

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. 21 So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” This phrase spoken by Greeks in John 12 is commonly emblazoned



on pulpits in churches. The purpose of this gentle reminder is so that when preacher stands behind the pulpit, he is to preach Jesus. The people who come want to see Jesus. Now of course that’s what a preacher is supposed to do, right? Isn’t that what pulpits are for? Sadly, even in evangelical churches, Jesus is often not the focus.

After studying 200 contemporary evangelical sermons, David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Seminary concluded that more than 80 percent were anthropocentric rather than theocentric—that is, they were focused on man rather than focused on God.¹ In the book, *The Jesus Manifesto*, the authors write, “We believe that the major disease of today’s church is JDD: Jesus Deficit Disorder. The person of Jesus . . . is being replaced by the language of ‘justice,’ ‘morality,’ ‘values,’ and ‘leadership principles.’”²

So even evangelical preachers do need to be reminded to that their people want to see Jesus or at the very least, they need to see Jesus. Because often preachers give the people what their “itching ears want to hear” as opposed to what they *need* to hear. But when the group of Greeks went up to Philip and said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they really did want to see Jesus. And by “see” Jesus, they didn’t mean they merely wanted to look at him from a distance. They meant it in the same way that the nurse walks into the waiting room and announces, “The doctor will see you now.” They wanted to spend time with Jesus and learn from him.

The fact that a few Greeks wanted to see Jesus may not seem like a big deal but it really was. Most of the Bible is very Jewish-centric, am I right? Starting in the twelfth chapter of the first book, the Lord chose a nation through one man, Abraham. From that point forward, everything was centered on Abraham's descendants. We see the nation of Israel formed through 400 years of captivity in Egypt. The next 400 years were ruled by the judges. Following the Judges they were ruled for about 450 years by a succession of good and evil kings. Then there was several hundred years of silence in between the book of Malachi and the birth of Jesus. For most of those 2000 years, the Tabernacle and the temple were the center of Jewish worship and culture. Then of course Jesus was born, not just into the human race, but specifically into the Jewish race, and even more specifically still, into the tribe of Judah.

So the Bible is almost exclusively Jewish, but not 100%. From the very first time the Lord spoke to Abraham we know that God had a much larger plan in mind.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abraham was blessed so that he would be a blessing to all nations. We get stuck one part of this: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse." We have turned this into a political statement and declare that we must support the nation of Israel at all costs. I am not saying that we should abandon Israel as they are one of our greatest allies, but that is not exactly what this verse means. Moreover, in my opinion, the most important part is what follows: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This fulfillment of this blessing upon all nations came through Jesus himself. Jesus was a blood descendant of Abraham and it was Jesus who was to bless all nations with the gift of his salvation. This is where the Greeks come into the picture in John 12.

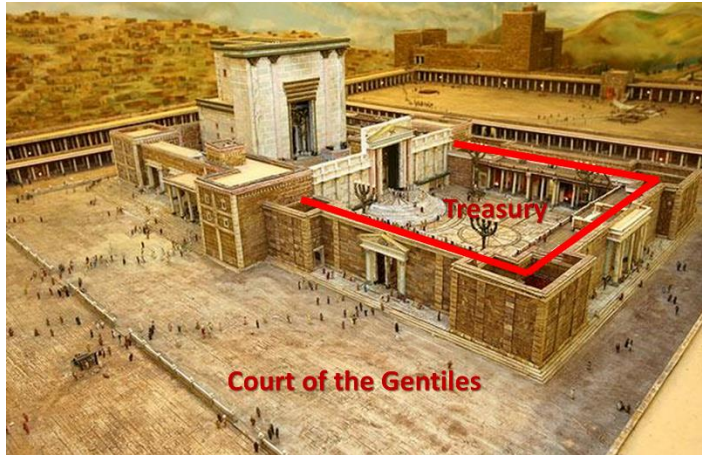
Why did they come to Jesus? If Jesus was the King of the Jews, what did Jesus have to do with these Greeks, these Gentiles? The problem is even more complicated when we realize that there was message inscribed in stone in the temple warning all Gentiles, including these Greeks, to stay out of the inner courts of the temple.

