



WHEN JESUS PRAYED FOR YOU

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 17:20-26

38th Message

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We conclude today our study of the magnificent section of John's Gospel known as the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus' last words to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. The Lord's relationship with these men was about to change in a fundamental way. He was leaving and they were staying. "I will remain in the world no longer," he said in his prayer to God the Father, "but they are still in the world." In these five chapters, therefore, Jesus taught the apostles everything they needed to know about life when he would no longer be physically with them.

This study has encouraged me in my own spiritual journey. It has helped me see more clearly into the heart of our Lord, his total understanding of my needs, and his preparation and provision for me. I pray it has done something of that for you as well.

After he had spoken to his apostles, Jesus began to speak to his Father, praying aloud so that the men could hear what he had to say. In essence, what he was praying for was that the truth he had been teaching them would be incorporated into their lives. That is how truth becomes real in a life. It is taught to us, we sense that it is true, and we want to respond to it. But we are weak; we need prayer to translate truth into everyday life.

Jesus' prayer divides into three parts, the first two of which we looked at last week. He began by praying for himself (verses 1-5 of chapter 17); then he then prayed for the apostles (vv. 6-18); and finally for all believers in the generations to come (vv. 19-26). He prayed for himself for glorification, for the apostles for sanctification, and for the church, those who would believe because of the apostles, for unification.

This last section of the prayer is quite unusual. We could well regard these verses as a summit meeting between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And we are privileged to listen into their deliberations! This is the most exalted summit ever. The focus is not a single country, but the entire world. The campaign does not cover a few years or even a few decades, but the entire age, from the first coming of Christ to the second. It doesn't involve a few local churches or denominations, but gathers in the whole body of Christ, every Christian who has ever lived, or will live, throughout all of time. In a very real sense, therefore, these verses contain the blueprint of God's program for this age. It is the plan for a military campaign designed to capture our rebellious planet for God; and we have from the lips of Jesus both the objective and the strategy for this campaign.

We begin with verse 20:

"My prayer is not for them alone [that is, the eleven apostles]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, . . .

Jesus' prayer extends clear across the running centuries of time. He is praying for all the millions of people who would come to believe through the apostolic word: "I pray for them . . . and those." They add up to *all*. Jesus prays specifically for you and me.

. . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Twice in these verses Jesus states the great objective that was constantly before him during his life on earth, and now that he is leaving, he is committing the objective to the disciples. And twice he specifically outlines what God intends to accomplish. In the last part of verse 21 he says, ". . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . ."; and again in the last part of verse 23, ". . . to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me . . ." There is the great objective. God's redemptive plan is aimed at one target: the world.

John 3:16 says: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." We sometimes forget this, becoming so absorbed in his work in us that we forget that he is still aiming beyond us. Jesus said in verse 15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world . . ."; and then in verse 18, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." We must never isolate ourselves from the world. We dare not live out our Christian lives in air-tight compartments, in a sort of Christian hothouse. We are here to be God's instruments through which human life, in every area and at every level, is penetrated by the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. That is our mission. It is not to improve the world, or even save the world. It is to penetrate the world so that people may see that Jesus Christ is the authentic voice of God to mankind; that in him lies the ultimate issue of human destiny; and in him we come face to face with all that is important in human affairs.

It is a difficult mission. Having been on the other side of the fence, we know that every worldlying lives in confusion and blindness. And it is a dangerous mission. We have a treacherous enemy bent on deceiving us into be-

believing that we can live life apart from God. That is why Jesus prayed for our protection. He prayed that we would be sanctified, set apart for God; that we would be God's man and God's woman; that we would not be a man or woman of the world, or the company's man or woman, but that we would be God's man or God's woman, not isolated from the world but insulated from it.

If that is the objective, what then is the strategy? How does God plan to accomplish this? Jesus states it three times: verse 21: "that all of them may be one"; verse 22: "that they may be one as we are one"; verse 23: "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity."

