

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
12:20-26

20. And there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. 21. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. 22. Philip came and told Andrew, and Andrew and Philip told Jesus. 23. And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour has come that the Son of man should be glorified. 24. Verily, verily I say to you, Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit. 25. He who loves his life shall lose it, and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. 26. If any man serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there my servant shall be also. If any man serves me, him will my *Father honor*.

20.--[*And there were certain Greeks, etc.*] Who these Greeks were has exercised the conjectural ingenuity of commentators. They were not downright heathens; it is clear from the expression that they were of those "that came to worship" at the feast. No heathen would be admitted to the passover. They were not, in my judgment, Jews who had lived among Greeks until they were more Grecian than Jewish in their language. The word we have rendered "Greeks" seems to me to make that impossible. I believe they were men who were by birth heathens but had become proselytes to Judaism, and as such were regular attendants on the Jewish feasts. That there were many such proselytes wherever Jews lived is a simple matter of fact. So in Acts 17:4 we read of "devout" or "worshipping" Greeks. The leavening influence of Judaism, in every part of the heathen world where the scattered Jews dwelt before the coming of Christ, was probably very considerable. It is worth notice that as Gentiles, the wise men from the East were among the first to honor our Lord when He was born; so Gentiles were among the first to show interest in Him just before His crucifixion.

Whether the circumstance recorded in the passage before us took place the same day that our Lord rode in triumph into Jerusalem, or whether there was not a break or interval of a day or two, admits of question. Judging from the inquiry of the Greeks, "We wish to see Jesus," it seems unlikely that it happened the same day. It stands to reason that our Lord, at a time when He was riding into Jerusalem on an ass and was the object of popular enthusiasm, would easily have been distinguished and recognized by the Greeks. Moreover, one cannot suppose that the words spoken in the following verse, and the miracle of the voice from heaven, belong to a time of noise, shouting, and popular acclamation, such as there must have been during the procession. For these reasons I incline to the opinion that we must suppose an interval of a day or two between this verse and the preceding one.

21.--[*Then they came to Philip...Galilee.*] Why the Greeks came to Philip more than any other disciple we do not know. It is conjectured that Philip, being an inhabitant of a town in North Galilee, was more likely

than the other disciples to be acquainted with Greeks from nearby Tyre and Sidon. But this reason applies quite as much to Andrew, Peter, James, and John--who were all Galileans--as it does to Philip. Is it not worth noticing that Philip's name is a more purely Greek name than that of any of the apostles? Does not this indicate that he probably had Greek relatives and connections?

The mention of Bethsaida accounts for Philip speaking to Andrew, in the next verse. Bethsaida was the native place of Andrew and Peter, and Philip therefore was their fellow townsman.

[*And desired him, saying, Sir.*] The Greek word rendered "desired" is more frequently translated "asked," "besought," "prayed." It implies the desire of an inquirer who expresses a wish for a thing and asks whether it is possible for him to have it.

The word we render "sir" is almost always rendered "lord." When rendered "sir," it is addressed by an inferior to a superior. Thus the servant of the householder says, "Sir, did you not sow good seed?" (Matt. 13:27.) The Pharisees said to Pilate, "Sir, we remember that deceiver said" (Matt. 27:63). The Samaritan woman says to Jesus three times, "Sir" (John 4:11,13,19). Here the use of the word marks the respect of the Greeks for our Lord and His apostles.

[*We would see Jesus.*] The English here fails to express the Greek fully. It is literally, "we wish, we desire to see."

Concerning the motive of the Greeks in asking to see our Lord, we know nothing certain. It may have been nothing but curiosity, like that of Zaccheus, aroused by hearing rumors about Jesus and sharpened by seeing the procession of the palm-bearing multitude at His entry into the city. This alone was enough to excite the attention of Greeks accustomed to the demonstrations of their own countrymen on public occasions. It may possibly be that, like the Canaanitish woman, the centurion of Capernaum, and Cornelius, they had, as proselytes, got hold of the great truths which underlaid Judaism and were actually looking for a Redeemer. But we do not know.

Bengel thinks that at this moment "Jesus was engaged in the inner part of the temple, to which an entrance was not open to the Greeks," and for this reason the Greeks could not get at Him and have a personal interview.

These Greeks, we should note, sought to see Jesus at the very time when the Jews sought to kill Him.

22.--[*Philip came and told Andrew.*] This expression seems to favor the idea that this whole transaction was not on the same day that Jesus entered Jerusalem. On such a day there would hardly be an opportunity for one disciple coming quietly and telling a thing to another. Why Philip chose to tell Andrew we have seen--he was his fellow townsman.

