

When God Prays, Part 2 (John 17)

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Spiritual activities often feel deeply personal and private, prayer included. Some of us are comfortable talking to other people about God. But having other people listen while we talk to God? That's a completely different story. It feels incredibly vulnerable.

The way Jesus talks with God the Father in Jn 17 ranks among the most personally vulnerable words he spoke during his public ministry. He's about to die and he knows it. He knows his closest followers are about to abandon him. He knows the Father himself is about to forsake him. If you had to choose the most difficult, the most stressful, the most painfully vulnerable night of Jesus' life, this is it. His prayer isn't scripted. It's not a press release. It's the outpouring of his soul to God. And for our sake, I'm so thankful the Spirit saw fit to inspire the Apostle John to write it down.

Jn 17 gives us a glimpse into the very heart of God. We discover what Jesus really cares about, his deepest passions and desires. We learn what he longs to see come to pass in our own lives and in our church. And in the process, he teaches us what we should join him in praying, both for ourselves and one another. Some of it is hard to understand. But he's not using religious jargon or being aloof. It couldn't be more personal.

Big picture, Jesus prays for two things. He prays for the sake of God's glory. V. 1, "Father...glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." We lingered there last Sunday. And he prays for the sake of God's people. V. 9, "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me..." Before he mentions any specific requests on our behalf, however, Jesus addresses two preliminary issues in vv. 6-11. First, WHO are the people of God for whom he is praying? Second, WHY is he praying for them?

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

Jesus prays in a primary way for his original followers in vv. 6-19, particularly the band of his closest disciples known as the apostles. Then he makes an explicit transition in v. 20 to praying for all who would join them in following Jesus in the future. But his description in vv. 6-11 of who the people of God are and why he's

praying for them is no less true for the people of God today than it was for the people of God back then. Jesus mentions two defining marks of God's people in vv. 6-8.

First, they are chosen by God. V. 6, "I have manifested (or made known) your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world." Throughout the Bible, names capture the essence of someone's character. They describe who you are no less than in the early days of American history when Mr. Cooper was a barrel maker and Mrs. Taylor was a seamstress. In a similar way, Jesus makes known the Father's name by showing us what God is like. This is who God is. This is what God is doing.

That's not something we discover by looking within ourselves or leaning on our own reason. In Jesus, God reveals himself to us. God makes himself known to us. We don't create or decide what is true about God. God tells us what is true about himself by coming to earth and showing us firsthand!

So who did Jesus do that for? To whom did Jesus reveal the saving glory of the Father? He didn't do it for everyone. He manifested the Father's name to God's chosen people, those whom the Father gave him "out of the world." As Americans, we love to own things, but we despise the idea of anyone owning us. Yet Jesus says, speaking of the people of God, "Father, they are yours." What does he mean?

He's talking about the divine work of election. All of us are born willingly running away from God and toward hell. But God, in the mystery of his mercy, elects or chooses certain men and women to draw back to himself, not against our will, but by sovereignly changing our will so start to run toward God instead of away from him.

Were it not for God's mercy in election, there would be no people of God, brothers and sisters! It's not a cause for pride or accusations of injustice. It's a cause for grateful wonder and awe. Even before we come to faith, there's a crucial sense in which we are already the Father's by virtue of election. He owns us because he chose us for himself.

So how does the Father ensure that all whom he has chosen are in fact saved? He gives or entrusts them to the Son that he might save them to the uttermost. "Yours they were," Jesus says, "and you gave them to me." We think a baseball player is pretty good if he gets on base 40% of the time. What does Jesus say about ALL

whom the Father gives him? Look at the end of v. 6. "They have kept your word," 100% of the time. He doesn't lose a single one. He's a good shepherd.

Rest in that, brothers and sisters. If you are a Christian, your salvation, your perseverance in the obedience of faith, rests not on your power to keep yourself but on Jesus' power to keep you. You could not be in more capable hands. The first mark of the people of God for whom Jesus prays is that they are chosen by God.

Second, they are characterized by obedient faith in God's Word. Look at vv. 7-8. "Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me." What does Jesus say he "gave" to the chosen people of God? He gave them what the Father first gave to him. What's that? The words of God. Why is human language a suitable and sufficient means of communicating the knowledge of God? Because God has chosen in his infinite wisdom to make himself known through words.

