

## **When God Prays, Part 1 (John 17:1-5)**

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Here's a question to consider. Why should we pray? Why should we stop what we're doing in a thousand situations and say in a thousand ways, "Help, God!" Should we pray because we're sinners and need God's mercy and forgiveness? Should we pray because our faith is weak and need to grow in trusting the Lord? Should we pray because we are powerless to change the people or situations around us?

Those are all good reasons to pray, but none of them quite capture the fundamental reason we should pray. One of the most initially striking things about Jn 17 isn't so much what Jesus is praying as it is the fact that *Jesus* is praying. And it's certainly not the first or only time he did so during his public ministry!

Is Jesus praying because he's a sinner? Is Jesus praying because his faith is weak? Is he praying because he's powerless to change the people or situations around him? Not in the least. He's God. When Jesus prays, God himself is praying. God the Son is pouring out his heart to God the Father in humble, earnest prayer. And God does not sin. His faith is not weak. And he has infinite power to change all the people and situations around him. So why is he praying if he has no deficiencies or weaknesses? Is it something he didn't need to do, but did anyway to exemplify what we need to do on account of all our issues and problems?

The reason Jesus is praying is the same reason we should pray. **At its core, prayer is verbal communication with God expressing relational dependence on God.** It's part of what it means to be fully human. To be a human being is to be created in the image of God for the joy of relationship with God. It's what the first Adam experienced *before* he sinned the world. And it's what the second Adam, Jesus, practiced as one who *never* sinned! He communicated verbally with God as an expression of relational dependence on God. As a perfect man, Jesus prayed!

Now I'm not saying Jesus' humanity is the *only* reason he prays. We must be ever so careful to avoid dividing Jesus into parts by saying, "He did this because he's a man. Or he did this because he's God." There are times he clearly acts in and through his human nature. There are times he clearly acts in and through his divine nature. But he does not swap out his humanity or deity like a change of clothes or blend them into some kind of superman outfit. He always acts as one person with two natures, fully God and fully man, unmixed and undivided.

So whenever Jesus prays, Jn 17 included, we must not think he is *only* communicating with the Father as a man or *simply* because he is a man. To the contrary, there are clearly things he prays in this passage (for example, “glorify me” in v. 5) that would be wickedly arrogant for a mere man to pray. The only person who can pray that prayer with moral integrity is God! And yet we learn something tremendously important from the simple fact that even though he’s a perfect man, Jesus still prays! **The foundational reason we should pray lies not in our sins or weaknesses but in our humanity.**

Prayer is not an unfortunate necessity. It is a holy expression of relational dependence. The sanest and most human thing we do in any and every situation is to join Jesus in lifting our eyes to heaven and crying out, “Father.” For to be a man or a woman is to be created for relational dependence on the God who made us. When Jesus prays, he shows us what it means to be truly human.

There is so much for our souls to feast on in this passage, friends! Where we see the unique way Jesus relates to the Father as the only Son of God, we should stand in awe. Where we see the kind of requests Jesus brings to the Father as the Savior who ever lives to intercede for his own, we should rejoice with gratitude. And where we see what we too should pray for as human beings created for relational dependence on the Father, may we obediently follow Jesus’ example.

We’re going to camp out in this chapter for three weeks, reading the entire thing every Sunday, though we’ll focus on different sections each week. This Sunday, we’ll give attention to the goal of Jesus’ prayer in vv. 1-5. Then we’ll spend two weeks working through the specific requests he makes for us as his people in vv. 6-26. We’re also going to end our gatherings every week by breaking into small groups to pray. What better way to apply sermons about the way Jesus prays than by following his example!

I’ll give you the main point of vv. 1-5 upfront and then we’ll unpack it and consider some implications. Believe it or not, it’s a one-point sermon! So here it is. Here’s the most important thing Jesus teaches us as he begins to pray: **the goal of prayer is the glory of God.**

The context of his prayer is critical. He’s just finished giving the disciples parting words of instruction in Jn 13-16. His death, resurrection, and ascension are

imminent. So he patiently prepares them for his departure by speaking to them words of encouragement and admonition. Jn 16:33 captures the gist of the whole. "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world."

Jesus isn't like a frantic parent trying to cram in as much guidance for the kids as possible before leaving for work. There are many things he doesn't say. Nor does he keep talking faster and faster until the moment of his arrest in Jn 18. Instead, "When Jesus had spoken these words" (v. 1), he stops and spends his final moments with them praying for them. It's stunning when you think about it. **God himself believed the most important thing he could do for the troubled men around him at this moment was to pray.** We do well to follow his example no matter who we're caring for!

