

John 12:20-36

Introduction

Paul says that the “word of the cross”—the word of “Christ crucified”—is “to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to [us] who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, 23-24). This morning we’re going to see the stumbling block and the foolishness of the cross and also—in that same cross—the power and the wisdom of God.

Last week, we saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem already anointed for His *burial*. But as He rides into Jerusalem “seated on a donkey’s colt” we see at the same time that this is the one who will “speak peace to *the nations*” so that “His rule will be *from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth*” (Zech. 9:9-10). Death and burial, on the one hand, and a rule that encompasses not only the Jews but all the nations and all the earth, on the other.

Last week, the last words we read were those of the Pharisees speaking among themselves: “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the *world* has gone after Him.” Are the Pharisees speaking better than they know? Is this yet another unintended “prophecy” of what is to come? Only John tells us about the Pharisees’ words, “Look, the world has gone after Him.” And only John relates the following:

I. John 12:20 — Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast;

There’s nothing unusual about this in itself. “Greeks” is a term that refers in general to all the Gentiles who came from any part of the Greek-speaking world (cf. Rom. 1:14). They could have been from a Greek city as close as the Decapolis [on the east side of the Jordan River (Acts 14:1; 17:1-4; 18:4; 19:10, 17; 20:21; Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9; 10:12; 1 Cor. 1:22-24; 10:32; 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11) (cf. Carson). “Greeks” in the New Testament is a synonym for “Gentiles.” There had always been “God-fearing” Gentiles and even Gentiles who had converted to Judaism (Acts 8:27; 10:22; 13:43; 17:17) who would go up to Jerusalem at the feasts to worship, but now we’re about to see this familiar reality in an entirely new light.

II. John 12:21–22 — ...these [Greeks] then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus.

Why don’t these Gentiles go to Jesus directly? In chapter four, John told us about a Gentile royal official who implored Jesus to come and heal his son who was at the point of death (Jn. 4:46-47). This man was emboldened to go to Jesus directly because of how desperate he was on account of his son. Matthew tells us about a Canaanite woman who cried out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed” (Mat. 15:22). And yet remember what Jesus said to her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mat. 15:26). And remember how the Canaanite woman responded: “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from

their masters' table" (Mat. 15:27). The Canaanite woman was emboldened to approach Jesus directly because she was desperate on account of her daughter, but she was well aware of the fact that as a ritually/ceremonially unclean Gentile (Jn. 4:9; 18:28; Acts 10:28; 11:3) this wasn't really her place. Jesus is very clear: "I was *sent*," He says, "*only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Luke tells us about a Roman centurion who, instead of going to Jesus Himself, "sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave" (Lk. 7:3). It's this same centurion who sent friends, saying, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof" (Lk. 7:6). As a man from among the unclean Gentiles, not only did this centurion not presume to go to Jesus himself, he even considered that he was unworthy to have Jesus come under his roof. Finally, remember Jesus' instructions before He sent His disciples out to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom:

- Matthew 10:5-6 — "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Can we understand, now, why these Greeks don't go to Jesus directly? They know that Jesus is a *Jewish* prophet and that He's been sent to the *Jewish* people. They know that as Gentiles it's somewhat irregular—and really, even out of place—for them to be asking for a special interview with Jesus. So, rather cautiously, but still rather boldly, they go to "Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee" and tell him of their wish to see Jesus.

Bethsaida was a city on the east side of the Jordan River, technically located in more "Gentile" territory, and "Phillip" was a Greek name, even though Philip himself was Jewish. Maybe these Greeks felt it would be more appropriate for them to approach a disciple like Philip. But in any case, Philip shares their uncertainty. He goes to Andrew and talks it over with him and then the two of them go together to Jesus (apparently while the Greeks were left waiting).

