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Sermon Summary #22

The Loving-Kindness of our Keeping King

John 17:6-19

Is there a *unifying theme* to the extended prayer of Jesus in John 17? I mentioned to you in an earlier message that John 17 ought to be called “The Lord’s Prayer” insofar as it is *a prayer that he himself actually prayed*. What we typically call the Lord’s Prayer is found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:9-15. But there is one thing in that prayer that Jesus never could and never would have prayed. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). But Jesus had no sin, he had no debts, he committed no trespasses that needed to be forgiven. So the prayer in Matthew 6 is the “Lord’s Prayer” only in the sense that it contains his instruction on how you and I are supposed to pray.

But John 17 is truly the “Lord’s Prayer” as it records for us what Jesus himself prayed. It is an inspired record of the things that lay on the heart of Jesus that he took to his Father in energetic intercession.

So let me ask the question again: *Is there a unifying theme to the extended prayer of Jesus in John 17?* Or is this simply a hodge-podge stringing together of a variety of random thoughts that entered into the mind of Jesus just before he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot?

I want to suggest that there is truly a unifying theme, a truth or principle that undergirds virtually everything he says to his Father and everything he asks of him. That theme is *the love that he and the Father have for us, the elect*. Jesus has described us as those whom the Father has “given” to the Son (v. 2). What he says in v. 2 he repeats again in v. 6 – “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.”

My belief is that the one truth that makes sense of everything in this prayer of Jesus is *the eternal, electing, unchanging, immutable, heart-felt, passionate, tender-hearted loving-kindness of God for his people*.

There are, of course, countless ways in which God's love for you is manifest and seen. The preeminent expression of that love is the cross of Christ. In 1 John 4:9-10, the Apostle John said this:

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

I could make the same point by reminding you of the most famous passage in the entire Bible, John 3:16. But again, *our concern today is with how the prayer of Jesus reflects and is undergirded by the love that God has for you and me.*

A close look at John 17:6-19 reveals that Jesus asks the Father for no fewer than four things. There is a great deal of truth in this paragraph, but I want to restrict myself to identifying for you the four things that Jesus prayed on your behalf.

The Four-Fold Prayer Requests of Jesus

First, he prays that the Father would “keep” the disciples in his “name” (v. 11).

But before we unpack what this means we need to look briefly at some of the defining characteristics of his disciples.

First, *they are not “of the world,”* for God has given them to Jesus *“out of the world”* (v. 6). In the final analysis, there are only two groups of people in the world at any particular time in history. And it isn't white people and black people, or Democrats and Republicans, or the rich and the poor. It is those who are either “of the world” or those whom God has given to the Son “out of the world.”

Second, in vv. 6-8, Jesus describes them as those *to whom he has revealed the “words” (v. 8) of the Father.* Jesus came to make God known, as he declared clearly to Philip back in John 14:9 – “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” The disciples have come to recognize that everything Jesus said to them came first from the Father, through Jesus. They didn't always immediately understand everything Jesus said, but they had a sufficient grasp of what he said to believe it was from God and to obey it or “keep” it (v. 6).

Some struggle to understand how Jesus could say that “they have kept your word” (v. 6) given the often shallow understanding of his teachings and their personal sinful struggles. But whereas their faith may have on occasion been less than perfect it was still real and sincere. And the “word” that Jesus says they “kept” is the gospel itself, the message that in Jesus God was reconciling sinners unto himself.

Third, Jesus singles them out as *those for whom he is praying*. Look again at vv. 9-10. This does not mean that Jesus had no concern at all for the “world.” Later in John 17:20-21 Jesus says:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they 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” (John 17:20-21).

As D. A. Carson has pointed out, “the fact of the matter is that Jesus must have some concern for the world or he would not be found praying for his followers to bear appropriate witness to the world” (187). If Jesus ever did pray for the world, he would have prayed that they cease to be the “world” and become his followers!

My primary concern, however, is with what Jesus asks his Father to do for his followers, for those who have turned to him and trusted him and now treasure him in faith. He says it clearly in v. 11 – “Holy Father, *keep them* in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”

I will come back to this emphasis on unity when we look at 17:22. For now, I want to focus on the request Jesus makes that the Father “keep” or guard or protect those whom the Father has given him. There are several reasons why Jesus prays this prayer.

