

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Text: John 17:6-19

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Scr. Reading: John 17:6-19

BELIEVE! The Gospel of John

It's always a delight to hear the story of someone's conversion. It's my favorite part of our church's membership process. Last week we heard a short summary of how Andrew and Amy Licht came to Christ and the content of the gospel that particularly impacted them. (We hope to hear more such stories soon!)

Here's another conversion story, this one from about 500 years ago... John Knox was one of the leading influences of the Protestant Reformation, a friend of John Calvin's, the founder of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. His famous lifelong prayer: "Lord, give me Scotland or I die!" Knox's greatest gift to the church wasn't his theological acumen or his penetrating scholarship; rather, it was his intense commitment to prayer and preaching. That's all he felt he needed: petitioning God about people and proclaiming God to people. Knox said, "One man with God is always in the majority." What power God wielded through him! Mary, Queen of Scots, is reported to have said, "I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe."

But it wasn't always so. In fact, it seems Knox wasn't even converted until his early 30s. Educated as a Catholic priest, Knox was serving as a private tutor when he came under the influence of Protestant preaching. But what really brought the gospel home to his own heart was his reflecting on our text for today, John 17, where he was deeply moved by the powerful and protective love of God for His people. Years after his conversion, Knox wrote about this text: "O that our hearts could without contradiction embrace these words, for then with humility should we prostrate ourselves before our God, and with unfeigned tears give thanks for his mercy!"

He's exactly right. As we look at this text, my simple prayer is that you, too, will be deeply moved—perhaps even converted—by the powerful and protective love of God.

Jesus is praying—in fact, John 17 is the longest conversation in the Bible between members of the Godhead. Our text today is verses 6-19, where Jesus prays particularly for His own disciples. Yet, nearly everything He

says directly applies to all Christians. ...which means, if you Christian, He's praying for you. Think of it: Jesus is hours from death. He's talking to His Father about the most important things on His heart. And ***one of those most important things, if you are a Christian, is you.***

He makes only 2 requests: Keep them (v11b) and Sanctify them (v17). But before He asks God for things, He offers extensive rationale—i.e., reasons God should answer His prayers, justification and argumentation for why the Father should do what He's asking.

APP: Have you ever noticed how often the prayers in the Bible do this? Moses in Exodus, David in the Psalms, the church in Acts, Paul in his letters, and even Jesus Himself all give God reasons why He should do what they are asking: "Please do this, because this is true." Everything Jesus says to the Father is something the Father already knows. So why say it? Because prayer is more than listing off your needs; prayer is engaging with God. It's reasoning, arguing if you will, pleading. Praying isn't placing an order in the Drive-Thru. It's talking with your spouse, pouring out your heart, drawing near your Father.

Notice the rationale that Jesus gives His Father...

Rationale

vv6-11a *I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.*

Essentially, Jesus grounds His requests on two lines of argument: "Father, do what I'm about to ask for these people because..."

1. "They were yours, and you gave them to me."
2. "They have responded positively to me."

It's not hard to see that **first rationale**; Jesus says it 5x in this prayer:

v2 *...you have given him authority to give eternal life to all whom you have*

given him”

v6 “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me”

v9 “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me”

v24 “...I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me”

It’s a statement Jesus (or John) makes 4 other times in this gospel:

6:37 All the Father gives will come to me...

6:39 This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me...

10:29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all...

18:9 This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.”

Notice particularly v9 once more:

v9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

God loves the world, a point this gospel makes as clearly as any other book in the Bible. But believers are especially precious to Jesus, and He prays for them exclusively here. Why? Because these ones belonged to the Father and are now Jesus’ responsibility. The Father gave them specially to Him. God will always have a relationship of peculiar love, intimacy, and blessing with His people that the world knows nothing of.

It’s a bit like a movie, where our Savior is a lavishly wealthy prince who owns everything in the kingdom. But in this scene, the action slows way down as He opens a little box or pouch and takes out the possessions which in all the kingdom are most precious to His heart—gifts from His Father, an inheritance passed on for Him to cherish and protect. And when the camera zooms in on these items He’s holding in His hands, you see... they’re people. Believers. It’s you!

