

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

John 17:6-19

It's hard to defend yourself when you are accused of something, or when you are establishing your right to exercise authority. Too easily, it comes across proud. Overbearing. Or you appear angry. We saw that with our newest Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh. When he was first accused of rather serious offenses, he reacted rather softly, preferring to allow others in that process of confirmation to vindicate him. Some say his response was too weak. And then, when given the opportunity later, he defended himself rather vigorously, with a measure of anger that could be judged as rather understandable. But he was accused of being too angry to be a good judge. He couldn't win.

It's always better to have someone else speak for you.

I have known that in my own life as well, realizing that the more you defend yourself, the more you appear, well, defensive. And the way we use that word today, it's not a good thing. The more you defend yourself, the more it seems maybe that you are actually guilty. Especially if the accusation is pride. Or selfishness. Or the abuse of power. The more you object, the more guilty you seem to appear.

The Apostle Paul had that problem. He was given great authority in the church after Jesus' resurrection. He exercised a great influence, perhaps as great as any other human being. He travelled as an evangelist all over the known world. And he wrote a large number of the books of the New Testament, books written to those churches many of which he had visited or even first established.

So what did he do when he was challenged to produce his credentials? What right did he have to exercise authority? And what would he say to those churches who questioned him?

He gives a rather long self-defense in

Gal. 1:11 "But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

He continued,

v.15 "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother."

Still further,

Gal. 2:1 "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me."

Fourteen years of gaining credibility. Talk about being defensive. That's a long time! And before that, 3 years in the desert of Arabia, and Damascus, apparently alone. And his point was that God had appointed him and equipped him to be an apostle. And God had taught him and trained him.

Other books have a more simple defense, for example,

Eph. 1:1 "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God..."

But perhaps the most helpful defense is in 1 Corinthians 9. He's defending himself against those who believe that Christians ought not to eat meat previously offered to idols. In defending his Christian liberty to do so, Paul says this,

1 Cor. 9:1 "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord."

Paul had a particular need to defend himself because he wasn't one of the original twelve. That sense of his difference from the other, original apostles was made clear in 1 Corinthians 15, when he speaks of those apostles who had seen Jesus in the flesh after his resurrection.

1 Cor. 15:7 "After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

All of that is to introduce the subject of the unique position of the apostles in the church. And their unique authority. They are, as Paul himself puts it, the foundation of the church. In Ephesians 2:20 he identifies the church as the household of God,

Eph. 2:20 "...having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."

Our text this morning is a significant part of that foundation being laid. And that's why this is important, because Jesus' prayer is for the building the foundation of his church. Jesus prays for his disciples—specifically, the immediate disciples in the sense of the original 12, those who would soon be called "apostles." Sometimes the word "disciples" simply refers to any

and all followers of Jesus. But sometimes the specific reference is to the 12 apostles, as they are identified in Luke 6.

Luke 6:12 "Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. 13 And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles."

This is how he identifies them here,
v.6

The contrast with all the other believers is in,
v.20

Similarly, here in our text,
v.9

Then John identifies the apostles rather clearly, making note of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

v.12 "While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

So we begin our study of this prayer by noting,

I. THE IDENTITY OF THE APOSTLES.

The identity of those for whom Jesus is praying, specifically.
v.6-8

This is crucial starting point.

A. The apostles are appointed by God the Father.

They were not self-appointed. They didn't choose the job for themselves, nor assume any authority for themselves. They were "the men whom You have given Me out of the world."

God the Father gave them to Jesus. God the Father chose them. For his own very specific purpose. “They were yours,” Jesus prays to his father. “You gave them to me.” Such a clear emphasis upon the sovereign purpose of God the Father. Such an emphasis on the Father’s own personal plan. His will. His design.

The apostles didn’t volunteer. They were called. Set apart by the Father before they were ever identified by the Son. And God chose them for a purpose. He gave them to Jesus for a purpose. Namely, to be the recipients of inspired revelation, to receive Jesus’ own words, from Jesus himself.

B. The apostles are the recipients of Jesus’ own words.

The word apostle literally means one who is sent. One who is commissioned, a commissioner bearing the authority or the determination of the sender. And that’s the whole purpose of these apostles. They would bear Jesus’ own words. They would receive those words and proclaim them to the world. They would attest to Jesus, validate Jesus, establish the truth and the legitimacy of Jesus. It was all about Jesus.

