

KEPT

by Ray C. Stedman

As our Lord closed the *Upper Room Discourse*, he prayed for three things:

1. He prayed for himself, that he might be glorified in order that he might accomplish the work which lay yet before him -- giving eternal life to those whom the Father would give him throughout all the ages yet to come. While he was on earth he accomplished the work of giving eternal life to those the Father had given him then; but to reach around the world and through the ages he needed the restoration of his powers of deity -- his resurrection, ascension, and glorification.
2. Then he prayed for his disciples, the eleven men gathered there with him who were the fruit of his ministry. We will look at that in this study.
3. The closing section of his prayer is for all those who would believe on the basis of their testimony as this gospel was to be preached throughout the church age -- and thus it includes us.

Verses 9 and 10 of Chapter 17 introduces our Lord's prayer for the eleven disciples. This section too is not only for them but, since they are representative of us, it is for us as well.

"I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them." {John 17:9-10 RSV}

Here you see the reason for our Lord's prayer for these eleven men, a reason which grows out of his great, heartfelt love and concern for them. He prayed for them for the same reason that we pray for each other -- because there is a love and a concern for one another. Our Lord loved these men, and not only them, but all who, like them, would believe on his name.

He tells us three reasons why he loved them and was concerned for them.

First, because they are "those whom thou hast given me." That is, they were the gift of the Father to the Son. All of us have something we have been given by someone whom we love. We treasure that gift -- not only because of its intrinsic value but because it comes from someone who means much to us. Jesus, looking at these men, guarded them and loved them and was concerned for them because they represented the Father's choice for him.

Here is a revelation of how God works in human lives. We have already seen something of it previously in this prayer. In all the universe, Jesus is the only one who has authority to give eternal life, i.e., the right to know God, this mighty, amazing, marvelous, attractive, magnificent being who flung the worlds into existence and who designed us in all our human complexity. He is the one whom to know is to gain the greatest blessing in life. And the only one who has the right to give us that knowledge is Jesus. But Jesus says that the Father has a part in this, too. He draws certain ones to him. God is at work throughout our lives drawing us to him by various means. If you have a hunger for goodness, that is the drawing of the Father. If you have a passion for truth and honesty, that is the drawing of the Father. If you love the words of Jesus and are attracted by who he is and what he says, that is the drawing of the Father, moving in you to bring you to Christ that you might commit yourself to him.

And these men had been drawn in that way. Isn't it amazing that out of all the multitudes that followed Jesus throughout his three years of ministry, these are all that are left? Of the thousands who followed him from city to city, these eleven men are all who remain. But that is enough. It is to these that he now commits the ministry which he himself has had. So they are dear to him because they are given to him by the Father.

And then he says that they are dear because "all mine are thine, and thine are mine." That is, not only had the Father given them to him, but now they were his, they belonged to him. And so his concern reaches out to them because they are his property, his ownership.

Written across the front of this auditorium are words which I read frequently because I think they capture one of the greatest truths in Christian faith: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price." You do not belong to yourself if you are a Christian; you belong to God. You haven't the right to run your life; he has. You haven't the right to make your own program and plans; he has: "You are bought with a price."

These men were bought with that price and belonged to him, and so they are dear to him.

The third reason is, "I am glorified in them." They were choice men because in them Jesus saw the means by which all the glory which is his due would be manifested. Just as a coach is glorified by the ability of the athletes he has trained, or a teacher by the achievements of the scholars who learn from him, so Jesus is to be glorified by these men. They would be the way by which the world would know who he is. That is what history has proven, isn't it. We have the Bible because of these eleven men. We read of Jesus because of them. He has been glorified before the whole world by these eleven men. So they were infinitely precious and dear to him, and thus he prays for them.

Now, what did he pray? Notice that he prayed three things for them. He didn't pray for the world because none of these things could be true of the world. He prayed for the world later, on his cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}. But here he is praying for these men.

First:

"Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." {John 17:11b RSV}

His first request is that they will be kept in unity.

The second is found in Verse 15:

"I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." {John 17:15 RSV}

His second request is that they be kept from destruction.

The third request is found in Verse 17:

"Sanctify them in the truth;" {John 17:a RSV}

These are the three things he prayed for these men who were dear to him:

- Keep them in unity;
- Keep them from destruction by the evil one; and
- Sanctify them by your truth.

Now let's look at them in more detail and in context.

Verses 11 through 13a:

"And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father [notice that -- Holy Father], keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to

thee;" {John 17:11-13a RSV}

It is because of this change of guardianship that Jesus prays for these men. "I am not any longer in the world, Father, I am coming to you; so you must keep them. For I have kept them while I was with them." He makes that clear. He kept them by the same resource which he now asks the Father to keep them by: "I kept them in thy name." That stands for all the resources and power and wisdom and glory of God, available to man. "I kept them by that resource. And now you keep them, Father, by the same resource."

