

“Christians in the World”

John 17:6-19

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Text Comment

Jesus is about to make certain requests of his Father on behalf of his disciples. He therefore begins by setting forth the reasons why he is praying for them – and not for others – and why his Father should grant his request. That, in itself, is a lesson for us in how to pray.

- v.6 They were part of the mass of sinful humanity – the world – just as sinful as the rest. But they were also chosen of the Father and had been given to the Son to save before he ever came into the world. To these people, then, Jesus revealed the Father and they responded in faith and obedience to his Word. Remember what Jesus had said earlier: “All that the Father gives me will come to me...” This is not the only place, by the way, where faith is described as obedience in the New Testament. All people are obliged to believe the truth, to refuse to do so is not an honest mistake but an act of rebellion. Hard as that is to face, it is the truth.
- v.8 There was much they did not yet understand or understand fully, but they did have by now the deep conviction that Jesus came from God and that what he spoke was the Word of God.
- v.10 Another of these statements, of which we have read a number in the Gospel to this point, in which the Lord Jesus identifies himself closely with the Father.
- v.12 The final reason for his appeal on behalf of his disciples is that he is leaving them. The prayer that his disciples may be one, that they may live in the loving unity of the Father and the Son, anticipates the more extensive petition for unity in vv. 20-23. The reference to Judas was necessary – remember this is a prayer that is being overheard – because, of course, there was one of the twelve that had left Jesus. But, of course, it only *appears* that he was lost. In fact, he was never one of those the Father had given to Jesus and long before the Scripture had indicated that there would be a false friend in the Messiah’s company (Ps. 41:9).
- v.15 The Lord Jesus will have delivered a fatal blow to the Devil by his death and resurrection, but that will not mean that he can no longer harry and harm the Lord’s disciples. John tells us in 1 John 5:19 that this world is, to some important extent, still under the control of the Evil One.
- v.17 “Sanctify” means to set something or someone apart to God, to serve God and his purposes alone.

We pointed out, some months ago, as we began our consideration of the Upper Room Discourse, which begins, as you remember, in chapter 13, that the word “world” is a key term in the

discourse, occurring 40 times in chapters 13-17. In the Lord's prayer, here in chapter 17, the word *world*, the Greek *kosmos*, occurs 18 times. And, without a doubt, it is the key term in these verses we have read.

The disciples were given to the Son *out of the world*;
 The Lord Jesus was not praying *for the world* but for them;
 He is *leaving the world* but they will continue to live *in the world*;
 The *world has hated them* because they are not *of the world*;
 He does not pray that they be taken *out of the world* but
 Protected *in the world*;
 They are not *of the world*; but
 The Lord has sent them *into the world*.

What we have revealed here is the cosmic, spiritual nature of the difference between the church and the world and the opposition of the world to the church. This is *world* as it has already been used in the Gospel of John, as a term indicating the sinful mass of humanity in rebellion against God. There are no believers, no Christians in the world in this sense. To become a Christian one must leave the world. The difference and the opposition between the kingdom of God and the world was revealed in the clearest terms in the life, the ministry, and the death of the Lord Jesus – the world hated him and murdered him –, and it will continue to be revealed in the life of his disciples in the world. In order to live forever, someone must be called *out of the world*. That happens only if God the Father has given that person to the Son to save. Once that person, man or woman, boy or girl, becomes a follower of Jesus Christ he or she must live *in this world* even though he or she no longer belongs *to the world*. In fact, the world will hate and oppose Christians because they do not belong to it. And, yet, at the same time, Christians have a mission *to the world*, to call out of it those who will believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. There is revealed, in all these different ways, a vast gulf fixed between the true Christian church and the world. If someone becomes a follower of Jesus, *in the very nature of the case*, that person must leave the world, abandon it as his or her home or community. But, having turned his back on the world he must still live in it, he must make his life, she must make hers in the midst of that community of human beings in rebellion against God. And they must seek to minister the Word of God to that unbelieving humanity. Christ's prayer, in effect, is that the Father would enable his disciples to live in the world while not being of the world, to endure its scorn while still seeking to save it in Christ's name. As one commentator sums up the ideas of this prayer and the lesson that we are to learn from overhearing it:

“The Christians' task, then, is not to be withdrawn from the world, nor to be confused with the world...but to remain in the world, maintaining witness to the truth by the help of the [Holy Spirit], and absorbing all the malice that the world can muster, finally protected by the Father himself, in response to the prayer of Jesus.” [Carson, 565]

Now all of this is fundamental to a Christian's sense of himself or herself. We all define ourselves and come to understand ourselves in relation to others and to other things. We are born into a family and learn to know ourselves first as the son or the daughter of our parents, the brother or sister of our siblings, the grandchildren of our grandparents, and so on. As we grow

up, the relationships that identify us and define our lives multiply. We are someone who lives in this town, this state, this nation, goes to this school, worships at this church, is employed in this company, has these friends, lives in this neighborhood, and on and on. And, as a Christian, fundamental to that sense of self, that definition of our lives, is that though we live in this world, we don't belong to it, we are aliens, strangers, passers-through. Ours is a different kingdom, a different home, a different community.

