John 17

The prayer Jesus offered to His Father at the end of His farewell address to His disciples is unparalleled in its majesty. Whether we consider its contents or the circumstances surrounding this prayer, our determined purpose for years was to read it in solemn, reverent silence without comment. Reluctantly, we now depart from that position. We feel compelled for three reasons: (1) it is our belief that the prayer was not offered up mentally by Jesus but audibly and for the instruction of the eleven men who were present; (2) it was recorded by John for the benefit of the Church in all ages; and (3) when it pleases God to preserve something for our use, we must try to understand it and may attempt to interpret it.

The prayer may be naturally divided into three parts. In the first part, Jesus prays for Himself. In the second, He prays for His disciples. And in the third, He prays for the Church which was to be brought into existence by their preaching.

Jesus Prays for Himself
The prayer Jesus made for Himself (vss. 1-5) contains just one petition with two reasons added. The petition is, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son” (vs. 1). Note the way He makes this petition. It is simple, ordinary, and confidential. “Father!” This is the first word and it occurs six times throughout the prayer, sometimes with, and sometimes without, any descriptive words that give further expression to His character (such as holy Father, vs. 11). This is the name Jesus gives to the One to whom this prayer is addressed. He speaks to God as if He were already in heaven. In fact, He specifically says He is a little farther on: “And I am no more in the world” (vs. 11).

“The hour has come” is a significant phrase. Note how much it expresses! The obedience of the Son, the intimacy between a Father and His Son, and the hope and joy that the Son has. The hour! It is the hour for which He has patiently waited. He has looked forward to it with eager expectation but has never tried to hurry it on. It is the hour that has been determined by His Father. He and His Son have always had an understanding about it. And, besides Them, no one else knows anything about it. That hour has come. Its arrival is suggested by His plea which supports the petition: “You know, Father, how patiently I have waited for what I am now asking for. I have not been weary in well-doing, nor have I avoided the hardships of My earthly existence. Now that My work is finished, grant Me the desire of My heart and glorify Me.”
“Glorify Me.” In other words, “take Me to be with You.” Jesus’ prayer is that His Father would now be pleased to take Him from this world of sin and sorrow to the place of glory He had left behind when He became a man. This is the way He explains what He means when He repeats His request in a more expanded way, as given in the fifth verse: “And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with Thee before the world was,” i.e., with the glory He enjoyed in the bosom of the Father before His incarnation as God’s eternal Son.

It is obvious that in this prayer for Himself, Jesus does not mention His approaching sufferings. Not long afterwards in Gethsemane He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me!” (Mt. 26:39). But at this time, He does not mention the cup of sorrow. He only speaks about the crown of glory. For now, heaven is in full view. The glories He longs for make Him oblivious to everything else. The ominous clouds which darken the sky and shut out the celestial world do not begin to gather until He has gone out into the night. Yet, even though the coming passion is not mentioned, it is virtually included in the prayer. Jesus knows that He must pass through suffering to glory, and that He must act with dignity throughout the last trial in order to reach His goal. Therefore, the spoken prayer includes this unspoken one: “Carry Me well through the approaching struggle; let Me pass through the dark valley to the realms of light without flinching or fear.”

The first reason attached to the prayer is “that the Son may glorify Thee.” Jesus seeks His own glorification simply as a means to reach a higher objective, namely, the glorification of God the Father. As He connects the two glorifyings as a means and an end, He is only repeating to the Father what He has said to His disciples in His farewell address. He had told them that it was good for them that He should go. No deep impression would be made on the world’s conscience about Jesus or His doctrine until His departure. In essence, He now tells His Father, “It is good for Your glory that I leave the earth and go to heaven. When that time comes, I can promote Your glory in the world better there than by staying here longer.” To strengthen His reason, Jesus then declares that what He desires is to glorify the Father in His office as the Savior of sinners: “even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life” (vs. 2). When we interpret the text in the light of this sentence, the prayer means: “You sent Me into the world to save sinners. Until now, I have constantly been using My time to seek the lost and give eternal life to those who wanted to receive it. But the time has come when this work can best be carried on by My being lifted up. Therefore, exalt Me to Your throne, that from there, as a Prince and a Savior, I may dispense the blessings of salvation.”

