

When God Prays, Part 3 (John 17)

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I think one of the hardest things to do in just about any work context is distinguishing what feels urgent from what is truly important. Whether it's the emails you write, the phone calls you make, the meetings you host, or the projects you prioritize, taking all your cues from the loudest voice or the squeakiest wheel is a good way to stay busy while crippling your long-term fruitfulness. If everything is important, nothing is important.

The same could be said of the Christian life. If I sent money to every Christian organization who mailed a fundraising request with the word "crisis" on the envelope, I would be broke. If I read every book a Christian publisher claims is a "must read," I would have no time for my wife or children. I would fare no better if I joined every Sunday ministry team, prayed for every prayer request, or attended every Christian event in our community.

Sometimes we try to do it all and stave off exhaustion for a few months or years. Other times we toss our hands up in defeat and become cynics who stop giving attention to anything God is doing in us or around us. We're just done with it all. Can you relate? One of the greatest blessings of the prayer Jesus prays in Jn 17 the night before his death is the way it identifies spiritual priorities for the Christian life.

Jesus doesn't pray for everything. He prays for the sake of God's glory. He prays for the good of God's people. And in the second category, he prioritizes four, specific requests on our behalf as believers. He prays we would be faithful to Jesus, holy like Jesus, unified in Jesus, and glorified with Jesus. We focused on the first one last Sunday. We'll give attention to the remaining three this morning.

Of all the arguably "good" things we could give attention to, these are the matters of greatest importance. These are the concerns we should care about the most and for which we need to pray, not once or twice, but again and again. The spiritual topics that are trendy in Christian circles will come and go. Jesus' priorities remain. May they be ours as well, brothers and sisters. Consider his second request in vv. 14-19.

2) HOLY LIKE JESUS (vv. 14-19)



Look at v. 14. "I have given them your word," Jesus says. What kind of "word" is he talking about? It's the word of the gospel. The good news of salvation from sin and death in Christ alone, by faith alone, for the glory of God alone! And what happened to Jesus' disciples as a result of hearing and receiving his word? They pocketed their get-out-of-jail-free card so they could hand it to St. Peter at the pearly gates and move on with life. No! Their identity as human beings was fundamentally transformed. They went from being citizens of the kingdom of this world to being citizens of the kingdom of God. V. 14, "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

Why can't you be a Chinese citizen and a US citizen, or a North Korean citizen and a US citizen? Because the governing principles and loyalties of those nations are fundamentally at odds with the governing principles and loyalties of our own. The same is true in a spiritual sense. Every human being is born into the kingdom of this world, arrayed by virtue of our sinful nature against the authority and rule of God – Father, Son, and Spirit.

But when you become a Christian and your relationship to God changes from separation to adoption, so does your kingdom identity. You are no longer part of the kingdom of this world. You are part of the kingdom of God. And what does Jesus say will happen when our spiritual identity is radically transformed? Our former kingdom goes from loving us to hating us. Why? Because our spiritual loyalties have changed.

The word of the gospel is divisive by design. It separates those who respond to Jesus by submitting to him as their Savior and Lord from those who do not. If you're a follower of Jesus, don't be surprised when you feel like a misfit in this world. Don't think something is wrong if people who used to like you don't want to have anything to do with you. You are "not of the world" just as Jesus is "not of the world." You're an elect exile and should expect Jesus' experience to be your experience. And when it is, remember this, no matter how often you're misunderstood or maligned. Jesus is praying for you!

V. 15, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." We are not abandoned as lone rangers in a foreign land, expected to do our special forces thing and prove our super-Christian status. We have an ever-present keeper, an ever-present protector. Jesus is in the business of saving his own on the final day. And Jesus in the business of saving his own today,



right now. 1 Cor 10:13, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

The Lord's response to the trials and temptations we face as exiles is to marvelously deliver, restore, and enable us to endure for our good and his glory. While we are in the world, he is powerfully at work in us! Look at v. 17. "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." To be sanctified is to be consecrated or set apart for a holy purpose, in this case, for devotion to God's service.

We tend to think of sanctification or growing in holiness as doing a better job at not thinking, feeling, or acting the way the world thinks, feels, or acts. Don't grumble. Don't lie. Don't lust. That's entirely biblical. It's also half the story! The reason we do not devote ourselves to the world's priorities and purposes is so that we can devote ourselves to God's priorities and purposes.

Think of an incredibly valuable musical instrument, like a Steinway Model D concert grand piano. What would you think if a theater company used it to support a row of scaffolding, or as a make-up table, or as a place to dry wet costumes? You would, I hope, realize something is terribly wrong, no less than if you used a Stradivarius violin as a tomato stake or a paint scraper.

In both cases you're taking something that ought to be reserved for a special purpose and using it for a common purpose. Not using them as drying racks or garden stakes is certainly good, but ultimately what were they created to do? They were perfectly crafted to produce exquisite music.