The problem for us here, however, is that all of this can only be seen and felt by faith. This was true for a long time in the Lord's ministry. The world seemed at first to love him. It crowded around him and sang his praises. Only at the last did its true colors appear. And, in the same way, it can be difficult for us today to see the chasm that separates the true follower of Christ from the world.

Sight seems to teach us that we are as much in the world and of the world as anyone else. We look like the people of the world, we speak in many ways like them, we work as they do, live in similar homes, eat the same food, work at the same jobs, even entertain ourselves with the same diversions. It is hard to believe and to remember that there are, really, these two warring kingdoms, these two utterly incompatible communities, and that a real Christian has no share at all in this world. He or she has come out of it, they turned their backs on it, because the Father in heaven drew them out, and because the Son saved them out of the world.

It is especially hard for us to believe that the world has such an antipathy for the church, for the followers of Christ, when we mix as easily with them as we do – in the community and at work – when we share so much of our lives in common. This is made the more difficult to believe by the fact that the people of the world do so many things that we admire, speak in so many ways with which we agree, make us laugh, or make us stand to our feet to applaud. What is more, let's be honest, there are any number of Christians we admire less than we admire some of the people of the world, we like less, we like less to be around. It isn't for nothing that someone said that "Christians are an acquired taste." Many of them are frankly less impressive and less pleasing to us than some folk who belong to the world. And, still further, there are Christians, at least people taken to be Christians, who are, in fact, citizens of the world, a fifth column within the kingdom of God. The Lord makes a point of mentioning Judas here and reminds us that not only does the church mix with the world, but the world mixes with the church! Making it even more difficult to see the difference between the world and the church are those men and women of the world who live in the church and are taken by us to belong to her. For most of these years the world was among the twelve disciples in the person of Judas and they didn't know it or recognize it. No, sight and sense will never reveal the philosophy of life that Jesus Christ has revealed in his wonderful prayer nor the vast distance that separates the followers of Christ from the world.

Several weeks ago I was dragooned into refereeing a soccer match at Stadium High School. The referee whom the league was to have supplied, for whatever reason, did not appear and as the only adult present with some experience I was enlisted. And so there I was in my street clothes, trotting as referees do, amidst the swirling action of the soccer field. Boys all around me, chirping at one another, cussing at one another, yelling their advice or, too often, their criticism at their teammates, all that one hears on the soccer field but rarely is one able to hear in the

stands. And here am I, telling one fellow why I called him for a foul, warning another that I had let him get away with this or that but wouldn't the next time, telling the boys to play on because the offense was minor or because to stop play would have been to the advantage of the team that had committed the foul, explaining to another who complained that I had not called what he felt clearly was a foul that life was full of many disappointments and that we must learn to live with them.

Back and forth we went, up and down the field, constant motion. They certainly had no idea that I was a Christian, still less that I was a Christian minister, and, had they known, I doubt they would have given it a second thought. My son was on the field and perhaps, for all I know, there was another Christian boy on one team or the other, perhaps even several. Someone else who long ages past had been given by the Father to the Son from out of the world. But one couldn't pick the Christians out of the rest by anything that would have been obvious to an observer of that game. Constant and complete mixture was what anyone would see. And that seems to me to be something of a parable of the Christian and the Christian church amidst the world.

The Great Awakening evangelist, Rowland Hill, was once criticized for preaching sovereign grace and divine election on the one hand while still exhorting sinners to repent. He was told that he should preach repentance only to the elect. He replied that if his critic would put a chalk-mark on all the elect, he would preach only to them! He was being facetious, of course, but he was reminding the man that the difference between the elect and the world cannot be seen by the eye, at least not in such ways as makes that difference clear and obvious to anyone.

Or take our group that attended the baseball game last Wednesday night. Sitting there, or standing up to cheer the Mariners like all the other folk around them, thousands upon thousands of folk around them. In the sense in which the Lord Jesus distinguishes his followers from the world, our folk at Safeco field last Wednesday night were invisible as a separate community, separate from, indeed inflexibly and eternally at odds with the world. It would not have appeared to anyone that this one group was as distinct from the crowds around it as light from darkness, life from death, good from evil. Only faith can see this, only faith knows and feels that "apartness." This is a holy and proper *apartheid*, not the evil *apartheid* they knew not long ago in South Africa, because in this separateness, in this distinctness, there remains on the part of the Christians a commitment to the salvation, the welfare of the world out of which they have come. The world may hate them, but they do not hate the world; on the contrary, they seek its salvation. By God's grace they were drawn out of the world and the spirit of grace within them hopes the same for many others who remain as yet within the world. For, as the Lord will say later in this prayer, in v. 20, there are many of the Father's chosen yet to be called out of the world.