[*And Andrew and Philip told Jesus.*] This expression seems to imply that the two Apostles consulted together before they told our Lord. Perhaps, as

thorough Jews, they did not feel sure that our Lord would care to give an interview to Gentiles, and at first hesitated about telling Him. They remembered that at one time Jesus had said, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles" (Matt. 10:5). On reflection, they probably remembered our Lord's kindness to the Canaanitish mother and Roman centurion, and resolved to tell Him.

Of course, it is possible that the Greeks only wanted to look at our Lord and see what He was like, and not to converse with Him. If this was all, the disciples may have doubted whether it was worth mentioning to Jesus.

23.--[*And Jesus answered them, saying.*] It is doubtful whether this was spoken to the two disciples only--or to them and the Greeks before mentioned--or to the twelve alone. I incline to think it must mean to the twelve, and specially to Andrew and Philip.

[*The hour is come...glorified.*] The true keynote to this verse and the two which follow is probably this: Our Lord saw the state of mind in which His followers were. He saw them excited by His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and the desire of strangers like the Greeks to see their Master. He saw they were secretly expecting a glorious kingdom to be immediately set up in which they would have chief places, power, and authority. He proceeds to rectify their conceptions and to remind them of what He had repeatedly told them--His own death.

[To paraphrase], The hour has certainly arrived for my being glorified. I am about to leave the world, ascend up to my Father, finish the work I came to do, and be highly exalted. My earthly ministry of humiliation is ending, and my time of glory is drawing nigh. But all this is to be brought about in a way very different from that which you are thinking about. I am going to a cross first, and not a throne. I am going first to be condemned, crucified, and slain.

That "glorified" means "to be crucified" I cannot admit, with such texts as John 7:39 and 12:16 before me. That the cross led to glory and that through the crucifixion came the glorification I believe firmly. But the glory came after the suffering (Luke 24:26).

Let us note that "the hour" or season for Christ to finish His ministry was fixed and appointed. Till it came, the Jews could do nothing to stop His preaching or harm His person. Just so it is with His people in one sense; each is immortal till his work is done.

Does it not seem that the inquiry of the Greeks has much to do with our Lord's opening words? "The Gentiles are beginning to inquire after Me. Thus the hour is manifestly come that my work should be finished and my kingdom fully set up in the world by my crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension."

24.--[*Verily, verily, I say to you.*] This is one of those solemn prefaces which are so frequent in John's Gospel, and indicate some very weighty truth coming. I think "to you" must surely include not only Andrew and Philip, but all the company around our Lord.

[*Unless a grain of wheat, etc.*] Our Lord here illustrates a great Scriptural truth by a very familiar fact in nature. That fact is, that in plants and seeds life comes by death. The seed must be put into the ground, must rot, decay, and die if we want it to bear fruit and produce a crop. If we refuse to bury the seed and will keep it without sowing it, we shall never reap any harvest. We must be content to let it die if we want corn.

The wealth of spiritual truth which this beautiful figure unfolds is very great. The death of Christ was the life of the world. From it, as a most prolific seed, was to spring an enormous harvest of blessing to souls and of glory to God. His substitution on the cross, His atoning death, were to be the beginning of untold blessings to a lost world. To wish Him not to die, to dislike the idea of His death (as the disciples evidently did), was as foolish as to keep seed-corn locked up in the granary and to refuse to sow it. "I am the corn of wheat," Jesus seems to say. "Unless I die, whatever you in your private opinion may think, my purpose in coming into the world will not be accomplished. But if I die, multitudes of souls will be saved."

Let us carefully mark here the immense importance which our Lord attaches to His death. Nothing can explain this but the old foundation doctrine of the Bible--that Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is the only satisfaction and atonement for the sin of the world. A passage like this can never be thoroughly explained by those who regard Christ's death as nothing more than a martyrdom or an example of self-denial. It was something far greater and more important than this. It was the dying of a grain of wheat in order that out of its death should spring up an enormous spiritual harvest. Christ's vicarious death is the world's life.

Let us notice here, as elsewhere, the Divine wisdom with which our Master illustrated spiritual truth by earthly figures. Illustrations, fitly chosen, strike men much more than abstract arguments. Ministers and teachers of religion should study to "use similitudes."

Theophylact thinks our Lord meant, by this beautiful figure, to encourage His disciples not to be offended and shaken in mind by His coming death. In His case, as in the natural world, they must remember life comes through death.

Zwingle thinks that as with the corn, when sown, so it is with the body of Christ. It does us good by dying for us, and not by our eating it.