This was not easy to do. Read the record of the Gospels and you will see that these men did not get along very well. They were easily divided, threatened with schism many times. He prays that they may be kept one, kept in unity, "for," he says, "I kept them that way." The record shows that this was a very difficult task to accomplish. They were fighting and quarreling with one another, in competition with each other, always striving to get ahead of one another and to put each other down.

- Remember how James and John laid hold of their mother to ask a special favor of Jesus before the others could get their word in.
- Remember how, on one occasion, Jesus said that they must forgive one another even seventy times seven, and how the disciples all turned as one man and looked at Peter; then they turned to the Lord and said, "Lord, increase our faith!"
- And remember how Peter and John were at odds with one another throughout the whole course of the apostolic training period. You find them in rivalry until the Day of Pentecost. When the Spirit of God came, this made friends of Peter and John, and they worked together from then on. Wherever you see one you see the other from that time on. The enmity of Peter and John was ended by the coming of the Spirit.

So our Lord prays for them here that they may be kept in this way. His was a difficult task: He had to rebuke them, and reprove them, and correct them, spend nights in prayer for them. But he kept them by the name and authority of the Father from all attacks upon their unity, so that even now, in the shadow of the cross, they are eleven men still together. "Not one is lost," he said, "except the son of perdition."

Judas never was a member of that band, in one sense, he never was part of the apostolic unity. Some think that he was fated, was compelled to be lost, that he never had a chance. But this is not the case. It was not his fate to be lost; it was his destiny. There is a difference between fate and destiny. Fate is what you are compelled to do, what you cannot help; destiny is what you find possible if you make the right choices. We speak of "men of destiny." What do we mean? We mean that they made the right choices in their life so that all the possibility of their lives was fulfilled. But there are men and women and children who miss their destiny because of the choices they make. And Judas was one. Therefore, Jesus calls him "the son of perdition," who never made the right choices, and so was lost.

But these other men who began with the right choice were never lost; he kept them unto the end. Now the positions of Jesus and the Father are about to be reversed. While he was in the flesh, Jesus kept them by the Father's name. Now he asks that the Father keep them in the Son's name, the name which the Father had given him. Thus Jesus commits them to the mercy of the Father through the days to come.

Beginning with Verse 13b, he prays his second request -- that they may be kept from the evil one:

"and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." {John 17:13b-16 RSV}

In this section our Lord indicated the great realm of controversy between himself and Satan, the realm in which Satan finds his activity manifested -- the world. Throughout this whole discourse you find two communities in view: the world, secular society, organized in its antipathy against God, seeking to build any contact with and dependence upon God; and the church, the body of Christ, God's family.

Every spirit of independence which says, "You've got what it takes in yourself," is a worldly spirit, and therefore is satanic. Every spirit which says, "You can shape your own life and make your own future," is a worldly spirit. Every spirit which says, "Things of comfort and enjoyment in this life are of far more importance than spiritual values and relationships with people," is a worldly spirit, a satanic element.

The Lord knew that there would be this conflict. He called a group out of the world -- not to be separate from it (as we will see), but to be a different group. God always sees humanity divided into these two divisions. Sometimes they are called two kingdoms -- the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Sometimes they are regarded symbolically as two cities -- Jerusalem and Babylon. But, in any case, there are always these two.

The world is Satan's realm. He is the god of this world, the ruler of it. He is the one whom people blindly and ignorantly worship when they worship money and fame and power and pleasure, and all these attractions of the world. Jesus, knowing the danger of the world, prays for these disciples. And he points out the reason why the world hates them. "These things I speak in the world," he says, "that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." Here are men who have learned a source of joy which the world does not know how to produce. And this always bothers the world. It longs to control everything.

Have you ever noticed how men are unhappy unless they can control every force at work in their lives? This is the philosophy of the world. This is why men desperately try to subdue nature and to conquer the universe. We have men out in space right now, desperately trying to exert human control over all the forces of life. The world is frightened and threatened by any source of joy or happiness or peace which it does not itself provide. That is why these men were hated, because they had a source of inner joy and strength which the world could not explain.

You find a good example of this in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In Chapter 1 he says,

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, and with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. {Phil 1:27-28a RSV}

There are men and women who have learned to stand up against persecution and mockery and ostracism, and not to be frightened or put down, but to be filled with steadiness and joy. Paul goes on to say,

This is a clear omen to them of their destruction [the world is frightened by this kind of a resilient spirit], but of your salvation, and that from God. {Phil 1:28b RSV}

And so the world hates Christians because they have a source of life the world cannot explain. Satan tries to destroy it, tries to ruin people's happiness, ruin marriages, ruin lives, ruin homes, ruin health -- anything! The devil is a murderer and his aim is to blast, to damage, to destroy in any way he can, through the deceitfulness of the allurements and illusions of the world.

