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Bridgeway Church

John 13-17 / #20

Sermon Summary #20

A Wide Open Window into the Heart of Jesus

John 17:1-5

On a somewhat regular basis, young married couples will come to me and ask my advice about how they might learn to pray together. Often, it is either only the husband or the wife who comes and complains that his/her spouse remains silent when the other prays aloud. For any of you to whom this applies, please don't take offense or feel any shame. Ann and I struggled with this for several years early on in our marriage. I couldn't understand why Ann was so reluctant to pray in front of me, and it was only after quite a few years that I discovered the reason: she didn't entirely trust me with her heart and her deepest desires and fears.

Aside from sexual intimacy in a marriage relationship, there is no time when a husband and a wife are as vulnerable and unavoidably honest with one another as when they pray. At least, it's supposed to be that way. When you pray privately with someone, especially your spouse, you open up your heart in ways that you probably wouldn't if you were asked to pray in front of the entire church on a Sunday morning, or before a banquet with friends, or even when you are asked to pray before celebrating your Thanksgiving dinner in the presence of your extended family.

Prayer is a funny thing. When you really pray, and I mean *really* pray, that is to say, when you allow your deepest desires to be known, when your fears and hopes and dreams and anxieties and most sincere beliefs are laid out in the open for someone else to see and hear, you feel unprotected and vulnerable and exposed. Young married couples especially are still trying to get know each other. They are still trying to figure out how much they should reveal about what they're thinking and feeling. And talking openly about their relationship with God and their spiritual desires and needs often just feels too scary.

By the way, here's my standard counsel to those married couples (or individuals) who come to me with this problem. I always tell them: "Don't push your spouse to pray out loud. It will only drive them deeper into secrecy and insincerity. Give them all the time they need. You go ahead and pray aloud and encourage them to pray silently. In time, as the two of you get to know each other better and your trust in one another increases, you'll be surprised how open and vocal your spouse will be." At least that's the way it is now with me and Ann. It's taken 44 years of marriage but she won't let me out the door without grabbing me by the hand and praying up a storm!

Now, why am I saying this about prayer? Here's why. If prayer truly is that moment in which a person is most vulnerable, open, and honest, consider what we are hearing in the words of John 17.

This is Jesus praying. This is Jesus at his most vulnerable moment in life. This is Jesus opening up for us a window to look through into his heart, into the depths of his soul. This is Jesus laying bare before all to see his longings and beliefs and hopes and expectations for the future. John 17 is a wide-open window into the most intimate and honest thoughts, desires, and passions of Jesus himself. This isn't Jesus praying before a meal at some religious or civic banquet. This is Jesus speaking to his Father. And the amazing thing is that he lets us listen!

The Most Sacred Chapter in the Bible (?)

I'm always careful not to differentiate greatly between portions or passages in the Bible. Every verse in Scripture is breathed out by God and is of the utmost importance. Still, though, I can't help but think that there is something very, very special about John 17. John Brown, an 18th century Scottish pastor, said this: "The 17th chapter of the gospel of John is without doubt the most remarkable portion of the most remarkable book in the world."

G. Campbell Morgan, British pastor in the early 20th century said: "I would be careful lest I should appear to differentiate between the value of one part of Holy Scripture and another, but no one will deny that when we come to this chapter we are at the center of all the sanctities."

Philip Melancthon, who succeeded Martin Luther during the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, delivered his final lecture before dying on this chapter, and said of it: "There is no voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or in earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime, than the prayer offered up by the Son to God himself."

Why do people say such things about John 17? Here are a couple of reasons.

First, Jesus invites us to gaze upon the depth and intensity of the intimacy that exists between him and his Father. I don't know of an earthly father-son relationship that can compare with what I had with my dad. I find it almost impossible to describe. There was such a trust and joy and mutual understanding between me and my dad that when he died in 1983 I felt as if I had died. But even that is nothing to compare with the love and unity that exists between Jesus and his Father. That is one reason why the cry of Jesus from the cross is so unnerving: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is precisely due to the depths of the love between the Father and the Son that the crushing of the Son by the Father with the penalty of our sin is so indescribably mysterious and majestic.

Second, Jesus obviously intended his disciples to hear him pray. There are, of course, things in his prayer that we cannot pray. None of us can pray the words of v. 5 – “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” So on the one hand there is much for us to learn here about how we are to pray and what we are to pray for, but there is also much that is altogether unique to Jesus due to his relationship with the Father.