Gill remarks that by "abiding alone," in this simile, Christ meant that if He did not die, He would be "alone" in heaven with the Father and the elect angels, but without any of the sons of men. Scott says the same.

25.--[*He who loves his life, etc.*] There are few of our Lord's sayings more frequently recorded by the Holy Ghost than this pair of paradoxes. The repetition shows its great importance. It will be found in Matt. 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, 17:33, as well as here.

The meaning is plain: "He who loves his life, or thinks more of the life

that now is than that which is to come, shall lose that which is the best part of his life, his soul. He who hates his life, or cares little for it compared to the life to come, shall preserve to eternal glory that which is the best part of his life, to wit, his soul."

One object of our Lord in saying these words was evidently to prevent His disciples looking for good things in this life if they followed Him. They must give up their Jewish ideas about temporal rewards and honors in Messiah's service. They must understand that His kingdom was entirely spiritual, and that if they were His disciples, they must be content to lose much in this life in order to gain the glory of the life to come. So far from promising them temporal rewards, He would have them distinctly know that they must give up much and sacrifice much if they wanted to be saved.

The other object our Lord had in view, in saying these words, was to teach all Christians in every age that like Him they must make up their minds to sacrifice much, and to die to the world, in the hope of a harvest of glory in a world to come. Through death we must seek life. Eternal life must be the great end a Christian looks to. To attain it he must be willing to give up everything.

The practical condemnation which this verse passes on the life lived by many should never be overlooked. How few hate their lives here! How many love them and care for nothing but how to make them comfortable and happy! The eternal loss or the eternal gain are often entirely forgotten.

Augustine gives a wise caution: "Take heed lest there steal upon you a will to make away with yourself, while you take in the sense that it is a duty to hate your own life in this world. Hence certain malignant and perverse men give themselves to the flames, choke themselves in the water, dash themselves in pieces, and so perish. Christ taught not this. Not by himself, but by another must that man be put to death who would follow in Christ's footsteps."

The word "hate" here must be taken comparatively. It is a Hebraism, like "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated." "Your appointed feasts my soul hates." (Rom. 9:13, Isa. 1:14.)

Scott thinks this verse was meant to teach the Greeks and all the disciples to arm themselves with a mind like their Master's if they wanted to follow Him.

26.--[*If any man serves me, let him follow me.*] This verse seems spoken for the benefit and information of the Greeks who sought to see Jesus, and of all who desired to become His disciples. If any man desires to serve Christ and be a Christian, he must be content to follow His Master, walk in His footsteps, share His lot, do as He did, and partake of His Master's inheritance in this world. He must not look for good things here--for crowns, kingdoms, riches, honors, wealth, and dignity. Like His Master, he must be content with a cross. He must, in a word, "take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). As St. Paul says: "We are heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be

also glorified together" (Rom. 8:17).

[*And where I am...be also.*] This is the first thing that Christ promises to those who follow Him. They shall be with Christ wherever He is, in paradise and in His glorious kingdom. He and His servant shall not be parted. Whatever the Master has, the servant shall have also.

It is a comfortable thought that however little we know of the life to come and the state after death, we do know that we shall be "with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:23).

[*If any man serves me, him will my Father honor.*] This is the second thing which Jesus promises to His disciples. The Father shall give to those who love Christ such honor as eye has not seen nor ear heard. Honor from the men of this world they may not have. Honor from the Father shall make amends for all.

It is impossible not to see throughout this verse that our Lord's intention is to discourage the carnal and earthly expectation of His Jewish followers, and yet to encourage them by showing what they might confidently look for. They must follow in His steps if they were his true servants, and in so following they would find a cross and not a crown, whatever they might be thinking at that moment while the hosannas of an excited crowd were sounding in their ears. But though they had a cross, they should not miss a reward finally, which would make amends for all. They would be with Christ in glory. They would be honored by God the Father.

The words "him will my Father honor," of course, admit of being applied to this life in a certain sense: "They who honor Me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). But it is much more agreeable to the context, I think, to apply them to the honor which shall be given in another world.

The clearest conception we can form of heaven is that which is here stated. It is being with Christ and receiving honor from God. Heaven is generally described by negatives. This is, however, an exceptional positive. It is being "with Christ." (Compare John 14:3, 17:24, 1 Thes. 4:17.)

Let us note how wisely and mercifully our Lord always damped and checked the unscriptural expectations of His disciples. Never on any occasion do we find Him keeping back the cross, or bribing men to follow Him, as Mahomet did, by promising temporal comfort and happiness.