Should we feel sorry for these Gentiles? Should we be upset with Philip and Andrew? Not at all! The point, here, is not the worth and value of Jews versus Gentiles as human beings. The point is God's election and what we can call "salvation-historical priority" (Acts 13:46; Rom. 1:16). To this point, the Gentiles *as Gentiles* have been "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12). The only way for Gentiles to share in the hope of Israel was to become "Jews" themselves – or at least to identify themselves *with* the Jews. When the prophet Zechariah pictured the Messiah's kingdom, he said:

- Zechariah 8:23 — Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

When Jesus said to the Canaanite woman, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" He wasn't talking about the relative worth and value of human life, but about God's electing purposes and "salvation-historical priority." Therefore, the Canaanite woman wasn't motivated by any low self-esteem. She was entirely *right* to respond: "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." If we feel "sorry" for these Gentiles waiting for Philip and Andrew to return with Jesus' answer, or if we're "upset"

with Philip and Andrew, this means either that we haven't understood what's really happening here *or* that we've become entitled and arrogant ourselves and failed to humble ourselves before the sovereign, electing purposes of God (cf. Rom. 11:17-24). As it is, we should be in a place to *wonder*, ourselves, what Jesus will say. We read in verse 23:

III. John 12:23 — And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Is this really an answer to the question? The fact is, we're never told what Jesus' answer was to the Greeks who were waiting to see if they would be granted an audience with Jesus. For John, at this point, that's completely irrelevant and beside the point; and so it should be for us. The *underlying* question, and the question that *matters* far more is this: “In light of God's electing purposes to this point and the salvation-historical priority of the Jews over the Gentiles— what does this mean for the *Gentiles* in relation to the *Jewish* Messiah and in relation to the *Jewish* Messiah's kingdom?”

“Jesus, there are some Greeks wishing to see you and we don't know how to answer them. What should we say?” Jesus sees that this question is *real*. It represents a *right* understanding of the situation. And so it's specifically *in this question* that Jesus sees the nearness of His “hour.” Until now, Jesus could always say of His “hour” that it had “not yet come” (2:4; 4:21, 23; 7:30; 8:20). But it's the request of these Greeks that provokes Jesus to say for the first time: “The hour *has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified.” It's only in Jesus' “glorification” that this current situation can be changed – that the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles can be broken down (cf. Eph. 2:14). And it's for this purpose that Jesus has come into the world. This is why Jesus sees in the request of these Greeks—and even in the uncertainty and hesitation of His disciples— a sign that “the hour *has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Jesus goes on to say in verse 24:

IV. John 12:24 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

So many of the things that Jesus said could never be fully understood by the disciples until after He was “glorified” and the Holy Spirit had come and “taught them all things” and “brought to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them” (Jn. 14:25–26). But we can understand now, can't we?

If Jesus doesn't die, He will “remain alone”; but if He dies then *He*, through His death, will “bear much fruit” – He will bring forth an abundant harvest consisting of Jews and Greeks together. Only in that day can the request of these Greeks in John chapter twelve truly be answered; only in that day can the hesitation of the disciples be taken away. And that day—or that “hour”— Jesus says, has now come. Jesus continues:

V. John 12:25–26 — “He who loves his life [Jesus continues] loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.”

Jesus is drawing a general lesson from His own unique experience as the Son of Man who will bear much fruit through death and applying that lesson in principle to all who would be His disciples. We, too, can only bear much fruit through death. *Unless* we die, we remain alone; *only* through death can we bear much fruit. There’s no other way.

What is this “death” that Jesus is talking about? It’s a sharing with Him in His death so that we die with Him to ourselves (cf. Rom. 6). That’s why Jesus says that “he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.” Death is not only the requirement for bearing much fruit, our dying—*now*—is the requirement even to life itself. One commentator says: “The person who *loves his life will lose it*: it could not be otherwise, for to love one’s life is a... denial of God’s sovereignty, of God’s rights, and a brazen elevation of self to the [pinnacle] of one’s perception, and therefore an idolatrous focus on self, which is the heart of all sin. Such a person loses his life... [causing] his own perdition” (Carson). Therefore, it’s the one who hates his life in this world—the one for whom everything else is despised and hated in comparison with his delight in “serving” Jesus and “following” Him—*he* is the one who will keep his life even to life eternal. *He* is the one who will be with Jesus *where He is*, and *he* is the one who will be honored by the Father.

