

Listening to Jesus Pray For Us #3

John 17

Call: John 14:15-21, 23 (NIV)

Scripture: John 17 (ESV)

I. Introduction

I invite you to once again for the 3rd of 4 times to join me in what has been called “The Holy of Holies.” I invite you into another exploration of one side of “the conversation at the center of the universe.” Here, Jesus, the Son of God, opens His heart to God the Father. Here the incarnate God prays to God. It is indeed holy space. Which is why one Puritan pastor named Thomas Manton preached 45 Puritan-length sermons on John 17 alone! You’ll be thankful I’m not going to do that! But I get it, because the more I live in John 17, the richer it becomes, and I’m beginning to think that 4 Sundays was not enough.

Review

Jesus is indeed “the man of prayer.” He is a Jew, and the Jews had a way of being that was entirely shaped by prayer. As a devout Jew, Jesus would have stopped to pray three times a day: morning, afternoon and evening. As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have participated in the Sabbath prayers in the Synagogue. As a good Jew, Jesus would have prayed the prayer book of Israel, the Psalms. His mother Mary would have taught him to pray the Psalms. Imagine that, a human being teaching the incarnate God to pray.

And, of course, we see Jesus, “the man of prayer,” praying throughout the Gospels? He’s always slipping away to pray to his Father. Though, we rarely hear what he is saying. But, here in John 17, we do hear what he is praying. And, why? As I said two weeks ago, I think for at least three reasons:

1. So that we can know what is on his heart. So that we might know his deepest desires.
2. So that our hearts might beat with the same desires. As he opens his heart to us, our hearts begin beating to the same rhythm as his heart.
3. So that we might know what he will be praying after he ascends to the throne. This prayer encapsulates the kinds of things he continues to pray, as the great intercessor, right now in his Father’s presence. As Hebrews says, Jesus *“always lives to intercede”* for us (Heb 7:25).

So, now, as we enter into this space for the third time, we continue to listen, to simply listen to Jesus pray. As we’re listening, we’re also asking, “What does Jesus want for us? What does Jesus desire his Father to do for us?” So far, we’ve seen things like –

- He desires for us to know who his Father is and what his Father is like.
- He desires for us to know that we are gifts from his Father to him.
- He desires for us to know his Father, by knowing him, Jesus, and therefore have eternal life.

- He desires for us to be kept in the world, in the Father's name and from the evil one. I've had several discussions this week with several of you about this word keep. Keep doesn't mean we are kept from suffering or pain or danger because as Jesus says himself, he sends us into the world just as he was sent, right into the suffering, pain and danger. But, while we are there, Jesus prays that his father would keep us, would watch over us, would pay careful attention to us, that he would hold us in his strong hands now and forever.
- And Jesus desires for us to experience the fullness of His joy.

Father, Jesus prays, I desire all of these things for your given ones.

And...

II. Inclusion

A. Introduction

Jesus desires for us to be included into the oneness of the Trinity!

The living God is not a solitary God. The living God is not an isolated God. The living God is a God of relationships. From all eternity, God has lived in relationship, as a community of persons, as a family. And, here's the good news that we hear in John 17 – Jesus is desiring for us to be included in this family of relationships, to live *in* and be alive *in* the oneness of the Triune God of love. It truly blows the circuit breakers of our minds. At least it blows mine.

Listen to what Jesus prays. Put your head on Jesus' heart and listen. Three times Jesus prays for oneness:

- Verse 11 – *“that they may be one.”*
- Verse 21 – *“that they may be one.”*
- Verse 22 – *“that they may be one.”*

And, each time He says it, he prays a definition of oneness.

- Verse 11 – *“even as we are one.”*
- Verse 21 – *“even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us.”*
- Verse 22 – *“even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.”*

One. Not uniform. As Darrell Johnson says, “Jesus is far too creative for uniformity!” But one: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Alliance, Pentecostal, Catholic, Orthodox ... one. Introverts, extroverts and everyone in between... one. Activists, contemplatives, prophetic-types, administrative-types, deacon-types, giving types, and everyone in between... one. And, the oneness is “even as” or “just as” the oneness of God.