Third, Jesus was not only praying for the disciples who were gathered in the upper room that night. He was also praying for you and me! Look at v. 20 – “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.” It’s incredibly encouraging to hear that people are praying for me. But to know that Jesus is praying is off the charts glorious! See Hebrews 7:25.

Fourth, although Jesus prays this prayer only hours before he will be scourged and crucified, it is not a prayer of doom and gloom. This isn’t a prayer of a depressed man, but a prayer of love and triumph and joyful expectation. This is prayed by the One who only moments earlier, as found in John 16:33, had said: “But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Two Breathtaking Truths about God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ

There are four breathtaking truths in these opening verses of John 17, only two of which we will look at today. We’ll save the other two for another day.

(1) We first take note of God’s unqualified, unmatched sovereignty over the life and death of his Son, and equally so over your life and death and mine too. We see this in the five words of v. 1 – “Father, the hour has come.”

One thing has been made unmistakably clear: until now, until the night of his betrayal by Judas Iscariot, the “hour” had most assuredly **not** come. Let me take you back into the early days of our Lord’s earthly ministry and let you see what I mean.

Why do you think King Herod failed in his attempt to kill the newborn baby Jesus? We are told in Matthew 2:13-15 that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take the child and Mary to Egypt until Herod had died. And why did it all unfold in this manner? Because “the hour” had not yet come!

Or consider that scene in Luke 4 where the scribes and Pharisees were enraged at Jesus. We read that “when they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away” (Luke 4:28-30).

What happened here? There is a sense in which Jesus was toying with them. It’s as if he said, “You can come only this close to me, but no farther.” He mocks their determination to kill him, saying in effect: “What little power you think you have over me is only what I and my Father permit you to enjoy. Come a little closer. A little closer still. Now, stop!” And they froze in their tracks, stunned and paralyzed in mid-course, unable to lay so much as a pinky finger on him!

In John 2:4 Jesus speaks to his mother, Mary, when she came to him with the news that they had run out of wine at the wedding feast. Jesus responded to her by saying: “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”

In John 7:6-8, Jesus twice said, “My time has not yet come.” Jesus made all his decisions about where to go and when based on his knowledge that the “time” for his atoning sacrifice and resurrection from the dead had not yet arrived.

Again, in John 7:30 Jesus has just declared that he had been sent by God, the very God whom his enemies, the religious leaders, did not know. The text says that “they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.” Try to envision the wicked rage of the people and their determination to kill him immediately. But an invisible force kept their hands at bay. A divine “force field,” if you will, surrounded him and prevented them from getting any closer than God would allow.

They were a determined lot. They “were seeking” to arrest him and kill him on the spot. It wasn’t for lack of courage that they failed in their plans to seize him. It wasn’t for lack of numbers, as they were many and Jesus was only one. They failed for one reason: “his hour had not yet come.”

Now, contrast that with what Jesus said in John 12:23 – “And Jesus answered them, ‘*The hour has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified.’” And then in John 13:1, at the beginning of this upper room discourse we’ve been studying, we read this: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that *his hour had come* to depart out of this world to the Father . . .”

That is why, in stark contrast to what we’ve witnessed up until now, we read this in Matthew 26:50, as Jesus finished praying in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.”

Whereas up until now the world stood helpless before him, he now stands helpless before the world. He whose infinite strength was so evidently on display, now gives way to the weakness of being arrested and eventually crucified. And it all unfolds by divine design: not one moment earlier nor a millisecond later than God had ordained. ***The alarm on heaven's clock has sounded.*** The day and hour decreed in eternity past had come. The predetermined plan of God has reached its apex and the hour of redemption has arrived!

What transpired in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was seized and arrested and what followed in his trial and scourging and eventual crucifixion didn't catch him or his Father by surprise. This was the hour for which he had been sent, and born of a virgin, and lived his sinless life. Jesus himself said earlier in John 12:27,

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour'" (John 12:27).

This, then, is THE hour of human history, unlike all other momentous hours that had preceded and unlike all that followed. This is THE HOUR that serves as the hinge, as it were, on which all of human history turns. It is THE climactic moment. Everything from Genesis 1:1 leads up to THIS hour. All of OT prophecy had looked forward to it, and we today, some 2,000 years later, look backward to it.

But never think of God's sovereign control over this "hour" as merely a theological idea. Jesus wanted his disciples to hear him say these words to the Father because he knew how distressed and frightened they were by what was about to happen. On numerous occasions in the upper room discourse of John 13-17 Jesus has mentioned their troubled and fearful hearts:

"Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1).

"Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27).

"But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:6).

