

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 17 – Jesus’ Prayer

Have you ever gotten to listen in on someone’s private conversation? Especially one about you? That’s when you know you’re getting the real story, isn’t it. You sit and you listen, and you are thrilled and worried at the same time.

We love these insider stories. That’s why we love to buy books about people who were on the inner circle of certain relationships – Princess Diana, Barry Bonds, Madonna, the President. We want to hear what people who were close to them thought about them, what they overheard and what they report to us. It feels so much less filtered.

In John 17, we get to overhear such a conversation. Jesus is praying yes, but praying is really just talking. He’s talking to God the Father, and we get to listen in.

This is Jesus’ last big conversation in the story. He does other talking, but here we have his last extended words, and it comes in the form of a prayer. We see what is on Jesus’ heart here.

This chapter is often called Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, and rightly so. Jesus does the work of a priest here, interceding for his people. But if that’s true, then I’d like to set that into the context of chapter 16 being about his work of a prophet, as he tells his people what is to come and inform them of the plans of God. Chapter 18 will be about Jesus’ work as a king, both implicitly and explicitly. This makes me happy – we have Jesus in his roles of prophet, priest and king.

What do you think Jesus says when we listen in?

Let’s look at some of the themes Jesus mentions in his prayer. Notice that Jesus’ prayer isn’t filled with the things I bet your prayer is filled with. I would guess your prayer list looks a lot like mine – grandma has cancer | I have a test coming up | I want a date | Help me to be content without a date | Get me a job this summer | Help my sister | I’m confused.

Those are good requests. God cares about all those things, and even more. He bores down into every aspect of our lives. Nothing is too small to bring to God. He cares.

But Jesus’ prayer isn’t filled with those things. His prayer seems much bigger than that, and we could learn from him to pray bigger prayers.

Holiness, Glory and Truth

Jesus starts this way, “*Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.*”

We start here because I want you to see that Jesus is God, but yet he’s praying to God the Father. And he’s praying that everything he would say and do would glorify the Father.

God is separate from us, and we actually need that to be true. When you come into contact with God, you aren’t just okay. He is Holy. He is Other than you. He is Greatness. He is Glory. When you are in the presence of such a thing or being, you are knocked off your feet.

So many of us have grown up or have been worshipping in churches where God has been pulled down to buddy status. He is our friend, our cohort. He is very knowable and approachable. That is certainly an aspect of God, and we’ll talk about that.

However, the Bible is filled with references to God being much, much different than that. He is the Creator of the Universe. He holds the universe in his hands. The oceans are like a drop in the cup of his hands. The stars don’t even span the width of his fingers. When people come into contact with this God, they are undone. They feel their inadequacy, how little and small they are.

Have you ever been in the presence of greatness? Maybe you were the best singer in Tallequah, Oklahoma. Then you got to OU and enrolled in the Musical Theater department. You started to rub shoulders with the finest students in America for that major (OU has perhaps the best in the country). You start to sing with seniors, who have been in the program for four years, fine tuning their voices, dancing and acting. They bring in a big name to be in one of the performances, and then you see even further.

When you see this type of greatness, you shrink back. You see your flaws. You are revealed before the Superb. You suddenly see a new reality. You can feel this in the presence of a math genius. Or if a truly beautiful woman walks into the room and you suddenly feel plain and dull. Or Kobe Bryant shows up to play basketball at the rec center and you have to guard him.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Have you related to God like this? Have you seen his holiness, transcendence, glory and truth? Or have you gotten so comfortable with him that you forgot the awesomeness of his glory. The radiance of his beauty. The piercingness of his truth?

He is God the Father. He is God. You are not.

Jesus says he has been sanctified for his people and for God. This word sanctified means “set apart.” It’s the same word as “holy.”

Jesus was set apart for a purpose. He came into this world – from his preincarnational existence (17:5) and lived a certain life with a certain purpose. To come and live the perfect life and die for his people. That was what he was all about. That was his purpose, and doing that very thing would glorify the Father. We’ll discuss that in a little bit when we get to his mission.

Notice first though that a part of Jesus’ holiness isn’t only awesomeness and glory, but in his resolute purpose. He was set apart.

Think of someone who is committed to and dedicated to becoming an Olympic athlete. What does she have to do? She has to train night and day. She has to eat certain foods. She has to say no to going out so she can sleep and rest, and then get up early and train. She is focused on her task. She’s set apart herself for a goal.

That can be true for going to medical school or law school or even college. It can be true for any of you who have a goal that you want to accomplish. You are set apart for that goal and purpose.

Jesus was holy in this way. Yes, he was perfect, but that isn’t the point of this word here. It means “set apart” for a different use.

The holy purpose that guided Jesus in how he would glorify God in his life was the truth. Jesus is very concerned about the truth here. John 16:14: *Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth.*

As Jesus related to God, as he fulfilled the purposes of God, he did so in regards to and relationship to God’s word, the truth, the Scriptures.

