

**“What Is the Goal?”**  
**John 17:1-5**  
**January 3, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

This morning we return to the Gospel of John.

Our plan is to continue in John from now through the seasons of Lent and Easter and then to come to the end of John’s gospel in May.

This morning we come to the beginning of what has traditionally been referred to as Jesus’s “High Priestly Prayer” – his prayer at the end of his instruction to his disciples in chapters thirteen through sixteen, and right before his arrest in chapter eighteen and crucifixion in chapter nineteen.

With that in mind, we turn to John 17:1-5.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

<sup>17:1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,  
that we may live and keep your word.  
Open our eyes, that we may behold  
wondrous things out of your word.  
Let your testimonies be our delight,  
and our chief counselors.  
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

## **INTRODUCTION**

We come this morning to the beginning of the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in the New Testament.

And while Jesus's prayers certainly were true prayers to God the Father, they were also meant to be instructional for us. [Augustine, CIV.2] Jesus says as much in John 11:42. Jesus's prayers are prayers – but they are also more than that. They are instruction, proclamation, and even revelation. [Carson, 552]

And that is especially the case here in John 17.

Jesus is praying. He is speaking to God the Father.

But he is also speaking for the instruction of the disciples – both those who were with him then, and those who were to come centuries later.

And so, let us listen to his words, spoken for our benefit, and let us learn.

And let us learn by asking three questions about what Jesus says in these verses:

First, we'll ask: What is the goal of Christianity?

Then, once we've answered that question, we'll ask about that goal: *Where* do we find it? And: *How* do we obtain it?

So:

*What* is the goal?

*Where* do we find it? And,

*How* do we obtain it?

## **WHAT IS THE GOAL OF CHRISTIANITY?**

So, first: What is the goal of the Christian life? What is the goal of Christianity?

And in a sense Jesus answers that question in verse two: the goal is eternal life.

Our text this morning says that Jesus came to give eternal life. It is for Jesus's mission of giving eternal life that God the Father has given him authority, we read in verse two. It is in giving eternal life to his people that Jesus glorifies the Father, as we read in verse four. It is in response to the Son's work of giving eternal life that the Father will glorify the Son, as we read in verse five. That is the work that the Father has given to the Son to accomplish.

So there it is. The answer to our first question. What is the goal of Christianity? That we might have eternal life.

Good. We can move on to question number two, right?

Well ... not so fast.

Because in many ways that just leads us to another question.

The goal of Christianity is eternal life. But what is eternal life?

And before we get to the answer Jesus gives us, we should stop and consider the kind of answers that are often given or assumed for this question. Because it is common for us and for others to assume certain answers to this question that are actually quite different from Jesus's answer.

And so I want to consider first two categories of common answers, and then go on to Jesus's answer.

So: What is eternal life?

The first kind of common answer assumes that to get eternal life is to *get something*. It assumes that to get eternal life is to *get something*.

And we might as well start with the most common version of this: most people think of eternal life as getting a place in heaven. They think of it as getting a spot in paradise – of being given admission into a place where everything is good, and then getting to stay there, perfectly happy, forever. The details may vary, but that is what many of us think of as eternal life.

What we should recognize is that that definition means that eternal life is fundamentally a *thing* that we *get*. It is a *place* where we get to dwell, and a *power* to live forever, and maybe also an *upgrade* in our body and soul so that we will live and act there as we should.

I think that's how most Christians think of eternal life.

What's interesting is that that's not how Jesus defines it here.

We'll get to Jesus's definition in a moment, but before we do, we should consider one other common answer.

Because others, who don't so much think of eternal life as *getting something*, will think instead of eternal life as *becoming something*.

For them, eternal life is not primarily something you get, but *someone you become*. Eternal life is about a change in you.

And how they define that change might vary.

For some it is about becoming good: becoming better people – more loving people, more spiritual people, more kind and caring people, more holy people, and *that* is eternal life.

For others, it is about becoming more joyful – more content. We become content here and now, we become more joyful people in all circumstances, and *that* is eternal life.

The details might vary, but for them eternal life is about some form of self-improvement.

And so, for some, eternal life is primarily about something you get; for others, it is primarily about someone you become.

What does it tend to be for you?