Pastor Scotty Smith makes some excellent comments on this paragraph in the *Gospel Transformation Bible*:

“Jesus counts us a love gift to him from the Father. He treasures and cherishes us as a bridegroom treasures his bride, for that is what we are. Should anyone ask, ‘Who gives these sinners to this Savior?’ the Father responds enthusiastically, ‘I do!’ Election is the most wonderful prearranged marriage imaginable.” (p1439)

The Bible speaks of personal conversion in 2 ways:

- God’s initiative. That’s what’s in view in this phrase “those you gave

me.” How loved we are to be the Father’s special gift to His Son:

2 Thessalonians 2:13 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

- Our response. As is so common in these passages that speak so clearly about God’s initiative, human responsibility is also here:

v6 ...they have kept your word.

v8 I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

These men believed God’s word, accepted it, didn’t add to it, didn’t take away from it, just received it as it is. This human response to the gospel is just as much a part of conversion as God’s initiative. If someone were to ask you, “How did you become a Christian?” should you answer “I believed” or “God chose me”? Yes! Both are true.

Jesus offers this as His second rationale for why the Father should answer His prayer: “Father, look at these men! Look how great they are! They have kept your word (v6). Now they know for sure (vv7,8). They received what I gave them (v8). They have believed (v8). What great guys! You really should answer my prayer for them...”

Isn’t it incredible to overhear Jesus talking to His Father about the disciples this way? He’s praising them to the Father for their faith, when literally just minutes earlier He was chiding them for their unbelief:

16:30-32 “Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.”³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe?”³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.”

I’m amazed by how favorably Jesus speaks about the disciples! “They have kept your word.” They have?! “They know for sure.” They do? “They have believed?” Since when? And yet, if you contrast the disciples with Judas’s actions or with the world’s attitude toward Jesus, there is definitely evidence of faith in these men. They have stayed with Him, listening, trying to understand, believing.

And so Jesus really does mean this about these men. This truly is how God sees them—how He sees you, if you are a Christian. Old things have passed away; all things have become new. Progress in the Christian life

is always **growing up into who you already are**. So often we are defeated because we don't think of ourselves as God sees us. Listen to the Son of God describe you! Yes, Christians could spend the greater part of every day confessing sin and repenting of how far they fall short. But that is not the emphasis of the word of God! Jesus says all this for our joy (v13). Of course He does! How do you feel, hearing Him say this?

Request 1: "KEEP THEM"

vv11b-16 *Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*

What does Jesus mean by this request? "Keep them" where? From what? Several hints in the text:

- v11a "in your name" = "name" represents the whole person (cf. v6 "manifested your name"). Jesus is asking that they be kept connected to the Father. So "keep them" means "keep them believing the gospel, persevering in faith."
- v12 Jesus says it again, but as a duty He performed:
vv12-13 *While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.*
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.*

"I kept them and none were lost except the son of destruction."

Obviously, the keeping He's talking about is keeping in the faith, keeping them from abandoning their loyalty to Jesus and meeting destruction like Judas. Jesus says this is a duty He performed while He was with them. But now He's leaving, v13 says He's returning to the Father, and so they must face the hostility of the world without the immediate help of His physical presence. So He releases them to the Father's care.

- v15 "keep them from the evil one" – This time, Jesus puts it in terms of preventing His followers from coming under Satan's dominion, as happened to Judas. Same point: keep them faithful to Jesus, believing in Jesus.

Essentially, He's asking God to make sure all His brothers and sisters make it home. None abandon the faith. None are overtaken by the evil one.

Notice the reason He gives in v11: "...that they may be one, even as we are one." There's an inherent oneness that comes from being children of the same Heavenly Father, each one kept by the same powerful and caring heart. All owing their salvation to the same source. Their eternal home with God certain because each and every one are being kept by God. Jesus will say much more about this in the following verses, but for now, get this: **Unity is a result of shared loyalty**. Common allegiance to Jesus makes people one. And how do believers maintain their allegiance to Jesus? The Father keeps them in the faith.