The fullness of God’s self-revelation is Jesus, and with Jesus, God in the flesh, that revelation is complete. But we still have the rest of the New Testament, each book written by or linked to an apostle, to give that necessary attestation. That’s all part of the foundation of the church

Heb. 2:4 “God also bearing witness [to Jesus] both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.”

This is how Jesus describes the apostles as he prays to his father,

v.7-8

That’s how the apostles form the foundation of the church. They were the recipients of Jesus’ words. And they wrote down those words, and added their own testimony to bear witness of the truth of what Jesus said. And that’s why that apostolic qualification is given, that an apostle must have been an eyewitness of Jesus. Paul just assumes that definition with his declaration in,

1 Cor. 9:1 “Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?”

Yes, yes he had. Not in the ordinary way, but as “one born out of due time.” I have always understood those three years in the desert of Arabia as the time when Paul saw Jesus. Surely it was a separate, and rather spectacular way to meet that necessary qualification of apostleship. But still true. Paul had seen Jesus Christ.

All the apostles received Jesus’ own words. So that what they wrote, what they said, Jesus said. God said! It’s all the same.

v.8 “For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them.”

So let’s talk then about,

II. THE ONGOING ROLE OF THE APOSTLES.

Ongoing, that is to say, compared to Jesus. Jesus would die. Remember the number of chapters John devoted in this gospel to the conversation Jesus had with his disciples about that very point. He was going to die. He was going to leave this world. In his flesh, he would no longer dwell with mankind.

And when he would leave, the work of the apostles would take on its significant, ongoing role. They would continue. They would lay the foundation of the church. They would write the words of

the Bible. They would testify of everything Jesus came to say and do.

A. The apostles are called because Jesus' work in the world will come to an end.

That's the point of,
v.10-11a

The underlying emphasis there are the words, "Now I am no longer in the world." His time of incarnation is over, complete. "I come to You," Jesus prays to his father. But not the apostles. "These are in the world." These remain in the world! They remain to bear witness to Jesus. And that is so necessary, so essential for us.

This is the foundation for our doctrine of the Bible as well, our understanding of what the inspiration of the Bible is all about. We have God's own words, words he gave to Jesus. And words which Jesus gave to his apostles. And we have those words with certainty and assurance.

2 Peter 1:19 "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

The apostles are those men of God! Thus Peter writes just before those words,

2 Peter 1:16 "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."

How do we know this Bible is the word of God? Because the

apostles who wrote it were eyewitnesses of the majesty of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. They saw Jesus in the flesh. And when Jesus leaves this earth in the flesh, the apostles remain, in order to make known Jesus and his word. And that's the foundation of the church.

B. The apostles are preserved as a permanent and unchanging foundation for the church.

That's what Jesus prays for, that the apostles would be preserved, kept.

v.11b "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are."

Keep them, Jesus prays. Protect them. Preserve them. And don't miss the extent of that preservation, "that they may be one as We are."

Jesus then notes how he has preserved them thus far.
v.12

Again, let me keep before you that picture of the foundation of a building. And God will preserve the the apostles so surely and certainly such that their unity together might be a representation of the unity that exists in the Trinity between the father and the son.

Here is the encouragement in all of this. That the apostolic foundation of the church is laid perfectly and completely, by those men whom God gave to Jesus to be his first disciples. And despite all the bad construction that might have taken place on top of that foundation, all the things that we have done to mar the beauty and image of the church, the foundation remains firm and unchanged.

I don't need to be reminded about the foibles and foolishness of the church, since, unfortunately, we see way too much of that in our presbytery, which meets again this week. There is a lot there that is not right. But no matter what presbytery might do, no matter what different men might do, or not do, the foundation is still secure. And that foundation is the apostles. Surely we need to return to that foundation, in so many ways, as a presbytery; and that is a struggle for many of us this week. But Jesus still prays for the apostles as they build that foundation themselves.

Jesus is no longer with us, he has ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of his father in heaven. But he left the apostles in the world to build a foundation upon which we continue to build the church. And that is our only hope.

In that context, let me ask a final question. What is,

III. THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE APOSTLES TO THE WORLD.

They are in the world. As we are. They live as mortal creatures, fallible and corruptible. Subject not only to sin, but to death. But they are still in the world. By definition.

A. The apostles are to remain in the world.

They are sent. They are commissioned. To go into the world. To live in the world. To stay in the world, a phrase that might more simply mean "alive," existing in flesh and blood, with natural life. This is a repeated theme for John, "in the world."

v.13, 15, 18

That last verse is clear as day, isn't it? The Father sent the son into the world, to be incarnate, born of a woman, to live as a human being. And the son sends the disciples. To be "in the world." Again, the emphasis there is to natural life, life in this age, life in this flesh.

