

2. Jesus Prays for His Disciples

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[0 : 00] Well friends, we're going to turn to John's Gospel, chapter 17 again, and if you'd like to follow the reading, you'll see it on page 903 in our big Bibles. Before I read, let me just point out that we have the usual display of books here, and also a selection of cassette tapes and CDs, so you're most welcome to stay at the end and browse and see what's going on and buy things, which we hope will be a real help to you.

So John's Gospel, chapter 17, and I'll read the first 19 verses as I did last week. Jesus prays to God the Father. John 17, verse 1.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you.

Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

[1 : 24] 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.

Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. 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.

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

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.

[2 : 33] 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 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.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth.

Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake, I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

And we pray, dear God our Father, that these words may be indeed words of life to us, helping us in our hearts and minds to love and to know you and the Lord Jesus better.

We ask it in his name. Amen. Well, friends, a fortnight ago, we looked at the first five verses of this great prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17.

[3 : 44] And today I'd like to take this central and longest section, verses 6 to 19. Now, you'll remember that this prayer was prayed in the presence of the eleven disciples, Judas having just departed out into the night.

So he prayed this prayer with the eleven approximately 12 hours before he was nailed to the cross. So this really is holy ground. And as Jesus faces his great and terrible ordeal, he prays first for himself in verses 1 to 5, secondly for his disciples in verses 6 to 19, and then third for the future worldwide church in verses 20 to 26.

So in verses 6 to 19, which is our passage for today, he's praying for his disciples and particularly for his eleven apostles, who are about to begin their work of mission after Jesus has departed from the earth and gone back to be with his Father.

But although he's praying for his apostles here, the thrust of his prayer surely applies to all Christians. I don't think there's anything in these 14 verses which is specific to the apostles without further application to other Christians of later generations, including ourselves.

So what is going on here in these verses? Well, what is going on here is that Jesus is expressing to the Father what is his will for all Christians.

[5 : 11] He's expressing to the Father in prayer what is his will for all Christians. Let me put it like this. I wonder if you've ever asked, I'm sure you have asked, what is God's will for my life?

Or perhaps what is Jesus' will for my life? Most of us have asked that question. But what have we meant by that question? Well, the question usually means, what is the Lord's specific guidance for my life when I meet the major crossroads of life?

It's the sort of question which a young single Christian man will ask when he's thinking about marriage. So he might say to himself, I very much like Miss Brown. But I must confess that I find Miss White rather appealing as well.

Well, I can't marry both of them, so I'll ask the Lord for guidance. Lord, is it your will that I should propose to Miss White or to Miss Brown? Don't tell me to propose to neither. We might ask the same question about the Lord's will when we're thinking about careers and jobs or career changes or moving house, what the Americans call relocating.

Lord, should I relocate to Dallas, Texas or should I stay in good old Boston, Massachusetts? Now, questions of that kind, questions about jobs, marriage, homes and so on, they're big questions.

[6 : 34] We all face them sooner or later. But the Bible hardly ever speaks of knowing the will of God in relation to that kind of question. Questions of that kind hardly surface in the Bible.

Now, they surface all the time in the newspaper horoscopes. But the Bible teaches us the will of God in much broader and deeper terms. So, for example, if I'm a Christian young man looking to marry, the Bible will tell me nothing about the question, should I marry Miss Brown or Miss White, but it will tell me a great deal about how a Christian husband should behave towards his wife.

The Bible won't tell me whether to take a job in Edinburgh or Birmingham, but it will tell me a great deal about the way in which God wants me to behave in the workplace as I relate to my colleagues with honesty and integrity and doing the work for my company in the very best way that I can.

Now, this passage that we're looking at today is not going to tell us whom to marry, or where to move on our retirement, but in these verses, Jesus expresses to the Father what is his will for his followers, his disciples.

He tells the Father a great deal about what he wants for his people. So we'll look at this passage with that question in our minds. What can we learn here about the will of Jesus for our lives and the lives of our fellow Christians?

[7 : 57] So let's look at this under three headings. First, the will of Jesus is that Christians should know that Jesus comes from God the Father.

Now you might say, well that doesn't sound very startling, not much salt and vinegar in that. We've known that since we were at Sunday school, haven't we, that Jesus came from the Father? Well, yes, at one level we have. If we've been Christians for many years, we know that that Jesus comes from God.

But I want you to see the very specific emphasis that Jesus gives to this fact in this prayer. Just look with me at verse 6. I'll paraphrase verse 6.