It's why your relationship to God's Word, the Bible, is the best indicator of your relationship with God. To obey or disobey God's Word is to obey or disobey God himself. NOT because the Bible is God, but because God relates to us and makes himself known to us through his word. And there is a specific way the people of God respond to the Word of God that distinguishes them as the people of God!

Look at v. 8. We "receive" it, giving it careful attention and consideration, refusing to ignore or disregard it. We recognize or "come to know" the divine authority it possesses, especially what it says about Jesus. That he isn't just a man. He's the Son of God who "came" from the Father to rescue us. And then we "believe" or trust God as a result. What we come to know of God through the Word of God causes us to lean the weight of our life on him. We entrust ourselves to him as the only One who can save us not just from sin and death in general, but in every experience of trouble.

And the defining mark of genuine belief, genuine trust, is exactly what Jesus describes in v. 6. We "keep" God's Word – not because we "have" to or "ought" to but because we want to! We know he's our only hope, so we surrender ourselves fully to his care. **The people of God are chosen by God and characterized by obedient faith in his word.**



And lest you despair, Christian, of ever passing the test, remember who Jesus is primarily talking about here. He's talking about his closest disciples, men who kept doubting him, getting his identity wrong, expecting things from him they shouldn't expect, making all kinds of arrogant statements, sinning against him and one another. On so many levels, they were a mess!

Yet how does Jesus describe them as he pours his heart out to the Father the night before his death? They have kept your word. They had received your word. They have come to know in truth that I came from you. They have believed you sent me. What grace, brothers and sisters. Despite all their weaknesses, all their failures, when Jesus looked at them, he saw the grace of God that was upon them.

J.C. Ryle, "Jesus sees far more in His believing people than they see in themselves, or than others see in them. The least degree of faith is very precious in His sight. Though it be no bigger than a mustard seed, it is a plant of heavenly growth, and makes a boundless difference between the possessor of it and the man of the world. Wherever the gracious Savior of sinners sees true faith in Himself, however feeble, He looks with compassion on many infirmities, and passes by many defects."

There is no privilege, no blessing, no identity of greater worth or value than to be numbered among the people of God. For this the Savior has promised us. V. 9. "I am praying for them." Why would the Son of God pray for the people of God? Because he's our Great High Priest. Jesus' labor of praying for his own prayer for his own didn't stop that night. Right now, in the throne room of heaven, he is pleading for them. Heb 7:25, "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."

Can you imagine a better confidence? A better surety? Christ himself is praying for you, Christian. While you're working, Jesus is praying for you. While you're sleeping, Jesus is praying for you. When you are intimately aware of his presence, he is praying for you. And when he feels a million miles away, he is still praying for you. And because he is both infinitely pleasing to the Father and intercedes in accordance with the Father's will, the Father always answers the Son's prayers for us with a resounding, "Yes!" His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.

Some of you know the story of Peter, one of the Lord's closest disciples. In the next chapter, he betrays the Lord, he disowns him during the most vulnerable hour of Jesus' life. When Jesus most needed a friend, Peter ran. His faith was so weak. But listen to what Jesus says in Lk 22:31-32. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

It was the prevailing power of Jesus' prayers for Simon that secured the fulfillment of God's saving work in his life. We are no different, brothers and sisters. J.C. Ryle, "This special intercession of the Lord Jesus is one grand secret of the believer's safety. He is daily watched, and thought for, and provided for with unfailing care, by the One whose eye never slumbers and never sleeps...They stand and persevere to the end, not because of their own strength and goodness, but because Jesus intercedes for them...The true servant of Christ ought to lean back his soul on the truth before us, and take comfort in it."

Yes, Jesus loves the world no less than the Father. It's why he sent the Son into the world in the first place. But Jesus' priestly intercession and atoning blood are reserved for the chosen people of God. As such, we are immeasurably and eternally blessed!

WHY IS JESUS PRAYING FOR US?

He mentions several reasons in vv. 9-11. First, "they are yours," Jesus says. **He prays for us because of the Father's sovereign purpose in election.** The fact that God has chosen a people for his own possession doesn't cause Jesus to sit on the sideline of the redemption playing field. It compels him to get into the game. To switch metaphors, he prays for us because the work of salvation is the family business! V. 10, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine."

