah's prophecy in chapter 14. Here the prophet foretold that when the Messiah came to rule the world the nation would observe the Feast of Tabernacles, which was, in turn, associated with palm branches. It was, to them, an electric, emotional moment, something nobody wanted to miss. After all, they had been waiting since Adam and Eve fell in the garden for this Messiah to come as prophesied (Gen. 3:15). In their minds that day the waiting room was closed.

Second, we have **The Fuzzy**. These were the people closest to Jesus, His disciples. Every day they were with him. They ate meals together. They walked lonely dusty roads together. They picked His divine mind and He took advantage of every opportunity to teach them about what it means to follow God. Surely, if anybody was in the spiritual know it was these men, right? Wrong. As we encountered in our study of the book of Matthew, it was the disciples who just couldn't come to terms with the concept that He must die before He was crowned King. He told them several times, but seems like Mary was the only one who really got the big picture. They were too captivated by all the other prophesies to focus on the ones which cramped their theological system.

Third, you can't help but see the group I'll label **The Furious**. These were the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Imagine, the people who should have warmly and joyously embraced the Messiah resented and rejected Him because He dared to challenge their tweaked teaching and rock their ecclesiastical boat. And as we see here, when it came to Jesus pulling away their parishioners, well, that was just too much. Something must be done to stop Him.

Throughout time these three types of people have always been with us. They are in every city, sitting in every church. None excluded. They are not readily identifiable all of the time. In fact, like a chameleon, they tend to blend into the religious woodwork. Theology may pour from their lips, religious zeal may ooze from the every pore, yet they may be on a channel altogether different from that of Christ. As you think about these three classes of worshippers, and for some of them I use the latter phrase loosely, collectively they teach us a sobering truth: *False views of Jesus easily grow in the soil of selfish, misguided motivations*. You might need to read that one more time and let it sink into the soil of your heart and mind. Makes you, also, want to ask yourself some personal, really searching questions: "Am I just emotionally caught up with this religious thing because of, say, who I'm dating or engaged to?" Do I tend to just embrace the biblical texts I enjoy, while shunning or neglecting ones which tend to challenge my theological assumptions and conclusions? Am I almost robotically wedded to religious traditions, be what they may, to the point I cannot or will not even consider what the Bible actually says about the person and work of Jesus, the Christ?

Now, I've walked with God long enough to realize that some might be nodding their heads in agreement and saying under the breath: Yeah, that's right. Go get 'em pastor. There are some people who need to do some soul searching. Yep. I hope what you are going to say today is going to finally ring their bell." To you I would say, Hold on. Might your prayer be that God would ring your bell to areas where you are selective or distorted in your view of who Jesus is and why He came to earth in the first place.

So, please, don't brush off these three Palm Sunday models, and please don't brush these questions off. Entertain them. Investigate them. Ruminant on them. Why? Two reasons: One, how you answer it can and will determine the destiny of your soul. Two, how you answer it can and will determine the growth of your soul.

Question is, Which group do you belong to? The best way to find out is to work our way through them one by one.

Group #1: The Fickle (John 12:12-13, 17-18)

You know this story well, but for our purposes in this study, let's remember the basic kernels of historical truth for a moment.

If you will look back up to verse 1 of chapter 12 you will notice that it says, "*Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany ...*" Now bearing in mind that the Jewish clock ran from sunset to sundown, the fact that many things transpired between his coming to Bethany and his triumphal entry (Jesus visits with friends, people spread the word that he is in town, people travel from Jerusalem to Bethany to see him and Lazarus, and that news of Jesus and Lazarus makes it back to the chief priests), and the fact that 12:12 states that the Triumphal Entry began on the next day, we must conclude that Jesus possibly arrived Friday after sunset and took his entry into Jerusalem on Sunday after the Sabbath. This would certainly allow ample time for all the events that are stated to transpire. In any event, 12:12 states that as Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem He encountered "the great crowd that had come for the Feast." The feast mentioned here is, no doubt, the Passover.

According to Jewish law, Jews had to travel to Jerusalem three times a year; once for Passover, once for Tabernacle, and once for Pentecost.



Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, who wrote not too many years after the death of Christ, estimated that Jerusalem at Passover time could swell with some 2,700,000 people. Now while his figures are frequently inflated, he is correct in saying hyperbolically that the city was crowded as were the roads. Conservative scholars estimate that there were probably around 300,000 people in Jerusalem for this particular Passover.