Father, I have revealed you to my people. They were yours, they are mine, and have kept your word. Now, verse 7, what is the consequence of this?

It is that they know something. So in Jesus' words, again paraphrase, the fact that I have revealed or manifested your name, your character, to them, and the fact that they have kept your word means that they now know something.

[9 : 05] And what is this great thing that they now know? It is, verse 7, that everything you have given me is from you.

In other words, they've looked at everything you've given me. The authority you've given me, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. They've looked at my power, power over creation, power to raise the dead merely by speaking, power over sickness, power over everything

that damages and destroys human life.

They've considered also my teaching, which is different in kind from the teaching of any other person. And they have drawn this momentous conclusion that all these things have come from God. They've looked at me and they've said, this man's stupendous authority and power and teaching can come from nowhere but heaven itself. Nicodemus, you remember, back at the beginning of chapter 3, is suspecting this when he first comes rather shyly to Jesus by night.

His first words to Jesus are these, Rabbi, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God for no one can do these signs that you do unless the Father is with him.

[10:20] So Nicodemus is dimly beginning to understand where Jesus comes from, although he's still tentative and confused. But let's make no mistake, this is one of the big themes of John's Gospel.

According to John's Gospel, one of the most prominent aspects of what it means to be a believer in Jesus is to come to the conviction that he comes from God, that he has been sent by God.

We noticed this briefly a fortnight ago in verse 3 of this chapter, where Jesus describes himself as Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. And throughout this Gospel, Jesus refers to God as the one who sent him.

And he refers to himself as the one who has come from God or the one sent from heaven. Look on to verse 8 in chapter 17, where Jesus puts it, if anything, even more emphatically.

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.

[11:33] Now, why is it so important to Jesus and to John the Evangelist that Christians should know this? Well, the reason is that if people are not convinced that Jesus is sent from God, they feel able to dismiss him as an imposter or a maverick.

So, for example, back in John chapter 9, a group of Pharisees say, this man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. Now, if they were able to say, if they felt they could justify their saying, he is not from God, it meant they could dismiss him.

But if they came to recognize that he was from God, there was only one thing they could do, and that is to submit to him. There was no other course open to them. But there's a further emphasis in all this.

In John's Gospel, this one who has come from God is also the only way to God. He says in chapter 14, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one can come to the Father except by me. So, not only is he from God, he's also the only one who can bring us to God. He is exclusive of rival claimants.

[12:43] And as we grow as Christians, there grows and develops in our hearts this wonderful conviction that Jesus is the one whom God has sent, and we need look nowhere else for eternal salvation.

He is the one. So, this afternoon later, as you walk out onto Buchanan Street, as you will, look at all the people who wander up and down, who are still worshipping other godlets.

The godlets of shopping and money and good looks and fashion and sex and alcohol and drugs and having a good time. And pray for them. Pray that some of them, at least, should come to the conviction that Jesus is the one sent by God.

And then thank God that in the words of verse 8, you're a person who has come to know in truth that Jesus came from God and that you have believed that the Father sent him.

So, it is his will and prayer for us that we should deeply know that he has come from the Father. That is his great authentication.

[13:54] Now, secondly, the will of Jesus is that Christians should be kept or guarded or protected by God the Father. Let me read verses 11 and 12 again. And I am no longer in the world but there in the world and I am coming to you.

Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one. 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. Now, the idea here, I think, is quite easy to grasp.

Jesus is just about to leave the earth and go back to heaven. While he was there with his disciples on the earth, he was able to keep them and guard them in God's name and not one of them was lost except for Judas about whom the scriptures had foretold that he would be lost.

But now, Jesus can't carry on personally doing that. He is about to leave them and go back to heaven. So he entrusts them back to God the Father so that the Father should now keep them and guard them.

[15:03] And in these verses, there are two specific ways in which Jesus asks his Father to keep his people. The first is that his Father's keeping should make them one.

So verse 11, Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given me that they may be one even as we are one. Now that is truly remarkable.

even as we are one. We there, obviously, is the Father and the Son. Now to what degree are they united? What sort of unity do the Father and the Son have? Well, they are utterly one, aren't they? Can you imagine any squabbling between Father and Son? Any resentment or misunderstanding? Can you imagine sulking in heaven? Or not speaking?

Such a thing would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? The Father loves the Son utterly. The Son utterly loves the Father. They fully and exactly share the same purposes and the same desires.