To be “*with* Jesus” (even *in* our sufferings as a fellowship with Him in His sufferings; Phil. 3:10) and to be “*honored* by the Father”—how can we fail to see that “it is not death to die”? And yet so often, we don’t see, do we? So often, we love our “life in this world” more than being always “with” Jesus where He is and more than being honored by the Father. But it’s on account of this very love of his life that the unbeliever ultimately *loses* his life forever (cf. Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:5-6). Do you hate and despise your life in this world in comparison with your delight in serving Jesus and following Him? Do we hate and despise our lives in this world in comparison with the joy of being with Jesus wherever He is—even in suffering and in pain—and knowing the Father’s praise and commendation (cf. Rom. 2:29)? If we do, then we will bear much fruit and keep our lives to life eternal.

But what about the question of the Gentiles and the Jewish Messiah and the Greeks who are requesting an audience with Jesus? What does this application have to do with the fruit that Jesus *alone* can bear *only* in and through *His* death? Once Jesus has been glorified, then the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile will be broken down, and the question of access to Jesus will no longer hinge in any way on the salvation-historical priority of the Jews. Then—and only *then*—will the way be opened for *Greeks* to come to Jesus—as Greeks—hating their lives in this world and *serving* Jesus, and *following* Him, and being *with* Him wherever He is. Then—and only then—will the wonderful (and also the sobering) universality of these words be fulfilled: “*He* who loves his life loses it, and *he* who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If *anyone* [Jew or Greek] serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if *anyone* [Jew or Greek] serves Me, the Father will honor him.” Do we see, as “Greeks,” what wonderful good news this is? But then Jesus says this:

VI. John 12:27–28a — “Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.”

For *what* purpose has Jesus come to this hour?—So that in this hour He might be *glorified* and *bear much fruit*; so that in and through this hour the name of His Father might be *glorified*. Jesus knows that it’s only by obediently entering and passing through this hour and “drinking this cup” (Mat. 26:38-39) that any of these things can come to pass. And yet the horrors and the sufferings of that hour still are not lessened. “Now My **soul** has become **troubled**,” Jesus says [My soul is distressed and in turmoil]; and what shall I say, ‘**Father, save Me from this hour**’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. **Father, glorify Your name.**” It’s here, in this prayer, that we see the true glory of Jesus as He goes to the cross.

If *we’ve* been saved from “that hour” precisely because *He* endured “that hour” (cf. Ridderbos) how can we not hate and despise our own lives and be always praying with Jesus, “Father, glorify Your name”? Do we know that that’s a prayer God will always answer? It’s a desire that will never be left unsatisfied—a longing that will never be left unfulfilled. And so here again we see that “it is not death to die” – even if this dying leads us at times into distress and suffering. It’s in this prayer—“*Father, glorify Your name*”—that we see the glory of *Jesus* as He goes to the cross. And it’s in the Father’s commitment to answering this prayer that we’ll see not only the Father’s glory, but the glory of Jesus in and through His death.

VII. John 12:28b — Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it [already, in the whole of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry], and will glorify it again [in and through Jesus’ sufferings and death].”

The deepest desire of Jesus’ soul won’t be left unsatisfied.

But there’s something else wonderful that happens here. Until now we might have assumed that Jesus is the only one present with Philip and Andrew, but now we read in verses 29-30:

VIII. John 12:29–30 — So the crowd of people who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes.”

The crowd that stood by hadn’t necessarily heard the words of Jesus, but they knew at least that He had prayed, and that the “voice from heaven” seemed to have come in response to His prayer. And yet Jesus says to the crowd: “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes.” Jesus isn’t saying that His Father’s answer was of no benefit to Him. Many in the crowd—if not the whole crowd—didn’t even hear what the voice said. The words themselves were intended mainly for Jesus. But Jesus didn’t need an audible voice from heaven for the communication of the Father’s answer to His prayer (cf. Jn. 5:30; 14:10-11, 20). So why, then, did the Father answer Jesus this time with an audible voice from heaven?