This is a prayer is for unity. Unity forms the strategy by which God intends to accomplish his objective. It is important to understand the kind of unity Jesus is talking about. And he is quite explicit about the nature of it. It is a supernatural unity modeled after and enabled by the Godhead. Our Lord is not praying for organizational unity, but for the unity of the Spirit. He is not speaking about human organizations designed to hold churches together (such organizations always disappoint), but of the sharing of the divine life. It isn't an alliance, or a merger, or an agreement that we enter; those things have no effect on the world. Our Lord's strategy is designed to bring to the world a divine life that is commonly shared: the life of the family of God, entered into by a new birth. It is a life so filled with love and warmth that those in the world will envy it. Like homeless orphans with their noses pressed up against the window, they will long to join the warmth and fellowship of the family circle.

But the church doesn't always act like that, does it? I'm reminded about the story of a man who was walking by a used book store and a certain book in the window caught his eye. It was entitled *How to Hug*. Feeling a bit lonely, and being of a romantic nature, he thought to himself, "That's what I need." So he went inside to look further. To his dismay, he discovered that the book was the 11th volume of an encyclopedia covering the subjects from *How - Hug*.

Many local churches are like that, aren't they? People come with deep, real needs; they are lonely, discouraged, and confused. They are hoping to find help, but often they are treated to an encyclopedic, academic, theoretical kind of love which means very little in real life. The Christianity they encounter looks more like a philosophy than a personal relationship with God.

There is a danger in evangelical circles of defining unity as a common set of beliefs. But Jesus is not referring to a complete unity of belief. Christians believe all sorts of things. But there is a common body of belief, passed on to us through the apostles. It is encompassed in the Apostles Creed, that simple yet profound second century document that describes what the early church believed. That statement encompasses the hard core of faith, the essence of it, and it consists mostly of Christ. We may disagree over other matters, yet we love one another despite our differences. Some of you are Calvinists, some of you are Arminians, some of you are Premillennialists, others are Amillennialists. Some of you are Dispensationalists, while some of you are Covenant people. Some of you don't even know what you believe. You wandered in

here and you don't know up from down. I'm with you! Yet we are all one because we love the Lord Jesus and we are counting on him for our salvation. There is a unity that our Lord has created which is a spiritual unity. Jesus says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me; and you are in me; and we all love one another."

Supposing we could bring together believers from different generations who have impacted the world for Christ: Augustine of Hippo from the fourth century; from the tenth century the saintly mystic and poet, Bernard of Clairvaux; from the sixteenth century the peerless reformer, John Calvin; also from the sixteenth century John Wesley, the great Methodist advocate of free will; and along with him the evangelist George Whitefield; from the nineteenth century Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody. These men would not be in unanimous agreement on very many things, but in the midst of their diverse personalities, gifts, and theological distinctives, they would be unified in their love of Jesus and their focus on him. Too many Christians think that other believers should be just like them — all reading the same books, educating their children the same way, thinking alike politically. Unity is not loving the same things; it is possessing the same love. That same mind that Scripture calls us to is the mind of Christ.

What it boils down to is this: Who or what you are depending on for your salvation? Are you looking to the Lord Jesus, to God himself for it? Do you love him? Are you devoted to him? Are you worshipping him? Is he the center of your life? If he is, then you are one with other Christians.

When I travel I meet Christians with different cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages, yet I recognize almost immediately that they have the Spirit of God in them. It doesn't matter what they believe about the peripherals of the faith. What I sense is that we are one because we have a common love for the Lord Jesus and we are counting on him for our salvation.

As we lean upon Jesus our lives are filled with love. That is what the world is dying to see. It is the persuasive factor that causes the world to believe that Jesus is sent from God. It is not our personality, is it not our theology. It is the life of God in us, demonstrated by our love.

Jesus desires that the world may be persuaded. He longs for them to come to know him. We have seen that yearning throughout the gospel. The heart of Jesus is as wide and as deep as the heart of God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son. It is that love that underlies his refusal to take the disciples out of the world, but which rather sends them into the world to fulfill his mission. But we need to remember that the mission is not merely one of proclamation. It is not only verbal, it is visible; it is relational as well as audible. Remember Jesus shared this strategy when he began this discourse. He told them: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. *By this* all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Evangelism is a community act. It is the proclamation of the church's relationships as well as its convictions.

