

“Sanctify Them in the Truth”

The Fifty-Third in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

John 17:6-19; Exodus 3:1-15

As you read through Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer” prayer in John 17, one thing virtually jumps out of the text. In this prayer we immediately see the deep and abiding relationship Jesus has with his Heavenly Father. Although the gospels tell us that Jesus often spent time in prayer with the Father, little is revealed about the content of his prayers. But in John 17 we are given insight into Jesus’ prayer life when we see his fervent desire to obey the Father’s will, and bring glory to himself and to his Father. We also see Jesus’ concern for his disciples—from whom he is about to depart. Jesus knows that because his disciples have received and believed his word, the world will hate them, just as it hates all those who value God’s word over human opinion. Another thing we will notice in this prayer is that Jesus’ redemptive work is focused upon saving those specific individuals whom the Father has given to the Son. It is far too commonplace for professing Christians to sneer at Reformed Christians for supposedly “limiting the grace of God.” Yet, this focus upon salvation being accomplished for the elect arises not from the cold Calvinist heart, but directly from the passionate prayer of Jesus in John 17, who prays *“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”*

For a number of weeks, we have been considering the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17), as Jesus prepares his disciples for his imminent departure from them—which, as they are discovering (but are having trouble accepting), includes our Lord’s death, resurrection, and ascension. We have completed the teaching portion of the Upper Room Discourse, and we are now working through Jesus’ final moments with his disciples, when Jesus stops to pray, before departing for Gethsemane and his fateful encounter with Caiaphas (the high priest) and members of the Sanhedrin, who will arrest him. The content of the so-called “High Priestly Prayer”—which is the longest prayer of Jesus recorded in the Bible—is given in John 17. In this prayer, Jesus prays first for himself (vv.1-5), then for his disciples (vv. 6-19), and then, finally for all those who will come to faith (that’s us) through the word of the disciples (vv. 20-26). We are considering the second section of the High Priestly Prayer in which Jesus prays for his disciples.

In our last sermon on John 17 (vv.1-5), we covered the first portion of the “High Priestly Prayer” in which Jesus prays for himself. Knowing that is about to be arrested and will then suffer and die, Jesus lifts his eyes toward heaven and prays to his Father that he (Jesus) would be glorified with that same which glory he possessed throughout eternity in the presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit. We observed last time, that before returning to the Father, Jesus must complete his messianic mission by securing eternal life for all those given him by the Father. This, Jesus says, he has done—and is about to finalize—through his impending death and resurrection. Those who, as Jesus puts it, *“know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent,”* are the ones for whom Jesus is praying (in the balance of the prayer), and these are the ones for whom Jesus has completed his messianic mission. In accomplishing his messianic mission, Jesus will bring glory to the Father and, in turn, bring glory to himself through his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Lest we forget, there is an important human dimension to consider here as well—especially in this part of the prayer. Jesus has been with the disciples for three years. No doubt, he has grown close to the

disciples and they to him. They have given up their lives to follow Jesus, and they have come to rely upon him whenever things got tense with the Jewish religious leadership. These men are friends in the deepest possible sense. Peter, James, and John probably didn't invite Jesus to go with them to the monster chariot rally at the Roman amphitheater in Caesarea, but they talked with Jesus at length about the most fundamental issues of life. His views became theirs.

But on this evening, the disciples are stunned to learn that Jesus is about to leave them. Even though Jesus told them it was good that he go away because he would send to them the helper, nevertheless, they are profoundly saddened, even if there really wasn't enough time to let their emotions get in the way of understanding what Jesus was telling them. So, as we go through this section of Jesus' prayer on their behalf, it is important to keep in mind what the disciples must have been thinking to themselves when they heard Jesus pray these petitions to the Father on their behalf.

As we turn to our text (vv. 6-19), Jesus now reveals the basis for his prayer to the Father by explaining the connection to be drawn between giving the Father glory and by giving eternal life to all those given to Jesus by the Father. It is immediately made clear that Jesus' prayer in John 17 is not a generic and impersonal prayer for that mass of people who make up the world's population from the time of creation (Adam) until the end of the world (when Jesus returns in judgment). Rather, in verse 6, Jesus prays specifically for those given him by the Father. He says "*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.*" Jesus directly refers to those individuals given him by the Father, who were the Father's, and in turn, whom the Father has given to Jesus.