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

It's as if Jesus is saying to them and to us: "Whatever trouble you may encounter, whatever confusion may fill your hearts, whatever pain you may endure, whatever frustration clouds your thinking, don't ever forget that your God and heavenly Father is in complete control. He is in control of the horrific events about to come my way, and he is no less in control of the horrific events that may come your way."

The best and most effective remedy for fear and uncertainty is a healthy dose of the sovereignty of God! So don't let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Your loving, all-wise heavenly Father is in complete control. Whatever he permits or decrees, you can rest assured that it is designed for your ultimate spiritual good, even if in the immediate present it is unbearably painful and perplexing.

I said earlier that this sovereign control over the life and death of Jesus is not something that God restricts to his eternal Son. It is no less true in God's relationship to you. In Psalm 139:16, David declared this concerning the sovereignty of God over his life in the womb and his destiny in the tomb:

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

David was conceived and born at the precise "hour" God had ordained for him, and he would die not one day earlier or later than the "hour" God had decreed. This applies equally to all of us. Every one of the "days" formed for you and me have been written in God's book. I can only speak for myself but I find that indescribably comforting and encouraging. I would much rather my life and death be in the hands of a loving and sovereign God than subject to the elusive whims of chance and so-called "luck".

(2) The second glorious truth I want you to see today is actually the first of many prayer requests that Jesus makes to his heavenly Father. He says in v. 1, "Father, the hour has come, [therefore] glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." He repeats this request in greater detail in vv. 4-5. There he says,

"I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:4-5).

Note first of all the clear and unmistakable truth that ***Jesus Christ did not begin to exist when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God the Son, the Second Person of the Triune Godhead, did not have a beginning. He did not start to be. There was never a time when he was not. There was never a point at which he leapt into being. He simply and eternally always is.***

We see this in the latter half of v. 5. The glory for which Jesus prays is the glory that he had with the Father before the world ever existed. The Son of God who became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth is eternally pre-existent. Everyone in this room and everyone who will ever hear the words of my mouth began to be. We all were at one time non-existent. Not God the Son. Not the glorious second person of the Trinity who became human in Jesus.

Now, catch your breath, and consider what it is that Jesus prays for the Father to do. He asks the Father to “glorify” his “Son [in order] that the Son may glorify” the Father. He says it again in v. 5. Jesus brought honor and praise to the Father by doing everything his Father sent him to do. And what did he send him to do? We’ll answer that question next week, but for now note what he says in v. 2. He came “to give eternal life to all whom” the Father elected or chose before the foundation of the world. Those whom the Father has “given” to the Son, the Son has given to them eternal life. In this way the Son glorified the Father.

And now Jesus in turn asks that the Father would once again honor and bring glory to the Son in the Father’s presence, just as it was before the world ever existed. God the Son lived in glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever before this world had ever seen the light of day. What brilliance and radiance and joy and majesty that glory must have been. But Jesus, in order that he might give eternal life to you and me, to everyone whom the Father had given to the Son, left behind that glory. He turned from the symphonic praise of myriads of angels to the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep in a stable in Bethlehem.

The Apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Philippians:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5-8).

Notice closely: this “glory” that the Son had with the Father in eternity past is here called existing “in the form of God” and being “equal with God”. Yet for our sakes, that we might have eternal life and know God, he emptied himself by taking the form of a human being.

Glory Gone, Gained, Given

There is a sense, then, in which we might speak of **glory gone, gained, and given**. You’ll notice that Jesus says that he “had” this glory with the Father before the world began (past tense). For him to speak this way implies that something happened to affect or obscure this glory. And we know what it was that happened. God the Son didn’t cease to be God in order to become a man. But he did cease to display his glory as God precisely in order that he might become one of us, a human being. The result was that people who looked at Jesus during his time on earth said: “Who is this fellow? Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” (Mark 6:3).

Thus we see glory “*gone*”. But we also see glory “*gained*”. Just as Jesus here prays that the Father would restore to him the glory he once had, we know that he “gained” it when the Father raised him from the dead and exalted him to the right hand of the majesty on high.

But we also see glory “*given*.” Look at John 17:22. There Jesus says:

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22).

Now this is truly mind-blowing! Jesus appears to be saying that the very glory or radiant beauty and transcendent majesty of God himself is in some sense given to or experienced by broken, weak, struggling, men and women like you and me. Could Jesus be referring to the “glory” that will be ours when we are “glorified” at his second coming? No. Because the possession and experience of this glory is what makes possible our unity with one another now. Therefore the glory must be something we have now. What could it be?

