

# “Jesus’ Prayer for Us”

John 17

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## Introduction

One of the most encouraging experiences as a Christian is to be prayed for by someone else – and not only prayed for but prayed with. When someone prays for you in your presence, something special happens in your heart: you feel warmed and encouraged. There’s a sense of intimacy, both between you and the other person and between you and God. It’s like you’re knocking on heaven’s doors together. It is one of the best ways to build relationships between Christians and one of the surest ways of ensuring unity in the church. It’s pretty hard for division to exist and take hold when people are praying together. Have you had that experience? While we do have to pray for one another, I believe firmly that we ought to pray with one another more.



It is one thing for us to pray for and with one another – to bring our brothers and sisters in Christ before the Lord in prayer – but it is quite another to realize that in Jesus we have someone interceding on our behalf. Do you know that Jesus prays for you? Do you know that He goes to the Father on your behalf and on our behalf? Listen to these words from **Hebrews 7: 25**, “**Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.**” **Romans 8: 34** says something very similar: “**It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.**”

Robert McCheyne (*Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) was a Scottish preacher of the Gospel who died "in the thirtieth year of his age and seventh of his ministry."*) once said this: “If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me.” If you have had the experience of someone praying with you – of having someone right next to you, sitting beside you, bringing your concerns and needs before God, I invite you now to imagine Jesus doing exactly that. I want you to close your eyes and to picture yourself sitting with Jesus. I want you to picture Him praying for you. As you picture Jesus praying for you, eyes closed, I’m going to read our Scripture passage. Listen to Jesus, as He prays these words. **Read John 17.**

In this passage, which is Jesus’ final moments with His disciples before being arrested, Jesus prays for His disciples. Knowing that He will be leaving them, praying for them is the best way to prepare them. Jesus prays for three things on our behalf: **protection, sanctification, and oneness.**

## Jesus' Prayer for Protection

The early Native Indians had a unique practice of training young men. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting, and fishing skills, he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then, he had never been away from the security of the family and the tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of a thick woods and he was terrified! Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. After what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long.

Jesus' first prayer for us is a prayer for protection. Of course, unlike that young boy, we have the benefit of knowing in advance that our Father is there to protect us; although just like the young boy, we don't always see our Father guarding us. Jesus asks the Father to "protect" us. He prays, **"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."** A little later he prays, **"I ask you to protect them from the evil one."** Eugene Peterson (*author of "The Message" version of the Bible*) translates the word **"protect"** as **"guard,"** and this is a helpful way of seeing it, especially when we think of that father watching over his son while the son was in the woods and thought he was alone.

Against what are we being protected? Jesus asks that we receive protection from the evil one, that we would be protected when faced with **temptation, opposition, persecution,** etc. He takes as inevitable that we will face such things.

But He doesn't ask that we be removed from these things. As Jesus says, **"I do not ask you to take them out of the world."** But while we are in the world, He wants us to be protected and guarded. Now the word that we translate here as **"protect"** or **"guard"** is **"tereo"**, which can also mean **"to preserve."** Jesus wants us to be preserved while we are in the world. Jesus' prayer for protection is a prayer that the disciples would remain in – and be shaped by – the revelation of God that they have received through Jesus once Jesus is no longer physically present. Jesus says, **"Protect them in your name that you have given me."** This is the same as saying **"Father, help them to remain true to what they have received from me. No matter what they face in this world, no matter how the evil one attacks them, help them to remain in me. Preserve them, protect them, and guard them."**

The purpose of this request is also to ensure the unity of the faith community, which mirrors the unity of Father and Son. As Jesus also prays, **"Protect them in your name . . . so that they may be one, as we are one."** **"It is for the preservation of this unity in the face of the cosmic power of evil that Jesus seeks God's help."** The church's life is therefore entrusted to God. "What God is committed to do," someone says, **"is to preserve the oneness relationship that exists between the believer and Jesus. Nothing**

on earth can tear us away from our Lord.”

## Jesus' Prayer for Sanctification

Jesus' second prayer for us is a prayer for sanctification. **“Sanctification”** here means **“to be made holy,”** and being made holy means **“being set apart”**.

Jesus wants us **“to be consecrated”** for service. It has to do with being set apart for the purposes of God. Jesus is praying that we would be set apart by the truth of who He is for the purpose of being sent into the world. We are in the world, but we do not, as Jesus says, **“belong to the world.”** Being holy, sanctified, and consecrated means that we belong to God and that He has set us apart for a purpose.

Having been raised Roman Catholic I am familiar with the practices surrounding the Eucharist. One aspect of the Eucharist is the consecrating of the dishes – the chalice that holds the wine, for example – that are used in Communion. These items have been set apart for a specific purpose; they have been consecrated and sanctified. Jesus is asking His Father to set us apart, to consecrate us for the purpose that He has for us.