Jesus didn’t go off on his own way to do his own thing. He set his goals to that of Scripture, to what it is he knew would make the Father happy. Jesus cared about truth.

We’re not so sure in our culture. We aren’t as jazzed about a God who can be over us in the way of glory, holiness and truth. We don’t want him to tell us what to do. We don’t think he says right things about our lives. We’re not nearly as trusting that God brings truth like that.

Jesus was. He related to God and his truth. He loved God’s truth, and showed forth God’s truth.

So what? What does this have to do with us? What should we do with this prayer? I think it’s important for us to hear it, because it can help teach us how to pray. Like I said, there’s nothing wrong with our normal prayer lists, but perhaps we should try to pray more like Jesus does. We should pray more about God’s glory and his mission in our lives.

I know for me so often I degenerate into praying to God like he’s some cosmic vending machine, doling out things I want if I put in enough time, money or prayer. Jesus doesn’t do this. He relates to God like a real person, like a Father. He discusses his attributes, and wants to do whatever it takes to bring his Father glory. He has a mission and things on his heart that he cares about – that mission and those things are people. Is God on our heart? Are people in our hearts? Are we willing to do anything so that God would be glorified?

If you thought of God this way, wouldn’t it change your relationship with God and others? You would have so much more joy, peace, patience, kindness, truthfulness and self control. You would be far less judgmental of others, and of yourself. You would not worry as much, thinking that God has somehow allowed the world to spin out of control. You would wait for his providence. You would be far more willing to obey him.

Why do you follow God’s rules? Is it out of a grudging fear?² So many of us relate to God as if he were the master of the field and we were serfs in a feudal system. Sure, we do the things he wants, but we’re not happy about it. We grumble behind his back. We hold back things. We don’t give our best effort.

Do you act that way with God? Many of you have been raised in moral, religious homes. But your obedience isn’t heartfelt. It’s obligation. It’s duty. It’s shallow. It’s grudging. It’s drudgery. And you don’t really want to offer it willingly. You are afraid of the master, so you obey him.

But what if God is your father and not your master? What if he loves you and cares for you? What if he’s given you the field because he loves you and cares for you? That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have any expectations any more. He will still come by and talk to you about what he wants to have done with the field. But suddenly, your relationship is transformed. You want to show him obedience. You delight to make him happy. You search for ways to see him smile. It grieves you when he is disappointed. It’s because he loves you.

Christians, he loves you so much. He loves you with the love of a holy father. If you understand that, if you understand God’s love for you and Jesus’ love for you, what else do you need? What situations can you not handle? What can befall you that could be greater than that?

² Keller illustration

This is comprehensive, this change in your outlook. It not only means you have a vast treasury of love from God through Jesus, but it also means that God is involved in every area of your life. He is lord of all. He is the creator of the universe. He doesn't want some little part of you, but he wants all of you.

The Christian is now thinking about how God and his love affects every area of life. We are to be set apart, sanctified. What does this mean for me to be a Christian economist? A Christian musician? A Christian educator? A Christian in the dorms? A Christian in the sorority or fraternity? A Christian boyfriend or girlfriend? A Christian husband or wife or mother or father? A Christian physicist?

Some say that Christianity is for the intellectually lazy, but how can this be true? We're saying that the idea that God is our Holy Father means that *every* area is now considered a place for Christianity to reign and rule. We have a lot to talk about. We have so many things to discuss as we wonder and figure out what God's kingdom would mean in our lives.

We learn what to do about those things as we pour over and study the Word. That's how we discover how being Christian changes us so much. We study the Word of God, and we submit to it in our lives. We can't think we can discover all the answers on our own with our brilliant minds. We need to learn the truth through God's word and give our lives over to that. That is Jesus' prayer for us. We need to be people of the book.

Access and Love

Let's look at some other aspects of Jesus prayer, particularly his access and love for the Father and for us.

This prayer is a picture of intimacy and confidence. Jesus goes right to the Father in this, the eve of his darkest hour. He isn't bashful or unsure. He is right there at the foot of God, in the presence of God. That's because Jesus lives in conversation with the Father. He's always talking to him and telling him what he's thinking and doing. He cares what the Father thinks and wants him to do. He says he will do nothing without the will of the Father.

This shows us God's desire for relationships. He doesn't have generals, corporals and sergeants. He has sons and daughters. Even in the Godhead itself there is true, genuine and intimate relationship.

Jesus calls God "Father." That is an important word. Just as I mentioned God as holy, just, full of wisdom and truth, we also must know God as Father. As the one who loves us and cares for us. Who disciplines his children because he cares for us. Jesus shows this for us.