So Jesus set out that day from Bethany to Jerusalem on roads that were jam-packed with worshippers, but this day was different because the people had come to proclaim him as the new Messiah of Israel. John gives us the account from the perspective of Jerusalem worshippers, while the synoptic gospels present it from the perspective of the Bethany worshippers (Matt. 21; Mark 11; Luke 19). Somewhere on this mountainous road, on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent his disciples to get him a colt to ride on (Luke 19:29-34). From what Luke tells us, the disciples threw their outer garments on the animal with great joy which Jesus rode on, and they eagerly followed him. Then as Jesus went down the western slope of the Mount of Olives and approached the Kidron Valley, Jerusalem Jews began to pour out of the eastern gate of the Temple and mingle jubilantly with the Bethany worshippers.

They took palm branches in their hands, which was a sign of military victory, and sang and shouted a familiar proclamation.

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel! (John 12:13).

This ringing cry, which bounced off the walls of the mountains, was part of a Praise Psalm that had been used for many years during the worship of Passover. Here the people quoted from Psalm 118:26a as they attributed it to Jesus Christ. What they were saying in effect is this: Jesus we believe that you are the Messiah because no one else could raise a man from the dead like you did! You catch a glimpse of this thinking down in verses 17-18. The fact Lazarus was walking and talking was a tremendous proof of Christ's power. So they shouted.

Hosanna comes from the Hebrew *yashah* which means *to save*, and translated here it means "Save now!" Thus, the people asked for the Lord to bring salvation of the physical, national sort. They wanted deliverance from Rome, they knew the Lord had promised to send a powerful deliverer, and surely Jesus must be the God-ordained man because he raised a man from the dead!

But herein we encounter their false view of Jesus Christ. They only wanted him for what he could produce. They only wanted him to be the new king of Israel. And they, obviously, only wanted to think about what they wanted to when it came to prophetic Scriptures. They weren't concerned about their sin, but a Savior who could deliver them from their enemies ... so they shouted with joy for Christ on Palm Sunday, but at the end of the week we hear this in the book of Luke:

Pilate, therefore, willing to release Jesus, spoke again to them [i.e., the Jews]. But they cried saying, Crucify him! Crucify him! (Luke 23:20-21).

What happened? They had allowed their selfish and sinful motives to push the Messiah into their mold, and when he didn't fit they discarded Him.

Be honest with yourself for a minute. Are you like the friendly, yet fickle followers of Jesus Christ? To answer this question, I propose we ask another one: What is the fickle person like? Three things come to my mind.

First, they are usually temporal. By that I mean, like a disposable camera or razor, there is just no way they are going to be around for the spiritual long haul. They are, as we would say, a flash in the pan, or a meteorite streaking brilliantly across the sky. They sing with you, worship with you, cry with you, why, they can even recite verses as these people did ... with you. Yet, in the final analysis there is no "sticktuitiveness" to them. Why? They want God on their terms. They want Him to act like how they think He should act. They want a God who doesn't disturb their world, who doesn't demand a whole lot from their lives, who fits into their political/social worldview, who doesn't have anything to do with pain and suffering, and who isn't exclusive and absolutist but embracing and accepting of any and all views. But when He does not act like they want Him to, or His teaching contradicts their teaching, then they hit the ejection button.

Believe me, I've seen my share of these folks. They are with you until you, as a pastor, teach something from the Word of God which runs counter to their pliable, flexible worldview, and then they are outta here. They are all committed to Christ until they head to the university and are given the real metaphysical, ideological worldview by liberal, progressive professors, and then they suddenly implode like a house of cards.

Second, the fickle types are frequently conditional. By this I mean their relationship with Jesus is built upon the sand of "if then." They say things like, "Jesus I'll follow you wholeheartedly if

- ✓ "... you fulfill my hopes and dreams."
- ✓ "... you answer my prayers."
- ✓ "... you bless my new business."
- ✓ "... you give me good kids."
- ✓ "... you help me get healthy again."
- ✓ "... you keep people in this church, or life for that matter, from offending me."
- ✓ "... you keep tragedy from my life."
- ✓ "... you, if you, if you ... (you fill in the blank).

