

Practicing Petition and Intercession in Prayer: Jesus Christ's Prayer of John 17©

I. Introduction: Context and Overview of John 17

A. The Context of John 17. The ministry of Jesus Christ to the world concludes in John 12. In John 13-17, Jesus is just hours away from His death. He turns His ministry to His closest disciples – the eleven remaining after Judas' departure (Jn. 13:30). During this time, known as the "Last Supper," Jesus gives a "graduation speech" to His disciples which contains many commands and promises from Jesus to them (Jn. 13:31-16:33).

Jesus begins by presenting them with the reality of the coming events. As the meal ends, He tells them that Judas is going to betray Him (Jn. 13:21). After Judas' departure, He lets them know that He is going to die and leave them (v.33). Additionally, Peter is going to deny Him (v:38) and the world is going to hate them and persecute them (Jn. 15:18-25; 16:2-3). From a human perspective, Jesus' ministry is ending in failure and their world is about to fall apart.

However, the purpose of Jesus' discourse is to keep the disciples from stumbling during the perilous times ahead (Jn. 16:1). So, Jesus explains many things to them in order to comfort them and tells them what He expects of them. Eight times Jesus teaches them about glory. He is about to be glorified and God will be glorified in Him (Jn. 13:31-32). Twenty-nine times he teaches them about love. The Father and He love them (Jn. 15:9; 16:27) and they are to have unending love for each other (Jn.

13:34). While He is gone they can still trust Him, follow Him, and request the Father's help through Him (Jn. 14:1, 6, 13-14; 16:23-24). He will go to prepare a place for them and then return for them (Jn. 14:2-3). He says they should know by now that He is God and that He and the Father are one (v.7-11). During His absence, the Father will send the Holy Spirit to indwell them and to minister in His place (Jn. 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-15). At the conclusion of His discourse, Jesus looks up to heaven and begins to pray (Jn. 17:1).

B. An Overview of John 17. Many call 1 Corinthians 13 the "love chapter" of the Bible because it beautifully defines biblical love. However, John 17 is the consummate love chapter of the Bible because in it Jesus shows us the total expression of the love of God. John 17 shows the love of God defined and the love of God in action. In this passage, Jesus shows us the love between the Father and the Son as well as the love of the Father and the Son for redeemed mankind.

John 17 contains four sections. First, Jesus prays for Himself (v.1-5). He affirms the Father's will for His work on earth and petitions the Father to glorify Him so that He may glorify the Father. In essence, He is saying, "Father, I've done all You've asked of me and I'm ready to complete the work You've given Me to do. Please make the final events happen so that I may glorify You and return to glory with You." Second, Jesus prays for the disciples who are alive at that time (v.6-19). These are the ones the Father has given Him. He intercedes for them and asks the Father not to take them out of the world. Instead, He asks the Father to (1) protect them from the evil one, (2) give them the oneness that the Father and Jesus have, (3) give them Jesus' joy, and (4) sanctify them with the Father's word. Third, Jesus prays for all future believers (v.20-

24). He prays for the same oneness that he requested for his current disciples and concludes by telling the Father of His desire for eternal fellowship with His disciples. Fourth, Jesus ends His prayer with the confidence that the Father will hear and answer Him (v.25-26).

II. John 17 is a model of prayer for believers.

A. Jesus shows us there is a place for ordering and prioritizing our prayer requests. In John 17 the order in which Jesus prays is important. First, Jesus petitions for Himself (v.1-5). If Jesus Christ is not successful in His work on the cross, then there will be no salvation for men and, hence, no disciples for whom to intercede. He prays for Himself first because His success is the foundation for all of the following requests. Second, Jesus intercedes for His disciples that are alive at that time (v.6-19). If these disciples fail, i.e. are lost to Satan, the ministry of reconciliation on earth will end in this generation. Third, Jesus prays for all future disciples (v.20-24). By praying for this group, Jesus covers all believers for all time to ensure that His ministry on earth will continue until the time of His return to receive His people (Jn. 14:3). Since there are many examples in Scripture where the order of prayer is not a critical factor, this principle cannot be generalized for all of our prayers. However, when there is a priority to our requests, we honor God most by acknowledging that order and lifting up those prayers in priority order just as Jesus did.

B. Jesus shows us that it is important to affirm God's truths in our prayers.

Throughout this prayer Jesus affirms many truths that He knows from the Father. For example, in John 17:2 He affirms that the Father has given Him authority over all mankind and that the Father has given a set of people to Him. Jesus uses these

affirmations as part of the basis for His petition to be glorified ([Warren W. Wiersbe, Listen! Jesus is Praying, A Study in John 17, p.34](#)). In John 17:6, Jesus anchors His entire intercessory prayer with the fact that His disciples have been given to Him by the Father and have been the Father's own possession. He repeats this fact at least four times during His intercessory prayer!