Here on the night before his death, he comes to God. He seems fairly calm. He isn't mad at Judas. He doesn't seem worried about what's about to happen to him, even though it will be the worst experience of *anyone* who has ever lived. He will suffer the full wrath of God for sins he didn't even commit, but for all the sins of his people. All of that will be poured out on him.

Yet, he prays in love to his Father. The closest thing we have to this relationship is marriage. Marriage is the loving relationship of mutual trust and commitment, of conversation, transparency, union and friendship. It's not sharing the same address. It's so much more, or else it's supposed to be. It's giving your life over to someone else because you love that person.

It's difficult to resist making applications of what this means for us, so I won't resist.

I think that Jesus love for his Father and from his Father spills out into his love for his disciples. For his people. For you and for me. Think about how unloveable his followers are. They are bad people to begin with. They are not moral superstars. They have not been the sharpest knives in the drawer. They haven't gotten what Jesus has been talking about. They're about to altogether abandon him and desert him. They're about to turn their backs on him.

But Jesus loves them. He prays for them. He doesn't seem disappointed in them at all. He prays for them out of love and concern.

Do you see how that's related to Jesus' loving relationship to the Father?

What if you had a love like that? Wouldn't it change you? Wouldn't it make you less irritable, less judgmental, less defensive. Wouldn't it make you more approachable, more accepting and loving, more willing and able to repent?

Think of it this way.³ What if someone came up to you and said you owed him \$500. That would be annoying and no good for you. Especially if you actually owed a lot of people a lot of money. Then you'd try to get out of paying it right away. You'd make excuses. You'd try to change the subject. Or if you thought you only owed \$400. You'd be annoyed. You'd be frustrated and mad.

But what if you won the lottery? What if you now had \$50 million? If someone came up to you and told you that you owed \$500, you would think, No big deal. That is chump change. You wouldn't blink an eye.

If you understand God's love for you like Jesus did, it changes you. If you can see that the Father loves you like that, it will make you less defensive when someone points out to you something you did wrong. You're not clamoring for that person's love because you have a treasure chest of it somewhere else. You are rich. So it's okay to admit you have a debt to pay. You can even throw in some more because you have so much. I owe you \$500? Well here, take \$800. You're confronting me about this sin? I can tell you about three more. You can do that because you know the love of the Father like Jesus did.

³ This comes from listening to Keller sermons on this.

Jesus also pictures for us access to the Father. This is hinted at here because of the prayer itself, but if we consider the role of Jesus as priest, and we think of Hebrews, we realize that Jesus gets us into God's presence – a place we couldn't go on our own.

The best example I can think of for this⁴ is actually from sorority rush. Every year right before school thousands of 18 year old girls arrive on campus, all ready and hoping to join a house. They parade around Greek row all dressed pretty much the same, all sounding pretty much the same, and all hoping pretty much the same – will someone like me? Will someone accept me? Will someone have me?

They line up in front of a house. Inside this house are the women who are already “in.” They have been chosen, accepted and initiated. They've been preparing for this day, and for these girls. They've read their files. They've talked about them, poured over them, debated them and have chosen the ones they want.

Here's what's interesting to me, and what is the picture of the priesthood. You cannot just walk into one of these sorority houses. If you were to show up, dress up and stand there ringing the doorbell, it wouldn't work. You can't waltz in and look around and ask questions.

Someone has to pick you up at the door. She has your file in mind. She has looked for your face. She is expecting you. And she brings you in and “rushes” you. She stands with you, introduces you, and talks with you. You are there because she is there. She has given you access that you couldn't have gotten any other way.

If the system works right, she then later fights for you and becomes your advocate.

We all want this. We want in. Maybe you didn't want to be in the Gamma Phi house or the Pi Phi house, but you want in somewhere. And we all want in with God.

Jesus shows us there is an in. He has it. He is in with the Father. He loves the Father loves him.

And Jesus is the priest who gets you in. He talks about his people with his Father. He loves them. He isn't going through the motions like some sorority girls do. He earnestly and honestly wants his people to be rushed into his Father's house.

Do you crave love and access like that? Do you know Jesus' love like that? Do you think God loves you like that?

If we understand Jesus' access to God and his love for his people, then we would also be changed. We would love others and be less judgmental. People would talk to us about what is going on in their lives. They would share openly about how they're doing, and we could bring to bear the love of God for them in Christ.

Again, so many of us think Jesus is so disappointed with us. We struggle. We sin. We fall. We fail. And we think all the while we are forfeiting God's love.

But look at how Jesus treats his people. He treats them with love and honor. He thinks the best of them. He is teaching them about what it means to be children in God's family. This is a good family where people are well thought of and not picked on. Jesus is patient with them and kind to them. He doesn't seem annoyed with them and their bumbling ways. We know that Jesus will speak sternly and straight to them, but when he is talking about them to the Father, he is loving and respecting them.