The greatest barriers to effective evangelism are not outdated methods or inadequate presentations of the gospel, but the insensitivity of Christians, their gossip, jealousy, and backbiting, their unforgiving spirits, roots of bitterness, self-absorption and greed. "Show me your redeemed life," a philosopher once said, "and I will be more inclined to believe in your Redeemer." If God is love, let us draw close to him and allow him to fill us with his love.

Recently I read again the true story of Teddy Stallard, who by his own admission was an unattractive, unmotivated little boy. He was difficult to like. Especially for a school teacher who all day long faced his dead-pan, expressionless, unfocused stare. Although his fifth grade teacher said she loved all her students, Miss Thompson had to admit that deep down she wasn't being honest. She didn't like him, and she even received a certain perverse pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and writing the F's with a flair. Her view of him was already distorted by her perspective, but she should have known better. As his teacher, she had his records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit:

First Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth Grade: Teddy is very slow but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, her class all brought her presents in pretty wrappings, and gathered round to watch her open them. She was surprised when she received a gift from Teddy. It was crudely wrapped in brown paper loosely held together with tape. When she opened it, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to giggle, but she had enough sense to put on the bracelet and apply some of the perfume on her wrist. She asked the class, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

When school was over and the children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a new person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement and had caught up with most of the students.

She did not hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that said:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Finally, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She deserved to sit where his mother would have sat; she had earned that right. She had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

This truth is hard to hear, isn't it? It has had a profound impact on my life. Parents, do you know what our children need? More than any books on parenting, more than any techniques, they need to see a mother and father with submissive wills and loving hearts. Those two things will foster the genuine faith of our children more than anything we do. My sons are not very impressed with my knowledge of the Scriptures. On one occasion my oldest son Joel said to me, "Dad, when are you going to get a real job?"

At Christmas time we are often at a loss to know what to give as presents. Let me offer a few suggestions. This year give some of yourself away. Give an hour of your time to someone who needs you. Give a note of encouragement to someone who is down. Give a hug of affirmation to someone in your family. Give a meal you prepared to someone who is sick. Give a word of compassion to someone who just suffered a loss. Give an act of kindness to someone who is often overlooked.

Praying for our ultimate destiny now, Jesus continues:

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

He prays that we will continue to be one on into eternity; that we will continue to love the Lord Jesus throughout eternity. That is what eternity is — being with Christ, the one we love. As John Bunyan put it: "He ascended Calvary so that he might not dwell on Mt. Zion alone." That is why our Lord died for us — because he didn't want to be alone throughout eternity. He wanted us there because he loves us. So we are not only one now, we will be one throughout eternity.

Jesus closes his prayer with a vow to the Father, which is a promise to us:

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Jesus will continue to reveal himself to us so that we will know for sure the Father's love for us. That is what grips our hearts. What changes our lives, makes us different people, forgives our sins and encourages our hearts? It is the realization that God the Father loves us as he loves Jesus. Love, therefore, is the hallmark of the true church. Thus the church must be a loving community if the world is to see that we have been with Jesus.

And, as Jesus has taught us, we do not begin by gritting our teeth and determining to act in a loving way. Love flows naturally out of a heart that is conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving these men he didn't grit his teeth and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him and how wonderful it was to be approved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him.

If you have never entered a relationship with the Father through Jesus, what better time to do so than Christmas? Do you feel like a homeless orphan, looking through the window this morning? Well, there is love, there is life, and it is found in only one person, the Lord Jesus Christ, who left the glory of heaven to find us.

And the way to love other people is to remind yourself of how much God loves you. When someone irritates you, review Christ's love for you. Stop and think of what the Lord did for you. He gave up his life for you. Think of how patient he is with you; how much he cares for you; how patient he is with your failures; how he supports you and acknowledges you as one of his own; how he tenderly provides for you. It is that wellspring of love that will enable you to love others. You can't love from a vacuum.

This kind of love has to arise out of the same kind of relationship that Jesus had with the Father. That is what made it possible for him to love us. He loved those men because God is love, and he was indwelt by his Father. He was in the Father and the Father was in him. And as he yielded to that relationship, love flowed forth. It could not help but do so, because God is love.

We are to love one another because we are in the Son, and the Son is in us. Since God is love, as we yield to that relationship to the Son, love will flow from us. "We love," John said in his first letter, "because he first loved us."

Amen.

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