

# Lesson Eighteen

*(John 12:20-50)*

As the time for the Passover Festival draws near, Jesus spends each night at Bethany and each day at Jerusalem. And it is at Jerusalem (probably in the area of the Temple complex known as the Court of the Gentiles) that a truly remarkable event takes place.

## **Some Greeks Seek Jesus**

*(John 12:20-26)*

<sup>20</sup>Some Greeks were among those who had gone to Jerusalem to worship during the festival. <sup>21</sup>They went to Philip (he was from Bethsaida in Galilee) and said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus."

<sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, "The hour has now come for the Son of Man to receive great glory. <sup>24</sup>I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces

many grains. <sup>25</sup>Whoever loves his own life will lose it; whoever hates his own life in the world will keep it for life eternal. <sup>26</sup>Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am. And my Father will honor anyone who serves me.

These Greeks are converts to the Jewish religion. Paul Butler says of them, "Out of despair and hopelessness brought on by their lifelong association with Greek philosophy and religion they were probably attracted to the Jewish religion because of its reasonableness and high moral standards. The idealism of Plato was cold, unfeeling and hopeless; the materialism of Aristotle was unreasonable and contrary to man's higher nature; the determinism and sensuality of Epicurus led to chaos and despair. The Hebrew religion of One True God, Creator, loving Father, . . . offered a more reasonable explanation of the cosmos than their mythical, polytheistic religion" (*The Gospel of John*, II, 185).

Apparently these men had heard Jesus teaching somewhere before, or at least someone had told them about him. So their thirst for truth leads them to ask Philip to bring Jesus out from one of the inner courts so that they may talk with him (they probably could not go beyond the Court of the Gentiles.).

Why does Philip consult with Andrew before conveying this request to Jesus? John does not say. However, it may very well be that Philip was afraid that the Jewish authorities might somehow distort the meaning of such a meeting and use it as an excuse for persecuting Jesus. (This tactic is used quite effectively a few years from this time when the Jews falsely accuse Paul of bringing Gentiles into the Temple. Acts 21:27-36) But after talking with Andrew, they decide to take the request to Jesus (12:22).

Like the other gospel writers, John does not say much about Andrew. Yet it is Andrew who always seems to be at the right place at the right time. And it is Andrew who repeatedly plays a part in helping people see Jesus (1:40-42; 6:8-9).

And how *unlike* Andrew we have become! As Doug Kostowski says, "We have too much secret discipleship. So many seem to have a missing ingredient, a void. Is not the Lord himself absent? When he chose the band of the Twelve to train for the world-wide mission, he called them clearly defining two ambitions for each apostle — (1) to be with him, and (2) to be sent out to preach (Mark 3:14). The latter explains that our mission is dependent on the former: his presence in our lives. To be with Jesus is to share Jesus." That is the principle which Andrew practiced so well.

When Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that some Greeks want to see him, Jesus recognizes this unusual situation as a sign that his suffering and death are near. But Jesus also looks beyond the agony to the ecstasy, that moment when he will be resurrected from the grave. That final victory over Satan will bring glory and honor to both the Father and the Son (12:23). (John does not make it clear whether Jesus delivers these words, and those that follow, directly to the Greeks or whether he sends the message to them by Andrew and Philip.)

Then Jesus explains in very simple terms the fact that he is destined to become the substitute sacrifice for the sins of mankind: "A grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains." It is no accident, then, that the number of his followers grows by leaps and bounds after his death and resurrection.

Next, Jesus says that, while he himself is the only sacrifice for sins, there is something which anyone who wants to be saved must do. Each of us must sacrifice our lives for him (11:25; Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 2:20). Each of us must "follow him" by imitating his life of love and service (11:26). And we are promised that those who do so will be rewarded with honor from the Father himself (Luke 18:28-30; Rev. 2:10; 3:21).

### **Jesus Speaks About His Death**

*(John 12:27-36)*

<sup>27</sup>"Now my heart is troubled — and what shall I say? Shall I say, 'Father, do not let this hour come upon me'? But that is why I came — so that I might go through this hour of suffering. <sup>28</sup>Father, bring glory to your name!"

Then a voice spoke from heaven, "I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again."

<sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard the voice, and some of them said it was thunder, while others said, "An angel spoke to Him!"

<sup>30</sup>But Jesus said to them, "It was not for my sake that this voice spoke, but for yours. <sup>31</sup>Now is the time for this world to be judged; now the ruler of this world will be overthrown. <sup>32</sup>When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me." (<sup>33</sup>In saying this he indicated the kind of death he was going to suffer.)

<sup>34</sup>The crowd answered, "Our Law tells us that the Messiah will live forever. How, then, can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"

<sup>35</sup>Jesus answered, "The light will be among you a little longer. Continue on your way while you have the light, so that the darkness will not come upon you; for the one who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. <sup>36</sup>Believe in the light, then, while you have it, so that you will be the people of the light."

The thought of the impending crisis sends a chill through Jesus (12:27). He abhors the idea of being nailed to a cross, but more than that he is troubled by the fact that he will be killed by the very people whom he wants to help. It is an ugly picture which crosses his mind, a scene in which the dark and sinful nature of man stands in stark contrast to his own purity and sinlessness. But he will not turn back now, for he is committed to doing the Father's will so that the Father's name may be honored (12:28).