Second, Jesus prays for us because he is glorified through our salvation. V. 10, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. Jesus consistently presents his glory and our good as two sides of the same coin. The primary way he's glorified, the primary way we come to see and exult in the perfection of his beauty, is through the hour of his death. Why? Because it is through dying to save sinners like us that Jesus displays the supremacy of his power, wisdom, and love.

Failing to redeem God's chosen people would mean failing to glorify his name. And because Jesus cannot fail to glorify God, he cannot fail to redeem the people of God. His commitment to his glory is the measure of his commitment to our good, which is why we know the Lord's good purposes for us as his people will ultimately prevail.

Finally, Jesus prays for us because he is not physically with us. V. 11, "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you." As Jn 17 ends, Jesus is about to leave his followers via his death, resurrection, and ascension. The nature of his care for God's people is changing from bodily presence to heavenly intercession. He's about to leave for home, but his followers will have to wait.

We are too, brothers and sisters. This world is not our home any more than it was our Lord's. We were created for the joy of heaven. As long as we're in the world, we're in exile. Remember that. Many of us have seen pictures of Afghan refugees walking through the Dulles airport, sojourners in a foreign land. That's who you are, Christian.

Life in a foreign land of this world comes with significant, life-threatening challenges. So Jesus brings four specific requests to the Father on our behalf. He prays we would be faithful to Jesus, holy like Jesus, unified in Jesus, and glorified with Jesus.

1) FAITHFUL TO JESUS (vv. 11-16)

"Holy Father," Jesus prays in v. 11, "keep them in your name." To modern ears, that sounds like a rather strange thing to ask. We're used to hoping or praying that someone we love would be kept safe or kept healthy or kept out of trouble. But keep them in your name? What does that mean?

Remember what I said earlier about the biblical significance of someone's name? To speak of God's name is to speak of the essence of his character. It's a description of who he is. So who is God? He's our "Holy Father." He's holy in the sense that he's characterized by transcendent, moral purity. He's not a buddy we sidle up to around the water cooler and say, "Hey, what's up?" He's an all-consuming fire who cannot bear to look at evil.

And yet, Jesus also calls him, "Father." He's the Father in relation to the Son because he is the unbegotten one, the source and fountain of the Godhead. And he's a "Father" in relation to all who are united to the Son by faith and adopted as beloved sons and daughters of the King. So when Jesus prays, "Holy Father, keep them in your name," he's asking God the Father to keep his disciples, his followers, clinging to, devoted to, and leaning the weight of their life on ALL that God is as our Creator and Redeemer.

When I'm crossing a steep snowfield in the alps, I lean the weight of my life on the steel crampons strapped to my feet and the carbon fiber poles in my hands. I'm depending on them to uphold and preserve me. I'm literally entrusting my life to them in a physical sense. That's a picture of the kind of total dependence and confidence Jesus wants us to have toward him in a spiritual sense. To pray, "keep them in your name," is another way of saying, "Lord, keep them dependent on you. Keep them faithful to you. Help them to persevere in the faith and not lose their trust, commitment, and passion for you."

And how do we express and keep on expressing our trust, commitment, and passion for God? We keep trusting, delighting, and living for the One in whom he is perfectly revealed. We keep trusting, delighting, and living for Jesus. V. 11, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me."

We do not remain devoted to God not by thinking true thoughts about him or going to church periodically or believing he exists or lighting prayer candles or some other preferred expression of spirituality. There is one and only one way we remain faithful to God. We keep on trusting Jesus, obeying Jesus, loving Jesus, and living for Jesus. And Jesus has two specific reasons he wants the Father to keep us faithful to himself.

First, he prays for the sake of our unity. V. 11, "Keep them in your name...that they may be one, even as we are one." We'll look closer at the nature and purpose of our unity as the people of God next Sunday. But for now, notice the priority and importance Jesus places on our unity as God's people.

Unity with one another on a horizontal level is only possible if we are each unified with God on a vertical level. When he unites us to himself in Christ, he unites us to one another in Christ. So why is our unity with one another so important to Jesus? Because he wants us to experience nothing less than the same sort of relational



intimacy God himself enjoys. He wants to bring us into an experience of the very life of God!

