

You Are Prayed For

John 17:20-26

Bryn MacPhail / Apr. 10, 2011

A question that we often ask young children is, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

While we don’t hold young children to the answer they give us, we do nonetheless regard this as an important question.

And as a child becomes a teenager, this question of “What do you want to be when you grow up?” becomes a huge priority. Accordingly, teenagers and their parents begin to carefully map out plans for suitable post secondary education.

It is a delight to watch a young person pursue and then achieve their academic and vocational goals.

We are a goal-oriented society, aren’t we?

Why then wouldn’t we think about giving similar attention to our goals as a follower of Jesus Christ?

And why wouldn’t we be at least equally as intentional about the forward progress of our congregation toward meeting certain objectives?

We need not guess about what we ought to be pursuing in this regard. This prayer of Jesus, recorded in John 17, reveals to us important attributes that our Saviour intends for us to pursue and possess.

The prayer begins with Jesus praying for His own glory, in relation to the glory of His Father. But then, in the second part of His prayer, Jesus prays for His followers; Jesus prays for those who are left to reflect His glory, praying that they would be marked by certain characteristics.

Beginning at verse 13, Jesus prays first of all that His disciples would be marked by *joy*.

What do we think of, when we hear the word 'joy'? Most of us, I suspect, think of joy as a feeling of happiness. Joy is what we feel when our circumstances are favourable.

Joy is what you feel when your favourite sports team wins 'the big game'. Joy is what you feel when you are reunited with a loved one who has been far away.

But is this the kind of joy that Jesus is calling for? Well, no.

The joy I have just described is not unique to being a Christian. You do not have to be a Christian to be a 'happy person'. But you do, however, need to be a Christian to possess the kind of joy that Jesus calls for. Jesus prays, **"that they may have My joy made full in themselves"** (17:13).

It is not any kind of joy, but *Christ's joy* that should mark the Christian.

'How do we get that?'

Well, first, let me say that Christ's joy is not something you can manufacture. In a social gathering we may be able to flip some internal switch to help us cheerfully engage others, but the same cannot be said for acquiring Christ's joy.

It is a persistent theme of Scripture, that there is *a connection between Christian joy and faithful obedience to God's commands*.

A couple of chapters earlier, in John 15, Jesus says, **"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love...These things I have spoken to you (in order) that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full"** (Jn. 15:10, 11).

Jesus explains that, in order for our joy to be **"full"**, *His joy* must be in us; and for His joy to be in us, we must be diligent to obey His commands.

What I find most striking in this instruction is the fact that *obeying God is joy producing*.

Many people imagine that obeying God is joy quenching. Many people imagine that if we did all that God required, we would be unhappy. We mistakenly imagine that doing what God requires means ceasing to have any fun.

Jesus' instruction tells us that quite the opposite is true. The one who has the deepest joy, the one who has an abiding joy, is the one who faithfully obeys God's commands (Jn. 15:11).

King David discovered this, and it caused him to write in Psalm 19, "**The precepts of the Lord are true, giving joy to the heart**" (Ps. 19:8).

The joy that each Christian is to possess, the joy that each Christian congregation is to be marked by, has a Divine origin, and it is a joy that comes from obeying God's commands.

The next characteristic we come to in Jesus' prayer is *holiness*. Jesus prays, "**Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth . . . For them I sanctify Myself, that they too may be truly sanctified**" (17:17, 19).

To 'sanctify' means 'to set something apart for holy use'.

Jesus connects our growth in holiness to two things. "**The truth**", or the Word of God, helps to sanctify us. As we give attention to the Scriptures, and as we submit ourselves to its precepts, we further our sanctification.

We also learn that Christ's sanctification contributes to our holiness. Christ's sanctification, as you might expect, is different from our sanctification.

Christ is set apart to be our atoning sacrifice. We are set apart in order to be made holy. But our set apartness hinges upon His set apartness.

That is, our growth in holiness is intimately connected to Jesus' life and death, set apart for our sake.

To put it another way, Jesus did not die merely to redeem you from hell. Jesus died not simply for you to be forgiven of your sins. Jesus died to make you holy and happy (McCheyne).