B. Kathos (“Even as”)

“Even as” means “in the same way and to the same degree” as the oneness of God (BDAG). “One” in the same way and to the same degree as the “we” in Jesus’ words. Yes, Jesus wants us to be “one like” the oneness that he and the Father enjoy, but more than “like,” he wants us to be one “in” the oneness he and the Father enjoy.

C. Review of “in”

There’s that preposition again. We’ve met it several times throughout the upper room discourse, haven’t we? In chapter 14, if you remember, Jesus said that the paraclete, the Holy Spirit, would come to be with us and “in” us (John 14:16-17). And, Jesus also said that “*On that day [when the Holy Spirit comes] you will know that I am in My Father, and you are in Me, and I in you*” (John 14:20). A few verses later, he will say that if we love him and keep his commandments, He and the Father will come and make their dwelling with us (John 14:23). We read those verses for our Call to Worship this morning. That’s a lot of “ins”! And, this “in-ness” or oneness is what Jesus is praying for right here in his prayer.

One because “in.” The oneness Jesus wants for his disciples, his given ones, is not simply *modeled* on the oneness of God. The oneness Jesus desires for His disciples *participates in* the oneness of God! It is not about imitating God here, it is about participating in God here. It is because disciples are called *into* the oneness of God that they become one, that they are one.

Now, I know that this concept stretches our minds.

D. The Relational God

The Father, Son, and Spirit not only live in constant communion *with* one another; they actually live *in* one another. The Father, Son, and Spirit not only embrace one another, they enter into one another, they permeate one another, they indwell one another.

On the top of our window is an ancient symbol for the trinity, called the trefoil, formed by three interlocking footballs. When Bernard teaches on the Window, he says this about the trefoil, “God is and always has been a triune God: three in one. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. And, the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father through the Son. The Trinity is a community of perfect love, goodness and fulfilment” (Bell, The Window). And, we are invited into that community!

Father, Son and Spirit in constant communion, *but* also in one another. Back and forth, as in a great dance, no Person of the Trinity ever living alone, no person of the Trinity ever living apart from the others. Each Person of the Trinity always giving himself to the others; always pouring himself out for and into the others. Jurgen Moltmann, a German Theologian, put it this way: “The divine persons exist not only in relationship to one another, but also in one another” [Moltmann, 86].

E. Rublev’s Icon

And, what Jesus is praying for here is that we be included *in* these relationships, that we be included in the oneness of God. When I talk about this extraordinary truth, I can't help but return to this icon.



Remember we used this last fall. This icon, Rublev's Icon, is called *The Holy Trinity* and shows the divine love of "in-ness." What we find here is the Trinitarian God extending his heart and hands, his life and love, to us. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, opens himself up to us and includes us in his life and love, for as you can see, the side of the table closest to us is empty to include one more person. That's you. We are included at the table with the Trinitarian God. For *we were once strangers, excluded from the covenants of promise, having no hope, but because of divine love demonstrated through the blood of Jesus, we've been brought near, even into the very life of God* (Eph 2:12-13). We were once excluded, but now are included in the Trinitarian God.

F. In Him

Once again, we are not called to only become one "like" God is one. We are called to "join in" the Trinitarian God being one. One because "in." One because we are included in the life and love of God. Paul will say later to the philosophers on Mars Hill, "*In Him, we live and move and have our being.*" Not just "because of Him we live and move and have our being." But "*In Him we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28).

G. Nesting Dolls

Because this is such a difficult concept, maybe another illustration will help, the Russian nesting dolls, although no illustration can really express the mystery. Every illustration falls short at this point. But maybe this one can help. You know the nesting dolls. One doll in another, which in turn is in another, which is in turn in another and so on. In... In... In... I have four here, one for the Father, Son, Disciple and Spirit. "*In Him, we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28). One because "in."

H. Father, Son and "Disciples"

Now, what is so wonderful about John 17 is that when Jesus prays using the preposition "in," we expect to hear: Father, Son, and Spirit. Instead, guess what we hear? Father, Son, and disciples.

