

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Sermon: "When Jesus Prays for Us"

John 17:6-19 (NRSV)

[6] "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. [7] Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; [8] for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. [9] I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. [10] All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. [11] And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. [12] While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. [13] But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. [14] I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. [15] I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. [16] They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. [17] Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. [18] As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. [19] And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

THE OBJECT OF PRAYER

Have you ever been the object of a spoken prayer? I have. Not very often but from time to time someone has lifted a prayer up to God just for me ... while I was listening.

This really has a way of focusing your attention. For some reason when we overhear a prayer meant just for us we tend to remember every word, and sometimes we are changed by that prayer in some significant way.

Let me give you an example. A friend, a fellow minister had just arrived at his first church. Soon after his arrival he drove a long distance to a regional hospital. One of his members was in that hospital, and this particular man was dying of cancer.

On the way he worried about what he might say to this man, but as it turned out his fretting was to no avail. The member did all the talking. When my friend made it

to the hospital, it was the patient who prayed for him! This old farmer struggled out of bed, got down on his knees, invited the young minister to join him and he prayed something like this, “Lord, this young minister means well. But, you and I know he’s going to need lots of help in the days to come. Please protect him. Help him to preach your word and do your work.”

It wasn’t so much what he said that made the difference. It was the circumstances that surrounded that prayer. When a dying man gets down on his knees and prays out loud for you, you tend to pay attention! Such was the case for my friend. He was profoundly changed by that prayer. And I have no doubt that he remembered it and was guided by it throughout his entire ministry.

The same must have been true for the disciples of Jesus. Hours before his death, Jesus got down on his knees, and prayed out loud for his disciples. And His prayer not only changed those disciples who first overheard that prayer; his prayer has continued to change disciples down through the generations.

So this morning I want us to understand that this prayer is meant to be taken personally. Imagine this. We are there with those first disciples. And Jesus is down on his knees; he is praying for us by name. And we are listening in on that prayer.

What is he saying? What does he want us to remember? What does he think is important for our lives? What does He want us to do? How will our lives be changed by overhearing this prayer?

If you had to summarize this prayer in one word I think that word would be protection. Jesus is asking his Father to protect his disciples. And in this prayer we come to understand: 1. the means that God uses to protect us, 2. the one thing that poses the greatest threat to the Disciples of Christ, and 3. what the protection of God enables us to do.

PROTECTED BY THE WORD

First, the prayer of Jesus reminds us that God protects us by the power of his Word. The power and presence of God have been revealed in the Word made flesh, this man named Jesus. And as disciples of Jesus we have received and accepted that Word.

In verse 6 Jesus prayed, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”

In other words, in his prayer Jesus says in effect, “I want my people to remember who they are and whose they are. They are children of the heavenly king. They are God’s chosen people. The very Word of God has come to live in their lives and in their hearts.”

A myriad of problems come into our life because we have a poor self image. Jesus' prayer for us takes care of that problem right off the bat. God has chosen us. God is no longer a mystery to us. The love and compassion of God have been plainly revealed to us in a very concrete way, in the example of his Son, Jesus.

God has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And as his disciples we have understood and accepted that revelation. We have believed the message. We already know the truth. We just need to remember that this truth can truly set us free.

Notice also that the power of protection is to be found in God's name. Jesus prays for the Father to protect his disciples through the power of his name. In verse 11 we hear Jesus pray, "... protect them in your name, that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

That verse sounds a bit awkward, but it contains a very important promise. What exactly does it mean to be protected by the name of Jesus?

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians that God had given an obedient Jesus a name that is above every name. (See Philippians 2:9-10) And in those days the name of a person represented that person's character. So the very nature of God is revealed in the name Jesus.

And what does the name Jesus mean? The name Jesus means "God is salvation."

So many people preach that God is out to get you. But, the name of Jesus tells us that God is not out to get anyone. God is out to save. God is salvation. Salvation is God's middle name ... so to speak.

With all the new digital channels on TV, I can now receive many more channels. But, often those channels are not the channels that I want.

One Home Shopping Network is one too many as far as I am concerned. Since I don't speak Spanish, I don't need any programming in Spanish. And to be honest with you I don't need any of those so called religious networks either. They are replete with very bad theology.

So as I exercised in front of the TV yesterday, I also "exorcised" the channels that I didn't want to see any more. But, when I came to the religious channels I stopped for just a few seconds to hear what they had to say.

