

March 10, 2024

Lesson 2: Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Scripture: John 17:1-16

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Our first unit titled “Jesus Prays,” is an examination of all the ways Jesus engages in prayer. Today’s lesson will be to discover how to live in the world and be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and not be a disciple of the world.

Today’s scripture lesson comes from the gospel of John in part of what is known as the Last Supper. As part of this final meal with the disciples, John’s gospel is unique in how Jesus has a long discourse with his disciples including instructions and a final prayer. The passage we read today has the “high-priestly prayer” in which Jesus gives both a proclamation and a thanksgiving.¹ This prayer contains both a history of what God has done in the past, as well as a description of the world the disciples are currently living in. There is a clear connection established between Jesus and the Father, with oblique references to the Spirit. The focus of the prayer is directed for the disciples to hear and learn something.

The whole prayer goes beyond verse sixteen all the way to verse twenty-six. The prayer is a plea for unity among believers.² The way Jesus gets to this point is by explaining his own relationship with both God the Father and his disciples. While it is clear God the Father and God the Son are one; there is also a mission component for God the Son. Jesus is meant to be in relationship with humanity as part of the plan and thus he has specific things to communicate to us. The focus of Jesus’ prayer is for God to make a holy people out of the believers in God through Jesus.³ There is a place for humanity and God has not abandoned those God created.

Yet there are paradoxes in this mission for humanity as found in the prayer. The disciples of Jesus are to be spared the corruptions of the world, even while not withdrawing from the world in a gnostic way where they know more than others and thus separate completely from others not in the church.⁴ There is a tension of being in the world yet not acting of the ways of the world as there has been another way given by the path and protection of Jesus.

As Jesus goes through the prayer, he names how he has tried to protect and be with them on their journey. However, Jesus must now go to another part of his mission and so Jesus prays for the disciples to continue to receive the same support and deliverance from the evil one. An interesting note is Jesus doesn’t ask to remove them from the world; Jesus asks they be kept safe. There is a reminder they do not belong to this world just as Jesus doesn’t belong to this world.

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 196.

² Ibid.

³Ibid., 197.

⁴ Ibid.

Application

Of all the common laments I hear in Christian circles, perhaps the one I hear more often is a desire to not to deal with all the trouble and evil of the world. People wish Jesus would just come and take us all back with him away from the mess. In many ways, it is a fair lament as it feels difficult to be a believer in Jesus when there is contentment with sins like murder, theft, and general meanness between people. Yet when I read this prayer, I am simultaneously challenged and encouraged when I hear the words Jesus has for those who follow him. The prayer reminds us we are not alone in this world because Jesus is always with us, praying over and for us.

Have you ever had someone pray over you? One of my favorite tasks when I am serving in any capacity where I interview someone on our District Committee on Ministry (DCOM) is to assign someone to begin our time with prayer and then end our time with someone praying over the candidate. In pastoral ministry, some of my favorite moments are praying over people whether it is the homebound member who deeply misses church, or the young disciples who are learning the posture of prayer with hands clasped and faces bowed. Prayer is a powerful conduit by which the Holy Spirit works in both measurable and mysterious ways.

One of my experiences with prayer is when someone prays over you, you feel assurance. A brother or sister in Christ exchanges what might be simple words or phrases like “help them” or “thank you for their love,” yet the experience is so meaningful. I think part of it comes from this example Jesus gives with prayer.

Jesus wants his disciples and us to see how prayer reminds us we are indeed in this world for a reason as hard and as convoluted as it might be. As we pray for and with each other, we are reminded the ways of the world are not for us. Often, the world focuses on the self-including how to get ahead and how to think for and only about us.

In this world, prayer acts as a counter-cultural practice. As such, prayer reminds us of two things. One is how there is the Lord God who knows all things and is the reason we have life. The second is prayer reminds us we are to think of others on our journey and we all need to reflect on who we are as disciples of Jesus.

For example, think about the last person you got into an argument with over something. My guess is you took several approaches with them, much like I do. Maybe you confronted them and had a come-to-Jesus’ meeting. Or maybe you withdrew because you knew your come-to-Jesus meeting would involve some less than kind or reflective statements. Hopefully like me though, you came to discover you needed to pray about the situation and for this person. For me, praying for someone, especially if I am upset or do not like them, changes the way I see them. Unlike what the world would have me to do, I am pushed to consider how this person is also a child of God.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a wonderful opportunity and yet it also demands things of us. As we see with this prayer, we are invited to consider how we live in this world without drawing away, or even worse acting like the ways of this world. The sneaky part of it all is how sometimes the ways of the world can disguise themselves in what I call a veneer of Christian respectability. This Christian respectability usually culminates with being mad at someone or something and then either attacking or completely withdrawing and withholding attention. The issues are still there yet there is a refusal to be like Christ and engage with others. This is not Christ-like behavior; this is the world defining our relationships and how we see one another.

I find it significant Jesus’ final prayer over his disciples was focused on unity in him and not anything else. Jesus didn’t care about their disagreements with each other or whether they liked each other. Jesus knew they were all going to abandon him, not standing with him in his

dark hour, yet his prayer over them was to come together to be who he formed them to be. Jesus was modeling for them the ways of Jesus as opposed to the ways of the world. His prayer though is beautiful, for as we read it, we can also see his prayer is for us. Jesus doesn't want us to act as children of the world. He wants us to act and be his children, citizens of heaven on earth praying for one another and sharing in his grace and love.

When was the last time you prayed over someone? How do you think prayer is counter-cultural? Who will you pray for this week? How is a disciple of Jesus different than a disciple of the world? How can you be wary of ways the world entices you to act differently than what Jesus asks of you?