Those individuals given to Jesus by the Father are those who elsewhere in Scripture are spoken of as the elect—those who have been chosen by God in eternity past to be saved through the messianic mission of Jesus, those who will be given eternal life, and will then believe (trust) in Jesus. The fact that Jesus can speak of a group of people given to him with such precision indicates that the number of the elect is fixed. Such a thing is not the figment of the Calvinist mind (as often charged), but the clear teaching of Jesus. In Revelation 7:9-10, John describes a vision of a multitude of formerly sinful souls chosen for redemption by Jesus, standing before God's throne. "*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*"

In this visionary scene, we see that at the very heart of Jesus' messianic mission is the task of saving all those given him by the Father. In verse 4, of John 17, Jesus has already told the Father, "*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.*" In the High-Priestly Prayer, Jesus in his office of covenant mediator, prays on behalf of his people—in this case his disciples, those present with Jesus this night in the Upper Room during their final celebration together of the Passover. These disciples are those of whom Jesus declares to the Father, "*you gave me out of the world.*"

It is to these specific individuals that Jesus has "manifested" (or revealed) the Father's name—the aorist tense of the verb indicating that this is something Jesus has already accomplished. These words from Jesus also resound with a loud echo from Exodus 3:15 (our Old Testament Lesson), especially verses 13-15. "*Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.' God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of*

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” Some commentators have debated whether or not Jesus is referring to a specific name of God which he revealed, such as his use of the I AM (*ego emi*) formula. But others argue that Jesus is referring to himself (i.e., his person) as the manifestation of God’s name, as for example, when Jesus told Philip, *“have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”*

However we understand this, it is clear that Jesus is the supreme revelation of YHWH. Furthermore, Jesus reveals this information to those given to him by the Father. *“Yours they were, and you gave them to me.”* Once again, we see the biblical basis for the so-called covenant of redemption, which some Reformed theologians describe as the covenant *before* the covenant. In this covenant of redemption (as revealed here in John 17), in eternity past the Father chooses to save a vast and specific number of sinful people from out of the mass of the fallen human race.

Under the terms of this covenant, the Father chose the Son to be the Savior of all those whom he has chosen. The elect are those who were the Father’s, and who are given by the Father to the Son. Jesus, in turn, takes to himself a true human nature (in the incarnation) so as to come to earth to give eternal life and faith to those whom the Father has given to him. This is what we mean when we say our “election” is “in Christ.” Jesus saves all those given him by the Father, granting them eternal life and faith.

The eternal decision of the Father to chose to save a vast multitude of fallen sinners, is basis for Jesus’ messianic mission (his coming to earth), which unfolds against the backdrop of the covenant of works (which God made with Adam as the representative of the human race) and in the incarnation of Jesus, who is the mediator of the covenant of grace which begins to unfold in the great promise of Genesis 3:15—a messiah will come who will crush the serpent’s head, and in the process be bruised himself. Those chosen by the Father, and who are given to the Son, are those who *“have kept your word.”* This is but another way of saying that the disciples (who have been given eternal life) have believed those things which Jesus has revealed to them so far. This implies that even with their limited understanding of the things Jesus has been telling them, they nevertheless believed in him. This statement from Jesus is best understood in light of John’s commentary recorded back in John 2:22. *“When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”* The disciples have kept God’s word by believing the things Jesus revealed to them so far. But after Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples understood these things in a way they could not have possibly understood before the events of Easter Sunday.

Jesus has revealed everything to the disciples that the Father has given him to reveal and the disciples have accepted his teaching. In verse 7, Jesus tells his Father *“now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.”* Jesus came to accomplish that work of redemption necessary *if* God’s decree to save his elect is to be realized. A major portion of his redemptive work is to reveal the will of God (his teaching), and that in his own person and work (especially in his death and resurrection), Jesus demonstrated that he is that one promised to Israel throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is one with YHWH. He is the true Israel, as well as the true temple. Jesus is the one to whom the feasts of Israel pointed—especially evident in the fact that he is the fulfillment of the Passover. Jesus is the sinless lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world. With their time together now up, Jesus has spoken all those words which YHWH has given him to reveal to the disciples, and the disciples understand that what Jesus has told them is nothing less than revelation from YHWH, and presumably, on par (in terms of authority) with the Old Testament.

In this petition to the Father we also see Jesus’ complete submission to the will of YHWH (Jesus’ active

obedience), as well as Jesus' total dependence upon YHWH to accomplish his messianic mission. In verse 8, Jesus adds, "*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.*" Jesus has not spoken anything to the disciples other than the words given him by YHWH. These words have given understanding to the disciples (in the sense of knowledge of God's will and purpose regarding Jesus' messianic mission). The words which Jesus has spoken are truth, and they have created faith in the hearts of those given by the Father to Jesus. In fact, says Jesus, the words given him by the Father have caused the disciples to believe that "*you [YHWH] sent me.*"

In verse 9, it becomes clear that Jesus is praying for specific people—the disciples—and not for humanity in general. This point is very important to grasp and has profound ramifications for a host of related doctrines. Jesus tells his Father in verse 9, "*I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.*" Jesus prays for the disciples, yet does not pray for the world. This fits with what Jesus has said earlier—that there is a specific group of individuals—the elect, which includes the disciples—who were given by the Father to Jesus to redeem and who will come to faith. These are the people for whom Jesus now prays. He could not be any clearer—Jesus does not pray for the world (those unbelievers not given to him by the Father, and who prefer to remain in darkness because their deeds are evil). As B. B. Warfield reminds us, the hallmark of Reformed theology is that in every case in Scripture, God's saving activities are directed toward those specific individuals whom God intends to save, and not to the world in a general, generic, or ineffectual way.