In John 17, “disciples are said to enjoy the very relationship that the Spirit is not said to enjoy” (Johnson MP3). The Spirit does enjoy it. He does enjoy it, but it is not said so here in John 17. What is said is that we, disciples, are given the place in the relationship with the Father and the Son which we expect the Spirit to have!

Thomas Manton, as with many other theologians, calls this the “mystical union.” It is the mystery and wonder of salvation. It is the wonderful inclusion of disciples within the exchange of divine life and love. The disciples get included in this exchanging of life and love between the Father and the Son. And that is what Jesus is praying for, for those the Father has given Him. That is what Jesus desires for you and for me. He wants inclusion, inclusion into the very life and love of the trinity, that all who name his name may be one in the oneness of the mutual indwelling of God.

I. The Holy Spirit

Now, it turns out that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. As we saw throughout the upper room discourse, the Spirit brings us into the Son, and with the Son, into the Father. It is all the work of the Spirit. The Spirit has been called the shy member of the Trinity because he’s always pointing away from himself to the Father and the Son. And, so, I think the Spirit would say, “I’m included too, but that’s not the point. I’m including you into the life and love of the Father and the Son!”

J. Honor

After talking to Eugene this week about how to preach this difficult concept, he reminded me of how much honor this inclusion bestows on us, right? Last week, I pointed out the honor Jesus gives us by calling us gifts from his Father to him. But, here, we see more honor and dignity given to us, as his image-bearers. He gives us this incredible honor of entering into this perfect relationship of love and eternal life. And, you know it’s actually what we were created for. We were created and redeemed to participate in this relationship at the center of the universe. You and I belong there within the life and love of the living God. It’s where we belong.

One because “in.” Not one because we agree. Not one because we hold the same doctrines. Not one because we have the same form of government. Not one because we hold the same political convictions. One because we are one *in* the oneness of God, which is why Jesus says in verse 22, *“The glory that you have given me, I have given to them.”*

K. Glory

When we participate in the oneness of God, we participate in the glory of God. This glory which is finally manifested in Jesus laying down His life for the life of the world. That glory is what he gives us. We too get to experience and live that glory: we too get to live by giving our lives away in servant love. We too get to live so gloriously! We too get to find life by losing it!

III. Prayer for the World?

A. Introduction

And, in fact, Jesus says, this is how the world will believe he is who he says he is. The world... World? So, what about the world? One of the most frequently asked questions about John 17 is “Why does Jesus say he is not praying for the world?” Look at verse 9.

Jesus says, “*I am praying for them,*” praying for my disciples, but then he says, “*I am not praying for the world.*” So people legitimately ask, “Why doesn’t Jesus pray for the world?” As I have studied John over these last few years, it’s puzzled me even more because of what we hear elsewhere in John, especially in John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...*” If the Father “*so loves the world*” why doesn’t the Son pray for the world?

B. The World

As I have said several times throughout our studies in John, “world” for John typically means “human society organizing itself without God.” It can simply mean the physical earth like in verse 5. But, most of the time in John, “world” is human existence resisting, rejecting and rebelling against God. So, Psalm 2:

- 1 *Why do the nations rage
 and the peoples plot in vain?*
- 2 *The kings of the earth set themselves,
 and the rulers take counsel together,
 against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,*
- 3 *“Let us burst their bonds apart
 and cast away their cords from us.”*

That’s the world speaking. Human society choosing to organize itself without the light, even against the light. Therefore, the world, human society without God, is always tending toward darkness.

So, if this is the case, how should Jesus pray for the world? Should he really pray that the world be “one” like he does for his disciples, “one” in its resistance to the light? Should he really pray that the nations be “united” while not knowing God?

C.K. Barrett says it best: “the only hope for the world is precisely that it should cease to be the world” (Barrett, 422). The only hope for “human society organizing itself without God” is that it cease to organize itself without God. The only hope for the world is for it to lay down its rejection, resistance and rebellion, and surrender to the lordship of Jesus, in which case it is no longer the world.