Jesus, knowing this, prayed for these men. Notice what he prayed -- two very important things:

He said, "I do not pray that you would take them out of the world." Isn't that amazing? I remember Dr. Louis Sperry Chafer, my dear professor at Dallas Theological Seminary (president and founder of that school), saying that as a young preacher he had had great controversies with those who held the Arminian persuasion, i.e., that once you were saved you could be lost again. He would say to them, "If I believed as you do, I would erect a chopping block beside every altar. And as soon as anybody got saved, I'd pass them over and chop their heads off. It would be worth it, rather than seeing them lost again once they had become part of Christ!"

In effect, that is what we do when we say to new believers, "Look, you are a Christian, so get out of the world. Don't have anything to do with it. Get clear away from it. Avoid any contact with it, and don't ever get mixed up in it as long as you live." Now, it may be necessary at times for a young Christian to get away from the world for awhile. But not to be removed from it! It is a violation of our Lord's prayer when we take

ourselves out of the world and build ourselves a wholly Christian life "from the womb to the tomb," with Christian friends and Christian contacts, and never go any place non-Christians go but simply isolate ourselves. There are many places and many churches like that today. The result is that the world is left without light -- to fall into decay and darkness, with no help, no help at all.

But, on the other hand, our Lord was aware that these men needed to be kept from the evil one. So he prayed that they should be kept from the evil one, from contamination by the world and all its deadly delusions. It is so easy to conform to the world, to identify with it, to seek its values and to measure your life by its standards.

What a deadly thing that is! Our Lord is calling here for men and women who, like himself, can live in the midst of the world -- right up to the hilt -- friends of sinners and tax collectors and publicans and prostitutes -- and yet not become contaminated by its life, but be, instead, a source of release to those around.

How do you live that way, walking a tightrope between falling off on the side of isolation or that of conformity to the world? Jesus' answer is in his last request:

"Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself [sanctify myself -- same word in Greek], that they also may be consecrated [sanctified] in truth." {John 17:17-19 RSV}

I don't know what you think sanctification is. All too often we think of it as kind of a religious de-worming process -- you go through it once and you're "sanctified," and nothing can ever touch you again. But that is false on the face of it. Scripture doesn't teach that, and neither does experience. Sanctification is a simple word which means to be set apart unto a certain purpose, to be put to an intended use.

When I selected my necktie this morning from a number of other ties, I sanctified it. When you selected the seat in which you are sitting, you sanctified that seat; you put it to its intended use. When you tear off a piece of paper to write a note, you sanctify that piece of paper to the use for which you intend. That is all it means.

And when God called these men, and called you and me, to be Christians, he set us apart for the use for which we were intended -- not to be our own, but to be his instruments, and to walk in conformity with his ways.

What is it which accomplishes this? Jesus tells us: It is the Word, the truth, the truth about life. The world lives in a continual shimmering illusion, a dream world. The world lives by things which are not true at all, but which it thinks are true, by values and standards which are worthless and meaningless but which they exalt very highly. Jesus said, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." That is how the world lives. And how can we live in that kind of a world, touch it, and hear it, have it pouring into our ears and exposed to our eyes day and night, and not be conformed to its image and squeezed into its mold?

The answer is, we must know the truth. We must know the world and life the way God sees it, the way it really is. We must know it so clearly and strongly that even while we're listening to these alluring lies we can brand them as lies and know that they are wrong, even while we feel the flesh within us rise up and urge us to get involved with it and participate in it and not be different, we can say by the Spirit of God, "No, I've given my life to Jesus. Jesus is my authority. And he is my strength. By his grace and power I'll stand in the midst of this world."

"Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth." But if your Bible is closed, if you are not growing in the knowledge of the Word of God, it is only a question of time before the world will move in and take you over. You will lose all the joy and vitality of your Christian experience.

Jesus lived this way himself. "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." The same way. "And for their sake I have sanctified myself" -- in order that they might have an example of what it means to be sanctified, to live by the truth of God in the midst of a lying world, a sick and dying world.

This is his prayer for his disciples.

I hope every one of us is asking the Lord Jesus to pray for us this same way, to keep us in unity, so that nothing may break up our fellowship, our membership one with another, and to keep us from the contamination of the world around us, the lies of the evil one who would destroy us.

"Sanctify us by thy truth." The Word is the truth.

Prayer

Our Father, our Holy Father, we pray as Jesus prayed that you will indeed do these three things in our lives. And if there are any among us who have not yet made this initial commitment to you, we pray that even now they will say, "Lord Jesus, let the world go its way; but I will be with you. I give myself to you." Then, Father, we ask you to keep us in unity, keep us from the evil one, keep us by thy truth, and help open our minds and hearts to this truth, so that we may glorify you. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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