The Christian church is to be marked by *joy*, it is to be marked by *holiness*, and thirdly, it is to be marked by *unity*.

Jesus prays, **“that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me”** (17:22, 23).

Immediately, we can glean from this petition that Jesus is calling for much more than a superficial kind of unity.

Jesus does not call for organizational unity, nor does He call for a sentimental, handholding, kind of unity. But, rather, Jesus prays that **“(the Church) may be one, as (He and the Father) are one”**(17:22).

Now how are we to accomplish that?

The late A.W. Tozer would often argue that, while the Church is to pursue unity, it is to do so by endeavouring to become like Christ.

And, to articulate his understanding of unity, Tozer employed the analogy of tuning pianos. If a hundred pianos were merely tuned to each other, their pitch would not be very accurate.

But if they were all tuned to one tuning fork, they would automatically be tuned to each other. Similarly, unity in the church isn't trying to be the same as everyone else. Rather, unity is achieved by becoming like Jesus Christ.

Unity, then, means much more than just getting along with one another. Unity requires much more than holding an interdenominational service.

Unity requires that we remain tuned to the tuning fork. Unity requires that we pursue the same goals—goals that are established by the prayer of Jesus.

And, finally, the Christian church is to be marked by *love*. James Montgomery Boice calls love “the greatest mark of the church”. The apostle Paul says much the same in 1Corinthians 13:13, “**now faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.**”

It has been argued, and I am inclined to agree, that love holds all of the other attributes together (Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 1347).

Think about what would happen if you removed love from the other marks of the church. If you have joy, without love, you are left with self-serving hedonism.

If you have holiness without love, you get a kind of self-righteousness—the kind that characterized the Pharisees in Jesus' day.

And, if you take love away from unity, you move towards a pattern of forced conformity (Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 1348).

When we recognize the need for love to permeate every aspect of Christian character we are not surprised to see Jesus end His prayer with this emphasis. Jesus prays that **“the love with which (the Father) loved (Him) may be (found) in (us)”** (17:26).

Again, it is not just any kind of love that will do, but rather, what is called for is the manifestation of Divine love in the lives of those who would follow Jesus.

This is precisely what Jesus had been teaching. Jesus didn't simply say, 'Love one another', rather, He commanded us, **“Love one another, just as I have loved you”** (Jn. 15:12).

This has been the pattern of Jesus' prayer for us. Jesus prays that we would be marked by certain characteristics, and then He gives Himself as the standard by which those characteristics are to be measured. It is Christ-like *joy*, Christ-like *holiness*, Christ-centred *unity*, and Christ-like *love* that we are called to pursue.

Now, before we close, we need to ask a question of paramount importance: *In what sense is Jesus' prayer answered?*

Think about that for a minute.

Jesus has already said that **“if (we) ask anything in (His) name, (He) will do it”** (Jn. 14:14). And so, presumably, when Jesus prays for something, the Father gives Him what He asks for.

Since we know that there is no such thing as a perfect Christian or a perfect church, we are compelled to confess that Jesus' prayer will not be answered *completely* until 'the age to come'.

Yet, on the other hand, to suggest the opposite of this; to assert that Jesus' prayer is, in no measure, answered during our lifetime contradicts the testimony of Scripture.

We conclude, therefore, that Jesus' prayer is indeed answered, in some measure, during our lifetime, and is answered perfectly in the age to come.

I am massively encouraged—and I hope you are—by the reminder that what ultimately keeps you and I on the narrow path, what ultimately promotes in us the fruits of the Spirit, is the prayer of Jesus.

When we struggle to overcome temptation and when we struggle to lead a life that is congruent with the will of God, we need to remember who is praying for our spiritual progress.

19th Century Scottish Pastor, Robert McCheyne, once said, “If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies...and He is praying for me.”

If we belong to Christ, we can expect profound, ongoing, change in our character.

We can expect change because someone is praying for us.

Jesus is praying for us.

And the prayer of Jesus will most certainly be answered. Amen.