And I don't mean, what's the answer you'd give on a theological exam, but what is your functional answer – the answer you assume without thinking about it? What do you tend to think of as the goal of Christianity – as the goal of your spiritual pursuits? What do you tend to think of as eternal life? Is it primarily *something* you *get*, like immortality or a future address in paradise? Is it primarily *someone* you *become* – someone more good, someone more content, someone more joyful?

Now, we should be clear here: Jesus tells us that eternal life does lead to immortality. He tells us that eternal life does lead to a permanent residence in the paradise of the new heaven and the new earth. He also tells us that eternal life will lead to us being perfectly good, perfectly loving, perfectly content, and perfectly joyful.

Jesus tells us that eternal life will produce all of those things ... but he doesn't use any of those things here to define eternal life. And that's important.

In other words, those things are the out-workings of eternal life, but they are not the heart of eternal life. They are not the definition of eternal life. They are the fruits of eternal life, but not the root of eternal life.

So what is the heart of eternal life? What is the goal of Christianity? What is supposed to be the goal of all spirituality – of all our spiritual pursuits?

Jesus tells us in verse three.

Speaking to God the Father, Jesus says “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Eternal life – the goal of Christianity, the goal of all right spiritual pursuits – Jesus says is to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.

And we often get that wrong.

Why do we often get that wrong?

Well, there are a few reasons.

First of all, we tend to think of eternal life as a thing or a concept instead of thinking of it in relational terms. We can tend to do with “eternal life” what one theologian points out we also tend to do with the concept of “grace”: we take a relational concept and we turn it into an object in itself.

And so, we can sometimes talk about “grace” as if it is a “force” or an “energy” or a fine substance – “a kind of fluid that can be poured into human hearts.” But that's not what grace is in the Bible. “In Scripture, ‘grace’ means essentially God's personal favor.” Grace is not a substance, but a quality in a relationship. Grace is not a *thing* we receive, but it is favor with God. [Leithart, 17-18]

In a very similar way, Jesus tells us here that eternal life is not fundamentally a kind of energy we possess, or a special kind of goodness or immortality that is injected into our hearts – eternal life

is not primarily about what we get or what we become: it is primarily about who we know. Eternal life, Jesus says, is to know God: to know God the Father, and to know God the Son.

Because Jesus doesn't say here that to know God *brings* eternal life. He says that to know God *is* eternal life. And there's a significant difference between those two things. [Morris, 720 n.13]

Eternal life is knowledge of God, the Eternal One. [Carson, 556] And every other spiritual good flows from that. Every other spiritual good comes from that. But eternal life itself is to know God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus came to give eternal life. Which means that Jesus came so that we might know God as he truly is. That was the goal of his coming.

Which should lead us to ask ourselves a question: That was Jesus's goal. Is that our goal too?

Whether you are a Christian or not, you need to ask yourself: What, ultimately, is the goal of your spiritual pursuits? What is the goal of your spiritual practices? What are you seeking? What are you primarily aimed at?

Is it happiness? Is it joy? Is it moral improvement? Is it personal growth? Is it peace? Is it freedom from fear, freedom from death – the hope of living forever in heaven?

Jesus tells us here that if your ultimate goal, if the primary thing you're aiming for, is anything other than to know the only true God, then you are aiming for the wrong thing.

Now – the thing you're aiming for might be good. It might be very good. In fact, all of the things I just listed a minute ago are good things. And all of them are the fruit of eternal life. But none of them are eternal life itself. And so none of them are worthy of being the heart of our personal and spiritual pursuits. The only thing worthy of that – the only thing worthy of being our ultimate goal, of being the primary aim of our hearts, our souls, and our lives – is the knowledge of God as he truly is.

That's the first thing we see here.

What is the goal of Christianity? What is the goal of our spiritual lives?

That we would know God as he truly is.

That's the first thing Jesus tells us.

That's the goal.

## **WHERE DO WE FIND IT?**

Which leads us to our second question: Where do we find it? Where do we find this knowledge of God as he truly is?

And as we did before, it's probably best for us to start with two common answers before we get to the answer Jesus gives us in our text.

So, what are two common views on how we can find true knowledge of God?

Well one common view is to assume that we can figure it out ourselves. And this assumption can take a number of forms, among Christians and non-Christians alike. But whatever form it takes, it means assuming that knowledge of God is naturally within our reach.