It is important to notice how Jesus defines His commission as the Savior. On the one hand, He represents it as one that involves all mankind, while on the other, as one that is especially concerned about a specific group of people. Therefore, He gives His work a general and a specific meaning. According to the teaching of the whole New Testament, Christ is presented as the
The essence of eternal life is defined in the next sentence of the prayer (vs. 3). It is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ His messenger. This knowledge must be understood comprehensively. It includes faith, love, and worship, with the emphasis lying on the objects of this knowledge (i.e., God and Christ). In this passage the Christian religion is described as being opposed to paganism with its many gods and to Judaism which believed in the one true God but rejected the claims of Jesus to be the Christ. It is also described in such a way that excludes Arian and Socinian views of the person of Christ (Editor's note: Arianism, a fourth-century heresy, taught that Jesus was not eternally begotten of the Father. Arius, the instigator of this false teaching, maintained that the Son was created by God the Father and, therefore, had a beginning. Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) maintained that Jesus was a mere man who was sent into the world by a gracious God, and only through him could salvation be secured). In John 17:3, the names of God and of Jesus are put on the same level as objects of religious worship. An importance is assigned to Jesus that is incompatible with any teaching that says Jesus was just a mere man. For eternal life cannot depend on knowing any man, no matter how good or wise he is. The most that can be said about the benefit that is derived from this kind of knowledge is that knowing Jesus as a man would be helpful for knowing God better. But the same thing could be said about Moses, Paul, John, and all of the Apostles. If one knows them better, he can know God better.
It might seem strange that Jesus, as He addressed His Father, thought it was necessary to explain eternal life. Some people, to get rid of this difficulty, have maintained that the sentence is an explanatory reflection that has been interwoven into the prayer by John. However, the words were perfectly appropriate for Jesus to speak. The first clause (“that they may know Thee the only true God”) is a confession by the man Jesus of His own faith in God His Father as the supreme object of knowledge. And the whole sentence is really an argument that supports the prayer: “Glorify Thy Son.” The power of the declaration lies in what it implies about how much people do not know about the Father and His Son. It is as if Jesus said, “Father, You know that eternal life consists in knowing You and Me. Look around. Notice how few possess such knowledge. The pagan world does not know You; it worships idols. The Jewish world is equally ignorant of You in spirit and in truth. For, while boasting that they know You, they reject Me. The whole world is covered with a dark veil of ignorance and superstition. Take Me out of it - not because I am weary of its sin and darkness, but that I can become a sun to it. Before now, My efforts to illuminate the darkness have had some small success. Grant Me a position from which I can send forth light over all the earth.”

But why does the Savior call Himself Jesus Christ? In the whole Gospel history, this is the only time He does it. Some people see in this compound name, which was common during the Apostolic period, another proof that this verse is an addition to His original prayer. Again, however, there is no reason for holding this view. The style Jesus uses to refer to Himself, perfectly fits the purpose He wants to accomplish. He is pleading with the Father to take Him to glory so that He may more effectively propagate the true religion. What would be more appropriate, then, than to speak about Himself objectively by using the very name by which He would be known among those who profess the true religion?

The second reason Jesus offers in support of His prayer is this: The service for which He was chosen had been faithfully accomplished. Now He claims its reward: “I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished (finished) the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me...” (vss. 4-5a). The great Servant of God is not only referring to the past but to His coming death which has already been endured in His intent to go through with it. So, the “I have finished” clause of the prayer means the same thing as “It is finished” which was spoken from the cross (Jn. 19:30). And what He says about Himself is true. No one else could make that declaration without bringing dishonor on himself. His words are not exaggerated or boastful but are sober and humble, indicating that He had a blameless conscience both before God and before men (see Acts 24:16). Nor can we say that the statement, though true, was spontaneous and uncalled for. It was necessary for Jesus to make that declaration. Though what He said was well-known to God, it was important to proclaim it in the hearing of the Eleven, and to the whole Church through their record, so their faith could be strengthened. The basis on which His claim to be rewarded with glory rested on this. For just as our faith and hope in God are based on
the fact that Jesus Christ was able to make this declaration, so they are confirmed by His actually making it. He notes that He has kept His covenant of works. To us, it is a seal of the covenant of grace and serves the same purpose as the Lord’s Supper.