This stone was recovered during excavations of Jerusalem in 1871 and is known as the Soreg Inscription.³ It is seven lines long and reads as follows:



NO FOREIGNER
IS TO GO BEYOND THE BALUSTRADE
AND THE PLAZA OF THE TEMPLE ZONE
WHOEVER IS CAUGHT DOING SO
WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO BLAME
FOR HIS DEATH
WHICH WILL FOLLOW⁴

This stone was located between the Court of the Gentiles and the Treasury. If you recall from a few months back I explained that the



treasury is where Jesus was standing when he declared that he was “the light of the world.” When he said that he was standing in the middle of four, 75-foot tall torches. So, all Gentiles were forbidden from entering the treasury and were limited to being in the Court of the Gentiles. The Soreg Inscription would have been located somewhere outside the treasury, perhaps at the large gate in the front. The Court of the gentiles is where the money changers were when Jesus drove them out.

So imagine if you are a Gentile but a convert to Judaism. We’re not sure if these Greeks who wanted to see Jesus were Jewish converts or merely God-fearing men, but even the Gentile converts to Judaism were forbidden to enter the inner courts of the temple. What kind of message would that have sent to them? It would be like our church allowing people to attend services but requiring them to stand outside and watch through the windows. Can you imagine such a division and still call ourselves a church?

But a few things happened which may have given these Greeks more hope. Let me explain it by reminding you of the sequence of events. Sunday was the Triumphal Entry. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were in Jerusalem for the Passover and tens of thousands welcomed Jesus into the holy city. The following day was Monday and that’s when Jesus cleansed the temple of sellers and money-changers with a handmade whip. After he drove them out, he said, *Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers”* (Mark 11:17).

Did you catch that? *‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’*? How might that have sounded to the Greeks standing outside the temple with an stone engraved sign warning them to stay out? “For all nations? That’s us!” if that were not enough, as I mentioned last Sunday, Jesus also taught on the parable of the tenants which ended this way.

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:
“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you **and given to a people producing its fruits**. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Matthew 21)

This teaching would have been a sweet melody in the ears of these Greeks. The wall which separated Jew from Gentile and bore the warning of a death penalty was the “dividing wall of hostility” that Paul mentions in Ephesians 2.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

The dividing wall of hostility was a metaphorical wall but it was also an actual wall with a sever warning attached. I know I am half way through the message but we’ve just arrived at my first point: All are invited. Even though the Bible is centered on the Jews and even though the Messiah was born a Jew, no one is excluded from the gospel invitation. Paul would not take the gospel to the Gentiles on his worldwide missionary journey until fifteen years after this, but the seeds of universal invitation were laid even while the Jews were about to crucify the Savior of the world.⁵ All are invited.

2. Death is the only path to life

In response to the request from the Greeks to see him, Jesus said, “*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.* That seems like a strange answer to their question, don’t you think? Of course Jesus is referring to himself and his imminent death, but how is this an answer to their request?

It was common for Jesus to give a non-answer type answer. He answers people according to what they need to hear, not necessarily strictly according to their question. But in this case I think he did answer their question, especially if you include verses 32-33.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. The Greeks wanted to see Jesus, to spend time with him and learn from him. But Jesus was in effect saying, “You will see me when I am lifted up on the cross. I will be like a grain of wheat that first must die before I can bear the fruit of salvation for all who believe.” The Greeks did not know Jesus was about to be crucified. The only people who knew that were Jesus, Judas and the Sanhedrin. Nevertheless, this was his answer for those who wanted to see him.

But more death was required than merely Jesus’ death. *Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* The grain of wheat that must die was referring to Jesus but this death belongs to us. Jesus was saying that our death was the only path to life. If you hate your life in this world, you will keep it for eternal life. But if you love your life now, it will be lost forever.