C. Jesus shows us that we can be confident that the Father wants our petitions. Jesus' petition acknowledges, in His humiliation (Phil. 2:5-8), that all of His work was done through the power of the Father. He has just spent three chapters making promises to His disciples. Even though He, Himself, is God, He immediately turns to the Father to enlist His power to make these promises happen. As J.I Packer says, "petitionary prayer, in which the persons praying humbly acknowledge their need and express themselves as trustfully depending on God to meet this need out of His sovereign resources of wisdom and goodness, is the dimension of prayer that is most constantly highlighted in the Bible" ([James Innell. Packer, Concise Theology, A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs, p.188](#)).

D. Jesus shows us how we can intercede for other believers. In John 17:6-24 Jesus shows several important things about intercessory prayer.

1. Jesus specifically states for whom He is praying and for whom He is not praying. In the first part of His intercessory prayer, Jesus refers to the people of His prayer as those who are God's and those whom God has given Him. At least four times in the first six verses of His intercessory prayer, Jesus refers to His disciples as those whom the Father has given Him. Emphasizing the human side, He calls these

people the ones who have kept God's word and have come to know that everything given to Jesus is from God (Jn. 17:6-7). In addition, He clearly states that He is not asking on behalf of the "world" (v.9). The "world" means all who stand in opposition to God and, hence, are incapable of knowing God ([Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, pg.447](#)).

In the second part of Jesus' intercessory prayer He transitions from praying for the first group by saying, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone" (Jn. 17:20). As with the first group, He clearly describes the second group and calls them "those also who believe in me through their word" (v.20). He does not state here that He is not praying for the world. First, future believers will have the indwelt Holy Spirit. Second, He actually prays for the evangelism of the world. Jesus desires that, through the unity of believers, the world would come to believe in Him ([John Brown, An Exposition of Our Lord's Intercessory Prayer, pp. 240-41](#)).

2. Jesus specifically states why He is praying for His people.

Jesus gives five reasons for praying to the Father. (1) These people are the personal possessions of the Father (Jn. 17:9-10). (2) Jesus is glorified in them (V.10) and therefore glorifies the Father through them (V.1). (3) Jesus is leaving the world and they are staying (v.11). (4) The only way Jesus can continue to be glorified in the world is through them (v.10, 21, 22, 23, 26). (5) Through these people the world may believe that the

Father has sent Jesus and has loved Him and has loved the disciples (v.21, 23). It is seen from how these reasons are spread throughout His prayer, that Jesus is continually telling the Father why He is praying right along with presenting the actual requests.

3. Jesus specifically states what He is praying for and what He is not praying for. Jesus asks the Father to (1) keep His disciples in His name that they may be one (Jn. 17:11, 21-23), (2) to have His joy “made full in themselves” (v.13), (3) to protect them from Satan (v.15), and (4) to sanctify them in the truth of God’s word (v.17). In addition, He tells the Father that He is not praying for the Father to take His disciples out of the world. Jesus demonstrates here that He not only prays for purely spiritual needs but also prays for emotional and physical needs (e.g. joy and protection).

D. Jesus shows us that it is important to promise God that we will do our part of the work. After 24 verses of petition and intercession, Jesus tells His Father, “I have made Your name known to them and will make it known” (Jn. 17:26). This promise is part of the conclusion to His prayer. In essence, He is saying, “Father, let all this happen. I know that you are going to hear and answer and I’m going to continue to do My part of Your plan, the part I know you want Me to do.” His part is to make the “name” of His Father known, that is, to reveal God’s essential nature, providential care, and love through His redemptive work on the cross (John Henry Bernard, “A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John,” in The International Critical Commentary, p. 569). A simple application of this principle occurs when we

pray for God to save a friend (Titus 3:5). We have to be willing to share the gospel with them (Matt 28:19-20; Rom. 10:17) as our part in God's work of salvation.

III. Prayer is to be God-focused

A. God-focused prayer acknowledges our relationship to God.

1. Our relationship to God is acknowledged when we address God as Father. The first word of Jesus' prayer is "Father." Immediately following that He twice calls Himself "Son" The whole prayer is voiced in filial submission to the Father. Six times in this prayer Jesus calls God "Father". By using the terms "Father" and "Son," Jesus is acknowledging His humiliation (Phil. 2:5-8) and emphasizing the relational aspect of their roles. This relationship was prophesied in the Old Testament (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14) and is verified in the New Testament (Heb. 1:5). Jesus always uses the term "Father" in His prayers and has also taught believers to begin their prayers with "Father" (Matt 6:9). Two of those times He adds emphasis to the title "Father" by calling God "Holy Father" (V.11) and calling Him "Righteous Father" (V.25). By doing this, Jesus not only acknowledges God as His Father but also affirms and calls upon two attributes of God, His holiness and His righteousness. Even though Jesus is God, He is acknowledging aspects of His relationship to the Father by affirming that the Father's holiness will keep His disciples holy and that the Father's righteousness will be satisfied on the cross (Rom. 3:26) (**Arno Clemens Gaebelein, [The Gospel of John](#), pp. 320, 335).**

2. Our relationship to God is acknowledged when we affirm that everything comes from the Father. In His humiliation, Jesus acknowledges that everything that He has come from God (Jn. 17:7,10). His whole petition of John 17:1-5 is an acknowledgment by Jesus that in His humiliation, the power for everything in His ministry has come from the Father. Jesus gives God the ultimate acknowledgment in John 17:22 when He affirms that the Father has even given His glory to Him.