When it comes to living a consecrated life, a life that is set apart for holy service, we need to focus just as much (if not more) on what we are doing than on what we're not doing. So how do we know what we should be doing? What are God's priorities and purposes for our life? We don't get to decide for ourselves. He tells us in the pages of his Word. That's why Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; *your word is truth.*"

Notice Jesus doesn't say God's Word is true, as if it conforms to some standard of truth outside of itself. He says the Father's Word is "truth." It is the standard. It defines what is good and beautiful and what is not. And it doesn't just give us correct spiritual information or tell us what a sanctified person looks like. It has a

sanctifying power, a consecrating effect. "Sanctify them *in the truth*," Jesus prays. It furthers and accomplishes God's sanctifying work in our lives as the Spirit takes all it contains and compels us to embrace new priorities and purposes that have everything to do with making much of Jesus!

V. 18, "As you sent me into the world," Jesus says, "So I have sent them into the world." To do what? To show the world just how good and beautiful and worthy Jesus is by progressively transforming us into his image! 1 Pe 2:9-12, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light...Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

That's why personal holiness matters. It's how we glorify God on the earth. And it would be absolutely impossible for us to devote ourselves to him had he not first laid down his life for us. V. 19, "And for their sake I consecrate myself (or set myself apart), that they also may be sanctified (or set apart) in truth." How does Jesus "consecrate" himself for our sake? By going to the cross and dying in our place.

Under the Old Covenant, when blood was sprinkled on something, it was made holy, set apart for God. The priests were sprinkled with blood. The tabernacle was sprinkled with blood. The people of Israel themselves were sprinkled with blood. It wasn't God's way of being gross. It sent a powerful message. It shouted something. It pointed forward to the sprinkled blood of Christ that sets us free from the guilt and power of sin so we could serve the Lord. Hearts that are "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience" in Heb 10 are devoted "to love and good works."

What is your life devoted to, friend? A sanctified person is someone who has completely devoted, completely surrendered, their life to Jesus. It's not about staying out of trouble or keeping his rules just because, but living as a sent one devoted to the priorities and purposes of the one who sent us. Are you living for yourself or are you living for God? The Savior's second request is that we would be holy like Jesus.

3) UNIFIED IN JESUS

In v. 20, Jesus transitions from praying primarily for the 11 disciples gathered around him to praying for all “who will believe in me through their word.” Knowing the word of the gospel would advance throughout the whole earth, what does Jesus pray? V. 21, “That they may all be one.” He prays for our unity as the people of God.

What kind of unity is it? It’s the kind God himself enjoys. V. 21, “That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.” Or v. 22, “That they may be one even as we are one...” God has told us that he is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Each person of the Godhead is fully God, which means the whole being of God dwells in the Son no less than it does in the Father and the Spirit.

And though they relate to one another in different ways, they share the same divine nature and mutually indwell one another as a result. Where the Son is present, the Father is present. When the Father is working, the Son is working. The unity within the Trinity is a unity where the persons are distinguished from one another and at the same time inseparably one. In fact, you cannot be more unified than God himself is unified. That’s the kind of unity Jesus prays we would experience as God’s people.

So how does that happen? Look back at v. 21. “...just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, *that they also may be in us...*” Friends, God doesn’t set the standard for unity and then tell us to get busy making it happen. It’s something he brings us unto by drawing us to himself. He brings us into his own glorious unity through the Holy Spirit who unites us to the Son and applies the merits of his saving work to our life. The spiritual privileges and blessings Jesus enjoys, we enjoy, unity with the Father included!

His life becomes our life. His victory becomes our victory. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. And through the gift of adoption, his identity as a beloved Son becomes our identity as fellow children of God. When we are united to him, we become members of God’s family. We have a new older brother, Jesus, and a whole bunch of spiritual brothers and sisters, men and women who have been likewise united to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. And all of that has two really important implications for our unity.

First, true unity is a fruit of the gospel. As Christians, we are united to one another the moment we are united to God. To be a Christian is to be a member of the body of Christ. So when we speak of pursuing unity or working for



reconciliation, we are not creating something new. We are striving to maintain (Eph 4) and live in the good of (Rom 15) the unity Jesus has already won for us and granted to us.

When we remember unity is something God creates, the work remains easy and the burden light. When we drift into thinking unity is something we have to create through listening more, lamenting more, or understanding more (as valuable and necessary as those things are), we begin to carry a weight only the Son of God can bear. At the deepest level, where it really counts, we cannot reconcile anyone, brothers and sisters. But we can point them to God who can and then fight together to live more faithfully in the unity he has purchased for us at the cost of his blood.

Here's the second implication. Because unity is a fruit of the gospel, it is *not* the result of voting the same way, having the same convictions about wisdom issues, being in the same season of life, sharing the same pastimes, or having the same life experiences. That's why we don't want our Community Groups to become affinity groups where you have the married people over here and the single people over here, the old people over here and the young people over here.

Unity in the church, and the kind of community we pursue as a result, should be glorious in its diversity because our common faith in Jesus is what brings us together. God delivers us from trying to baptize the tribalism of our age by sorting ourselves into groups of democrats and republicans, homeschoolers and public schoolers, Latino families and white families, seasoned believers and new believers, mask lovers and mask haters. If we begin to unite more around those things than our shared life in Jesus, we're not only abandoning biblical unity. We're also undermining the ultimate purpose of our unity.