Go back to verse 15, and note how important it is to be in the world. Sometimes we think that our job is to escape the world, but actually its just the opposite. We are to live in it. We partake in the normal, ordinary, earthly affairs of life. We are with the apostles in this, we live "in the world." And Jesus doesn't pray for us to be rescued out, as much as we might wish that to happen sometimes.

Sometimes we want that escape, and might even pray for it. And sometimes when you pray you might get frustrated, because you are being left in the world seemingly without any help or protection. Surely, we are vulnerable. Because we are corruptible. Even sinful. As are others in the world. And often we think that it would be beneficial to escape.

I am old enough to remember air raid drills in school. I grew up during the cold war, when the threat of missiles from Russia capable of destroying our country was a real threat. And the solution, going back even farther to the 1950s, was the use of bomb shelters. The idea was if you build a big enough bomb shelter you could survive an enemy attack.

And there might have been some wisdom in that, but that analogy in terms of our Christian life is a warning to us. We are not called to go into our bomb shelters until Jesus returns. We are not called to hide out in our little bubbles, trying to protect ourselves from all the dangers of the world by refusing to live in the world.

The most extreme example of that is Roman Catholic monasticism. Become a monk or a nun. Separate yourself from any contact with the world. Don't live in the world at all, but take a vow of chastity, poverty and obedience. But NO. That is not what Jesus is teaching here with reference to his disciples. They are to

go into the world! They are to live in the world. They are to be salt and light in the world, in a world that is, by that definition, in darkness. And without the flavor of godliness.

Jesus prays for his disciples as they remain in this world. And hard as it might sometimes, as we struggle with the reality of living in this world, that is our calling as well. And Jesus notes how hard that might become.

B. The apostles will be hated by the world.

v.14

Don't be surprised. Don't be alarmed. Don't be unsettled.

Remember our study of,

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

There is even a blessing attached to that.

Mat. 5:11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Seems like a hard task, doesn't it? You are to remain in the world. But the world in which you live will hate you. That calls for much endurance. And perseverance. And one other thing. Separation.

C. The apostles are to be separated from the world.

They are to be in the world. But not of the world, not like the world.

v.16

What does that mean? Ultimately, it means to be set apart from the world, what we label sanctification. Separated, in terms of being different. Separated by their behavior. Separated by the conduct of their lives and by the character of their hearts.

But how does that happen? Jesus prays for it to happen. That the apostles be sanctified, set apart. So he prays,

v.17

Don't miss that. How are we set apart? By the power and the working of the Bible, by the word of God, which the writer of Hebrews says

Heb. 4:12 "...is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

Jesus is explicit. He does not pray for our escape from the world, but rather for our protection from the evil one.

v.15

Again, Jesus prays that for the original apostles, distinctly. But it applies so directly and so fully to us. It is in the Lord's prayer as well, "deliver us from evil," from the evil one. That's what it means to be separated from the world. To be kept safe from Satan, described as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. And we bear our own responsibility to resist him.

James 4:7 "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he

will flee from you.”

We are called to flee from all sorts of sin, too, idolatry, sexual immorality, and all kinds of evil. We are called to “to stand against the wiles of the devil.” But never forgot, that the root of all those exhortations is the prayer to be separated from the world, Jesus’ prayer. He prays that his disciples, the original apostles and in this case, you and I as well, he prays that we will be sanctified by the truth. Even as Jesus is sanctified.

v.19

So what about you? Are you separated from the world? That’s a continuous challenge, isn’t it? It’s never something you fully accomplish in order to move on to the next item on the list. This is daily duty, a daily struggle. It is Jesus’ prayer. That while you live in this world, as long as you live in this world, as long as this age endures, that you be set apart from the world by the truth of the word of God.

Please, hear this word of encouragement, this word of exhortation. Please hear this call to be set apart, to be separate, different from the world. There are so many examples. Outward and external things like sexual morality and purity. Internal things like pride, or kindness. Even your motives and your desires. Your heart, and your life, are to show forth that you are different from the world in which you live.

As for yourselves, please be willing to identify where you imitate the world, and turn to the Lord in repentance. Turn to the Bible, to be the means by which God transforms you so you will be different.

And to that end, Jesus prays to his father.

v.17 “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”