For some that means looking to your heart. You look into your heart – to what you think is right or wrong ... to what you think is good or bad – and you assume that, whatever you find in your heart, *that* must be (more or less) what God thinks too. You look into your heart and you find what seems good and right to you, and you assume that God must agree with that.

For others it means more looking to your gut. If looking to your heart is more proactive, something we intentionally seek out, looking to our gut might be more reactive – responding on a gut level to different possibilities. It's less like an introspective reflection and more like a hunch. As you deal with different questions or situations you find yourself responding to different possibilities and reflexively thinking “Well, God would never think *that*. God would never want *that*. God, of course, wants everyone to be like *that*.” And if asked how you know that, you couldn't give much of an explanation except that you know it in your gut. It's a deeply rooted spiritual hunch.

For others – and this may be a bit more common in our Presbyterian circles – you don't look so much to your heart or your hunches; you look to your head. You think long and hard. And you determine what is good and what is best. And since God must want what is good and what is best, you conclude that you have figured out what God likes, and therefore what God is like. You trust your head.

Still for others, it's not your head or your heart or your hunches – it's your heroes: Those you look up to. Maybe it's a public figure – a public speaker, or activist, or thinker – and you admire them, and look up to them, and you look to them to hear or to see what God is like. Or maybe your heroes tend to be closer to home – someone you know, who's had a serious impact on your life. Maybe it's an individual, or a couple, or a community – but you look to them, and you trust what they will tell you and model for you about God.

Where do you tend to look for knowledge of God? For knowledge of what God is like – what he loves and hates, what he wants and what he does? Is it your heart? Your head? Your hunches? Your heroes?

We each tend towards one of these things – Christians and non-Christians alike. But the first thing – the most obvious thing – we should see about each one, is that none of them – none of the things we tend to look to – are God himself.

Each one assumes that we can figure it out ourselves – that such knowledge of God is naturally within our reach, without us ever having to ask God himself.

And so it leads to a situation where we are more likely to declare what God is like, than to turn to God himself in order to be told what he is like.

Have you ever had someone do that to you?

Have you ever been in a situation where someone, whom you have some level of relationship with, starts to talk about you ... and as they do, it begins to dawn on you that they don't really know you ... but they think they do? They are really confident that they've got you figured out – they confidently explain to you or to someone else what you like or what you don't like, or what your goals are, or what your motivations are, or what your temperament is – and they are just wrong? And they're not even asking you what you think – they're just assuming they are right ... but they're not?

If that's happened to you ... how did that make you feel?

It felt lonely ... right? It makes you feel really distant from that person. And the reason you feel distant from that person is because you *are* distant from that person. There is real relational breakdown.

How serious that is, of course, depends on how serious the relationship is. If it's just an acquaintance it might not be that big of a deal. But if it's a closer friend, it hurts more. If it's a trusted confidant it can hurt deeply. If it's a parent, or a child, or a spouse, it can be devastating.

Because such an interaction is a sign of foundational relational breakdown.

Because the problem is not just that they don't know you – plenty of people don't know you. It's first that they don't know you when they should know you ... because you had shared yourself with them ... but they clearly didn't really hear you.

But it's not only that – it's not only a failure to listen. Because if they just failed to listen, and that was all, then they would still know that they didn't know you and they could still seek to know you. But that's not what they're doing. Because they don't think they need to. They think they already understand you. They think they know you. But they don't. They're just projecting their own ideas onto you. And who knows where they got those ideas, but it wasn't from you. And so the relationship is broken. And you feel estranged from them. And you feel hurt and lonely.

It's a terrible feeling.

And we do it to God all the time.

We do it to God all the time. Wherever we may look – whether to our heart, or our head, or our hunches, or our heroes – when we decide we know God and we tell ourselves what God is like, and we tell others what God is like, and maybe we even tell God what God is like ... when we do that we are not listening to God himself, but we are projecting our own ideas onto him.

And when we do that, God knows what we are doing. He sees it clearly. The question is: Do we?

Often we are blind to this tendency in ourselves. But it can be easier to see it in others. It can be easier to see how others are projecting their own ideas onto God. And when we see a lot of this, it can lead to another common answer to the question of where we can find the knowledge of God. And that other common answer is: Nowhere.

It's nowhere to be found.