[16:04] Neither is jealous of the other. They delight to see one another honoured and glorified amidst the heavenly hosts. How could the two of them possibly disagree? How could they be disappointed with each other?

The Son has fully done the will of the one who sent him and has accomplished his task. The Father is satisfied fully with the Son's obedience and loyalty.

And the Son has expressed such love for the Father in going to those horrific lengths through the cross and everything to win our salvation. And that utter, delighted and delightful unity, which the Father and the Son enjoy together, that is the unity for which the Son asks the Father to keep and protect his people.

It is a remarkable thing. So let me ask, have we, if we're Christian people, have we begun to enjoy that kind of love and unity with other Christians?

I think most of us would say, yes, we have begun to. But we've only begun to. There's so much more. Let me ask, what is it that keeps us from enjoying this kind of unity more on this side of the grave?

[17:19] Well, I guess the answer is that there's our personal awkwardness or angularity, sometimes simply our plain sinfulness. Aren't we awkward and angular with each other so much of the time?

We often feel shy of other Christian people. We don't know them well and we don't know quite how to approach them. So we feel inferior to others or suspicious of others.

We get tongue-tied. We feel threatened, don't we? He looks so big in confidence and I'm just such a small little squib. We feel embarrassed about ourselves, perhaps embarrassed about our past or our lack of talent or the fact that we haven't served the Lord terribly well.

Well, let's face it, friends, all of us, to a pretty large degree, are socially and emotionally crippled. Isn't that right? I certainly speak for myself. And yet, despite all this, we have begun, nevertheless, to taste the delights of real unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We don't often say to one another, I do love you, partly because we might be misunderstood, but we are beginning to learn and enjoy what it means to love one another and indeed to be delighted in each other.

[18:33] It's not true that we know nothing of this unity for which Jesus prays in verse 11. We are indeed beginning to taste it. Now, will the Father not answer the Son's prayer?

Well, of course He will answer it, the Son's prayer that the Father should keep us in this unity. He's doing so already. He's already leading us into this kind of unity and love.

Every time you and I learn a new lesson about loving other Christians, this prayer of Jesus' is being graciously answered. And one day in the new creation we shall know the fullness of this unity.

Now, it's as though we just tasted in little tiny sips, a little foretaste, but then we shall have the full banquet. So the will of Jesus is that we should be one in love and trust and delight and mutual service, serving one another, just as, verse 11, the Father and the Son are one.

Now, the second keeping of his people that Jesus asks the Father for is that they be kept from the evil one. Let me read verses 14 and 15 again.

[19:46] I've 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. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one.

Now, this request from Jesus that his people should be kept from the evil one who is the devil. This is given against the background of another reality which is the world.

The world presses forward here, doesn't it? Now, in John's vocabulary, that word world is not a neutral entity. It doesn't simply mean the planet.

It's not an astronomical term to distinguish our planet from Mars and Mercury and Jupiter. It's not a geographical term describing the oceans and the continents of the earth.

This is a term which bristles with moral hostility towards God. It really means human life as organized without reference to God and in rebellion against God.

[20 : 46] And this is the reality of the countless lives which have not yet bent the knee to Christ. Now, in verse 14, Jesus distinguishes his disciples from the world and he distinguishes the two with great sharpness.

The world, he says, has hated them, my disciples, because they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. So there's a great divide here.

On the one side of the divide are the people who don't recognize Jesus and don't worship him.

That's the world. On the other side, there are Jesus and his people. And, says Jesus, the world will hate his people.

He's already warned his disciples back in chapter 15, verse 18, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. So, friends, it should never be a surprise to us if we come up against real hostility from people who are not Christians.

It will happen to us again and again if we are prepared to nail our colors to the mast to be known as Christians and to be unashamed of Jesus and his teaching. But let's notice just how Jesus prays in verse 15.

[22 : 00] He does not pray that his followers should be taken out of the world. Now, do you feel a bit miffed by that? A bit disappointed? Do you feel how lovely it would be to be whisked out of this hostile world so that we could live together in a world-free environment where Christians could enjoy happy harmony in thatched cottages with the scent of roses and honeysuckles and home baking?

Now, if that happened to us, if we were whisked off into a beautiful peaceful Christian ghetto, how could we possibly bear witness to the world? Look on to verse 18. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

So we have to stay in the world to carry on the Lord's mission to the world. If I think back to my own conversion years ago, if the people who brought me to Christ had been whisked off to a beautiful thatched cottage, I would not have become a Christian.

Nor would you. So we have to stay in the world as Christ's witnesses. But it's here, in this hostile, anti-gospel environment, that Jesus prays that we be kept from the evil one.

Now, the fact is that the evil one and the world are friends. They are united in their hostility towards God and the church. They work hand-in-hand to mess things up.

[23 : 24] They work hand-in-hand to discourage Christians, to divide Christians, to confuse Christians with false teaching, to stop evangelism, to break up Christian marriages, to hamper Christian ministers, and in any and every way to gag the word of God.

And that's why Christians need to be kept from the power of the evil one. Ultimately, of course, the devil is a defeated foe. But before accounts are finally settled with him, he is, in Peter's words, prowling around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

And in Paul's words, he is throwing his flaming darts at us all the time at believers. So, of course, we need to be protected from him. And incidentally, doesn't this verse 15 also teach us how to pray for other Christians?

If Jesus prays for Christians with the malignant power of the devil very much in mind, should not we pray for Christians in the same way, conscious that our Christian friends and our Christian loved ones are daily subject to the attacks of the evil one?

Spiritual warfare is waged in the heavenly places every day. Jesus teaches us how to pray for others. Don Carson has written this about this verse. The spiritual dimensions of this prayer of Jesus are consistent and overwhelming.

[24 : 49] By contrast, we spend much more time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family, and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one.

Well, we've seen so far that Jesus' will for his disciples is that Christians should know and believe that Jesus has come from the Father and that Christians should be kept or guarded by the Father both for their unity and that they should be protected from the evil one.

Now, third and last, Jesus shows that his will is that Christians should be sanctified in the truth.

Verse 17, Sanctify them, he prays, in the truth.

Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world and for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Now, those final, those famous final four words of verse 17, your word is truth, that is a great doctrinal statement about the word of God and the understanding that that phrase gives us, namely, that the Bible is the very truth.

[26 : 08] That is one of the central foundations of true Christian theology. But, we must notice how Jesus uses these words here. He's not teaching theology in the university lecture hall.

He's praying here for Christians on active service. He's not just concerned for what they believe in the confines of their minds. He is concerned for how they're going to live.

So, these three verses here are a commission for action. Just as new graduates from Sandhurst are sent off into active service wearing their regimental colours.

So, we who are Christians are sent out into the world. How? Well, verse 18 makes the point that it's exactly as Jesus was sent into the world by the Father.

The Father sent him and in the same way he sends us. It's the same mission. It's his mission that we're involved in. Was it easy for him? No.

[27 : 07] Will it be easy for us? Certainly not. Did he accomplish the mission for which he was sent? Yes. Can we accomplish the mission for which we are sent?

Yes. And what are the regimental colours which set us apart and equip us for this kind of service? the Bible.

The Bible. Sanctify them in the truth. Set them apart by means of this truth. Your word is truth. So, if the will of Jesus is that we go into the world at his bidding as he went into the world at his Father's bidding let's make every effort, friends, to be sanctified in the truth which is God's word.

You come from many churches, I know. Encourage your minister to preach the word to you each Sunday full blast, full volume, whole hog. Whole hog preaching of the word sanctifies the church for action and sends it out on Christ's mission.

Isn't that so? But preaching, of course, is not the only way in which we're sanctified in the truth. We must allow the truth of the Bible to penetrate us in so many ways. Our hearts, our souls, our minds, our imaginations, the very inner springs of our dreams and desires and then we shall be equipped for action.

[28 : 33] So, let's allow John 17 to teach us what the Lord's will for our lives is. Forget about this business of marrying Miss Brown or Miss White or even Miss Turquoise. The Lord Jesus' will for our lives is first that we should know, deeply know and be convinced that he is the one sent from God and that we should live accordingly.

Second, that we should be kept by the Father for unity with each other and from the power of the evil one. And thirdly, that we should be sanctified, set apart in the truth of God's word so that we should fulfil the Master's commission to bear his truth to the world.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Amen. Dear God, our Father, we do indeed want, if it's possible, to make this prayer of the Lord Jesus' our own prayer for the Church.

And we long and we ask to see your people more and more gladly, joyfully obeying this commission to go into the world just as the Lord Jesus was sent into the world by you.

We pray that more and more the churches will unashamedly equip their people with the truth of the Bible so that they can go into battle, battling against the world, the flesh, and the devil with the Gospel.

[30 : 05] We pray for each one of us who is here today that this will of the Lord Jesus for us should more and more be seen in our lives, that others might be drawn to Christ through us and through our words.

And all these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.