

# John 12:12-19

## Will the Real Jesus, Please Stand Up

Customizing players in video games is nothing new. I always enjoyed creating a football player that was, by far, the tallest, strongest, and fastest player on the field. Now, however, younger generations seem to spend more time modifying their players than playing the game itself. They're constantly changing characters, attributes, settings, and everything else. By the time they decide on hairstyles and dance moves, I'm exhausted!

We do the same thing with God. If we don't like who God is or how he presents himself, we simply try to change him. We try to update his teachings, pick and choose his attributes, and often ignore his commands. The problem, of course, is that God is not subject to human opinion or our preferences. This is all seen at the Triumphant Entry which ushers in the final week of Jesus while simultaneously demonstrating how we, even now, tend to fashion God in our own image.

The narrative opens with **The Herald of the Crowd** (vs. 12-13). Much of the imagery in this scene carries significant meaning. For example, the crowd waves palm branches. Between the Old and New Testament, the Maccabees managed to liberate both the Temple and Jerusalem from the Greeks. They celebrated by laying down palm branches (1 Maccabees 13:51). The plant, therefore, became a national symbol representing liberty and victory. Following the Maccabean revolt, for example, coins in Jerusalem had palm branches stamped on them. Therefore, the waving of these branches was a call for Jesus to do to the Romans as the Maccabees had done to the Greeks. They were not looking for salvation from their sins, but liberation from their oppressors.

Likewise, they sang "Hosanna" as Jesus entered the city. The quotation stems from Psalm 118 which originally referred to the pilgrim on his way to worship in the Temple. Interestingly, that is precisely what Jesus was doing. Upon his arrival, he entered the Temple for worship but was forced to cleanse it due to its desecration caused by gross consumerism. The crowd, however, have reinterpreted the song to reference the King of Israel marching toward conquest. The greeting underscores the point that the crowd was welcoming Jesus with nationalistic interests. It is no accident, then, they call him the "King of Israel." Clearly, the crowd want revolution and see in Jesus the figure who will finally liberate them.

The scene then shows **The Humility of Christ** (vs. 14-16). It is not accidental that Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. Just as the palm branches were rich in symbolic meaning, so was Jesus's choice of riding companion. Donkeys were royal animals (see, for example, 1 Kings 1:38) as were (and still are) horses. Stallions were symbols of war, especially in the Roman world. Often, triumphant generals were paraded in Rome on a beautiful stallion to the praise of the city. Jesus,

instead, choose a donkey which was a royal symbol of peace. By choosing the donkey, Jesus subverts the crowd's expectations. He is their Messiah, but he will not submit to their manmade expectations.

Thirdly, the scene shows **The Hope of the Congregated** (vs. 17-18). At this point, the narrative camera transitions from the crowd expressing their hope in a political savior to those following Jesus seeking a healing savior. Behind Jesus are those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus (John 11) which defied all explanation given that Lazarus had been dead for four days. They followed Jesus telling others he was a miracle worker. Their interests wasn't in the political, but in the physical.

This, too, is a common adjustment we make for Jesus. Survey your prayer life. Is it dominated by supplication or adoration? Do you spend more time seeking physical healing than anything else? It might even be true we only pray when we have certain needs.

Many, therefore, seek for God to fix and to protect them from problems. We want, more than anything, that promotion we think we deserve, the perfect marriage, financial security, happiness, and ease. Having been raised in a world dominated by materialism, we often prioritize the physical over the spiritual. No wonder our faith is often fickle. When life is good, we love Jesus. When bad things happen, we start to question his eternal love. This is no way to live.

The West's failure to consider the supernatural has had detrimental effects. We become nothing more than our bodies, careers, wants, and desires. Surely, we are more than that. Even if you had perfect health, an ideal marriage, an abundance of wealth, and a quiver full of children, still we would be missing something. We are more than our bank accounts and our medical charts. We are image bearers made for worship. We, therefore, need more than a healer, we need a Savior.

The story concludes with **The Hunger of the Critics** (vs. 19). Considering all that was happening, the religious leaders became angrier. Earlier John revealed they were actively seeking to kill Jesus along with Lazarus since an increasing number were following him and, thus, abandoning them (John 12:9-11). The Jewish leaders feared Jesus's growing popularity threatened their security. If the Romans heard about a "king," they may come in and destroy them. To them, the death of Jesus was worth the protection of their way of life. Even more, Jesus threatened them with irrelevance. Christ challenged the religious leaders openly and threatened their power. Removal seemed the best policy moving forward.

Thus, the stage is set for the final week of Jesus. He enters with one crowd seeking a revolutionary followed by another demanding safety and ease. Then there was another crowd who resented it all. Each group preferred Jesus to image them rather than falling before him in repentance and faith.

Things haven't changed. We often want Jesus on our terms. Some want a Jesus that agrees with their politics. Others want a protective Jesus who makes their life easier. Some want a genie who does all we ask him. But we do not get to define who he is. Our choices are simple – either we crown him as king or crucify him again. The problem with the latter is that he has already conquered the grave.