For one thing, *he is about to depart out of this world*. Speaking of the future as if it has already come to pass, he says in v. 11, “I am no longer in the world” and “I am coming to you.” It’s as if he’s saying, “Since I won’t be physically present with them to guard them as I have these three years, I’m asking that you would keep and guard them.”

Another reason why he prays this is because he knows how much *the “world has hated them”* (v. 14). They are not “of the world” and just as the world hated Jesus it will hate his followers. This hatred takes many forms: verbal abuse, threats, persecution, mockery, imprisonment, even martyrdom.

Now, as I said earlier, *the underlying theme that makes sense of all this is the love that God has for his children.* He loved them, then, and loves you and me today, so very, very much that he will personally take charge over guarding us and keeping us spiritually safe. We are never promised that God will guard us or protect us from pain or persecution or imprisonment or physical death. What God promises is that none of those forces or experiences will ever be able to separate us from his love. Our physical lives may be taken from us but our eternal and spiritual life in Christ is secure. This is what Paul had in mind in Romans 8:31-39.

I wonder if Peter had this prayer of Jesus in mind when he wrote this in 1 Peter 1:3-5 –

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Just think of it. The omnipotent God of heaven and earth is keeping you and guarding you and preserving you by sustaining and upholding you in your faith in Jesus Christ so that you will never fail to finally inherit that glorious salvation that he has laid up for you in heaven! “But Sam, what if my faith fails? What if I stop believing in Jesus?” But look at this verse again. What you fear might fail is the very thing God promises to uphold and preserve in you. He promises to uphold your faith in his Son as the very means by which you stay secure.

Do you actually believe that the limited power of a finite human will is greater than the unlimited power of the infinite divine will? If God wills that you be guarded and kept secure for your eternal salvation, your will has no possibility of canceling out his. Jesus himself said much the same thing in John 6:38-40,

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:38-40).

This is but one of the many reasons I'm such a strong proponent of eternal security.

Second, he prays that his followers would experience in themselves the same joy that Jesus himself experienced (v. 13).

Although it is not stated explicitly that this was what Jesus prayed, it clearly describes his intentions toward them, his desire for them, his hope that they would experience in themselves the same joy that he himself experienced. We know this because John 17:13 is but an echo of John 15:11. There Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

What specifically was the ground or reason for the joy of Jesus? Some say it came from his perfect obedience to the Father’s will. Perhaps. But I think it is more likely something else. ***I think the joy of Jesus was the delight and satisfaction and thrill and spiritual ecstasy he experienced in beholding the beauty of his Father. In other words, the joy that Jesus felt in beholding and enjoying the Father is the very joy that he wants to be in us. He wants us to enjoy the Father in the same way that he does!***

And how does he propose to give us this joy? How do we get it? In John 15:11 he tells us: “These things I have ***spoken*** to you.” The same thing is found here in John 17:13 – “these things I ***speak*** in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”

Now listen carefully. We live in a world that has increasingly grown to despise and dismiss what may be called propositional truth; that is to say, objective, eternal, unchanging truth communicated to us in words and propositions or statements of fact or assertions regarding what is true. But Jesus says that the way we come to experience the fullness of his joy in us is precisely by means of the “things” that he has spoken. His teachings, his declarations that are preserved for us in the four gospels, as well as all the teaching of Scripture that makes known the truth he came to reveal, this is the way we enter into the experience of the very joy that Jesus himself experienced.

Do you understand now why I preach the way I do? Can you see why my primary approach to preaching is to take the statements of truth found in the Bible and unpack them for you and apply them to your heart and mind? I don’t do it because I’m an overly educated egg-head. I don’t do it because I am more cerebral than other preachers. I don’t do it because it feeds my intellectual ego. I do it because of what Jesus says. ***In his statements, in the things he taught and the things that the apostles later would teach about him in the rest of the NT, in understanding these propositional truths is the key to your everlasting joy!***

When the things or the truths that Jesus spoke and taught are received in your heart and mind the Holy Spirit ignites them and sets them on fire to awaken in you “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). The statements and teachings and truths that Jesus had in mind here are what we often call “biblical doctrines.” So I make no apology for teaching and preaching as I do. For if I don’t, you will fail to feel and enjoy and be empowered with the very joy that energized the heart of Jesus himself.