So what is the purpose of our unity? Look at the end of v. 23. May they "become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." Our unity in Christ doesn't have a feel-good aim. It has a missional aim. It makes much of the power and glory of Jesus.

When the world looks at the church and sees a diverse group of people loving one another, serving one another, longsuffering toward weakness, forgiving sins, rejoicing in suffering, a people marked by gratitude, not complaining, generosity, not selfishness, demonstrating in a thousand ways our commitment to live for a

glory greater than us, what does the world start to conclude? That God is real, God is among us, and the love he has lavished on us in the gospel is no joke! How else could such very different people living in close relationship with one another?

One of the best things you can do for a non-Christian friend is invite them to join you in spending time with other Christians. Why? Because it's through the testimony of our community, our unity, that they will see Jesus. Our unity as a church matters because our gospel witness to the world matters. And if our unity begins to fragment, so does the integrity of our witness.

It's why you shouldn't look for a church filled with people who are just like you or think the same way you do about every conceivable issue. It's why navigating conflict well and not running from messy relationships is so important. It's why we're not an independent, isolated church. We're part of a denomination where we seek to give as much institutional expression to our unity in Christ as possible through fellowship, mission, and governance.

A church won't make it more than a few years, let alone the 32 years we have existed, apart from members who are committed to contending for unity even when it's hard. Many of you have done that, brothers and sisters. Thank you. The sacrifices you have made to keep loving one another in season and out, when it would have been emotionally easier to pull away, are why we still have a powerful gospel witness. And frankly, when you're rocked by a messy split, or a sexual scandal, and the church is struck down, but not destroyed, it's then (and perhaps not until then) that people begin to wonder, "Maybe this Jesus thing is for real."

Something supernatural is happening when we have a multilingual conversation, or build a multigenerational friendship, or a family with young kids invites a single adult or an elderly widow over for dinner. When the world sees the love we have for one another, they will see the love God has first shown us, a love that first existed within God himself. They will see the Savior who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. The Savior's second request is that we would be united in Jesus.

4) GLORIFIED WITH JESUS

V. 24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am..." It's a stunning request. But it's not a new desire on God's part. He's

reaching all the way back to the beginning of the story, to a mountain sanctuary in Gen 3, where the first man and woman sinned and God came looking for them, calling out, "Where are you?" His immediate response was the pain and longing of relationship lost.

It's why he sent Jesus to deal to do away with the sin that separates us from God and us from one another. It's why the story of redemption ends in a new mountain sanctuary where the dwelling place of God with men. Rev 21:3, "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

Do you think of God that way? As someone who wants to be with you? Someone who loves you and longs to thrill your soul with the sight of his glory and goodness? There is no greater joy, friend. The way a fish was made for water and a bird for the air, we were made for beholding and delighting in the beauty of God. We were not created or redeemed for the fading glories of this earth. Heaven is our home because only when faith becomes sight and the glory of our Risen King fills our eyes will our homesick hearts be fully satisfied.

V. 24, "Father, I desire that they also...may be with me where I am, *to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*" The glory of heaven is the glory of the eternally begotten Son of God, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb who was slain, loved by the Father from eternity past, and infinitely pleasing in his sight.

Years later, the Apostle John describes him this way. Rev 1:12-16, "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw...one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength." John's trying to capture a glory that defies description. He's like this. Like that. But by the end it's clear. Jesus isn't *exactly* like anything or anyone else at all. Isa 46:9, "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me."

We don't deserve the satisfaction of seeing God's glory. Why would God choose to reveal the beauty of his majesty to his enemies, let alone make a way for us to be *with* him? Because he is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love.



Because he delights to display his glory in bringing sinners home. If we are faithful to Jesus, holy like Jesus, and united in Jesus, then this we know. A day is surely coming when we will always be with the Lord. 1 Thess 4:18, "Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

CONCLUSION

Jesus ends his prayer in vv. 25-26 by returning to where he began, to his longing for the knowledge of the glory of God to fill the earth. In many ways, he summarizes the story of the universe. There is a "Righteous Father," a living God who created all things and rules all things with perfect justice. We're all accountable to him. Though he created the world, the world does not know him. We've all turned away. We've all sinned.

But there is one who does know him. His obedient Son. And in his great mercy, he came to earth, to our broken, sin-ravaged world, to make him known. Jesus makes God known through his life, but ultimately through his death. It's a saving work he accomplished while he was on earth and a saving work he continues to accomplish through his Word and by his Spirit.

And if you know Jesus, if you've surrendered your life to him, the goal of his work in your life is nothing less than full conformity to the image of God. He wants the perfect love the Father has for the Son to become the perfect love we have for one another through the joy of intimate relationship with God, now and forever.

That's our story, brothers and sisters. We've been caught up in his story. We're the answer to his prayers. Anything good in us, the measure to which we are presently faithful to Jesus, holy like Jesus, united in Jesus, and will one day be glorified with Jesus, is to the praise of his glory, not ours. We are his workmanship, from first to last, that in everything he might be preeminent. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.