

Secret Disciples

The following words from Jesus touch directly on an important decision that we all have to make in our lives. “Whoever loves his life, loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me....” (John 12:25-26a) This is a classic passage that teaches us, at least, this: true disciples of Jesus, by grace through faith, are dying to their own sinful priorities, loves, anxieties, and unhealthy fears and seeking to live for Christ. As we begin to unpack our passage from John’s gospel, we’re introduced to two men who have lived much of their adult lives in *fear*. In this case, fear of what other powerful men may do to them. To set our passage in context, John 19:38-42 begins shortly after the crucifixion and subsequent death of Jesus. “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but *secretly* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away the body.” (19:38) If we search the accounts of all four gospel writers, we learn some helpful information about Joseph of Arimathea. In Matthew 27:57 we’re told that he was a “rich man” who had become a disciple of Jesus at some point. He was also a “respected member of the Council” and a “good and righteous man” (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50). We also learn that Joseph was “looking for the kingdom of God” (Mk. 15:43). We don’t know where Joseph was when Jesus was tried before the Council because Mark records that “*they all* condemned [Jesus] as *deserving death*” (Mk. 14:64). And yet, we discover that Joseph was not in agreement with the decision and action in *putting Jesus to death* (Lk. 23:51).

Only John tells us that Joseph was a disciple “*secretly*.” It seems that it’s at the *death of Jesus* that Joseph finally determines that it’s time to stop being a *secret disciple* and to step out in faith. Mark mentions that Joseph “*took courage* and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” (Mk. 15:43) Joseph was well aware that anyone who *openly* professed to believe in Jesus was in danger of being marginalized in Jewish society by the Jewish leaders—even to the point of putting them out of the synagogue—an important part of Jewish life and worship (John 9:22; 12:42-43), or sadly, even killing them (John 12:10).

Looking further in our passage, we’re told that a man named *Nicodemus* is involved in this as well. Interestingly, only John mentions the part that Nicodemus plays in the preparation and burial plan of Jesus. In fact, John is the only one of the gospel writers that mentions Nicodemus *at all!* If we look at the whole of what John reveals about Nicodemus up to this point, we learn that Nicodemus was also a *secret disciple*. The first time that we hear of Nicodemus is in John chapter three where he “came to Jesus by night....” Clearly, Nicodemus didn’t want any of the powerful Jewish leaders to know that he had met with Jesus.

We see what could appear to be a slight change of heart in John 7:51 as Nicodemus is taking part in some dialogue between certain “officers [who] came to the chief priests and Pharisees.” These Jewish leaders were angry because these temple officers had not arrested Jesus. Nicodemus, speaking of Jesus, says, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” It may be that he’s defending Jesus, although some scholars suggest that Nicodemus is simply placing a focus on a finer point of Jewish law. The Jewish leaders respond angrily and ask Nicodemus to search the scriptures and he’ll see that “no prophet arises from Galilee.” (7:52)

John mentions something in chapter 12:42-43 that goes to the heart of the fears that *secret disciples* have: “.....many of the authorities believed in [Jesus] but, for *fear* of the Pharisees they would not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for *they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*” Does a desire for the approval of family, friends, peers and others cause you to shrink back in fear rather than fully committing, by faith, to the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life? There comes a time when genuine disciples, by grace, have to put their fears behind them and declare their allegiance to the “King of kings and Lord of lords.” (1 Timothy 6:15) For all those who perpetually choose to stay hidden, it may be that—rather than being a *secret disciple*—you may not be a disciple of Jesus at all.

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