We would do well to acknowledge that everything we have comes from the Father. Our salvation is a gift (Rom. 3:24; 6:23) and so is the faith to accept the gift (Eph. 2:8). For our life as believers His divine power has given us “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3)! We are so quick to forget these things we are busy praying our petitions to our Father. We need to remember that every breath we take is a gift of mercy and grace from our beloved Father.

B. God-focused prayer is totally consistent with and submissive to the Father’s will. Jesus affirms to the Father that the very plan of redemption that He is carrying out is the Father’s plan. God has sent Him to earth (Jn. 17:3, 18, 21, 25) for this very work (v.4). In John 5:30 He says, “I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” Therefore, every accomplished task that Jesus relates to the Father in John 17 is an affirmation that He has carried out His Father’s will. In His prayer He tells the Father that He has glorified Him on earth, accomplishing the work the Father has given Him (v.4). This includes such details as (1) keeping the disciples in the

Father's name and guarding them (v.12), (2) giving the Father's glory to the disciples (v.22), and (3) bringing the disciples to the understanding that the Father has sent Him (v.8, 25).

C. God-focused prayer desires only to glorify God. The Last Supper discourse begins with the theme of God's glory (Jn. 13:31). Jesus talks about the theme of glory eight times during the discourse and prays about glory eight times in John 17. In His petition of John 17:1 Jesus prays "glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You." In the Greek text "that" is the word "ἵνα" (pronounce "hina"), which denotes a purpose clause (H.E. Dana, Julius R. Mantey, [A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament](#), pg. 282-83). In other words, Jesus prays "glorify Your Son for the purpose that Your Son may glorify You." He does not want glory for His own sake but rather for the Father's sake. Henry Swete aptly observed that the glorified Jesus Christ does not detract from the glory of the Father but rather manifests the Father's glory to the world. On that day when every knee will bow to Jesus Christ, it will be to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11) (Henry Barclay Swete, [The Last discourse and Prayer of Our Lord](#), p. 161). Glorifying the Father was the ultimate goal of everything Jesus Christ ever did.

In John 14:13 Jesus teaches us that when we pray in His name, i.e. in pursuit of only Jesus Christ's glory ([John MacArthur, The MacArthur Study Bible](#), p.1613), He will do what we ask. This is so that He can glorify the Father! This same principle is seen in John 17:1. There, too, Jesus Christ's glory is the means to glorifying the Father. When Jesus tells us to pray "in My name" (Jn. 14:13), He is telling us to pray consistent with who He is and with what His will is. Since His will is the same as the Father's will (Jn. 5:30), we are praying for what the Father wants. This means that we are praying

for that which glorifies the Father. It is not asking too much for those in whom the glory of God resides (Jn. 17:22) to focus their requests on glorifying Him.

D. God-focused prayer intercedes for the unity of His people. The primary thing that Jesus requests in the intercessory part of His prayer (Jn. 17:6-24) is the unity of the people the Father has given Him. It is the reason He asks the Father to keep them (v.11). Four times Jesus prays “that they may be one” (v.11, 21, 22, 23). The reason He prays for unity is the evangelism of the world, that is, “that they world may believe that You sent Me” (v.21 and restated in v.23). Jesus is saying that the unity of believers will be a testimony to the world that the Father loves Him and has given Him for the world’s redemption (Jn. 3:16).

All believers are one, positionally, through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Eph. 2:14-16). The context of this part of Jesus’ prayer is established as holiness when Jesus calls upon His Father as “Holy Father” (Jn. 17:11). His disciples are left in an unholy world. As possessions of the Father and the Son believers are called to holiness. Jesus commits them, then, to the care and keeping of the Father. He is holy. He is able to keep them from the unholiness of evil and He is able to make them partakers in His holiness (1 Peter 1:14-17) (Gaebelein, p. 320). Jesus is praying for His people to be kept one through holy lives that set them apart from the defilement of an unholy world. He needs His disciples to have contact with the world (Jn. 17:18) without becoming contaminated by it. Unholiness kills Christian testimony.

Another way that Jesus intercedes for the unity of His disciples is shown beginning in John 17:17. He asks His Father to sanctify His disciples in His word because His word is truth. The word that Jesus uses for “sanctify” is ἀγιάζω which, literally, means

“to consecrate or set apart persons to God” (Archibald Thomas Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, p. 279). We state this as “to make holy.” Jesus adds that they are to be made holy through the word of God. It can then be seen that in verses 15-21 Jesus is praying for the Father to set up the basic pattern for His Church. As the word is preached (2 Timothy 4:2), God makes us holy (Jn. 17:17). Holy disciples have the unity of the Father and the Son (Jn. 17:11,21,22,23). Christians who have unity are effective witnesses for Jesus Christ. As shown previously, to pray in Jesus’ name (Jn. 14:14) is to pray consistent with His will. His will was for the unity of His people. So, we would honor our Lord Jesus Christ by praying as fervently for Christian unity as He did here.