The list is endless with the fickle, and it seems like God doesn't ever measure up to their never ending requests. So, they do what the fickle do by nature. They drop out, as the worshipers did with Christ by the end of this Passover week. The same ones who happily cheered "Crown Him" within a couple of days chanted "Crucify Him" with their fists pumping in the air. Why? *He didn't measure up to their specifications.* They wanted a God who would fulfill the ancient prophecies detailing a Warrior/Messiah (Isaiah 61:1-2), who would come and deliver them from their enemies. When He had a different agenda to fulfill prior to this fulfillment they eliminated Him from their lives.

Have you done that? I know some have and it's spiritually tragic. Because Christ hasn't acted in your life how you wanted Him to act, you've written Him off and you're on the verge of cutting yourself off from being near His people. Why, you might even be watching this sermon online because you've let conditional faith move you away from His presence and His people. I think you know what you need to do to rectify the situation. God hasn't moved. You have. Wouldn't you say it's time to drop the conditions for God and walk with Him on His terms for a change?

Third, fickle types tend to be highly emotional. They live for the spiritual high. They thrive on a theatrical pastor who will drive them to tears each Lord's Day. They want to feel the anointing of God in every service. They want to be in a church where folks are slain with the Spirit, where people are struck with holy laughter, where the music builds into a religious frenzy. For them, faith is first and foremost a feeling thing. Doctrine, they say is important, but it is relegated to the back seat because emotion is in the driver's seat with her foot pressed firmly on the gas pedal, wanting more and more religious emotional speed.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for enjoying worship and feeling the presence of God; however, if your whole spiritual walk is built upon emotion, you're going to be short-changed eventually. Emotion is but for the moment. Doctrine is for eternity. Emotion is unpredictable. Doctrine is constant. Emotion is uncontrollable. Doctrine is manageable. Emotion can be misleading. Sound doctrine always leads to truth. Emotion is like a drug. You're always looking for more, which means you're never satisfied. Doctrine feeds the soul and leaves you full.

Again, I must say, I've seen my share of these types of people. They are here for brief periods of time, but they never are long term because they are on an emotional religious quest, and when the teaching doesn't match up to the emotion they want to feel, they are out of here. I encountered a lady who attended a rapidly growing California church, a church known for being highly progressive, innovative, creative, and having Bible-lite sermons lest they offend folks. As she waxed eloquent about how much she loved this church, I asked her, "If you don't mind me asking, why, exactly are you there? What's the main draw?" Her reply didn't shock me, "Oh, the Senior Pastor there makes me cry in every sermon. It's so wonderful and so cleansing. That's why I love it." I can't help but wonder if she's still there, and how deep her spirituality is.

The tragic thing is this: Many folks will miss being in heaven because they were merely emotional in their approach to religion. They had, as the ancient Jews, enough theological teaching to make them dangerous, yet they banked everything they did based upon how they felt. Is that you? Is the relationship you want with God based upon whether you encounter great emotion or not? If so, you're headed down the road which leads to spiritual nowhere.

Jesus doesn't want fickle followers. No. He wants honest people who will accept Him on His terms, on His teaching(s). Are you willing to drop your unstable ways and embrace Him?

A second group we see clearly is found in verses 14 through 16.

Group #2: The Fuzzy (12:14-16)

The disciples were at least one giant spiritual step ahead of the crowd because they at least knew who Jesus was. Their problem was they didn't understand nor accept all of His work and teaching. We see this most clearly in verses 14-16 which reads:

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 'Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.' At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

These verses show us first that Jesus Fulfilled Zechariah 9:9. Along with all of the other prophecies concerning the Messiah and His ministry, Zechariah 9:9 foretold he would come riding not a war horse, but a donkey. Concerning this William Barclay states:

We must not misunderstand this picture. With us the donkey is lowly and despised; but in the East it was a noble animal. Jair, the Judge, had thirty sons who rode on asses' colts (Judges 10:4). Ahithopel rode upon an ass (2 Samuel 17:23). Mephibosheth, the royal prince, the son of Saul, came to David riding upon an ass when he was coming in peace. This action of Jesus is a sign that he was not the warrior figure men dreamed of, but the Prince of Peace ... Here was the one who was to come. But they looked for the Messiah of their own dreams and their own wishful thinking; they did not look for the Messiah whom God had sent (*John*, 118).

Jesus' whole life was a fulfillment of prophecy, but none of this caused the disciples to see the full scope of his ministry.

