

JOHN 12:20–26

Lent 3, March 12, 2023

Smith

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, 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. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

This Gospel lesson consists of two parts: the approach of an audience to listen to Jesus, and the message that Jesus gives to them. The audience is unusual; the message is, for Jesus, typical.

Greeks came to listen to the Lord. They were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, which tells us that they were already instructed in the ways of the Jews; they already believed in God. They were able to come to the temple and participate in the festival. We can't say if they were merely proselytes of the Gate, who could do some things but not everything in the temple, or if these men had become proselytes of righteousness and were therefore recognized as able to do everything in the temple that any other Jew could do. But the point John makes is that they also wanted to see Jesus.

Perhaps they came to Philip because he had a Greek name. This might make you wonder, was Philip maybe a Greek? No, John says-- Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee, just like so many of the other apostles. But here we also see something for the ministers, teachers and professors who are here today. Philip didn't know how to answer their question. No one knows everything. There will be times when every pastor, every professor, every teacher, has to go to a colleague for advice. Maybe Philip hesitated because Jesus had forbidden his apostles from going to the Gentiles when he sent them out. Or maybe Philip was just naturally more hesitant and less decisive. We see this in the account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand at one point.^a

So Philip goes to a friend and a colleague for advice. At this point, Andrew's name is brought forward because Andrew takes on the responsibility himself. “Let's go,” he says, at least with his actions, and he and Philip told Jesus.

^a John 6:5-7

What had these Greek Gentiles come for? Had they come because Jesus was famous? Because he could heal? Because he gave good answers? All of those things that may have led other people to Jesus were okay, but this was Holy Week. It was only days-- we think only two days-- before he was betrayed and arrested. It was no longer time to gently draw people in. The Greek got the same message Jesus gave to his own disciples.

Now, remember: Not only were these out-of-towners in town for the festival, the way that John says it, this was their regular practice. This meant that they were not strangers to the message of the Scriptures. They had heard the promises about the Messiah in Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms. And so Jesus doesn't need to draw them in. Jesus doesn't need to supply them with mere milk; he goes right for the meat, because these men, like his own Apostles, were ready to hear it.

And the message he gives, whether he spoke to the Greeks directly or whether he preached a little message for Andrew to take back to them (it doesn't really matter which was the case), this message was yet another prophecy about what was about to happen, and an encouragement to keep following him.

Soon there would be many Gentiles coming into the kingdom. It was time for the message of the gospel to go out into the whole world, and it would spread rapidly, thanks, in part, to the work of both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had little pockets of Old Testament teaching scattered here and there all through the Roman Empire and in other places, too, parts of Africa and Asia where the Romans, at least, did not yet have a foothold. But it was on account of the Romans, the unified Empire, the road system, the safer travel by sea and by river throughout the interior of the Empire, and the unified Greek language used throughout the Empire, that would permit the Gospel to travel very far, very fast, and be bolstered by those little pockets of faith here and there, the synagogues, even when the leadership of those synagogues were hostile to the message of Christ.

But first, the message had to be fulfilled. There was that one thing that was yet to come.

All of the tenses had to change. He will forgive needed to become "he forgave." "He will be glorified" had to become "he was glorified." "Christ will suffer and die" needed to become "Christ DID suffer and die-- and he is risen, risen indeed!"

And the moment when all of that would happen, the flip in the tenses, the fulfillment of the ages, the payment of the penalty for all our sins: the moment had come. It was here, this week, days away, hours away, even.

The kernel of wheat had to die. Jesus had to die. Without that death, Jesus would have remained righteous and holy, but we wouldn't be. Without that death, none of the benefits that have come to us would have taken root; the Living Water would never have begun to pour out.

And our sins would not have been paid for. Old Testament Jew, New Testament Gentile, shy and introspective disciple, decisive and outgoing disciples-- none of it would make any difference because we would all still be shackled forever to our sins.

Every sin of ours is committed because of our weakness. We might even be intact and pure except that the sinful nature is the receptacle we are born into, and like a bruise or like rust, it allows error in us to spread and grow until we are hopelessly infected with sin. Christ came to save us from all of this. But remember that it is Christ who saves, his blood atones, not ours.

So he warns us and he commands us: Do not love your sinful life. If you remain in your sinful state, in your Old Adam, you will lose e v e r y t h i n g . But if you know that your old Adam, your sinful self, must be drowned and buried by repentance, then you have hated your life as Jesus says, and you will keep your true life, the life of the forgiven child of God, for eternity.

You and I will continue to sin. This is a disease in us; it's not something we can overlook. But our consciences are bothered by it, and that means that the law and gospel of God are at work in us. When you feel that something is wrong and you have a bad conscience about it, you are a sinner, yes, but your faith in Christ sustains you because you are not trying to wriggle out from under that sin on your own.

Now, if a person tries to justify their sins with their own excuses and make jokes about the Word of God, they are moving from sins against the second table of the law into sins against the first table, and there is deadly danger there. So we keep ourselves focused on Jesus.

We follow where he leads, not where we try to drag him. "Where I am," the Lord says, "my servant also will be." This is the killed kernel of wheat speaking, the one who died so that the rest of us would live. So we stay in his field, under his shade, nourished by his bread, his body and blood. He came for the good of all creation, for the Greeks, for the Jews, for each one of us, for me, for you, to atone for your sins and mine. The kernel fell. The tenses all changed. The message goes out. And we have gift of eternal life. Amen.