

Subject: Jesus prays for the disciple's unity, joy, and protection

Sub-title: Getting ready for God to do a new thing

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/z4vLEDc3zmQ>

The setting of our Gospel takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ is found praying for his disciples with great fervor. The intensity of the moment was something that his disciples would never forget, as he prayed with such earnestness that he sweat great drops of blood. Jesus was wrestling in prayer for everything he held dear.

Jesus was not blind to the difficulties that lay ahead. He knew what the cross represented, in personal pain and horror, and how devastating it would be for his followers. From the standpoint of the world, the cross would represent a tragic defeat and shameful death, but from God's viewpoint, it would be the means of overcoming evil and providing an atonement for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was fully aware of what was at stake. Therefore he prays aloud for those whom he loved.

There were a few instances recorded where Jesus prayed aloud. And I cannot help but wonder if he did so because He wanted them to know the high hopes he had for them.

All of us have heard of the "power of suggestion" and of "self-fulfilling prophecies," whereby predictions and wishes for the future come true because the person was aware of them early on and somehow participated in making them come true. At a certain level, prayers for a person of which that person is aware work that way.

For myself, I will never forget how my mother told me while sitting in a hospital bed that she had been praying for me day and night. She said she believed that I had a call of God on my life and that I must prepare myself for the ministry God had in store for me. Something happened in me when I knew she was praying so fervently for me. I couldn't help but feel strengthened because I knew my mom was behind me, saying through her words and her prayers, "You can stand up and be the man God has called you to be. You can hear his call and allow God to use you."

I believe this is the same kind of thing the disciples felt as they heard Christ pray for them with great fervor. His prayer meant that we can face our fears and whatever else the world throws at us, if we will believe the Lord is for us and not against us. Therefore, our Lord prays, ***“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.”***¹

This petition is a foretaste of his heavenly intercessory ministry, where he prays at the right hand of the Father for each of us.² For this reason, many theologians have called this passage “The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.” The petitions it contains are as vital for them as it is for us. Jesus was about to leave this world knowing that the world would be as hostile to them as it was to him. And regardless of human progress, the same is true today.

The word “world” is used ten times in this prayer. The disciples are those who Jesus identified as those who the Father has given to him “out of the world.”³ In other contexts, the “world” is a term that refers to the religious, cultural, and social environment brought into being by sinful humanity. It is a world that stands in opposition to God’s kingdom. It is characterized by selfishness and self-indulgence that has no regard for God and his laws. Other parts of the New Testament describe this world as being under the dominion of Satan.⁴ We can never fully comprehend such evil, but there are times when you can feel it and see evidence of it when people use their words to incite hatred and violence. At other times, it is more subtle. The world’s philosophies and basic principles run counter to God’s revelation. For example

The world may say:

Save your life

Be First

Be a Ruler

But God says:

Lose your life (Matt 16:25)

Be Last (Mk 9:35)

Be a Servant (Mark 10:44)

¹ John 17:11

² Hebrews 10:12

³ John 17:6

⁴ See Ephesians 2:1-2 “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.”

Exalt yourself	Humble yourself (Lk 14:10)
Look to your own interest	Look to the interests of others
Get all you can in life	Give liberally (Lk 6:38)
Giving impoverishes	Giving will cause an increase
Love grows cold	Love never fails (I Cor 13:8)
Hate your enemies	Love your enemies (Matt 5:44)

These are just a few of the areas where God’s ways are different from human ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. Therefore Jesus prays, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”⁵ The word “sanctify” comes from the Greek verb that means to “make holy, or set apart as holy.”⁶ This dedication to God means that a believer will be set apart for a special purpose. God’s purposes call us to be salt and light. We are meant to make a difference in this world, but to make that difference, we must be engaged with the world. We must be in the world, but not of it. We, as Episcopalians, *don’t* have a list of rules telling us how to be different from the world. Instead, we have principles given to us in the Sermon on the Mount. In that Sermon, Jesus gives us principles and attitudes that should characterize all we do. Our righteousness is meant to exceed that of the religious Scribes and Pharisees, who were so concerned about being uncontaminated by the world that “they forgot weightier matters of the law such as judgment, mercy, and faith.”⁷

In preparation for his leaving this world behind, Jesus prayed, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”⁸ Jesus knew that they would no longer be able to look Jesus in the eye to ask him a question, or receive a rebuke, or to get an “Attaboy!” His going back to heaven meant that their ongoing relationship with him would never be the same.

⁵ John 17:17

⁶ Strong’s Concordance #37 hagiazō (hag-ee-ad'-zo): It also means “to hallow or dedicate to God”

⁷ Matthew 23:23

⁸ John 17”15

Transitions such as this—holy or unholy—are made up of such “endings.” Like many of the changes we had while growing up, we have had to grow through our periods of confusion and doubt, of groping along in the dark to find one’s way. That is where this prayer of Jesus comes in. When life throws such changes our way, we also need to pray. We need to find all over again our purpose and our calling.

The context of our New Testament lesson from Acts occurred just after Jesus ascended to heaven. During this time before the Day of Pentecost, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, to the upper room where they “...were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”⁹

They pray. They wait. They gather. They take care of each other. Together, they live through the labor pains of Jesus’ death—resurrection—departure, to give birth to a new thing—A new way of life—a new truth—a new community, a community in which God lives by his Spirit.

So let’s be faithful to ask, seek, and knock for the fulness of God’s Spirit as we wait in expectation for the new thing God has planned for us. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- How does Jesus’ prayer reflect the reality of grief and trouble while also cultivating a resurrection hope? How have these polar opposites played out in your own life?
- Jesus speaks about the reality of the world, which is in opposition to God. What is most challenging for you as you try to be in the world but not of it?
- How does Jesus’ last prayer inspire you to pray for yourself and others?

⁹ See Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”