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The Gospel of John
XLIX. Jesus Prays for Us
John 17:1-26

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Jesus prays for us. So many times I have heard Christians going through a crisis say how much it meant to them to know that other Christians were praying for them. How much more, then, should it mean to us to know that Jesus Himself prays for us? Every Sunday we confess that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. Part of what that means is that at the Father's right hand Jesus is interceding for us continually. And this morning we are privileged to overhear Jesus actually making that intercession with the Father on our behalf. We get to hear not only that Jesus prays for us, but also the content of His prayer for us.

Jesus begins His prayer by praying that the Father would glorify the Son through the hour that is to come. That word "glory" is one we have encountered again and again in John's gospel. Remember how it first appeared at the very beginning, in the prologue – as if to frame for us how we were to understand everything that was to follow: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*¹

We have seen the glory of the Son revealed to us in so many ways in John's gospel – from the changing of the water into wine at Cana to the healing of the blind man by the pool in Jerusalem, from the feeding of the five thousand to the raising of Lazarus from the dead. But now, prays Jesus, now is about to come that one defining moment in which we shall fully see the glory of the Son: *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you."* The glory of God is about to be revealed by the death of Jesus on a cross for our sin and for our salvation: *"For God so loved the world . . ."*²

But having prayed that God's glory should be revealed through His death on the cross, Jesus then turns His attention to us, His disciples. And the content of what He prays to the Father on our behalf is tremendously important for our understanding of who He wants us to become, as well as what He has redeemed us to do. In short, in Jesus' prayer for us, we hear Jesus outlining His expectation for how we will live as His disciples while He is seated at the right hand of the Father waiting to come again in glory.

And what He prays, in essence, is this: that as the glory of God has shown out into the world through the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, so now should His glory continue to shine out into the world through us, His disciples: *"All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them."* As the glory of God is about to be supremely

revealed through the death of Jesus upon the cross, so Jesus here prays that God's glory will continue to be revealed through the way that His disciples shall live in the world after He is ascended. *"What is the chief end of man?"* asks the opening question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. And the answer: *"The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."*³

That we might indeed fulfill Jesus' prayer of His glory continuing to shine through us, Jesus then asks the Father for three specific things to happen in us and through us. First, He prays that we should be sanctified by the Word of Truth which He has spoken to us. That we should become sanctified, made holy, transformed, guarded and kept by His Word: *"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. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."* Jesus prays to the Father that you and I should become sanctified – made different from the world, made holy before God – by the Word He has spoken to us. And in our sanctification by the Word of God, you and I become bearers of the glory of God in this world.

Sanctified. What exactly does Jesus mean when He says sanctified? A Presbyterian pastor tells of something that happened during a wedding reception that spoke to him of sanctification. All the married couples had been asked to come out on the dance floor. And while these married couples were dancing, the DJ started eliminating couples based on the length of their marriage. So the bride and groom had to leave first, since they had only been married for an hour or so, then those who had been married less than a year, then those less than five years, then those less than ten years – and so on, until only one couple was left on the dance floor. They had been married for fifty-three years. And everyone just stood around watching them dance – a tall, courtly man and his lovely wife. Everyone was watching them, but their eyes were on each other. Their dance just radiated a quiet joy – the dance of two people who had loved each other very much and very well for a very long time. And the DJ said to the young bride and groom as they watched this couple dance: *"Take a good look at that couple on the dance floor. Your task now is to live and love together in such a way that fifty-three years from now that's you."*⁴

That is what Jesus is praying for when He prays that we should be sanctified. That we should grow into the kind of Christian in whom His Word is deeply understood and deeply revered and deeply loved and deeply lived. He is praying that we should become "deep" Christians – Christians whose lifelong dance with God has become profound and intimate and transformative. Christians whose discipleship is not superficial or spotty, but deep and true and radiantly alive. He is praying for us to become the kind of Christian who has practiced a "long obedience in the same direction."

He is praying for us to be as mature and joyful in our walk with Him as that older married couple was in their dance with one another. That is what it means to be sanctified – it means that through our intimacy with the Word of God, we become the real thing: Christians, followers of Christ, disciples who are in the world but not of the world. Such that when the world looks at us, what it sees in us is something so real that it cannot be dismissed, something so joyful that it

cannot be ignored, something so beautiful and good that it can only be longed for. Such that what the world sees in us is nothing less than the glory of God. *“Sanctify them,”* prays Jesus for us. *“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”*

And second, that we might bring glory to God, Jesus prays that we should become missional. By missional, what I mean is that Jesus is praying that we should not keep our faith to ourselves, but should go out into the world every day to share it with others. In other words, that we glorify God by continuing the redemptive mission that Jesus has begun in this world: *“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word . . .”*

“Believe in me through their word.” Jesus’ prayer is that we would glorify God by carrying on in the world the work Jesus inaugurated during His incarnation – by leading others to Jesus through our daily witness and work. Jesus is praying the Father that we should be equipped and enabled to spread the good news of God’s love and salvation to all whom we meet. He is praying that we should be a missional people, bringing the blessings of God upon all whom we encounter through our daily labors. In other words, Jesus is praying that as we go about our daily business we should do so in such a way that we constantly are doing things for others that can only be called “Christ-like.”