Notice the very first thing he says. "Father, the hour has come..." In Jn 2:4, Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come." In Jn 7:30, "No one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come." And again, in Jn 8:20, "No one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come." Then finally, at the beginning of the Farewell Discourse in Jn 12:23 and the end of the Farewell Discourse in Jn 17:1, Jesus says, "The hour has come." What sort of hour is he talking about? And why does he call it "the hour"?

It's the hour of his crucifixion and death. And Jesus calls it "the hour" because it's the central event in his life, indeed in all human history. It's the hour on which God's entire plan of redemption turns, the centerpiece of his mission to make right all our sin has made wrong. **It was the defining hour of Jesus' life. It ought to be the defining hour of our lives as well, brothers and sisters.**

To live in this world is to experience the curse of sin in all its painful brokenness, including moments of suffering that permanently alter the course of your life. Your child or spouse tragically dies. You're fired from the job of your dreams. Someone violates you sexually. Or you're diagnosed with a terminal illness. Pick a crisis, the common denominator is an acute sense that life will never be the same. It's a life-altering hour. It looms as large as the Mont Blanc massif in western Europe, dominating our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

But even in that hour, whether it is past, present, or future for you, my friend, know this. The power and influence of "that" hour pales in comparison to the power and influence of "the" hour. And if you're a Christian, if you are holding fast to Jesus as your only hope, your only Savior, the defining hour in his life is the defining hour in



your life. It's the hour that governs the course of your life, from the cradle to the grave. For his victory is your victory. His triumph is your glory.

And his hour ensures that no matter what happens in all our other hours, there is no hour that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. May his hour, "the hour," always loom larger in our minds as more determinative, more defining, than any other. If Jesus' view of himself and his life was gospel-centered, the identity and outlook of those who are in him by faith should be the same.

Know Jesus isn't trying to be dramatic by calling it "the hour." It's "the hour" because it is something the Triune God planned from eternity past to accomplish at this exact moment in human history. Jesus didn't die at a random time. He died at a sovereignly appointed time. Saying, "Father, the hour has come," is an expression of his life-long submission to the sovereign will of God as the obedient Son of God.

So what does Jesus do when he recognizes the appointed time of his death has arrived? He sits quietly and waits for God to do whatever God's going to do because, you know, he's sovereign. No! He prays. **The sovereign plan of God compels him to pray! May it do the same for us, brothers and sisters!**

Do not pray because you doubt God's sovereignty and think you might be able to twist his arm. Pray because you trust God's sovereignty, because we know he has sovereignly ordained to accomplish things through our prayers that will not be accomplished otherwise. If the reality of God's sovereign purposes motivates God himself to pray, how can it possibly justify passivity on our part?

**Now look at what Jesus prays for first. It's his greatest desire, his highest priority.** "Father...glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." To glorify someone is to exalt or make much of them, to reveal and proclaim the greatness of their worth and value. From beginning to end, the Bible teaches us that there is no one in the universe more glorious or intrinsically worthy of praise than God. No one deserves to be made much of more than him. And the Lord is well aware, which is why he repeatedly and justly says in places like Isa 42:8, "My glory I give to no other."

So when Jesus prays, "Father, glorify your Son," is he asking God to break his word and commit idolatry by making much of Jesus instead of much of himself? No. Why not? Because Jesus is God, the Son in whom the glory of the Father is most fully

revealed. When Jesus is glorified, the Father is glorified. “Glorify your Son *that the Son may glorify you*,” Jesus prays. It’s an unmistakable claim to deity.

But doesn’t the timing seem a bit strange? Isn’t the “hour” of which he speaks an hour of unimaginable suffering – arrest, crucifixion, and death? In fact, it is! So why not pray, “Father...comfort your Son” or “Father...strengthen your Son.” Why does Jesus pray, “Father...glorify your Son”? Because it is through his death of God that the manifold glory of God is most clearly displayed for all the world to see.

Whenever the Bible speaks of glorifying or exalting God that’s what it’s talking about. Not adding to God’s glory or increasing God’s glory, but making much of his glory, savoring his glory, lifting it up for all to see.

From every human angle, that’s not what the cross appears to be. It doesn’t look like an hour of glorification. It looks like an hour of humiliation. What could be more humiliating than hanging naked on a cross until you asphyxiate from exhaustion? And that after such a promising 3 years of public ministry! But what is it in reality?

**The hour the gracious goodness, unfathomable wisdom, and matchless power of God is supremely revealed.** V. 2 explains why.