Think of it this way. If you want to start a fire you need two things: wood or kindling, and a spark. The words of Jesus are the wood, the kindling, and the Holy Spirit is the spark. The Spirit ignites the wood and a fire rages. Likewise, the words of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, the doctrinal truths of Jesus are set on fire in your soul when the Spirit ignites them, resulting in a volcanic explosion of inexpressible joy! In the absence of the wood, the spark does nothing. And in the absence of the spark, the wood remains dry and unchanged. That is why we

must have both the words of Jesus, the truths he communicated, together with the Holy Spirit who sets them aflame in a conflagration of holy joy in our hearts!

We see this principle numerous places in Scripture, but none any clearer than what we read in Nehemiah 8:9-12.

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (Nehemiah 8:9-12).

Why did they “make great rejoicing”? Through what means did they experience “the joy of the Lord” as their strength? It was because they heard and understood and trusted in the truth of the words of God that they heard, words which the Spirit set on fire in their souls.

Third, he prays that the Father would “keep them from the evil one” (v. 15).

The “evil one” is, of course, Satan. One of the ways in which Satan attacks God’s people is through the hatred of the world, to which Jesus makes reference in v. 14. This prayer does not mean that Satan will never attack us. Scripture tells us that he will (Eph. 6:10ff.). What Jesus is asking the Father on our behalf is to prevent Satan’s temptations from leading us away from Christ.

One way God could do this would be to take us all out of the world and into his presence in heaven the first millisecond after we come to faith in Jesus. But that would not be consistent with our calling to be the witnesses of Christ to the world. So Jesus doesn’t pray that God would take us out of the world but that while we are in the world that God would guard us from letting the assault of our Enemy lure us away from faith and trust and love for Jesus.

The Apostle Paul turned this prayer of Jesus into a declaration of truth, when he said in 2 Thessalonians 3:3 – “But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.” Notice that our safety in eternal life, our security in Christ, is an expression of **God’s faithfulness**. For any of his children to be spiritually destroyed by Satan would be a colossal failure on God’s part, showing him to be faith-less rather than faith-ful. The Apostle John echoes this truth in his first epistle. As he closes his letter he says this:

“We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18).

“Hold on a minute, Sam. Doesn’t Jesus himself tell us right here in John 17 that at least one of his followers, Judas Iscariot, *did in fact* suffer destruction?” That would appear on the surface to be what is meant in John 17:12 –

“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” (John 17:12).

There are a couple of reasons why that is not what this verse means. In the first place, as we saw earlier in John 6:38-39 the will of God is that Jesus “should lose *nothing* of all that he has given me.” If Judas is lost, it can only be because he was not among those whom the Father gave to Jesus. Furthermore, the treachery of Judas, far from being outside and in opposition to the will of God, was in direct and explicit fulfillment of God’s will as revealed in Scripture. The departure of Judas, “the son of destruction,” happened precisely in order that the prophetic word regarding him might be fulfilled. The Scripture Jesus has in mind is a combination of Psalm 41:9 and Psalm 109:8. In fact, earlier in John 13:18 Jesus said this about Judas:

“I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me’” (John 13:18).

So we might reasonably render John 17:12 in this way:

“And I guarded them, and not one perished. But the son of destruction did perish. However, far from proving that in this instance the plan from eternity had failed, it was actually in order that OT prophecy might be fulfilled and God’s decree as recorded in Scripture might stand fast.”

Fourth, he prays that the Father would “sanctify them in the truth” (v. 17).

One of the primary means by which God keeps his children safe and secure is by sanctifying them. This is what we see in vv. 16-19.

Before I unpack this, look at v. 19 again. When the ESV quotes Jesus as saying, “And for their sake I *consecrate* myself,” the word rendered as “consecrate” is the same Greek word that is rendered “sanctified” at the close of the verse. It’s the same Greek word we find in v. 17 where Jesus asks the Father to “sanctify” us. So what’s going on here?