Missional living in our daily lives. And that doesn’t just mean supporting missionaries – it means being missionaries ourselves by the way we live and by the words we speak. We have so many wonderful school teachers and administrators in our church – this story is for you. It is a story of missional living in the classroom and it concerns a seventh-grader named Stewart and his English teacher, Mr. O’Brien. Stewart could not sit still. Stewart’s mind could not sit still. Stewart could not be quiet. Stewart was a middle school teacher’s nightmare. Mr. O’Brien offers this as a sort of typical classroom exchange he would have with Stewart:

“Stewart,” I say as if I’m doing him a great honor. “How did you answer number four?”

“Mr. O’Brien,” he says as if he were speaking to me for the first time in ages, “guess what I did last night.”

“No, Stewart. I want you to tell me how you answered number four.”

“Okay.” He pauses. “I went shopping with my grandmother.”

“Stewart,” I interrupt. I’m in control.

“And she bought me this jacket to wear when I’m riding my dirt bike.”

“Stewart.” (Less calmly.)

“And then we went out for pizza.”

“Stewart!” I pound my desk. The other students look down at their desks, embarrassed.

“Geez.” He slumps in his chair. “Why are you always so mad at me?”

“Stewart, just answer number four.” I repeat the question for clarification: “What is a noun?”

*“A comma. No, wait – it modifies something. No, I don’t know . . . running. Is running a noun?”
My left eye begins to spasm.⁵*

Being a Christian, as well as a middle-school teacher (you know, sort of like there are no atheists in foxholes!), Mr. O’Brien turned to Scripture to see if he could find any guidance on how to deal with Stewart. In the letter of James, he read: *“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness . . . My brothers, this is not to be.”*⁶ Mr. O’Brien took this to mean he couldn’t kill Stewart with his words. In Genesis, he found: *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”*⁷ Mr. O’Brien took this to mean that he also couldn’t kill Stewart with his bare hands. Then he came upon these verses from Paul’s letters: *“Christ is the image of the invisible God”* and *“We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.”*⁸ And what Mr. O’Brien heard in this passage was this: *“For me this meant that I was called to become the image of God to Stewart, however he behaved.”*

I wish I could report that this revelation made everything better. It didn’t I still struggled with Stewart on a near-daily basis. But I realized, at last, that my struggle wasn’t really with him at all. It was with me. And as soon as I recognized how far I had to go to be an accurate representation of Christ, I became much more gracious about Stewart’s faults. He served quite a lot of detention. But I served it with him, because I realized that I too am in need of transformation.⁹

That is missional living in the classroom – being Christ-like to a difficult student. And Jesus is praying for all of us to lead missional lives wherever we are to be found on a daily basis. He is praying for us to treat others the way He treats us, to do the sort of things that He did – like caring for the poor and tending to the sick, like forgiving our family and friends and loving our enemies, like sacrificing ourselves sometimes for the sake of others, like seeing our daily lives as an opportunity to serve and not to be served. And, most of all, to use the opportunities God gives us each day to tell others with our words, as well as with our deeds, about the love of Jesus Christ for them. And through these missional lives of ours, indeed, the glory of God will shine: *“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them.”*

And last, Jesus is praying that the glory of God should be revealed through us in the way we love one another within His Body, the Church. He prays for us to have with Him and with one another the same sort of intimate union that He shares with the Father. He prays for us that we *“may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me . . .”* Jesus prays for us to be unified in love within His Body, the Church of Jesus Christ – so that through our unity in love, the world may glimpse through the Church something of the glory of God.

Now, that we should be one within the Church does not mean that we will agree on everything, that we will never on occasion get exasperated with one another or bothered by one another or even hurt by one another. Rather, what it means is that we will hold onto one another no matter what – the way Jesus holds on to us no matter what. Take care of one another, bear with one another, endure with one another, praise God with one another.

Paul puts Jesus' prayer for our unity into beautiful terms in his letter to the Colossian church – this is Paul's description of what Jesus is praying for His church to be:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.¹⁰

When the Church looks something like that, then indeed the Church is shining forth the glory of God to the world. When the world looks at the Church, as imperfect as we know it to be, but nonetheless can see something of this sort of love happening therein – a people who genuinely love, care about, and help one another – then the world will be drawn in, drawn to Christ. Because, as Burt Bacharach sang a few decades back, but which is still so true today: “*What the world needs now is love.*” And when the world sees love happening in the church, this lonely and broken and hurting world will come, will come asking to join in, will come asking for Jesus to come into their lives.

And this is what Jesus is praying to happen among us, to happen through us:

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know – so that the world may know! – that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me . . . O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

“*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

And so Jesus prays for us. He prays that we should be sanctified, missional, and unified. May His prayer be fulfilled in us by the Father, and may the glory of God be seen to shine through the worship, work, and welcome of the disciples of Jesus – here in the Easley Presbyterian Church. And in all Christ’s people in every place, and in every time, until He comes again in glory.

¹ John 1:14.

² John 3:16.

³ Question 1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in our PCUSA Book of Confessions.

⁴ John Ortberg, The Me I Want To Be (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), p. 19.

⁵ Brandon O’Brien, “To Kill or To Love – That Was the Question,” Christianity Today, Vol. 53, No. 7 (July, 2009), p. 42.

⁶ James 3:9-10.

⁷ Genesis 9:6.

⁸ Colossians 1:15; II Corinthians 3:18.

⁹ O’Brien, p. 44.

¹⁰ Colossians 3:12-17.