Suddenly, the voice of God announces, "I have brought glory to it and I will do so again" (12:28). Only three times does God speak during the ministry of Jesus: at his baptism (Mark 1:11), at his transfiguration (Mark 9:7), and here. The voice no doubt alludes to the victory which Jesus will win over death and to the rapid spread of his kingdom throughout the world. But the voice, which the crowd could not clearly interpret, was not just for Jesus' benefit (12:30). This great phenomena was a testimony to the closeness between Jesus and his Father.

And in 12:31-33 Jesus indicates that Satan's time has come, too. It is said that one day, while wasting away in exile, the dejected Napoleon pointed at a red dot on a map which marked "Waterloo." He turned to a friend and said, "If it had not been for that small, red dot on the map, I would have conquered the world." Jesus lets us know that after his resurrection Satan will look back at the blood-stained but empty tomb and say, "If it had not been for that empty tomb, I would have conquered the world."

In 12:34-36 the multitudes reveal their ignorance about the true nature and mission of the Messiah, and Jesus again uses the figure of "light" to try to get them to see him as their only hope. Time is running out, not only for Jesus but also for them.

## **The Unbelief of the People**

*(John 12:37-43)*

After Jesus said this, he went off and hid himself from them.

<sup>37</sup>Even though he had performed all these miracles in their presence, they did not believe in him, <sup>38</sup>so that what the prophet Isaiah had said might come true:

“Lord, who believed the message we told? To whom did the Lord reveal his power?”

<sup>39</sup>And so they were not able to believe, because Isaiah also said, <sup>40</sup>“God has blinded their eyes and closed their minds, so that their eyes would not see, and their minds would not understand, and they would not turn to me, says God, for me to heal them.”

<sup>41</sup>Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.

<sup>42</sup>Even then, many Jewish authorities believed in Jesus; but because of the Pharisees they did not talk about it openly, so as not to be expelled from the synagogue. <sup>43</sup>They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

The latter part of 12:36 marks the end of Jesus’ public ministry. The rest of his time will be spent in private discussions with his closest and most trusted disciples. The public phase of his work is now history, and soon even his earthly life will be over.

In 12:37 John explains how prejudiced and sin-hardened the multitudes really are. Miracle after miracle had only caused them to close their eyes more tightly, lest they see and obey Jesus as their Lord.

In 12:38-40 John quotes from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:9-10 to explain their rejection of Jesus: “God has blinded their eyes . . .” But John certainly does not teach the Calvinistic doctrine that God long ago predestined certain individuals to reject Jesus and there is nothing such people can do to change their status. It is not God’s fault, nor is it his desire, that these people (or anyone today) should disbelieve in his Son. But since they choose to reject him, God uses their unbelief to work out his plan of redemption (just as he used Judas’ unbelief). Just as the preaching of Isaiah “caused” the Israelites to shut their eyes to the truth, the preaching of Jesus results in people rejecting him. But it is their fault, not God’s.

Just as Adam and Eve could choose between obeying and disobeying God, these Jews (and everyone of us today) are free to choose God’s way or Satan’s way. After awhile, however, God will abandon to their own destructive lusts those who harden their hearts against him. God wants to save everyone, but not everyone will cooperate with that desire.

There are few scenes in the Bible more disgusting than the one John mentions in 12:42-43. Here are men with training in the scriptures, leadership responsibilities, and personal integrity to uphold. But even though they know Jesus is the Messiah, they

don't want to take a chance on him. It is a terribly tragic situation when any religious leaders love "the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (12:43).

### **Judgment by Jesus' Words**

*(John 12:44-50)*

<sup>44</sup>Jesus said in a loud voice, "Whoever believes in me believes not only in me but also in him who sent me. <sup>45</sup>Whoever sees me sees also him who sent me. <sup>46</sup>I have come into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. <sup>47</sup>If anyone hears my message and does not obey it, I will not judge him. I came, not to judge the world, but to save it. <sup>48</sup>Whoever rejects me and does not accept my message has one who will judge him. The words I have spoken will be his judge on the last day! <sup>49</sup>This is true, because I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has commanded me what I must say and speak. <sup>50</sup>And I know that his command brings eternal life. What I say, then, is what the Father has told me to say."

In these closing remarks, Jesus shows that he is equal with God the Father (12:44-45), that he came to rescue people from spiritual darkness (12:46), that his primary reason for coming was to save, not to judge (12:47), that his words will judge the disobedient on the last day (12:48), that his words are the words of the Father (12:49-50), and that obedience to God's command brings eternal life (12:49). These words are a compact summary of the gospel story, and should be the focus of our preaching and teaching today.

### **Thought Stimulators on John 12:20-50**

1. Why had the Greeks gone to Jerusalem?
2. Which of Jesus' disciples did the Greeks talk with?
3. Explain Jesus' teaching about the "grain of wheat" in 12:24.
4. What did Jesus mean by asking us to "hate" our lives?
5. What does it mean to "follow" Jesus?
6. In what way(s) should we be like Andrew?
7. Those who lovingly obey Jesus will receive honor from whom?
8. Why was Jesus troubled?
9. What did Jesus say would happen to "the ruler of this world"?
10. How did Jesus "draw everyone" to himself?

11. What were the three occasions during Jesus' earthly ministry when God spoke from heaven?
12. How is it that people could witness Jesus performing miracles and still reject him as Lord?
13. In 12:42-43 Jesus mentions certain Jewish authorities who "believed" in him, but wouldn't admit it publicly. Were they saved by this "faith only" stance, or did they need to do something else to be saved?
14. Whose fault is it when a person rejects Jesus?
15. Whose words will judge people on the last day?