And those who come to that conclusion tend to give up on the whole question of God and spirituality. They brush it aside. They decide that anyone who claims to know God is just projecting their own ideas onto him.

But this is really just another version of the same thing. Because it also assumes that if God can be known, then such knowledge must be naturally within our reach. And if it's not, then it must be impossible to receive it.

But that doesn't make any sense. Just because a lot of people project their own caricatures onto someone does not mean that that person doesn't exist or that they can't be known. It just means that such caricatures are not a reliable way to know someone.

But anyone can be known by us if that person chooses to tell us themselves who they are – if they choose to reveal themselves to us.

And in our text this morning Jesus tells us that that is exactly what he came to do.

And he can do that in a way that no other spiritual hero can. Because he's not just a spiritual hero. He is God himself.

He says as much in verse five.

He says that he was with God, in glory, before creation existed. Before anything was created, Jesus was. Because, as the Apostle John told us at the very beginning of this Gospel, in the beginning Jesus was with God, and in the beginning Jesus was God.

God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons, one God, has existed from all eternity. And in Jesus, God the Son has come to us in the flesh. And because he himself is God, he is able to reveal God to us as no creature ever could.

And in saying even that, we quickly begin to see that the God Jesus reveals to us is not just some vague, abstract deity, or some mirror projection of ourselves. He is something we never would have imagined. He is personal. He is tri-personal. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons, one God – a God of both unity and diversity. A God we would never come up with ourselves. A God who, to be known, would need to reveal himself to us. And that is what he has done in Jesus Christ.

That is what Jesus says here. It's what he says in verse three. He makes it clear that we cannot have the knowledge of God without the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The two cannot be separated. [Carson, 556; Morris, 720]

Which means that if we want to know God, then we need to look to Jesus.

And how do we do that?

We look to him in the Scriptures. In fact, we look to him in *all* the Scriptures.

And that is important.

Because, of course, we see Jesus as we look at the Gospels, like here in John. But the revelation of Jesus – and therefore the revelation of God – is not limited to the four Gospels.

In Luke 28, Jesus himself says that Moses and the Prophets – that the entire Old Testament – spoke about him – spoke about Jesus.

In the book of Jude, Jude says that it was Jesus who led Israel out of Egypt.

Which means that whenever God is at work in the Scriptures, Jesus is at work. And so, Jesus is revealed on every page of the Bible. Which means that God is revealed on every page of the Bible.

And so, if we want eternal life – if we want to know God – then we must look to Jesus Christ, as he is revealed throughout the Christian Scriptures.

For it is in Jesus that God has revealed himself. It is in Jesus that God has made himself known to us.

That is the answer to our second question.

## **HOW DO WE OBTAIN IT?**

Which leads us to our third question: How do we obtain it?

How do we then obtain the knowledge of God?

We know what we need, which is to know God. We know where to find it: which is in Jesus. Now, how do we obtain it – how do we lay hold of it so that we ourselves know God?

And here, once again, we have a tendency to answer badly. Because far too often we once again fail to acknowledge the relational nature of all of this. And this is the third time we see that tendency.

First, we tend to treat eternal life as an object that we can acquire, when really it is a relationship – a relationship of knowing the only true God.

Second, we tend to try to find the knowledge of God in an abstract way, rather than in a relational way. We tend to treat God more like a math problem or a list of facts, rather than as a person – as three persons – who must reveal themselves to us in relationship.

And then third, when we come to the question of how we receive it – how we receive the knowledge of God after failing to relate rightly to God for so long – we once again treat it as a technical problem instead of as a relational problem.

And so we look for technical solutions.

So, on the one hand we might try to fix it by working really hard at being really good, or by feeling really spiritual, or by studying really hard.

Or, on the other hand, maybe we look at the ways we've gotten it wrong in the past and we just give up. We push the whole thing aside and walk away.

But both of those treat knowing God as a technical challenge. And so both, again, treat God more like a *thing* than like a *person*.

Knowing God is not like a to-do list that you can just try harder at. And knowing God is not like a Rubik's cube that you can just drop on the table and walk away from when you get frustrated.

Knowing God is like knowing a person. It's not primarily technical. It's primarily relational.

Which actually means that the problem is much bigger than we tend to think.

Because if it was just a technical problem, we might get discouraged, but we could always come at it again with a different technical solution until we get it right.