Do you see what’s so amazing and wonderful about this? Right in the midst of this most intimate and powerful moment between Jesus and the Father, when Jesus prays in the distress of His soul, “Father, glorify Your name,” and the Father answers His one and only Son, “I have both

glorified it, and will glorify it again”—even in this moment, the people standing by haven’t been forgotten. The Father *responds* to this prayer that *Jesus* prays with an audible voice from heaven *not* for the sake of Jesus, but *only* so that in answering His Son *we* might know that the Father hears Him and so that we, too, might truly hear Him and believe and put our trust in Him (cf. Mat. 3:17; Mk. 9:7). *We* didn’t hear the sound of the voice from heaven, but we *have* heard the Father’s answer to Jesus; so we ought to pay all the closer attention to these words that Jesus speaks:

IX. John 12:31 — “*Now* judgment is upon this world [judgment for refusing to believe in God’s only Son]; *now* the ruler of this world [Satan] will be cast out.”

What is this “*now*”? “*The hour has come*,” Jesus said in verse 23, “for the Son of Man to be *glorified*.” It’s in *this* “hour”—in *this* “now”—that judgment has come upon the world. It’s in *this* “now” that the ruler of this world will be cast out. And it’s in *this* “hour” and in *this* “now” that Jesus will begin to draw *to Himself* not just Jews, but “all men”—Jews *and* “Greeks” without distinction. We read in verses 32-33:

X. John 12:32–33 — “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will *draw* all men [not all men without exception, but all kinds of men without distinction] to Myself.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.

See how the “drawing” of “all men” is *dependent* on the being “lifted up.” Jesus was “lifted up” from the earth on the cross, and now it’s only *as* the Lamb who was *slain* (Rev. 5:6, 12; 13:8)—it’s only *as* the one who is vividly portrayed to us as the *crucified one* (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 3:1)—that Jesus is now powerfully drawing and bringing to Himself (cf. Jn. 18:10; 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19; sermon on Jn. 6:44) men and women and children from *all* the peoples of the earth. So we read in Revelation five:

- Revelation 5:9 — And they sang a new song [to the Lamb], saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were *slain*, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from *every* tribe and language and people and nation.

And remember how we started this morning with the words of the Apostle Paul:

- 1 Corinthians 1:23–24 — We preach Christ *crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, *both Jews and Greeks*, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Here is the ultimate answer to the request of the Greeks and the hesitation and the uncertainty of Philip and Andrew. Once Jesus has been glorified, then the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile will be broken down, and the question of access to Jesus will no longer hinge in any way on the salvation-historical priority of the Jews. Then—and only then—will the way be opened for *Greeks* to come to Jesus—*as* Greeks—hating their lives in this world and *serv*ing Jesus, and *follow*ing Him, and being *with* Him wherever He is.

XI. John 12:34 — The crowd then answered Him, “We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever [cf. Isa. 9:7; Ezek. 37:25; Ps. 89:35-37; 110:4]; and how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man? [What kind of person is He?]”

The crowd isn’t believing. They’re hearts are hardened.

XII. John 12:35–36 — So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them.

Remember how this passage began with the request of the Greeks to Philip: “**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**” If we’re not explicitly told that Jesus granted their request to see Him, we *are* told that Jesus “hid Himself” from the unbelieving Jews so that they could not “*see*” Him. Here already, in principle, we’re seeing the wonderful (and also the sobering) universality of these words: “*He* who loves his life loses it, and *he* who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If *anyone* serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if *anyone* serves Me, the Father will honor him.”