It is a striking fact that the Lord's prayer for his disciples was heard and answered so immediately upon his departure from the world and ascension to the Right Hand. Just as he said, he had sent them into the world, and his disciples began making their way out into that world of unbelieving humanity which, seemingly, had no interest in the living God or his son, Jesus Christ. Indeed, they were, by and large, hostile to the message the Christians brought and showed their hatred of it and of those who brought it in open ways. Over and again in the Book of Acts and in the history of early Christianity we find the Father protecting the followers of Christ from the hostility of the world just as the Son had prayed he would. And, in short order,

tens of thousands of people who had all their lives belonged to the world, began streaming out of it into the church, causing the world still more to gnash its teeth against the Christians and their message.

And still today we stand under this prayer and learn from it what the Lord's will is for us his people. What he asked on our behalf from the Father is what we must seek both in prayer and obedience ourselves. And we must seek it both in love for Jesus Christ and in imitation of him. For he is asking nothing of us but what he did for us!

Think of the Lord Jesus and the world. He came to be, John tells us in chapter 4, "the Savior of the world." And see how he lived amidst the world. He lived in such a way that he made many friends among the people of the world. They invited him to their homes and they felt it was an honor when he could accept. They flocked to hear him preach and, of course, were amazed at his marvelous deeds, his miracles. They were touched by his compassion, his sympathy, his tender feeling. They could easily see him as their king!

Only, only at the end when it became entirely clear to them what Jesus was claiming about himself and what he was requiring of them – their faith and the submission of their lives – did the yawning chasm that separates the world from Christ come into view. When he says, in v. 14 that he was not "of the world" and that we who follow him are not either, he does not mean that he did not have association with the world, that he did not have friendship with people of the world, and was not always trying to win the world. He means only that he did not partake of their unbelieving spirit and did not live by their principle of rebellion against God. It is exactly what Paul would later describe as being *in* the world but not *of* the world. There is no idea of a Christian ghetto here, but of Christians living in the world and taking the Father's *word* to the world while being themselves not of the world.

Not easy – this being in the world but not of the world; living among people who do not believe in Christ and who do not live their lives in submission to him while being ourselves people whose entire life and living is dominated by our faith in and loyalty to the Lord Christ – but then, that is the entire point of the prayer!

The fact that he prays for them in just these ways indicates that the grace and help and power of God will be necessary if we are to live in the world without being of the world, if we are to be protected from the world while attempting to win the world. Just as he prayed for what he commanded, so we must pray for the very things we are committed to be and to do in obedience to him.

Look at your life. I guarantee you, if you are an earnest Christian, you will find rebuke, and summons and encouragement all compact in your Savior's prayer.

The rebuke will come from this so perfectly clear picture of what a Christian is to be and do. Who here is ready to say that he or she has lived in the world without being compromised by the world, that we have not been beguiled by the world or drawn away by the world from the true purpose of our lives? Who here is not rebuked by the way in which the Savior describes us as out of the world, not of the world, though in the world, and sent to the world? Who here feels

that that is a fully accurate description of himself or herself. If you are a Christian it is a description of you, to be sure, but how well have we lived up to that description? That is the question and in that is the rebuke.

The summons will come from this wonderfully clear way of speaking about the Christian life in contradistinction from the world. *Out of the world, in the world, not of the world, to and for the world.* Write that over again in your heart, in your journal or diary, beside your name in the front of your Bible: *Out of the world, in the world, not of the world, to and for the world.* So was our Savior for us and our salvation, for we were once the world. And so must we be for his sake and for the sake of the world. Is there any part of our life that does not become clearer to us, even more inspiring and attractive to us, when we write over it: *Out of the world, in the world, not of the world, to and for the world?* Think of your temptations, your challenges, your opportunities, even your manifold blessings and see if their meaning and their purpose and your way forward through them is not made clearer and if you are not inspired in respect to them simply by seeing them in terms of our Savior's prayer: *Out of the world, in the world, not of the world, to and for the world.*

The encouragement will come from the fact that the Lord knew it would be difficult to live in the world while remaining apart from its spirit and principle, that it would be difficult to face the hostility of the world when you sought to take the Word of God to the world. He knew it would be difficult, *which is why he prayed for his disciples and why he prays for us still today!* There is nothing in all of human life so difficult as to be *out of the world, in the world, not of the world, to and for the world* at one and the same time. So difficult as to be impossible apart from the help of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

The encouragement will come from the fact that the reasons the Lord advanced for his Father to hear and answer his prayer on our behalf are so invincible. Of course the loving Father will hear and answer his beloved Son, who has been so staggeringly faithful to the terribly hard assignment his Father gave him. How encouraging to rest our hope of success in life as Christians not on our own wit or wisdom or fortitude or perseverance, but upon the perfect achievement of the Son of God and his prayer for us based squarely on that achievement. Holy Father, hear the prayer of your Son and our prayers in imitation of his!