God gave him, Jesus, “authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” On what basis is the Son asking the Father to glorify him and in turn to be glorified by him? On the basis of the charge the Father gave him from eternity past to bring the kingdom of God, the redemptive rule of God, to pass by virtue of his future obedience unto death.

Dan 7:13-14, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall never pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

**Friend, Jesus is the one with whom we have to deal.** He is the appointed ruler and king of the universe. The Father has given him final authority over “all flesh,” your life included! How you respond to the crucified and risen Son of God will determine the future course of your life. Your life is in his hands, not yours. You are not captain of your fate or master of your soul. Jesus is.

And here's the most marvelous thing about King Jesus. The Son exercises his "authority over all flesh" not by selfishly throwing his weight around the way human authorities so often do. He does it by accomplishing all that is necessary to give "eternal life" to the chosen people of God. The kingdom of God is not his sovereign reign over the affairs of men in general. It is his redemptive rule over the people of God in particular, a rule Jesus achieves by securing eternal life for all whom God has set apart for himself.

What is this eternal life, you ask? Jesus tells us in v. 3. "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." **Eternal life is more than unending life, friends. It's the life that comes from knowing God as the Savior he has revealed himself to be.** Which means "eternal life" isn't primarily something waiting for us in the future; it's a kind of life, a quality of life, that we enter into right now.

The moment you choose to turn from sin and embrace the obedience of faith in Jesus is the moment two things happen that are really two sides of the same coin. One, you come to know God the Father as the only true God. You recognize the radical exclusivity at the core of the gospel. The God of the Bible is not one among many gods. There is no other God! And two, you come to know Jesus Christ, the Son sent by the Father, as the Savior in whom he is perfectly revealed, who came to earth to make a way for us to be right with God.

The "knowing" Jesus describes in v. 3 involves more than acquiring an intellectual data point (though it involves historical facts!) or having an emotional experience (though it inevitably affects our emotions!). **It is a faith-filled kind of knowing that responds to the salvation Jesus offers us by trusting him accordingly.** D.A. Carson is right. "Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One."

It's what the Lord promised would happen in Jer 31:34, "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." When that happens, Jesus says, **when the Son secures eternal life for all whom the Father has predestined for salvation and entrusted to his care, the Son will be glorified, and the Father will be glorified in him.** In other words, the primary way God is glorified is through the gospel!

Here's what that means. **God's passion for his glory is the measure of his commitment to our good.** No greater good has ever or could ever come our way as sinners than the good news of the gospel. And nothing glorifies God, Father and Son alike, more than the salvation he accomplishes through the gospel. And that means our greatest good and God's greatest glory are not opposite things or even two things. They are identical! They are one and the same. The gospel through which he displays the supremacy of his glory is the gospel through which we experience the supremacy of his goodness.

When Jesus prays at the outset of his prayer, "Father, glorify your Son," he's asking the Father to bring the very thing to pass that ultimately secures our salvation. He's asking the Father to magnify his power to save by lifting Jesus up on the cross, exalting Jesus as the Savior of the world. The entire goal of his prayer is the glory of God.

It's not a request Jesus starts with to cover his bases or pay his spiritual dues, so to speak, before he gets to the stuff he *really* wants the Father to do. No. It is the divine desire, the unshakeable commitment, that guarantees the success of all the other requests he will mention. It's the most important prayer Jesus prays! It's the most important prayer we pray, friends. "More than anything else, Father, glorify your name! For when you do that, I know everything that is good for me will follow. You'll make it happen. You'll get it done. Because your glory and my good always go hand in hand."

Do you pray like that, friend? On one level, Jesus' prayer has already been answered. It was answered less than 24 hours later when he was lifted up on the cross. But on another level, it's a divine desire, a divine goal, that should inform and guide our prayers today. What does Paul tell us in Col 1:18? God's plan, God's desire, God's sovereign purpose, is that in everything Christ might be preeminent, our prayers included!

**When the goal of our prayer is the glory of God, our prayers are impacted in two ways.** First, we discover a source of tremendous power and encouragement to pray and keep on praying. "Father, you could not be more committed to your glory. In this situation, in my marriage, in my child, in my church, in my friend's life, in my work, in my school, glorify your name! Act for the sake of your renown. Act for the sake of your praise. Act so that all can see you alone are God and there is no other.



Display your power to save. Make known the saving might of your arm. When the glory of God is the goal of your prayer, it will fuel your prayers and compel your prayers like nothing else.

Second, when the glory of God is the goal of your prayers, it will change not just the confidence with which you pray but the very things for which you want to pray. For example, if Jesus' greatest desire is your greatest desire (Father, glorify your Son!) then you will no longer ask small things of a small God. You will ask great things of a great God. Your prayers will no longer orbit around the impoverished sun of your own comfort and convenience. Your prayers will be shaped by a far greater glory.