Do you speak like that? So often I fail to do so. I think I have access problems in my heart. I think I so often think I need to earn God's love.

But Jesus says I have it. I have God's love in Christ. I am unified with Christ. God loves me just as he loves Christ. This should affect me. This should change me. This should capture me. Please Jesus make it so.

Mission - Glory

Let's last look at Jesus' mission and glory. This is really the bulk of the explicit parts of this prayer. Jesus came with specific purposes when he was set apart. What were those? What are the things he did and will do to bring about God's glory?

He came that his people would know and love their Father. He came to die for his people. He came to make them right with God by his substitutionary death.

He gives eternal life to all God had given to him. Jesus holds the keys of the kingdom. It's only through Jesus that you can have eternal life. That's how you can know God – through Jesus. Only through Jesus.

He manifested God's name to the people God gave him. He showed them about God. He brought them to God. He was God. He was the Word made flesh to dwell among us. If you want to know what God is like, what God thinks and what God does, you need to look at Jesus. There is no other way. He is the way, the truth and life. No one can come to the Father except through him.

He gave them God's words. He taught them about God through the Scriptures, that they might know the truth. Through this he has seen them believe in that word, in that truth, in Jesus as Savior and Redeemer.

He prayed for them, as we're seeing in this passage. He prays that they will be kept by God, and guarded by God. He knows that hard times are coming on them, and they will be severely tested. But he asks God to keep and guard them along the way. He says that he has not lost any of them. None have escaped from his loving hand.

⁴ And this is from Les Newsom.

He prays for their joy. He prays that their lives would be filled with peace, love and joy. With that supreme happiness of being secure in the Father's love.

He prays for protection for them from the evil one. Not only will they be tested and persecuted by people, but also by Satan. He works to see their woe. But Jesus defends them as their prophet, priest and king.

This is where he mentions how his mission is to set himself apart for his people, and he prays that they will set themselves apart for the truth as well.

He prays for the next generation of people who will believe. Not only for his followers, but for their followers. He is thinking of us. He has you and me in mind. He was not satisfied with influencing just a few people, but he is after changing the world that they may be one. This speaks of unity. Jesus wants unity, not for some ecumenical goal of a lovefest, agreement conference, but because of his glory. Because of his love for and unity with the Father. That is why we should seek unity with each other.

This is possible because we are unified with Christ. What he has done we do. His life becomes our life. His death becomes our death. His resurrection becomes our resurrection.

Jesus is that identified with us as our representative. We are unified in him, and therefore God loves us just as he loved his only begotten son. *The love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*

Isn't it amazing that Jesus prays for his people – he prays for you! – this way? Isn't it incredible that you get to hear his love for his Father and for you this way? This is a privileged conversation we're allowed to hear, and it teaches us so much about what is on his heart.

What is your mission in life? Are you trying to get as much money as you can make? Are you trying to be successful in your career? Are you wanting to get love and affections – to be happily married, living on the right side of town, always up to date in fashion, technology and the latest news?

For most of us, we live in that type of American Dream. We want that. We're working toward this middle to upper class suburban lifestyle.

God calls us to something else. He calls us to glorify him. That was Jesus' mission. He spoke the truth. He spoke love. He spoke of redemption and forgiveness.

What is your mission? Are you involved in bringing light into the darkness? Are you involved in speaking truth when there have been lies? Are you healing the brokenhearted? Are you clothing the naked, feeding the hungry and teaching the ignorant?

Are you about the work of Jesus?

This unity we find in Christ is one of a new people. It means that our mission is to bring others into the kingdom of God. Into the people of God. Into the family of God. That means that we are different. You have more in common with other Christians than people from your own high school class, or race, or town or even family if they are not Christians. We are one in Christ. Do we live that out?

Gospel

Remember this – Jesus has accomplished this. He uses us in this process, but he is doing it. He says his hour has come. He is talking about his death on the cross, the place where he will bring his Father the most glory even though that seems so counterintuitive.

He is taking the place of his people. He is being considered unclean and unholy and despicable so that we could be counted as clean, holy, forgiven and accepted.

He is cast out so that we can be brought in. That is why he is consecrating himself – so he can die for his people. You cannot ever pay enough to gain that sort of love. You have to admit you need help and need redemption, and allow Jesus to save you. You have to follow him and believe in him not just as Teacher but as Savior and Redeemer – in all of your life. This is why he did all this – for you. For his people. Because he loved them so very much and thought them so very precious.

Can you believe Jesus prays for God to love them/us just as he loves his son? That is an incredible thought. It's possible because of the gospel. Because we are unified with Christ when we believe and accept the gospel and therefore we are adopted as sons and daughters and loved like that. It seems so amazing, so incredible, so unbelievable.

And it's true.

Let that truth change you.