In fact, the disciples floundered with Zechariah 9:9. They just didn't get it. Why? Because they, too, were caught up in the selfish and sinful thinking of the people. We see this on several occasions when Jesus tried to inform them that the Messiah must die **before** He reigned. For instance, in Mark 9:33-34 we read:

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

This sinful desire for who was the best disciple mushroomed later when the mother of James and John came to Jesus with an unusual request. In Matthew 20:20-23 we read:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. 'What is it that you want?' he asked. She said, 'Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in the kingdom.' 'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said to them. 'Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?'

Buried deep in the memory banks of the disciples was the knowledge that when the Messiah came and established his kingdom, He would choose others to rule under him (Zechariah 3:7; Isaiah 32:1; Matthew 19:28; Luke 19:12-28). And since they knew Jesus was the Messiah, they thought it quite appropriate to argue about who was the most qualified disciple. The mother of James and John just went one step further and verbally asked Christ for reigning rights for her sons.

All throughout the lives of the disciples, you can see they were absorbed with thoughts about the political kingdom that the Messiah would erect. No matter what Jesus taught them about His approaching death, they just couldn't divorce their thinking from the concept of the coming political kingdom. For example, in John 16:16-18 Jesus tells the disciples,

In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.' Some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father?' They kept asking, 'What does he mean by 'a little while?' We don't understand what he is saying."

They couldn't get a mental grip on the Messiah's death because they were so caught up in thinking only about the political prophecies concerning the Messiah. Even after Jesus was resurrected and stood before them ready to ascend back into heaven, they asked wondering:

Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:6-8).

Unlike the fickle followers along the road that day to Jerusalem, at least the disciples **knew** who Jesus Christ was. But like those followers the disciples, too, selfishly and sinfully focused on only one part of the Messiah's work. They only listened partially to what Jesus was saying about what His divine mission entailed. As John states here in 12:16, it wasn't until **after** the glorification of Jesus that the disciples grasped the total picture of the Messiah's work.

This is a sobering thought, isn't it? I mean, the people closest to Jesus, the people who are most intimate with Him can be theologically off center. No, they haven't bought into outright heresy. Lord forbid. No, they are just selfish saints who have so focused on their pet theology they have completely missed the main message and mission of Jesus.

Once again, all of this makes you want to ask yourself some probing questions, doesn't it?

- Lord, am I spiritually myopic? Do I only see what I want to see? Do I only just embrace what I want to hear, while neglecting other things your Word says I need to hear?
- Lord, is there an area in my spiritual life right now where I just don't get it, where I'm just not connecting the dots?
- Lord, am I talking too much about my viewpoint without listening to you and your viewpoint?
- Lord, am I missing anything really big you are doing because I think I have a handle on what you're doing?
- Lord, can you please show me this Easter season where I am spiritually fuzzy so I can become spiritually focused?

These two groups are most likely among us. Which one do you belong to? Neither? Then perhaps you can identify with the third.

Group #3: The Ferocious (John 12:19)

Verse 19 introduces us to these religious minded folks. Their goal is simple: *Terminate the spiritual opposition to your religious position based heavily on tradition.* You catch the real scent of these people in the heartless and biting words of the Pharisees, "See, this is getting us nowhere." Throughout Christ's ministry they had openly opposed Him, and recently they had been looking for an opportunity to arrest and kill him. We read about this in John 11:57,

But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

And killing Jesus wasn't enough either, for in John 12:9-11 we see they were intent on killing Lazarus too:

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to see Jesus and putting their faith in him.

It is shocking the lengths religious zealots will go to destroy the evidence of Christianity. Instead of seeking to kill Lazarus, don't you think logic would say he needed to be interviewed? I mean if he really did rise from the dead, wouldn't this mean you just received incontrovertible evidence to drop your entire and erroneous religious position, no matter how long you and your family line have held onto it? Such are those who have religious tradition and not religious truth. They are all appearance and no substance. They are like the old Queen Mary smokestacks. When they pulled these $\frac{3}{4}$ steel stacks off the old ship in Long Beach, California, engineers discovered the steel plate was completely gone. All that held the units together were thirty coats of paint applied over all those years since the ship was built in 1936. This is an apt description of the ferocious. They have a religious look, but lack in substance, and they will attack anyone who'd dare challenge their position.

Jealousy and love for their own religion moved these wicked men to seek to terminate Lazarus and the Messiah. On Palm Sunday they realized that now they really couldn't get to Jesus nor Lazarus because of the joy and number of the people. So all they could do on the dusty road that triumphant day was grit their teeth and wait for the right time to get rid of this Messiah.

