

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

I concluded my previous article by noting that there are many Christians who believe that they have very little to offer as a disciple. We began our look at Philip, a disciple of Jesus, under the heading of “Genuine disciples of Jesus desire to tell others about him.” Even though Philip is shown in John’s gospel to be a very timid individual who seems to show very little initiative, telling others about Jesus is one thing that Philip does.

Look with me now in Verses 45-46: “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”

It’s important to note that when Philip says “we have found,” he’s almost certainly referencing Andrew in the plural pronoun “we.” He’s merely using different words to say what Andrew has already said about finding the Messiah. Philip didn’t find anyone, but he was found by Jesus.

In addition to what Andrew said in Verse 41, Philip states that this is the one that “Moses in the Law and also the prophets” wrote of. Philip still had a lot to learn, and yet, even though he may have been lacking in gifts and initiative, Philip was willing to go and tell his friend Nathanael about Jesus.

Let’s continue our look at some of what John’s gospel teaches about what it means to be a genuine disciple by looking next at:

Genuine disciples of Jesus are completely known by Him

When we consider what it means to be completely known by Jesus, let’s look at this under the categories of both explicit and implicit knowledge. Look with me now at Verses 47-48:

“Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’”

What do we know about Nathanael? It seems that Nathanael is the same person as Bartholomew in Matthew, Mark and Luke. John is the only one who uses the name Nathanael. In addition to this, all the other gospel writers list Bartholomew as second in the list of the second group of Jesus’ disciples/ apostles (in Acts 1:13, Bartholomew and Thomas are reversed).

Scholars note that Bartholomew is not really a personal name, but, like “Simon, son of John” Bartholomew means “son of Tolmai.” That being true, many scholars believe that this is “Nathanael Bartholomew.” It certainly seems to fit well if we conclude that Nathanael is one of the 12 Apostles. But he may have simply been one of many other disciples who followed Jesus but were not, strictly speaking, one of the 12 Apostles. Still, without trying to be dogmatic, one thing that seems to support Nathanael being one of the 12 is that he’s listed in Chapter 21 as one of those who was with Peter after the resurrection of Jesus when Jesus appeared to them (21:2).

Jesus shows in these verses that he has explicit and implicit knowledge of Nathanael. God knows Nathanael completely. Of course, this knowledge is not merely of one event, but, rather, he knows Nathanael intimately. Jesus calls Nathanael “an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit.” This is just to say, in effect, that Nathanael is living faithful to the knowledge that he has of the covenant God of Israel. His life is not one of perfection but certainly one of integrity shown by the fact that he’s honestly seeking to obey what’s been revealed to him.

Taken with Verse 51, we may see somewhat of a comparing and contrasting with Jacob in the Old Testament (Genesis 28:12), who was said to be a deceiver until after the night that he wrestled with God and his name is changed to “Israel.” Yet, unlike Jacob, in Nathanael there is no deceit.

We’re not told anything else of the event of Jesus seeing Nathanael “under the fig tree.”

In the Old Testament, the fig tree is often used as a symbol of “home” and even of “prosperity” (1 Kgs. 4:25; Is. 36:16; Zech. 3:10). It can also just mean a literal fig tree. Whichever way we think of this, it seems that John’s point here is the supernatural knowledge of God, rather than a focus on all the specific details of how Nathanael was known to Jesus. John is clearly continuing to point to the deity of Jesus as well as the authority that he has to call disciples and to fulfill his ministry. Jesus shows that he knows Nathanael both explicitly and implicitly. Something about this supernatural knowledge caused Nathanael to know that this could only be the work of God and God is to be worshiped!

Along with explicit and implicit knowledge, next we’ll be given an example of extemporaneous praise. By God’s grace, Nathanael is immediately aware that Jesus is no ordinary man. In a moment of extemporaneous praise, Nathanael declares: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” There seems to be no doubt in Nathanael’s mind that this man is to be worshiped.

In summary, we’ve seen that genuine disciples of Jesus are completely known by him. With this biblical truth in our minds, as we look forward to the coming New Year, may we be reminded that all Christians are perfectly and completely known and loved in Jesus Christ.

As we’ve seen today, he perfectly knows us from the inside-out. All our deepest secrets that may be unknown to others are known to God. And this should never be a cause of unhealthy fear. For example, we may find ourselves thinking, “I’m a disciple of Jesus but I failed again. Will God finally give up on me?” God the Father could no more give up on his children than he could give up on Jesus! In his first epistle, John reminds us that, “perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18)

What a blessing to know that — even though we may find ourselves pretending with others — we don’t have to pretend with God because, in Christ, God loves his people perfectly. Along with this, God is a God who delights to forgive his children of their sins (1 John 1:8-10).

May we rest in the blessing that God is at work in the lives of his people for good and — as Nathanael reminds us — he is worthy of our worship.

The Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton.