

BaptistWay Bible Series for February 4: What Jesus Wants For His Followers

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What Jesus Wants For His Followers

- John 17

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As I read John 17, I recalled a prayer I overheard 27 years ago. I was a young journalist working for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission (CLC). An assignment took me to Hendersonville, NC, where I stayed in the home of Dr. and Mrs. A. C. Miller. Dr. Miller, then in his 80s, was teaching young pastors from western North Carolina at Fruitland Bible Institute. Many years earlier he had served as the first executive director of the Texas Baptist CLC and then the national CLC.

Early one morning as I stepped out of the upstairs bedroom to go for a jog, I was startled by a voice. Through the slightly open door of his study, I could hear Dr. Miller praying aloud. This venerable old saint was praying for his students. With great tenderness and love, he prayed for their safety as they commuted to school several days a week. He prayed for their families and their churches. He prayed for specific needs and challenges in

their lives. He prayed that they would learn, and that he would have the wisdom to teach them what they most needed to know. And he prayed that they would remain faithful to their calling as ministers of the gospel.



An Overheard Prayer

In John 17, we are invited to overhear another teacher praying for his students. Only hours before his betrayal by a member of his inner circle and the rapid succession of events culminating in the agony of an execution on a Roman cross, Jesus prays for his disciples. It is the longest prayer placed on the lips of Jesus by the Gospel writers. It is a prayer of consecration for himself and his friends. It is a tender pastoral prayer, the prayer of the Great Shepherd for the sheep who know his voice and follow in his steps.

Philip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's adviser and colleague, wrote of this prayer, "There is no more voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or in earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime, than the prayer offered up by the son of God Himself."

The prayer is often called the "High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus, in part because its structure parallels a prayer offered by Aaron, the high priest, in Leviticus. It concludes Jesus' farewell discourses in John. Jesus' transition from addressing the disciples (and the church) to addressing his Father in prayer reflects the integrated quality of his life and ministry.

Prayer's Structure and Focus

The prayer is commonly divided into three sections. Jesus prays for himself (17:1-5), for his disciples (17:6-19); and then for all his followers to come (17:20-26). The perspective of the writer, however, seems to be that of the post-resurrection church, and Jesus' words, while spoken in the present, are also timeless. At one level, this is a prayer for his disciples. At another level, it is a prayer for disciples in every age. It is a prayer for the church.

Jesus prays for us. That should give us pause. As one writer notes, "It is interesting to ponder how the Christian community's self-definition would be changed if it took as its beginning point, 'We are a community for whom Jesus prays.'"

Significance of 'The World'

Here (verses 6, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, and 25) and elsewhere in the Gospel, the term "the world" has special meaning and significance. This is not the "world of creation"; rather, the writer uses "the world" (like Paul's use of the word "flesh") in the sense of "the world as it organizes itself against God."

"The world" . . . is what is out there when people try to run their lives as though God didn't exist, which is why there is solid and settled hatred for genuine Christianity and those who, however inadequately, attempt to stand for it.

In the language of the prologue, Jesus, as the Word that was in the beginning with God, "was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (1:10).

Jesus asks his Father to consecrate or to sanctify his disciples "in truth" (17:17-19). To sanctify is, literally, "to make holy." This is a deeply counter-

cultural concept. Holiness in scripture is not primarily a moral category, but a way of speaking about living in the presence of God. It is about being set apart for right living.

Sent Into the World

Jesus prays for the disciples (then and now) as his “sent” people: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:19).

Against the background of the entire Gospel that has preceded it, this is a remarkable statement. The Father sent the son into the world to do his works. He and the Son were one in everything. At the end of his mission, the son went back to the glory of the Father. It will be the same for the disciples. They will take on the works of the son. They will be one with him in everything. And, finally, they will join him in glory, leaving yet more disciples to do the works of the son and the Father.

This sending is startling in many ways, but it is not new. The image of the God who sends is woven throughout scripture. God calls, empowers and sends out of covenant relationship. For reasons beyond our comprehension, God has chosen from the beginning to carry out God’s purpose in creation with us and through us. This collaboration and co-creation is inherent in the nature of God. It is consistent with the God who takes the initiative in salvation history, in the task of redeeming and reconciling a fallen and broken world.

Jesus prays for you and me because he has called us to be part of God’s mission in the world. That is what it means to be a Christian.

Questions for Discussion

- What does “overhearing” Jesus in prayer suggest to you about the nature

and importance of prayer?

- Jesus prays for his followers' protection from evil, their mission in the world, and unity with one another and with God and himself. Imagine Jesus offering to pray for you. Considering these three categories, what would you ask Jesus to pray for on your behalf?

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