**Jesus Prays for His Disciples**

After Jesus offered this brief petition for Himself, He proceeded to pray for His disciples for a much longer period of time. The rest of His prayer is concerned mostly with them. From the 6th to the 20th verse, they are His *only* concern. He makes the transition with a special declaration. He applies the general statement of the previous sentence ("I have finished the work") to that specific aspect of Christ's personal work that had to do with the training of these men. "I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world" (vs. 6). After this introductory statement, there is a short description of the men He is about to pray for. Jesus indicates His disciples had good character. First, He acknowledges that they were good when He got them and was extremely careful not to exaggerate the importance of the work He did in training them to be Apostles: "Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me” (vs. 6b). They were godly, devout men, God-taught, God-drawn, and God-given. Then He affirms that since they had been with Him, they had maintained the same character they had when they joined Him: “They have kept Thy word” (vs. 6c). Finally, He confirms that the men whom His Father had given Him had been true believers in Him. They had received all of *His words* as the very truth of God and had received *Him* as the One who had been sent into the world by God (vss. 7-8; see Lk. 22:28-29). Here, truly, are generous words about His disciples who, though sincere and devoted to their Master, made many mistakes (as we know) and learned very slowly.

After Jesus generously praises His humble companions, He indicates His intention to pray for them: “I ask on their behalf” (vs. 9a). But He does not pray for them right away. He must preface His prayer with some other words to give it more emphasis. First, the men He prays for are singled out for the moment and are the only ones on whom He focuses His attention. “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world” (vs. 9). The reason Jesus makes this statement is not, of course, to suggest that He is excluding the world from His concern. His purpose is not exclusion but *concentration in order to eventually include the world*. He wanted His Father to bestow His special honor on this small group of men, for the prosperity of Christianity is tied up with them. He prays for them as a dying mother might pray exclusively for her children. It is not that she is indifferent to everyone else. It is simply natural that her all-consuming concern would be for her family. Jesus prays for them as the precious fruit of His life’s labor, the hope for the future, the founders of the Church, the Noah’s ark of the Christian faith, the missionaries who will carry the truth to the whole world; praying for them *alone*, but for the world’s sake. The best thing He can do for the world right now is to ask the Father to take care of them.
We can now guess what Jesus intends to ask for the men He has singled out. He wants His Father to care for them now that He is about to leave them. But before He makes His request, He offers two reasons why it should be granted. The first is expressed in these words: “They are Thine; and all things that are Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I have been glorified in them” (vss. 9-10). In essence, this means: “It is Your business and Your interest to take care of these men. They are Yours; You gave them to Me. Take care of Your own. It is true that since they became My disciples, they have been Mine. But that makes no difference. They are still Yours. For between Me and You, there is no distinction between meum and tuum (Mine and Thine). Then I will be glorified in them. From now on, My cause, My name, and My teachings are to be identified with them. If they fail, My interest will be shipwrecked. Therefore, since You value the honor of Your Son, take care of these men.” The other reason why the request He is about to offer should be granted is this: “And I am no more in the world” (vs. 11). The Master, about to leave the earth, commends to His Father’s care those whom He is leaving behind without a leader.

Now comes the prayer for the Eleven. It is offered with the appropriate seriousness when He emphatically addresses the Hearer of prayer: “Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are” (vs. 11). The word holy suits the purpose of the prayer, which is that the disciples may be kept pure in faith and practice, separate from all existing errors and sin, so that they may eventually be salt to the corrupt world in which their Lord is about to leave them. The prayer itself presents two truths. The first is that the disciples may be kept in the name of the Father which Jesus has manifested to them. This means He is praying that they may continue to believe what He had taught them about God and become His instruments for spreading the knowledge about the true God and the true religion throughout the earth. The second is, that they may be one. By this He means that they may continue to love one another and be kept in the faith of the divine name. They must be separate from the world but not alienated from one another (vs. 11). Jesus asks for these two things, truth and love. These are vitally important. Truth is the badge which separates His Church from the world. Love is the bond which unites believers of the truth into a holy fellowship which bears witness to the truth. The Church should always consider these two things as of equal importance. Love is not to be sacrificed for truth, thereby dividing those who ought to be one, by insisting on a testimony that is too exact and detailed. Nor is truth to be sacrificed for love, thereby making the Church a very broad, all-inclusive body without a purpose or raison d’être (reason for existence) and having no truth to guard and teach, or testimony to bear.

Having commended His disciples to His Father’s care, Jesus then gives an account of His own stewardship as their Master and maintains that He has faithfully kept them in divine truth (vs. 12). He claims that He has fulfilled His responsibilities to them, even to Judas. In his case, He acknowledges that Judas would perish but, at the same time, does not blame Himself. His mentioning the false disciple shows how conscientious He is about giving an account of His work.
It is almost as if He had been asked the question: “What have You to say about this man?” In essence, He replies: “The Scripture had to be fulfilled. The son of perdition is not lost through any failing on My part” (vs. 12). We know all too well how much Jesus was entitled to make this declaration.

