

# Exegetical Brief: "What You Are Doing, Do (More?) Quickly" John 13:27

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The tendency of *koine* Greek to be less precise, or at least less concerned with careful distinctions than was classical Greek, is well documented. For example, conjunctions take on additional usages. Clauses introduced by  $\iota\upsilon\alpha$  are no longer just purpose clauses but may be object clauses or even result clauses (cf. John 9:2). Prepositions assume a wider range of meanings than they had previously. The prepositions  $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  and  $\epsilon\nu$  are regularly interchanged. And when  $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  is used, it may function not only as a preposition but as a virtual conjunction, introducing a purpose idea, the so-called "telic  $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ." Or  $\delta\iota\alpha$  with the genitive is no longer restricted to the meaning of "through" but may mean "after" (cf. Ga.2:1, Ac 24:17).

Similarly the careful observance of the degrees of comparison in both adjective and adverb forms became blurred in *koine* usage. In general, one might say that the superlative degree came to be less used than it had been in classical Greek. And while the comparative forms can and do at times retain their traditional function of drawing a comparison between two persons or things, they tend to broaden out and encroach on both the positive and the superlative degrees.

Comparative forms of adverbs and adjectives came to be used to draw a comparison between more than two items, thus functioning like superlatives. And in an interesting reversal, comparative forms also came to be used where the positive degree was clearly called for by the context.

It is no doubt the prevalence of this *koine* tendency to use comparative forms even when the positive degree was intended which accounts for the fact that, of the some twenty English translation randomly consulted, none rendered the comparative form  $\tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$  of John 13:27 with a comparative meaning.

The passage in question is the one in which Jesus on Maundy Thursday evening tells Judas,  $\circ\ \pi\omicron\iota\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\omicron\nu\ \tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$ . All the translations consulted render that passage with some variation of "What you are doing, do *quickly*." Robert Young in his well-known *Analytical Concordance of the Bible* lists the form as a comparative. But even he, in his *Literal Translation of the Bible* (Baker, 1971 reprint of 1862 original) renders the sentence, "What thou dost—do quickly."

The closest thing found to an intentional reflection of the comparative force of  $\tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$  is in the *Amplified Bible* (Lockman Foundation/Zondervan 1958). There the comparative sense is added in square brackets as an "amplification," not the text itself. They render the passage, "What you are going to do, do [more swiftly than you seem to intend] and make quick work of it."

We should note that the form  $\tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$  can and occasionally does function as a true comparative. In describing the events of Easter morning, John tell us that he and Peter both ran out to the site of the tomb, but "the other disciple ran more quickly ( $\tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$ ) than Peter" and got there first (John 20:4) Obviously, the comparative force is proper here. It is this writer's contention that the context suggests similarly good and valid grounds for retaining the comparative force of  $\tau\alpha\chi\iota\upsilon\omicron\nu$  at John 13:27.

Driven by disaffection with his Master, Judas made his deal with the enemies to turn Jesus over to them for thirty pieces of silver. Although the Jewish leaders were delighted with this turn of events, recall their one reservation. They wanted Jesus done away with, "but not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people" (Mt 26:5; cf also Mk 14:2).

Judas now looked for an opportunity to betray Jesus. Consistent with the understanding he had with the Jewish leaders, it's likely that Judas did not intend to betray Jesus on the eve of the Passover. But neither Judas nor the Jewish leadership were in charge of Jesus' death. It was God's plan of salvation and his timetable. The Passover Lamb was going to die on the Passover! Human forces could not make it happen, nor could they prevent it. To Judas and the Jewish leaders, just as to Pilate, Jesus could have said, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above (Jn 19:11).

In the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday Jesus "gave power from above" to his enemies. With his imperative ποιησον he not only commanded Judas to proceed with his nefarious deed, but by adding the adverb ταχιον even commanded him to do it more quickly than he or his evil cohorts were intending. That, of course, does not shift responsibility for the betrayal to Jesus, nor does it exonerate Judas. Judas did what he wanted to do. But the Savior's clear words, faithfully recorded by John, leave no doubt that it was the powerful and omniscient Son of God whom Judas was betraying. The Son of God freely and willingly laid down his life. No one took it from him. He was fully and completely in charge of his own death, even to the point of speeding up the process and seeing to it that it was done ταχιον, more quickly than human agents would have done.

The intent of this little excursus is not to lobby twenty English versions to change their translation of John 13:27. Translating ταχιον as a comparative may not be absolutely essential for rendering this verse into acceptable English. But neither should the comparative force of the adverb be totally overlooked. Standard Greek usage allows the comparative meaning, the context suggests it, and such an understanding gives assurance regarding Christ's divine control over the timetable of God's plan of salvation. All these constitute strong and perhaps even compelling reasons for the exegete to give this comparative its due as he expounds the verse for his hearers.