And they all said the same thing. "God is really mad at a lot of people. Send me money!"

I think if God is mad at anyone God is mad at those TV evangelists. God wants to protect us from these and other religious hucksters who suggest that salvation comes at a price other than the price of God's grace as revealed in Jesus. God

wants us to know that we can't buy salvation, and God also wants us to know that His middle name isn't "judgment."

God's middle name is salvation.

God is love, and the love of God does not divide us. It brings us together. This passage tells us that we are protected and united by the name of Jesus. If we believe in God's grace, then we become gracious people. God's name will make us one even as God and Jesus are one.

PROTECTED FROM EVIL

But, there are forces that would keep us from believing this word of grace and truth. Jesus prays that his disciples might be protected from the world and in particular Jesus prays that the disciples might be protected from the evil one (or evil). What is this great evil that threatens God's people?

According to Jesus the greatest threat to our life is not hurricanes, wars or rumors of war. The greatest threat to our life is not terrorism, persecution, or even death itself.

The great enemy from which we need protection is the enemy called falsehood. We need to be protected from lies. Indeed, Satan is known as the Father of All Lies. And it is the big lie that takes away our very soul.

What do we pray each week in the Lord's Prayer? "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." That's not just an archaic phrase that we keep out of tradition. Evil exists. It is real. And it resides wherever lies are found.

Jesus may have ascended into heaven, but we are still in the world. And so we struggle. We struggle with evil. We are tempted by that evil.

In this passage Jesus knows that he will soon ascend into heaven leaving his disciples alone here on earth. And like a loving father who wants the best for his children Jesus wants the best for his disciples. How can he protect them from the trials that were to come?

And how can we be protected from falsehood? We are protected and sanctified (made holy) by the truth, the truth about God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Notice that in order for the truth to set us free we must do more than just learn the truth. We must live the truth. We must be sanctified (or made holy) by the truth. (John 17:17)

SANCTIFICATION

How would you define sanctification? One commentator suggested tongue in cheek that sanctification means that Christians are weird people.

I think he's right. It's true. We're weird. We don't fit in. We don't belong to the world. We're not like everyone else. We're different because God wants us to be different.

Most of us spend a great deal of time and effort trying not to be weird. We want to fit in. We want to dress in a way that's accepted. We want to be polite and appropriate in all situations. We don't want to call attention to ourselves in a bad way.

Now of course it's okay to have good social skills. It's okay to dress appropriately and avoid social faux pas.

But, there is one area where Christians can't fit in with the ways of the world. There is one big lie that the Father of All Lies tells and from which all other lies spring. Do you know what it is?

Think back to the story of the first temptation. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit by the Serpent. And according to the Tempter that fruit would give them knowledge of what was good and what was evil.

And they would be like gods. They wouldn't need God anymore. They could decide for themselves what was right and what was wrong. If you remember the story, it didn't work out so well. Their relationship with God was profoundly disturbed by this sin, and they were expelled from the Garden of Eden as a result.

If there is one belief that the modern world holds to be sacred, it is this, "We can decide. It's up to us. We have the knowledge of what is good and what is evil. And we can forgive ourselves."

TV THEOLOGY

I like to watch the TV show 24. It's about a spy named Jack Bauer who often has to "break the rules" in order to save people. If a prisoner has to be tortured in order to stop a terrorist attack, so be it. Bring on the shock therapy!

But, his rule breaking carries a heavy personal and professional price. Jack Bauer is a man filled with self-doubt and regret.

In last week's episode he is about to die. Since he has no particular religious beliefs he calls in an Islamic leader (whom he has just met) to come to his death bed and "say a few words." The religious leader who is sympathetic to Jack's situation prays, "Let us forgive ourselves for the sins that we have committed."

This is a wonderfully succinct statement of the big lie. The big lie is that we can forgive ourselves. We can do anything we want to do as long as it helps us defeat our enemies and achieve our goals.

And when we come to the end of our life, we can just sprinkle holy water on it all and forgive ourselves. We are like gods. We decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil.

And when we make these decisions we can become very sanctimonious. Morality is defined by self-interest, and when that happens anything goes. We look askance at those who are too weak to make the hard choices.

REJECTED BY THE WORLD

This was why they crucified Jesus.