From eternity past, God has enjoyed the gift of perfect relational unity as Father, Son, and Spirit, one God in three persons, in complete harmony with one another. Jesus isn't talking about uniformity where the identity of the individual is dissolved in the identity of the tribe. The Father does not cease to be the Father, a distinct person from the Son, even as he remains one with the Son. He's talking about unity, a relationship where the heart, mind, and will of the Father is the heart, mind, and will of the Son.

In the same way, when Jesus for the sake of our unity, he isn't praying for uniformity or that all the members of our church look the same, talk the same, or sound the same. He's praying for the kind of relationships where we are of one heart, one mind, and one will because of our shared devotion to God. The relational intimacy he enjoys with the Father is the relational intimacy Jesus wants us to enjoy in the church.

Our unity matters, brothers and sisters, because it's how we experience and enter into the very life of God himself. I'm not talking about the absence of conflict. I'm talking about the presence of relationship. It's why making charitable judgments, believing the best about one another's motives, leaders included, and avoiding sins like gossip and slander are so important. It's why practices like pursuing community and not living in isolation from one another are so important.

If we do not devote ourselves to building strong relationships in the church and work to restore them when they are tested, strained, or broken by conflict, then we are actively opposing God's purpose for our life. We are functionally undoing what Jesus prayed we would experience and died to secure. Unity is not a byproduct of the gospel. It is God's agenda for the gospel. It's what he's seeking to accomplish through the gospel.

Here's the second reason Jesus asks the Father to keep us faithful to himself. **He prays for the sake of our joy.** V. 13, "But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." Christian, do you realize God wants you to be happy? It's one of the main reasons he is committed to keeping you faithful to himself. He wants you to be happy in him and gloriously so!

Think about it. God doesn't need us. He's not incomplete without us. He has always been perfectly happy; he will always be perfectly happy. So why is he so radically committed to guarding your faith? For the sake of your joy and his glory in your joy. Jesus longs for you to know the joy of being as satisfied in him as he is in himself. It's the whole reason he's going to the cross and has said everything he ever taught his disciples over the last three years. Jn 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

How do we experience that kind of joy? Through the gift of God's Word. Through the "things" Jesus has spoken. Ultimately, that's how Jesus keeps us faithful to himself. He opens our spiritual eyes to see again and again in the pages of his Word just how worthy he is. And as we see his worthiness, we experience a gospel-centered unity and a gospel-centered joy. As the people of God, the Father is faithful to keep us faithful to Jesus for the sake of our unity and the sake of our joy.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it's not a work we do for ourselves, brothers and sisters. It's a work God does for us and in us. "While I was with them," Jesus says in v. 12, "I kept them in your name." He guarded his disciples. Except for Judas, who the Lord knew would betray him from the very beginning, "not one of them had been lost." And now that the Son is about to depart, he asks the Father to continue the work he began.

Does the Lord use means? Must we keep believing God's promises, heeding his warnings, and choosing to obey Jesus no matter the cost? Yes. But don't forget, Christian, your perseverance in the faith is ultimately God's work. God is the one who keeps you. God is the one who guards you. Through his priestly intercession, the Savior loses none of all the Father entrusts to his care. There is sweet comfort and good hope in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints!

Are you struggling to trust God in some area of your life? Cast yourself on his mercy, friend. He will be faithful to keep you. Are you struggling to honor God in some area of your life? Cast yourself on his mercy. He will be faithful to keep you. And on the mornings where your faith feels weak and the nights where you think, "I'm not sure I can do this any longer, Lord," remember this.



There's no power in the universe stronger than the arm of God, brothers and sisters. If you are in Christ, if you have turned away from sin and are leaning the weight of your life on Jesus, then even now your Father in Heaven is keeping you. When Jesus prays, "Father, keep them in your name," the Father's answer is always, "Yes!" Yes, I will keep them. Yes, I will lead them. Yes, I will bring all my sheep safely home.

I mentioned last Sunday that we would end each of our weeks in Jn 17 by following Jesus' example in prayer. Last week we prayed in small groups. Today, I want us to do something a little different. Before we sing, let's stand and pray the words of Ps 121 together. Abiding faith in Jesus enables us to declare these words with confidence, despite all our spiritual weaknesses.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."