C. World-Oriented

Here's the thing though. Although Jesus says he’s not explicitly praying for the world, the whole prayer is world-oriented, isn’t it? After all, the word “world” occurs 18 times in the prayer (if I counted correctly), almost all meaning human society organizing itself without God.

From verse 6, where Jesus says, *“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world,”* to verse 21, *“that the world may believe that you sent me,”* to verse 23 *“I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me.”* Jesus desires for the world to know and believe! And particularly as a result of the oneness of his given ones, of the inclusion of his given ones. In other words, when the world sees disciples living within the oneness of the oneness of God, the world will conclude not only that the Father sent the Son, but will hopefully desire to enter “in,” with the disciples, into the life and love of the Trinity. When Jesus’ disciples participate in the life and love of the Triune God, when they live by giving themselves away for the world, the world will recognize that there’s something different about those people, and, they will be drawn to enter into the oneness and stop being the world.

What else does Jesus desire for us? Verse 17.

IV. Sanctification

A. Introduction

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. Sanctify means, “to set apart for God; or to be dedicated by God for God and his purposes.” It’s the verb from which we get the word “saints.” Saints are not perfect. It’s just that they have been set apart by God for God. They are set apart from the world, and from themselves, by God for God. “Father, as you keep the disciples in the world, set them apart for yourself and your purposes. Consecrate them.”

B. In Truth

And, set them apart *“in the truth.”* That is, keep them in the truth. Keep the truth of Jesus before them. Surround them, constrain them, hem them in with the truth of Jesus.

C. The Word

“Your word is truth.” The means of sanctification is the truth of God’s Word. Jesus’ desire for us is that we be set apart for his Father and for his purposes by living our lives kept in God’s Word, and living our lives by God’s Word. As we soak in and absorb God’s Word, we become set apart for God and His purposes. We become sanctified. We begin to think the way God thinks. We begin to see things the way God sees them. We begin to hear things the way God hears them. We begin to feel the way God feels. We begin to act and react the way God acts and reacts. We become sanctified, set apart for him.

This is why one of our family values here at PBCC is devotion to the Word, because God’s Word sanctifies us.

D. Jesus Sanctified

Jesus then prays in verse 19, *“And for their sake I sanctify myself.”* It is because of this line that John 17 has been called “The High Priestly Prayer,” at least since the 16th century (David Chytraus, 1531-1600). We are sanctified for God’s purposes in the world by Jesus first

sanctifying himself, by Jesus giving himself in loving obedience to his Father's purposes, by Jesus going to the cross to manifest the glory of God.

So Hebrews 10:10, "... *we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all.*" Tomorrow, Jesus will go to the cross, the place of humiliation but also, paradoxically, exaltation. And, at the cross, Jesus will reconcile the world to God. At the cross, Jesus will defeat death and the ruler of this world. Tomorrow, at the cross, Jesus will dedicate himself, will sanctify himself, will give himself away as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's what Good Friday is all about.

He desires more too, but we'll wait for next Sunday to hear it.

V. Conclusion

So, after three weeks, what does Jesus desire for us? He desires -

- That we know we are gifts,
- That we have eternal life,
- That we be kept ones,
- That we have joy,

And, he also desires that we

- be sanctified, that we be set apart by God for God and his purposes.
- And he desires that we be included in the oneness of God, included in the life and love of the triune God, included in the divine dance. Remember the nesting dolls.

So, I leave you today with this observation from Dallas Willard, from his book *The Divine Conspiracy*:

"It is being included in the eternal life of God that heals all wounds and allows us to stop demanding satisfaction. What really matters of a personal matter when once it is clear that you are included." (Willard, 341).

You are included. Amen.

Benediction

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God [the Father], and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forever. (2 Corinthians 13:14) Amen.

Resources

Barrett, CK, *The Gospel According to St. John*

Burge, Gary, *John (NIV Application Commentary)*

Carson, Don, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus*

Johnson, Darrell, *John 17 (Regent College Course, #3810)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Moltman, Jurgan, *History and the Triune God*

Newbiggin, Leslie, *The Light Has Come*

Willard, Dallas, *The Divine Conspiracy*