There are several answers. **First**, as strange as it sounds, we experience the reality of God’s glory when we endure humiliation and suffering even as Jesus did. When we are persecuted for our commitment to Christ, God’s glory rests upon us! Listen to how Peter put it:

“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:14).

As much as this runs counter to common sense, we know that the glory of Jesus himself was revealed most clearly in his willingness to endure unjust persecution and suffering, even to death on the cross.

Second, I think the “glory” of God that is ours now may well be linked with what Jesus said in v. 3. There he said that the eternal life we possess is primarily experienced in knowing God. To know God is to enter into the experience of his glory even now.

Third, the primary way in which we experience now the glory of God is in the fact that the Triune God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lives inside us! Back in John 14:23 Jesus made this promise: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” God’s glory is God himself living inside his children! That blinding and majestic glory that resided above the ark of the covenant during the time of the Old Testament, what is known as the Shekinah glory of God, now lives in us!

May I remind you of what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:8? There he said that although we can't see Jesus now, we can still love him and believe in him and "rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory." In other words, the joy that is ours in knowing God and being indwelt and empowered by God and enjoying God and resting satisfied in God ***is not just any kind of joy . . . it is "glorified" joy, joy that is immersed in and saturated by the very glory of God himself.***

Does that sound like your experience? If not, it can be, today!

God's Pursuit of His Own Glory and His Love for Us are not Distinct!

Now let's come back to John 17. Someone could easily read vv. 1, 4-5 and think that God is ***a colossal egomaniac***. After all, the first and all-consuming request of Jesus is that the Father glorify him so that he can also glorify the Father. At first hearing, ***they sound rather self-absorbed***. It almost seems as if the only thing God cares about is himself, his glory, his fame, his praise. ***But this zeal of the Father and Son for their own glory, far from being selfish and egomaniacal, is the most tender-hearted, merciful, loving, and gracious thing that God could ever do for sinners like you and me.***

You've heard me preach this countless times before, but I fear that many do not as yet grasp the truth of it. So listen again to what I believe alone accounts for and explains the words of Jesus here. I've decided to explain this by putting into the mouth of Jesus what I think is in his heart as he prays this prayer:

"Child of God, let me tell you how much I love you. I could show my love by giving you perfect physical health and never a day of sickness. I could show you my love by giving you more money than you could ever find time to count or to spend. I could show you my love by stirring the hearts of others to honor you and praise you. I could transport you into the distant galaxies, far beyond what the Hubble Telescope could see, and show you dimensions of space that would blow your mind. But as great and wonderful as those things are, you would always live in doubt as to whether or not I *really* love you, until such time as I give you that one gift that would make physical health and monetary wealth and everything else look and smell like rubbish. ***You will never how much I really love you until I've given you . . . Me, to see, savor, and be satisfied forever!***"

And so, Jesus then turns to his Father and prays this:

"Father, I know you love your children without limit, even as I do. So let's demonstrate our deep and everlasting love for them in the highest and most glorious way possible, by enthraling them with the most

beautiful things they could ever behold. Let's shower them with the most intense and intimate affection possible by satisfying their souls with the most blessed and majestic vision and knowledge that is available in this universe. Of course, Father, I'm talking about you and me and the Spirit. I'm talking about giving these hell-deserving sinners ourselves. I'm talking about showing them our grandeur and opening their hearts to sense and feel the incomparable glory that we, the Triune God of Scripture, alone embody and possess. For there is no greater love that the lover can show to the beloved than to open their eyes and hearts and minds to the splendor of God and empowering them to savor and enjoy and delight in who we are."

The point is this. For God to love you and me he must give us, at great cost to himself, the most beautiful and majestic and all-satisfying thing in the universe. ***To give to the beloved whatever it is that will most fully and eternally satisfy their hearts and bring them the greatest imaginable joy. That is love!***

And the one experience that will, more than anything else, satisfy our souls and enthrall our minds and inflame our affections and expand our joy and delight is the experience and enjoyment of God and his glory! If God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are to love us they *must* pursue their own glory in order that they might bring us into the soul-satisfying experience of enjoying it and resting in it and being captivated by it and declaring it to others in praise and celebration and thanksgiving.

Thus, far from it being sinful, selfish megalomania for Jesus to pray in this way, this is the way he loves us. For in pursuing and demonstrating and imparting their glory to us they are giving us the greatest gift in all the universe, and in this way are loving us to the highest degree possible. That is why I keep on saying to you that for God to pursue his glory and for God to love you passionately are not separable or distinct pursuits. They are one and the same.