The first point to take from Jesus' petition in verse 9, is that Jesus reveals that his intention is to save the elect, and not to merely make people "savable" if only they exercise their freewill and accept Jesus as their personal Savior. The Father loves the fallen world so much that instead of destroying it, he sends Jesus to save his elect out of the world (through his own suffering and dying no less) and that on the last day, when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new, the world will indeed be saved. Not a hint or trace of human sin remains. All of creation will be redeemed in the form of a new heaven and earth. This is the universal dimension of Jesus' messianic mission.

A second thing we need to understand, is that Jesus' intercessory prayer is as extensive as is the salvation he came to accomplish. Jesus prays for all those (but only those) he came to save. He does not pray for humanity as a whole, or for people in general. In this prayer, our Lord prays for specific individuals—his disciples who have been given him by the Father. Jesus' High-Priestly Prayer is effectual. The Father answers Jesus' prayer because Jesus' is perfectly obedient to the Father's will. They are one in nature, and one in purpose. In fact, Jesus came to do the Father's will. Is Jesus now praying for something that is not the Father's will—that everyone be saved, when he knows not everyone will be? Of course not.

His Father hears Jesus' prayer and answers it—which is not the case in those universal schemes of salvation in which it is argued that Jesus came to make salvation possible for all, yet does nothing to save anyone in particular. Do we really want to portray Jesus as praying for (indeed dying for) people whom he cannot save—those who reject him, and for whom Jesus' prayers and atoning death do not avail. Does Jesus' redemptive work accomplish what God intends? Are his prayers not answered? Rather, in John 17, Jesus prays for those whom he intends to save, and whom he does save, and those whom he will save. Jesus' prayer is answered! Jesus' prayer is effectual. This is what the Reformed mean when we speak of "particular redemption." God's plan of salvation is accomplished by Christ. Jesus saves all those (effectually) given him by the Father.

A third thing to consider in light of this verse is that Jesus' relationship to those whom he intends to

redeem, and that of world (those unbelievers whom Jesus does not intend to redeem) is very different. Jesus rules over his church as a gracious Lord and covenant mediator. While protecting the interests of his church and its members, Jesus rules over the nations as a sovereign Lord leaving them to perish in the guilt of their sin and rebellion against God (described by John in Revelation 19). In making this distinction, we have the Christological dimension of the Reformed distinction between the kingdom of Christ and the civil kingdom (the so-called “two kingdoms”). Jesus rules over both his church and the nations, but in vastly different ways. He is the friend, mediator, and Savior to the church, and the sovereign Lord and judge of the nations.

The eternal covenant between Jesus and the Father appears again in verse 10. *“All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.”* The disciples have “belonged” to the Father because they have been chosen in Christ, and accordingly given by the Father to the Son so that the Son might secure for them eternal life. Such a statement indicates that Jesus is equal with the Father (and therefore gives us a remarkable degree of insight into Jesus’ own understanding of his eternal relationship to the Father), as well as reaffirming that Jesus will bring glory both to himself and to his Father when he accomplishes the work of redemption which the Father sent him to do. This glory will be finally and supremely revealed on the cross when Jesus purchases eternal life for all those given him (those chosen for salvation), through Jesus bearing the wrath of the Father in the place of those chosen for salvation.

Knowing that he is soon to leave the disciples so as to return to the Father, in the first part of verse 11, Jesus’ thoughts now turn to the friends he is leaving behind. *“And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”* Jesus is leaving. The disciples will remain behind. They will be without Jesus’ physical presence—although they do not yet understand how Pentecost will change everything for them for the better. It should not surprise us then that Jesus petitions the Father to protect and preserve the disciples after Jesus departs from them. In the second half of verse 11, Jesus asks the Father, *“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”* Jesus knows the hostility and temptations the disciples will face in hours and days ahead. He prays that his Father will keep them united in purpose (“in your name”), as the events associated with Jesus’ arrest and death unfold. Jesus’ petition “in your name” likely refers to the fact that God has supremely revealed himself in the person of his Son. Surely this petition also focuses upon that time after Pentecost when the church is formed as the disciples take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Jesus not only called the disciples to follow him when he first encountered them in the Galilee, but he also kept them throughout his messianic mission. Jesus affirms this fact in verse 12. *“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.”* Jesus has given the disciples eternal life and faith, and despite all the difficulties they encountered, he has preserved them. Jesus has accomplished salvation for them, and has kept them in that salvation. Only Judas (who was with them, but not of them) has been lost. But this too was in fulfillment of the eternal purposes of God, and so as to ensure the fulfillment of prophecy (as in Psalm 41:9—*“Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me”*). It is also interesting that Jesus identifies Judas as the “Son of Perdition” (one doomed to destruction). It is certainly not accidental that Paul uses the same expression to describe the end-times figure (the Man of Sin), using the same phrase the “Son of Perdition” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This makes Judas one of the many antichrist figures who appear throughout the Scriptures, who oppose the messianic mission of Jesus.