You will long for Christ to be made known in Thailand and pray accordingly! You will long for Christ to be honored in the young men and women in our church and pray accordingly! You may still pray for someone to be physically healed, but you won't stop there. You will pray for them to know Jesus better through their suffering. You will pray for power to know and treasure Jesus more in your own suffering! Your prayers for your children won't focus on getting into a good college or landing a high-paying job. You'll ask the Lord to open their eyes to see the ravishing beauty of Jesus for the sake of his glory.

**Take care that your prayers are not an attempt to hitch God to the wagon of your own comfort or glory, friend.** Ask and seek and knock that God might be glorified in you and around you. Do not pray, "Lord, make my life easy." Pray, "Father, glorify your name!" and when he glorifies his name by leading you and sustaining you on the road of suffering in the same way he exalted his Son on the road of suffering, remember this. It is a privilege to lay down our life for the One who laid down his life for us.

In vv. 4-5, Jesus recounts his faithfulness to do exactly that – to live for the glory of God. "I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." Notice two things in what he says.

**First, we do not glorify God with our lives primarily by avoiding sin or not doing things that are wrong.** We can think like that as Christians. Glorifying God with my life means not sleeping around, not using bad language, not being a jerk to people, not looking at pornography, etc. Are those things important? Absolutely. But glorifying God requires so much more than not breaking certain rules. It means living a surrendered life, a submitted life, a life where we say:



Lord, I choose to make your work my work. I choose to devote my time, my energy, my money, my gifts and abilities, to your priorities and your purposes, to what makes much of you, not much of me. I choose to not set the course of my life by asking, "What do I feel like doing?" but, "Lord, what good and glorious work do you want me to do and have prepared for me to do so that I might walk in it?"

Could that mean curling up on the couch with your spouse and watching a movie? Absolutely. But why do we presume it always means that but never means abandoning our comfortable American life to move to a place where Christ has yet to be named to tell people just how good and glorious he is? Do you really want to do his work, friend? Have you asked him to show you?

**Here's the second implication. There's only one person in the universe who can say with perfect faithfulness and integrity, "Father, I accomplished the work that you gave me to do."** I can't say that, at least not the way Jesus did.

Should we try to? Yes! Yet we all stumble in many ways. But don't let that discourage you, Christian. Why not? Because the Lord delights to use your feeble, insufficient works to make much of his perfect and completed work.

The biblical goal of good works is not getting people to say, "Wow, look at how sufficient you are!" No, the goal is for people to look at us and be immediately drawn to the sufficiency and faithfulness and perfection of Jesus' work, starting with the work of salvation he accomplished for us and at the cross.

**From beginning to end, the story of the universe isn't centered on our work or our glory. It's centered on God's work and his glory.** It's why Jesus concludes the first section of his prayer in v. 5 by asking the Father to restore him to the position and experience of glory he enjoyed in heaven prior to coming to earth as a man. "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

Besides implicitly asserting that the material universe is not eternal, and that there was a time when God existed and the world did not, what is Jesus doing? He's asking for God to bring him home. My mission is nearly complete. My work is done. Before the world existed, I shared your divine glory, Father. I laid aside the prerogatives and full display of my glory to come to earth as man, to live their life,

and die their death. Now restore me to your right hand, Father, restore my pre-incarnate splendor.

When he rose from the grave and ascended to the right hand of God, the Father answered Jesus' request with a resounding, "Yes!" What does that have to do with us? Everything. **It means our lives are part of a bigger story, a greater glory.** A glory that extends back into eternity past and will never crumble or fade. What does nearly everything we watch on TV or read online say? It's all about you. What does the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ declare? It's all about Jesus. He's the glorious one. He has always been glorious. He will always be glorious.

## **CONCLUSION**

When you devote your life to living for Jesus you are devoting your life to glory that transcends and will outlast all the fading glories of this world, your own included, friend. Don't live for what is passing away. Live for what is eternal. Live for the glory of Christ. **When his glory is the aim of our life it will become the goal of our prayers,** no less than it was for our Lord when he walked among us.

I can think of no better response to Jesus' example and instruction than joining him in prayer. So let's break down into groups of 4-5 and pray for several things:

- Pray that our greatest desire would be for Christ to be glorified, not our own comfort or ease
- Pray that we would see prayer not as an unfortunate necessity, but a holy expression of relational dependence
- Pray we would see the goodness, wisdom, and power of God displayed in the gospel
- Pray we would trust God's passion for his glory is the measure of his commitment to our good