In John, chapter 11 the religious leaders are fuming about the popularity of Jesus. So many people are being attracted by his miracles and power. Many think that Jesus might be the Messiah, and they are beginning to say it out loud. This is very dangerous. The religious leaders feared that the Romans might destroy their nation and their holy place if this messianic claim went any farther.

And so these religious leaders decided to make the hard choice. They would torture and kill one man (Jesus) so that the whole nation might be saved. Since it was the high priest and his cronies who made the decision that made it all right. They reasoned that sometimes you have to do the wrong thing for the greater good. (John 11:47-53)

I think the application of this passage to current political and moral dilemmas is obvious. Whenever we decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, whenever we break our own rules for the greater good, there is great moral and spiritual danger. And anyone who dares to challenge this big lie must be prepared to be rejected and even persecuted by the world.

God in Christ never promised us a rose garden, far from it. Notice that when Jesus prayed for his disciples, he said that he was not praying to have them taken out of the world. He was praying that they might have the strength to resist the temptations of the world. Instead of being sanctimonious and self-assured, Disciples of Christ are to be sanctified.

Sanctimonious people make their own rules and rely on their own abilities to be saved. Sanctified people live by God's rules and trust in God's power for salvation.

Sanctimonious people want to do their own thing. Sanctified people want to do God's thing.

Sanctimonious people want to defeat their enemies at all costs. Sanctified people want to love their enemies because they know that they are saved by grace alone through faith.

Sanctimonious people will do anything to keep the finger of blame from pointing at them. The problem is always the other guy's fault. Sanctified people recognize and admit that they are sinners. Sanctified people don't cover up or rationalize their mistakes. Sanctified people because they are forgiven sinners don't have to pretend that they're perfect. Sanctified people are freed from the tyranny of the self through the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

That commentator had it right. Sanctified people are weird. Sanctified people are quite different from the rest of the world.

But, sanctified people are weird in a good way. As that commentator put it, "We have the freedom to be weird—different from the people of the world—and to invite them to share in the weirdness that God gives."

SENT INTO THE WORLD

That brings us to my final point. We have been sanctified for a reason. We have been forgiven and freed from sin for a reason. And that reason is to go into the world with this "weird" gospel of grace. Jesus said to his Father in prayer, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." John 17:18 (NRSV)

This is where sanctification gets scary. We can accept that Jesus prays for us. We can accept and even revel in the fact that we are forgiven and freed sinners. But, we are not so happy to take that message into a world that thinks we are totally weird and crazy.

Jesus tells to be in the world but not of the world. But, we often want to be part of the world. We don't want controversy. We don't want to be hated by the world. We want to be loved by the world! We want to stay where it is safe instead of being sent into the world. But, just as a ship was not meant for the safety of the harbor so Christians are not called to believe what they want in the safety of their own homes and churches.

The message of Christ is a challenge to the world. God in Christ throws down the gauntlet to those who say that we can do what we want and believe what we want and save ourselves.

And we are a part of the process. As God sent Jesus into the world, so God in Christ sends us into the world. How did Jesus put it? We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus does pray for us as he prayed for his first disciples. You may have noticed this promise in the declaration of pardon that I used today. After we confessed our sins I said, "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us." (cf. Romans 8:34; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Having Jesus pray for us is a great honor, but it also a great challenge as well. I wonder, "Do we really want Jesus praying for us?" If we say "yes" then we need to prepare ourselves for God to answer and to be the answer that God uses.

A LETTER OF SALVATION

William Barclay told a story about a famous evangelist by the name of Brownlow North. The life North lived was anything but Christian. And once, just before he was to enter the pulpit in a church in Aberdeen, he received a letter that detailed a shameful series of event that he had engaged in.

North's stomach turned as read all that he had done in black and white. The letter concluded, "If you have the gall to preach tonight, I'll stand and expose you." North took the letter and went to his knees, and a few minutes later he was in the pulpit.

He began his message by reading the letter from start to finish. And he said, "I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I am ashamed of what I have done. And I come tonight not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven."

Barclay said that God used that letter and the balance of his ministry almost as a magnet to bring people to Jesus.

In a way all of us have been given a letter from God delivered by his Son Jesus. That letter says that we have sinned and fall short of glory. And the question is this: what are we going to do about that letter, that hard word of truth?

Are we going to cover it up and tell ourselves that we are really not that bad? Or are we going to use that harsh truth as a prod to accept the forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus.

This very day Jesus is praying for you and me. The power of his grace will protect us and free us for this life and the life to come.

Amen.