In the next part of the prayer (vss. 14-20), Jesus defines what He means when He asks that His disciples may be kept. In doing this, He virtually offers new reasons why the petition should be heard. He commends them to His Father’s care because they are the guardians of truth and are worth keeping if for no other reason. And they need to be kept because the world dislikes the truth so much (vs. 14). By the word keeping He does not mean they ought to be removed from the world but preserved from the moral evil in the world. Their presence there as salt is necessary. And their purity is needed just as much so that the salt might not exist without flavor and virtue. He did not intend for this explanation to be heard by His Father alone. It was also for the ears of His disciples. He wanted them to understand that there were two things that were to be equally avoided - conformity to the world and weariness of the world. They must abide in the truth, and they must abide in the world for the truth’s sake. They must remember, for their consolation, that when they felt the world’s hatred the most, they were doing the most good, and that the weight of their cross was the measure of their influence.

The “keeping” Jesus requested of His Father for His own men (vs. 11) is just the continuation and growth of an existing moral condition. He does not need to ask His Father now to separate His disciples from the world. They are already separate. This was true when they first joined His company. And it is still true of them. In fairness to them, their Master is careful to state this twice in this portion of His prayer. He maintained, “...they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (vs. 14,16). With these words, He put them on the same level with Himself with His characteristic praise, and not without truth. For the people He was describing, though they had many faults, were not worldly. They did not care for the three things the world considers important - riches, honors, and pleasures. The words of eternal life were all they were concerned about.

Yet, even though they were sincere, the Eleven still needed not only “keeping” but refining. Therefore, their Master went on to pray for their sanctification in the truth. He had in mind, not only their perseverance, growth, and maturity in grace as private Christians but especially their spiritual preparation for the office of the apostleship. Consequently, He continues in the next breath to mention their apostolic work, thereby demonstrating what was most important to Him: “As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (vs. 18). His intense desire is for them to be equipped for their mission. Therefore, He proceeds to speak about His own sanctification as a means to their sanctification as if His own ministry was subordinate to theirs. “And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth” (vs. 19). Remarkable words! Their meaning is obscure and has been debated by
many, but in them we may at least discover with confidence a clear demonstration of humility
and love. Jesus speaks here like a parent who lives for the sake of His children. He is personally
committed to their moral training, denies Himself pleasure for their benefits, and makes it His
primary purpose and concern to form their characters, complete their education, and equip
them for the duties of the position which they are destined to fill.

**Jesus Prays for the Church**

The rest of the prayer (with the exception of the two closing sentences) concerns the Church
at large (vss. 20-24), that is, those who would believe in Christ through the Apostles’ words,
which were either spoken by their own lips or contained in their writings. What Jesus desires for
believers is partly to be inferred. For when He says, “I do not ask in behalf of these alone”
(vs. 20), He suggests that He wants the people whom He will pray for next to receive the same
things He has already asked for His disciples: that they be preserved in the truth, kept from the
evil in the world, and sanctified by the truth. The one blessing He specifically requests for the
Church is unity. His heart’s desire for those who believe in Him is “that they may all be one” (vs.
21). His goal for the Church’s unity is very high. The divine example for it is the unity that exists
between the Father and the Son. And the basis for it is the same divine unity: “one as we are one,
and in us who are one,” bound together as closely and harmoniously by the common name into
which they are baptized and by which they are called” (vs. 21).

This unity is desirable for its own sake. Jesus especially desires this because of the moral power
which it will give the Church as an institution for propagating the Christian faith: “that the world
may believe that Thou didst send Me” (vss. 21,23). Now this purpose cannot be accomplished
unless the unity of the believers is, in some way, observable. A unity which is not observable can
have no effect on the world. It would be like a candle under a bushel that gives no light. Isn’t that
true? Not really. It actually ceases to be a light and goes out. There can be no doubt, therefore, that
our Lord had a visible unity in mind. The only question is how it is to be attained. The first and
most obvious way is by uniting in one church organization with the appropriate means for repre-
senting the whole body. This body would then express its united mind, such as the ecumenical
councils did in the earlier centuries. This was the most complete manifestation of unity and was
observable in the primitive Church.