This mirrors what Christ has done. **“Jesus is asking God to do for the disciples what he has already done for him: set them apart for God's work in the world.”** Just as God set apart His Son for a mission in the world, so Jesus is asking that the Father would set apart His disciples for God's work in the world. As Jesus says, **“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”**

Sanctification is not about living a clean or perfect life, but an obedient life. The attraction of the world, the weakness of the flesh, and the onslaught of the devil are daily battles. It involves a purifying of the whole life of that person or thing to the service of God. In the Old Testament it usually conveyed the idea of making something sacred, usually by the burning of the sacrifice. It does not mean to purify as to purify from sin. Jesus purified Himself even though He had no sin by setting Himself apart as the sacrificial offering to God so that we His followers might also be pure and holy. Sanctification is not about avoiding or escaping the world but yielding and surrendering to God. Being set apart does not mean we are stored away.

## Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Jesus' third prayer for us is a prayer for unity. In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't. “What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?” asks Linus. “These five fingers,” says Lucy, “Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold.” “Which channel do you want?” asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, “Why can't you guys get organized like that?”

What does it mean to have unity here? It doesn't mean that we agree on every single point of doctrine. It doesn't mean that there is only one denomination. But it does mean

that we are united in confessing that Jesus is the Son of God. It means that we confess in a united way that the Father and the Son are one and that the Father sent the Son into the world and reveals who the Father is.

The importance of oneness and unity is emphasized over and over again in our passage: **“Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one (v. 11).”** **“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one (v. 20).”** **“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one (v. 22, 23).”**

This is not a unity we can achieve by our own efforts. Our unity emerges as a result of our remaining in Jesus – by being focused on Him. **A.W. Tozer** in **The Pursuit of God** asks “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”

### **“So I have sent them into the world”**

The purpose of Jesus’ prayer – His prayer for our protection, sanctification, and unity – is so that we would be prepared for being sent into the world. Jesus doesn’t ask the Father to preserve merely to wait until Jesus comes again. **“Being set apart does not mean we are stored away.”** Jesus says, **“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”** We are preserved and protected, consecrated and made holy, and made one and unified so that we can continue Jesus’ work in the world. For we are in the world even if we are not of the world. And while here there is something for us to do.

Jesus’ work was to reveal the character of the Father, to show His love for the world, and to live out this love for the sake of those who believe. Jesus did this pre-eminently by going to the cross, by giving up his life for others.

Just as Jesus’ sole purpose and mission was to be set apart for God’s work in the world, so the disciples are to be set apart, sanctified, made holy, for God’s work in the world. Jesus was able to do this because the Father loved Him and He loved the Father; they are one; and He glorified the Father and the Father glorified Him as a result. This is why unity is so key. Our witness and being consecrated for God’s work has as its specific content a love for one another, based in the love Jesus has revealed to us. This love becomes evidence to a godless world that Jesus was sent by the Father. In other words, only by loving one another can we hope to be an effective witness in the world. And that is what we are called to be a witness. Jesus’ prayer for us is not so that we will simply be protected until He returns, but that we also are sent just as He was sent. We have a mission, a share in his mission, and only through the unity of love can we live out this mission. This is Jesus’ prayer, and His request that we be protected, sanctified, and unified are all to the purpose of being a witness to the world. The disciples, us included,

continue Jesus' mission in the world. We have been commissioned.

The reason unity is crucial to witness and mission is that in a world defined by conflict, broken relationships, dysfunctional families, and fractured and nearly non-existent communities, such unity would indeed be a sign that God is at work because no human effort could accomplish it. The love that we are to show the world is to mirror the love the Son shows us; that is to say, that our love for one another has to be a costly love, a sacrificial love, where we are willing to lay down our lives for one another just as Jesus did for all of us. That is also what it means to receive glory. Jesus received glory by proceeding to His hour: His glorification includes His death. In following Jesus along the same path, we too will receive glory.

## Jesus' Prayer for Us

Lastly it is very important that we recognize that this passage is a prayer. Jesus is asking His Father to accomplish all these things. He is asking His Father to protect us. He is asking His Father to sanctify us. He is asking His Father to make us one in heart and mind. These are not things we can accomplish. We cannot preserve ourselves. We cannot sanctify ourselves. And we certainly cannot make ourselves one and create unity amongst ourselves. Jesus entrusts His disciples to God the Father. So should we.

All of what Jesus asks of his Father here can be summed up in what He says at the end of His prayer: **"I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."** Love is the key.

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp. When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. **Francis Schaeffer**, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred. When love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ. That is what we are called to do.