This is the classic ‘death to self’ passage. In order to live the Christian life, you must die to yourself every day. You must take up your cross daily and follow Christ. And if you don’t die to self, if you don’t lose your life, you don’t get eternal life. Right? Well that’s almost right. You do have to die to self, that’s for sure. Death to self is required for salvation and for spiritual growth. but what we forget is that as believers, we have already died. There is an “already but not yet

aspect” to dying to self. In other words, losing your life has already been done for you but must continue to be done by you. Because we have already died, we must continue to die. As I read these, listen to what has already been done for us.

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24).

You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

We have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

I am crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

Did you catch all of the language of death? God has done this for us in the person and work of Christ. We have already lost our life spiritually and now we are called to lose our life practically. But whatever you do, don't ever separate the practical from the spiritual. It is nearly impossible to die to one's self on a daily, practical level, but if we realize what has already been done for us, it is now in the realm of possible. It's never easy but at least it's possible.

So what does losing one's life look like practically? This could be an entire sermon series in and of itself, but let me give you some examples. As I do, think of the opposite of a spirit of entitlement. You can call it humility because that is what it is, but to lose one's life is to lay down your rights. And that's the opposite of a spirit of entitlement.

For example, let's say you and your spouse had a “disagreement.” There may or may not have been raised voices and tears involved but it was a fairly serious disagreement. Not always, but generally speaking, more than one of you were to blame for the disagreement. Naturally, each of you think that the other person is responsible for greater than half of the problem. You are willing to own 30, maybe 40 percent of the blame but obviously your spouse carries most of the blame. So now what are you entitled to? You are entitled an apology, right? It's what you deserve. So you wait for the apology that never comes. And you wait. You deserve it so why don't you get it? Now even if you were less than 50% at fault, even if you had an attorney on your side arguing that you were less at fault than your spouse, you have a sense of entitlement.

Losing one's life at the foot of the cross tells us to let that go. So you deserve an apology—so what? Why would you hang onto that? I am not saying that you should gloss over marital issues and not work through them. But when it comes to the small to medium stuff, why would you insist on demanding what you think is due to you? First of all, you may be wrong but even if your husband or wife is more at fault, losing your life says to let it go.

Marriage squabbles go hand in hand with how easily you are offended by others. Incidentally, 100% of dying to self has to do either with our relationship with God or our relationship with

others. So if you are easily offended the question is why are you that way? Why is your skin so thin that it seems to bruise at the slightest provocation? Why do you need people to admire you? Why do you seem to need recognition? Why do you need others to know how hard you have been working? Why do you seem to need a pat on the back as often as you do? All of these are examples of holding onto self.

One time a man was sharing his testimony with a group of people. As he was sharing I figured that he would mention my name as I thought I had played a fairly significant role in his spiritual walk. But he finished his testimony but there was no mention of Rich Maurer. I brushed it off quite easily but the very fact that I was waiting for my name to be called out means that my self was not dead that day, and is not dead yet. That's why it's a daily dying.

Dying to self is not thinking less of yourself less, but thinking of yourself less. I didn't need to be recognized that day. But the crazy thing was, while I was listening to this man's testimony, I wasn't just thinking about him, I was thinking about myself. This even comes up when someone compliments us. If someone says that you did a good job with a task, there are three basic responses that we tend to give. The first would be that the compliment goes to your head and makes it a size larger. We all know that is wrong because it's just pride. But the opposite response is also prideful. We might respond to their compliment by saying, Oh, it wasn't that good. I could have done much better." It might feel like that is humility but it is actually a false humility. You are thinking about yourself too much. Why not just thank them and say you are glad they enjoyed it or appreciated it?

Ethan toasted a bagel yesterday morning so I decided to have one too. After mine was done I went to the refrigerator to get some cream cheese. I found the cream cheese but immediately realized that there was barely enough for one bagel let alone two. Ethan stepped out of the room and my immediate thought upon seeing the scarcity of cream cheese was this: I've got to get this cream cheese on my bagel before Ethan comes back. Seriously, this selfish thought entered my head just like that. But then I was convicted about it, how selfish it was. So I gave the cream cheese to Ethan since he toasted his bagel first. It's little decision like this, little instances of laying down your rights that can teach us to die to ourselves.