We need to remember that the Greek word for “*sanctify*” can have at least two senses in the NT, sometimes even more. On occasion it means to “consecrate” or “to set apart for a holy purpose.” That is the sense in which it is used by Jesus of himself. Jesus is saying, “I consecrated myself to accomplish your will, Father. I set myself apart as uniquely devoted to your service and glory.” This is Jesus’s way of saying, “I committed myself from the start to obeying your will perfectly. I belonged to you and devoted myself to you.”

On other occasions the word “sanctify” can mean to purify someone from evil and sin. It is used this way in the NT to describe the progressive, slow, incremental transformation of the believer’s heart and mind so that we will more and more live in conformity to Jesus himself. For example, Paul says this in Romans 6 –

“I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness *leading to sanctification*. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get *leads to sanctification* and its end, eternal life” (Romans 6:19-22).

So, the point of Jesus in John 17 is that he “consecrated” or “sanctified” himself in the sense that he set himself apart for unqualified obedience to the Father precisely so that we might experience moral transformation or sanctification and thereby become more like Jesus.

And what “means” or “instrument” or “tool” does God employ, through the Holy Spirit, to change us or sanctify us? The answer is right there in v. 17 – the **TRUTH!** And what is truth? God’s **WORD** is truth. And what is his Word? It is all that Jesus spoke and taught. It is all that we find preserved and inspired for us in this book, the Bible.

Once again, may I be allowed to justify my approach to preaching? Without wanting to be critical of others, cute stories and long poems and film clips and drama are not going to sanctify your soul. That’s not to say they are always inappropriate. Sometimes they can be helpful in making clear what God’s truth is and how it applies to our lives. But genuine, lasting, eternally fruitful sanctification will come to you only so far as you pay heed to the words spoken by Jesus and the entire Word of God as found in Scripture. And that, again, is why I insist on preaching verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book through the Bible. ***It is your only hope for change.***

Caution: Is it possible for some people to use the “Word” of God, God’s revealed “Truth” in such a way that instead of producing humble and holy people it results in arrogant and judgmental and quite unpleasant people? Yes. That can happen. And we must be diligent to guard against it. I must be diligent never to suggest or to preach in such a way that the result is a bunch of overly-intellectual, prideful, arrogant know-it-all who do nothing but offend others. God help us from ever falling into that trap!

*One more thing before we close. Look closely at the **purpose** for Jesus praying as he does. He asks the Father to “sanctify” Christians in and by means of the truth of God’s word **so that they will be equipped and energized as Jesus sends “them [and us] into the world” (v. 18b)**. God doesn’t work in us to change us so that we can merely sit on the mantle above God’s fireplace in his living room as shiny trophies of what he’s done. Trophies of God we are. Make no mistake about it. But Jesus prays that we would be sanctified because his goal is to send us into the world, the very world that he earlier said hates us.*

The goal of our Lord’s prayer, then, is mission!

Conclusion

I want to close with one final word of application. It would be all too easy for us to lay hold of the many “things” that Jesus spoke as well as the many truths of God’s “word” that we find throughout Scripture, and then remain there without doing anything, making little if any progress in our spiritual journey. It’s all too easy to develop what some have called a “**fortress mentality**” in which we hide safely entrenched behind the walls of our theological beliefs, fighting others who disagree with us and never venturing out into the world.

We must never allow ourselves to think that what we know now, today, of God’s truth, as found in God’s Word, is all that we will ever know or understand. I know of no better way of making my point than by quoting the words of Jack Hayford:

“Early I learned the tendencies of my own soul to settle for the status quo, to relax on the record of whatever gains experience or understanding brought me. Nothing in my training had prepared me to battle with the monster which threatens abounding fruitfulness in any of our lives. That beast isn’t lust, greed, conceit, or error. It’s the unperceived smugness that drugs the soul with the notion that our *present* boundaries of understanding God are the *permanent* boundaries of His readiness to reveal Himself to us. But even though His Word is a completed Book, the thunder of His Spirit’s voice from its pages demands stretchable souls in those He would use to stretch forth His hand to mankind.”

But above all else, remember this: The reason our great Triune God “keeps” and “guards” us is because of his great love for his children. And the reason why Jesus prays that we would experience in our lives the very joy that he

experienced in his is because our great Triune God loves us. And the reason why God protects us from the nefarious plans of the Enemy and is determined to transform us into the image of Jesus himself is because of his great love for us, his children. Praise God for his great and glorious love!