In our day, the Church is divided by doctrine and incompatible forms of church government.
Consequently, union on a large scale is not possible. We must resort to other methods by which
we may express unity. One of the methods that might be tried is that of confederation, where
independent church organizations are united like the United States of America, or like the Greek
republics which found unity in the legislative and judicial assembly called the Amphictyonic
Council. But whatever you think about that, one thing is certain: The unity of believers in Christ
must become more apparent if the Church is to fulfill her responsibility as a holy nation that has
been called out of darkness to embody the virtues of Him whose name she bears and win for Him the world’s praise and faith. It is certainly true that the unity of the Church does find expression in its Creed. We do not mean the creeds of this or that denomination but the Creed within the creeds that expresses the universal orthodoxy of Christendom and embraces the fundamentals (and only the fundamentals) of the Christian faith. There is a Church within all the churches which holds this Creed as its main value. Everything else in the hearts of its members is only the husk containing the precious kernel. But the existence of that Church is a fact that can only be known by faith, not by sight. The world does not feel its influence very much. And no matter how thankful we may be for the presence of this holy commonwealth in the midst of ecclesiastical organizations, we cannot accept this as the fulfillment of the ideal which the Savior had in mind when He spoke these words, “That they may all be one” (Jn. 17:21).

In the next two sentences (vss. 22-23), Jesus enjoys lingering over this prayer - repeating, expanding, reinforcing the petition using language that is too deep for us to fully understand. However, He clearly communicates the truth that without unity the Church can neither glorify Christ, commend Christianity as divine, nor have the glory of Christ abiding on Her. Upon reflection, this is a truth which is reasonable. Arguing is not a spiritual thing, and it does not need any divine influence to cause it. Anybody can argue. And the world (who understands that) has little respect for a quarreling Church. But the world opens its eyes in wonder at a community in which peace and harmony prevail, saying, “Here is something out of the ordinary - selfishness and self-will have been rooted out of human nature. Nothing but God's influence could overcome the centrifugal forces which tend to separate people from each other.”

The endearing name Father, the first word of the next sentence, marks the beginning of a new, final paragraph in the prayer of the great High Priest (vs. 24). At this point, Jesus looks forward to the end of things and prays for the final consummation of God's purpose for the Church - that the Church militant may become the Church triumphant; that the body of Christ, though imperfectly sanctified on earth, may become perfectly sanctified and glorified in heaven. They will be with Him (for that is where He will be), and they will behold His glory and be changed into the same image by the Spirit of God.

Jesus’ Final Comments
Then comes the conclusion. Jesus returns from the distant future to the present and begins to reflect on the company assembled in the room where they were having supper - He and His disciples - rather than on the Church at large. These two closing sentences serve the same purpose in Christ’s prayer that the phrase for Christ’s sake serves in ours. They contain two requests: (1) the service of the people He is praying for, and (2) the righteousness of the Being that is prayed to. The last one comes first and is found in the title O righteous Father. The services, merits, and claims of Jesus and His disciples are specifically mentioned as matters that
the righteous Father considers important. The world's ignorance of God is alluded to in order
to enhance the value of the acknowledgment which He has received from His Son and His Son's
companions. That ignorance explains why Jesus thinks it is important to say, “I have known
Thee.” Even His knowledge was not something to be taken for granted in such a world. The
man Jesus had to make an effort to keep God in His knowledge - just as much as He had to keep
Himself unspotted from the world's corruptions. It was just as hard for Him to know and confess
God as Father in a world that in a thousand ways practically denied that Fatherhood as to live a
life of love in the midst of many temptations to put self first. The truth is the two problems were
really one. To be light in the midst of darkness, love in the midst of selfishness, holiness in the
midst of depravity, are in effect the same thing.

While Jesus is pleading His own merit, He does not forget the claims of His disciples. In essence,
He says this about them: “They have known Thee second-hand through Me. I have known Thee
first-hand by direct intuition” (vs. 25). Not content with these remarks, He elaborates on the
importance of these men as objects of divine care. He indicates that they are worth keeping, that
they already possess the knowledge of God’s name. They are destined (before long) to know it
even more perfectly so they will be able to make it known as an object of praise to others. God
will be able to love them even as He loved His own Son as He was in the world faithfully serving
His heavenly Father. “I have made Thy name known to them, and will make it known; that the
love wherewith Thou didst love Me may be in them, and I in them” (vs. 26). Wonderful words to
be uttered about mere earthen vessels!