The sad thing about the feeling of the Pharisees is they were more worried about losing religious converts than they were about the truth. All they could do was look at the thousands of chanting people and conclude in disbelief, "Look how the whole world has gone after him!" And in a sense it had . . . but only for a brief moment.

Burning hatred and dislike for Christ and Christians hasn't subsided since Christ walked this earth. And, as in His day, it is most dangerous from religious zealots who reject the

Christian message. Let me warn you: There is a growing movement in this country to silence the Christian completely by other religious groups, as well as various political groups.

The very ones among us who are calling for free speech so they can say anything they want no matter how inflammatory or derogatory it may be, are working arduously to limit your free speech because when you speak out against them this is deemed hateful. Hence, the very free speech we permit them to have is the very thing they are seeking to silence us with by labeling our speech hurtful and harmful. Twisted, wouldn't you agree? Point is, if they are successful, then Christians will have to choose their words carefully in public lest they are fined, incarcerated or both. This is where we are headed because some are obsessed with their hatred of Christ based upon their false view of His person and work.

The furious are as present in our world as weeds in your garden. And they are not static, either. No. Whether they are working through a false religion or a false moral formula, they will, like the Pharisees, not stop until they have kept you from proclaiming Christ. My counsel to the Christian is simple: *Don't be fearful of the furious. Do be fearless.* Pray for them to come to know the grace of the Savior who rode the humble donkey. My counsel to the furious is equally simple: Drop the unfounded, unreasonable anger and draw close to the Savior, Jesus. Many before you have done it and it has changed their lives and radically so. Now instead of inner pain they have inner peace, instead of hate they have love, instead of being tired from swimming against the flow of what they know is true they are refreshed each day knowing they are going in the right direction.

Three types are here today. The fickle, the fuzzy, and the furious. Each one of them has their own set of issues. Yet each one of them is an object of Christ's concern.

To the fickle He says, "Stop being a flake and start living by embracing the faith."

To the fuzzy He says, "Stop majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors."

To the ferocious He says, "Stop resisting the Christ and start resting in the Christ."

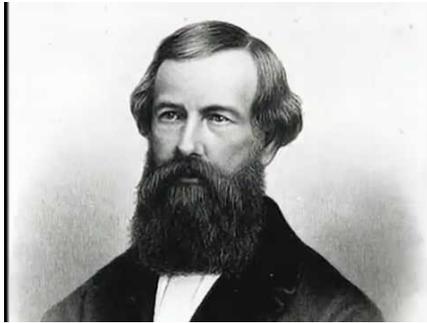
What does it mean to embrace the faith and/or to rest in Christ? Let me illustrate by drawing your attention to the historical development of the elevator. You've probably seen the



name OTIS engraved in the steel of elevators you've ridden, right? What does this mean? That's the wrong question. The right question is, Who is this? The name takes us back to Elisha Otis. He didn't invent the elevator, but the braking system for the device.

Prior to 1854, sales of elevators were negligible because no one wanted to be dangling from a somewhat open box if the cable snapped. That all changed in 1854 when Elisha demonstrated his new elevator braking system at the Crystal

Palace Exhibition in Manhattan. As curious crowds watched, a rope hoisted Elisha high above the ground, and then he would command a man to cut the rope. The crowd, of course, gasped, thinking they'd seen the end of Elisha.



They were pleasantly surprised when his newly invented breaking system kicked in and slowly controlled his descent back to earth. After this step of faith in the facts of the breaking system, elevator sales skyrocketed. No there are 70,000 elevators in New York City alone. And to think it all started with a man who trusted in the facts of his mechanical engineering.

This is what it means to embrace the faith and/or to rest in Christ. You trust the biblical evidence that He, and He alone, is the only one who can take you to spiritual heights both now and in eternity because He died for your sin and He rose from the grave to defeat sin and give you the opportunity to have eternal life.

Anyone willing to step onto this elevator of all elevators? I think you are going to like the destination.

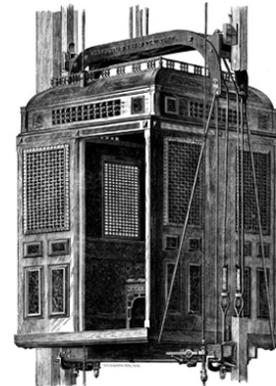


Fig. 1.—THE OTIS ELEVATOR PASSENGER CAR.