John Henry Neuman said "To take up the cross of Christ is no great action done once for all. It consists in the continual practice of small duties which are distasteful to us." I like that quote because it is often true but I'm not sure that it is always true. Losing your life or dying to self is not all horrible and painful. There can be great joy in losing your life.

Take ministry and service as an example. It takes a certain amount of losing your life to serve others. There are risks and sacrifices. You might engage in a ministry task or perform in front of people and get embarrassed. My "firsts" in ministry were always horrible. My first baptism, my first public prayer, my first-time leading communion, my first several sermons—all of them were disasters. I mean they were really bad and embarrassing. But so what, am I right? Those weren't my only failures and they won't be my last. But through the failures I have derived unbelievable joy from serving the Lord. If I hadn't died to self at least to a certain level then I certainly would have quit. Had you heard me lead, teach and pray back then you may have suggested that I stick to my day job and forget about becoming a pastor.

Now don't mistake activity in the church for dying to self. Over the years I have met some pastors that did not seem to be in ministry for the right reasons. Just last night I heard of a pastor who had a moral failure. His selfishness and sin is going to damage countless relationships for years or even decades and in this case, I know some of the people in that church. This is why I was almost weeping during the singing—I was hurting for my friends.

This sort of sin by a pastor is like setting off a spiritual nuclear bomb in the middle of the church. The power of that sin just explodes and radiates throughout the entire church body. Those who are closest to the situation will suffer the most but no one is exempt for the carnage.

I shouldn't be so naïve but I never cease to be amazed at the entitlement that Christians walk around with. "I deserve to be treated with more respect. How dare she say that about me. I'm going to do this because it makes me happy. If it makes me happy, how can you say it's wrong?"

The Song of Solomon warns the reader to beware of the "little foxes" which ruin the vineyard. That's how it is in life. It's the little foxes, the little daily decisions which lead to larger and more important decisions. This pastor who had a moral failing did not suddenly wake up one day and decide to have an affair. It never works that way. I guarantee you it was a result of years of little foxes ruining the vineyard of his soul. It's like with Ethan and the bagel.

People, were not so good at this dying to self thing. Losing your life is a "consists in the continual practice of small duties which are distasteful to us." The reason dying to self is distasteful is because it is distasteful to our flesh. Our flesh hates it. But dying to our self is actually joyful to your inner being, the Holy Spirit within you. It brings joy—joy in this life and incalculable joy in the next. Which leads to our final point.

3. Those who die to self will receive honor.

If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Imagine being honored by the Father. Wow. It makes earthly honor and worldly praise seem so, so empty. So stale.

So you're saying that I need to deny myself in this life so I can be rewarded in the next? Yes, that's exactly what Jesus is saying. Your small decisions to die to self matter. They really do make a difference. When you refuse to be honored here you will be honored there. When you walk away worldly pleasures now you will receive eternal pleasures later.

Rich Maurer
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¹ *No God But God*, Os Guinness and John Seel, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 185.

² Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *The Jesus Manifesto* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), xvi.

³ Josephus—"Located within it, and nearby, were steps which led up to the second structure, which was surrounded by a stone wall used as a barrier, engraved with an inscription not allowing foreigners to enter into it under the penalty of death."

http://www.biblehistory.net/newsletter/wall_of_seperation.htm

⁴ http://www.bible-history.com/gentile_court/TEMPLECOURTWarning_Inscription.htm

⁵ There were always God-fearing Gentiles in the midst of the faithless Jews. Think of Rahab and Namaan and these two centurions.

*After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 Now a centurion had a servant¹ who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. 3 When the centurion² heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation, and **he is the one who built us our synagogue.**" (Luke 7)*

*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, **gave alms generously to the people,** and prayed continually to God. (Acts 10)*