Jesus knows that the hour has arrived. His petition in verse 13 indicates as much. *“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”* Soon,

Jesus will return to the Father, but he is not leaving the disciples on their own. Jesus prays that they experience the joy which he has promised to give them. Jesus has spent three years with the disciples, equipping them for what is about to come. *“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.”* Jesus has taught them all of those things given him by the Father—he has given his disciples the words YHWH sent him to reveal. Because of this, Jesus knows that the world (those unbelievers who reject God’s word preferring instead to cling to their own sinful opinions) will hate his disciples just as the world hates him. Jesus prays that the promises he has made to them will be fulfilled. In this petition, the disciples must have seen the love which Jesus expresses towards them.

Jesus also prays that his disciples will be preserved in the midst of the trials they are about to face, not that they be removed from these trials. In verse 15, Jesus asks his Father, *“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”* Jesus disciples will remain in the world, yet not be of the world. Jesus’ prayer is that all those who are his, will be protected from the whiles and attacks of Satan, even as they remain in the world. Because Jesus has called his own to faith, he can say of them *“they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”* Had the Father not chosen them, given them to the Son, so that the Son might give them eternal life, the disciples would remain in darkness. They would not only be in the world, but of the world, and they would perish apart from God’s gracious decree to save them. But Jesus has called them to faith, and they have been liberated from their bondage to darkness (ignorance of the truth). Now the disciples know YHWH through faith in Jesus, and they now live in the light (the Father’s will) revealed by Jesus.

In verse 17, Jesus petitions the Father, *“sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”* Just as the Father has chosen Jesus to be the Savior of those given him (and is therefore “set apart” for his messianic mission) so too Jesus asks that the disciples be “set apart” from the world. The primary meaning of the term “holiness” is that something (or someone) has been set apart by God for God’s own use and purpose. Only in a secondary sense does “sanctify” refer to ethical purity (holiness). Those things (or persons) which God chooses for his own purposes are “holy” by virtue of his choice of them. Once chosen, they are then purified (or kept pure) as in the case of the “holy” vessels used in the temple. All those who believe in Jesus and are justified, are also being sanctified.

Grounded in the truth of God’s word (which implies that God’s word cannot err in all that it affirms), Jesus’ disciples are set apart for God’s purposes. They too will have a mission to perform once Jesus departs from them. Jesus is praying that YHWH sanctify his disciples (set them apart) so that they are no longer of the world, and so that they can perform that task for which they have been chosen, a task spelled out in verse 18. *“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”* Just as the Father sent Jesus to accomplish (and fulfill) his messianic mission, so too, Jesus is indicating that the disciples (who will remain behind, in the world, but not of it) will likewise have a mission to accomplish. Chosen by the Father, and sanctified by the truth, they will take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In verse 19, Jesus prays for them (with them listening to his prayer), *“And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”* As evident throughout the course of his messianic mission, Jesus has self-consciously set himself apart (consecrate) to accomplish the Father’s purpose—to give eternal life to those given him by the Father. So too Jesus prays that the disciples will indeed be similarly “set-apart” (sanctified) by (or through) the truth (which has been revealed to them by Jesus). Jesus knows that after he departs from them, and sends them the Helper, their own mission will get underway—a mission for which God has already set them apart (as apostles), so as to preach the Gospel to the very ends of the earth and establish that church which will become the bride of Jesus.

In this section of the high priestly prayer, Jesus is focused upon fulfilling God's saving intention for his disciples. The Father has chosen them before the foundation of the world, and then given them to the Son, who gives them eternal life and faith. Jesus has revealed to them the very words which YHWH had given him to reveal to the disciples, and through these words, Jesus will sanctify them in the truth.

Although it is easy to understand that Jesus has done this for the disciples, whom Jesus loves and who are listening to Jesus' prayer on their behalf, let us never forget that Jesus has done the very same thing for us. We may not be called to be apostles, and our names are not mentioned in the Bible, but Jesus has given to each of us eternal life, and faith, and even now he is sanctifying us through his word, which is truth. For if we now believe in Jesus, it is only because we were given to him by the Father.