But because it's relational, the problem is actually much deeper than that.

A few minutes ago we talked about what it's like when someone else thinks they know you, but they don't really ... when they tell other people what you're like, but they don't really understand you ... when they tell *you* what you're like, but they haven't loved you enough to actually *ask* or actually *listen* to what you are like and who you really are.

It hurts.

And what then do we do with that hurt?

Because something has to be done with it – right?

We can try to shove it down, or we can try to push it aside, but it always comes back. It pops up somewhere else or it flares up the next time we see that person.

When someone hurts us – when someone wounds us like that – when they reduce us to a caricature and deny our dignity and our complexity as we really are, we have two options. We can either experience the pain of that ourselves, or we can inflict the pain back on them.

Those are basically our options, right? We can either let our hearts break, allowing ourselves to suffer the pain of that hurt, or we can take that pain and try to impose it on them, through our words or our actions.

Relational betrayal and relational sin always leads to pain. The only question is who will receive that pain: will the one sinned against try to impose that pain back on the offender, in an act of justice ... or will they choose to endure that pain themselves through an act of forgiveness? Those are the two options. But either way, someone has to feel the pain.

Jesus begins his prayer here in an odd way. It's easy to miss it. He begins by saying "Father, the hour has come." What hour? What does that mean?

Jesus actually tells us just two verses earlier. At the end of chapter sixteen he says "the hour is coming, indeed it has come" [16:32] – and what hour is that? Well, he makes it clear in the words that follow that it is the hour of his arrest – the hour of his crucifixion. [Carson, 553; Cara, 12]

Jesus begins his prayer here in chapter seventeen by stating that the time has come for him to be crucified. The cross is the framework for what follows.

Why does that matter?

It matters because the cross is where God takes the pain that we have caused in our betrayal of him – in our refusal to know him as he is, in our failure to treat him as a person, in our rejection of him, in our sin against him. The cross is where God himself takes the pain of our cosmic betrayal, and instead of bringing it down on us as we deserve, he takes it onto himself. The cross is where God the Son takes that pain onto himself, and he endures it, so that we don't have to. He is broken on the cross so that our relationship to him and to the Father can be healed and restored.

The cross is the only way we are able to receive true knowledge of God. The cross is the only way we are able to receive eternal life. Because the cross is the only way our relationship with God can be restored after our betrayal.

Which is why Jesus begins his words here with that reference to the cross – it's why he begins by referring to the hour of his arrest and crucifixion. Because it is only through that cross that everything he goes on to talk about will be possible.

It is only through the cross that he will be able to give eternal life to the very ones who had betrayed him. It is only through the cross that our relationship to God can be restored so that we can truly know God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, as he says in verse three. It is only through the cross that Jesus can accomplish the task that the Father gave to him, as he says in verse four. It is only through the cross that Jesus will receive the glory that the Father had set out for him, as he says in verse five.

The only way we can know God as he truly is is through the cross. That is the only place we can receive the forgiveness and the grace that can begin a right relationship with God.

And within that right relationship, God then continues to reveal himself to us in Jesus Christ, as he is revealed to us in the Scriptures – in *all* of the Scriptures.

And having received his grace, and having taken hold of his word, we can know God ... which is eternal life.

That is our goal. That is our aim.

And like everything else we have considered this morning, that knowledge must be relational too. It's not just gathering information. It's knowing a person.

Throughout the entire Bible, “knowing” God is never held out as a merely intellectual pursuit. It is never merely about possessing certain information. Knowing God always “entails fellowship, trust, [and] personal relationship.” [Carson, 556]

And how could it be otherwise? So it is for every relationship in our lives that really matters. Knowing a spouse, or a friend, or a son, or a daughter, is never just about reviewing and memorizing a list of facts about them. It entails fellowship – spending time with them. It entails self-disclosure – revealing our own hearts to them. It entails loving them with our words, as we praise what is praiseworthy about them. It entails loving them with our actions, as we serve them and care for them by what we do.

And so it is with God. We must know God holistically. We must love him in thought, word, and deed. We must love him by listening carefully to his words to us. We must love him by speaking our hearts to him. We must love him by praising him, by receiving the gifts he gives us with thankfulness, by living our lives for him, just as he gave his life for us in Jesus Christ.

That is knowing God. That is eternal life.

That is the goal of everything.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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