Notice how well the rationale Jesus gave earlier fits this request? Earlier He appealed to God: "These are the people you gave me." Now He prays: "So keep them." **That's how salvation works. God gives, and God keeps from start to finish.** Jesus grounds His request that God will keep on the fact that God has given.

Salvation really does save! It doesn't just give people a strong likelihood, a fighting chance. **It secures people for all eternity.** What truth will reassure you on your deathbed? This: The Father gave you to the Son, and the Son has done everything necessary to be sure you are kept. The reason you are going to believe tomorrow is because God Himself is keeping you.

Philippians 1:6 *I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Verses 15-16 are intriguing, and they start to shift to Jesus' 2nd request:

vv15-16 *I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.* ¹⁶ *They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*

Why not? If just getting his followers home was Jesus' ultimate objective, wouldn't He ask the Father just to gather them all up and get them home? There must be something left here for them to do... And there is. Jesus' next request shows that this worldly "battlefield is also our mission field" (S. Smith).

Request 2: "SANCTIFY THEM" (vv17-19)

vv17-19 *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸ *As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹ *And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

Do you see the progression in the 3 requests Jesus has asked so far?

- Jesus prays for His own glory = people coming to eternal life.
- Then when that happens, He prays for preservation—kept right until the end, that we all would be one with Him in glory.
- But while we are still here, He prays for our sanctification.

What does “sanctify them” mean? Two options. The word itself means “to set apart,” and it’s used with reference to 2 different objects:

- to select one thing out from the group and distinguish it from others (Ex 29:44 “I will sanctify Aaron and his sons for this purpose: that they may minister to me”) = to set apart for service to God, to consecrate
- to make morally pure (1 Thes 4:3,7 “This is the will of God: your sanctification... possess your vessel in holiness and honor”) = to set apart from sin, to cleanse

So which here? To consecrate for service or to cleanse from sin? The word is used 3 other times in John, and all are used the same way:

- 10:36 Jesus set apart for service and sent
10:36 ...do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?
- v18 names a mission for which they are set apart
- v19 Jesus did this to Himself – He can’t be “cleansed from sin.” Rather, Jesus set Himself apart, devoted Himself to perform His Father’s will. Jesus dedicated Himself to the task of bringing in God’s salvation, and now He’s praying that His followers will be dedicated to the same mission.

So sanctification is being set apart for mission. Jesus was set apart and sent by the Father. Now Jesus asks His Father to set His followers apart and send them.

Notice how this “setting apart” happens: “sanctify them in [better, “by”] the truth; your word is truth.” God’s people are set apart and sent on their saving mission by hearing the word of God. God’s word sets believers apart for service. It mobilizes them for mission.

Hearing God’s word is not meant to be an end in itself; it’s meant to mobilize you for mission! How can our church become more evangelistic? Keep preaching the gospel! As you hear it and believe it, all

the motivations you need for evangelism begin to grow in your heart. Compassion begins to arise as the gospel softens your hard heart toward lost people. Joy and hope in God begin to arise above all other joys, and we always talk about what we enjoy. “Sanctify them, send them on mission by your truth; your word is truth.”

Notice how that same original rationale from Jesus fits this request. Jesus prayed, “Father, you gave me these people. Because of that, set them apart for mission.” Election tends to make us work with all diligence. It shows success is certain because the Father is giving people to the Son. Nothing is more paralyzing than thinking that, with all of our exertion, we may still fail! But if God has purposes that cannot fail and people whom He has given to the Son, your evangelism will succeed! You speak the good news, and God will give some to the Son.

CONCL: It’s no wonder this was the passage that melted John Knox’s heart and sent him on his relentless quest to win the whole of Scotland for Christ. When he was on his deathbed at 58, Knox asked his wife to read several texts to him during his final hours: various Psalms, Isaiah 53. But then he said to her. “Most of all, please read John 17, because that is the place where I first cast my anchor.”

No wonder!

- What better text for mission?
- For confidence that God will keep you in the faith?
- For feeling loved by God, knowing He gave you as a personal gift to His Son?

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