

## **John 17:6-19**

### **Sanctified in the truth**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

This week at Pastors' Conference I was reminded that many of us, including some pastors, struggle when asked to pray in a small group setting. It might seem strange that those who lead us in public prayer on a Sunday morning would struggle in this way, but consider how we got the Lord's Prayer. The disciples, who had been with Jesus for some time, learning from him and seeing his example of a life of prayer, asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. And as a result, we get a prayer that is used throughout the church, used every Sunday morning around the world in dozens of different languages. But we also get a prayer that shows us how to structure our prayer, and what's important in prayer.

Our gospel reading today was part of another prayer of Jesus, the prayer he prayed before his arrest and crucifixion. And this prayer, the longest recorded prayer we have from Jesus, can also teach us a few things. Firstly, if we read the whole of John chapter 17 where this prayer is recorded, we see that Jesus actually gets quite a bit repetitive. We might even say that the prayer rambles a bit, and that might give comfort to some of you who have a tendency to do the same. And remember, this is the eternal Son talking to the eternal Father, and not really being as clear and concise as we might expect.

But we also know from Scripture that Jesus warns against vain repetitions in our prayers. So, what do we make of this? I think we need to understand what Jesus meant by vain repetition. Some take it to mean that any repetitive prayer is vain. Even to the point of saying that praying the Lord's prayer regularly is done in vain. The very prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is thus rejected as not good enough simply because we repeat it. But the repetition that Jesus warns against is what the pagans would do. If they repeat themselves enough times the gods would have to listen, they wouldn't be able to ignore the volume of prayers. This sort of repetition is just about the pure quantity of prayers.

We as Christians know that our heavenly Father is always listening to us and answers our prayers. He doesn't always answer them according to our will, but he does always answer them, just according to his will. Remember this prayer that we have here in John 17 is the one Jesus prayed before his arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion. This is the night where Jesus also prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42, ESV).

Jesus gives us the example here that our prayers always expect the Father's will to be done. Vain repetition like the pagans makes no difference to that. Our Heavenly Father does listen, our Heavenly Father does answer, and our Heavenly Father's will is done. So, we know that sheer quantity of prayer is not needed. But do we then conclude that if it's not quantity then we must need quality in our prayers? Often, they are the two options: quantity or quality.

But again, I think the answer has to be no, and that this is actually our problem in the first place. We want to make sure we don't say anything wrong in our prayers, that we get them exactly right. And this leads us to avoid situations where we have to publicly pray for fear of praying something wrong or not good enough. But the good news is that God does not need our perfect prayers. God understands the desires of our hearts. Indeed, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we don't have the words to pray. But it is still helpful to have some idea of how we might structure our prayers. So, we're going to take this prayer in John 17 as our example, and reflect a bit on the Lord's prayer as well as it does tie in in a few spots.

So firstly, who are you praying to and why should they listen? Here Jesus prays to the Father, and in the Lord's Prayer he instructs his disciples to pray 'Our Father'. So, whenever we pray, it's not to some generic nameless god. We're not praying to the universe. We're certainly not praying to ourselves or to other people. God has given us his name. We can call on him as our heavenly Father. And God wants us to call on him.

This is something that we possibly take for granted, but the Lord of the universe does care and does listen. Those who belong to the Father know his name and have access to him. And a name is really quite significant. God's 'name' stands for all that God is and has done, most importantly in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To know that name is to live as one sustained and protected and guarded in that name. And that protection includes delivery from evil, as in the Lord's prayer, or being kept safe from the evil one, as in today's gospel text. But also being protected from the world.

This is another one of those things that people misunderstand. What does scripture actually mean by the 'world'? In one sense we see the world as just the creation, including humanity, which is where Jesus found his disciples. When Jesus called them to follow him, they didn't come from outside of society but from inside of it. They were everyday people, part of the everyday world.

In belonging to Jesus, in following Jesus, the disciples have been called to something different, called to be separated from the world. And then as they preach and live out the gospel of Jesus, they do so in a world that doesn't necessarily want to hear it.

This is the other thing that the scriptures mean by the 'world'. It's those persons and forces opposed or indifferent to the things of God as revealed in Christ Jesus. But this world is also the very object of the Father's love, and where the disciples are sent. So, they must continue to do ministry in this world while separated from it. And so, Jesus prays that they be kept safe as they do this.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ today live out their Christian life in this same world. So, in our prayers, when we're praying for someone else, we can consider where they are at in relation to the world. How do they encounter the world as a thing opposed to the gospel, and how can we bring that before God? And people do need this sort of prayer. One of the dangers of being in the world is that you can once again become part of the world. And so, we get to one more thing that Jesus himself prays: 'sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth.'

In the other prayer we're considering, the word for sanctified is translated hallowed. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." In that case, the Father's name is to be sanctified. Here in John 17 it those who belong to Jesus, his own people who are to be hallowed for God's purposes. That means to be made holy, to be set aside for a special purpose. And the Father's word is what does the sanctifying. And at the start of John's Gospel, it is revealed that Jesus himself is the Word made flesh. And we also know that Jesus is the truth. He says I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). So, we are sanctified, we are made holy, in and through Jesus.

When it comes to our prayers then, we can ask that God's people would continually be made holy by God's Word. The Word proclaimed, the Word preached, the Word incarnate who gives himself to us in bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. And God's word is important too for the content of our prayers. When we pray, we can speak God's very word back to him. If you don't know how to express lament or anger or praise or frustration or thanksgiving, I can guarantee that someone in the bible has prayed in a similar situation. And the easiest starting point for finding these words is the psalms. They can definitely give us the words to speak when our own words fail us, and while we still trust the Spirit to pray for us. So don't be afraid to just take the words of scripture as your prayer to God. And take heart that Jesus knows your needs and the needs of his people and that your possibly feeble efforts at prayer are heard and welcomed.

There is of course so much more to our prayer than what we've looked at today, but I do hope you have found courage simply to pray. To know that God our Father listens. To trust that our prayers are answered according to God's will and God's wisdom. And if all you can manage are the words that Jesus taught the disciples, then that's okay. They are good and fitting words that can and should be prayed anywhere and anytime. We would do well to pray them more often, more regularly, so the truth that is in them becomes ingrained within us. And in doing so we are sanctified in the truth, made into God's holy people, set aside for his work of mission in this world so that the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ may be proclaimed in every corner of the earth to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.