

Jesus: His Last Will and Testament

Wednesday @ First

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Bible Text: John 17:20-26

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Let me just say a word about what we've been doing over these last several weeks together. This may say more about my eccentricities than about the life of our church but almost everywhere we've been turning since the beginning of January, we've been reading in the gospel according to John and one of the things that we've said about that is what has often been said in the history of the church, that the marvelous thing about John's gospel is that spiritual lambs can bathe in it and wade in it whereas spiritual elephants, those who have grown large and strong, can never get to the bottom of it. We've been looking at John's gospel in our church services on Sunday mornings; we've been looking at chapters 13-17 on these Wednesday lunches. We're going to look at chapters 18-21 bringing us to the conclusion of the gospel in our church up to Easter Sunday evening and on Thursdays we've been talking about the Apostle John himself. As I think I mentioned last Thursday, at the lunch, I actually started to dream about the Apostle John and I may say something about that tomorrow night at our Communion Service.

We've come to the end of chapter 17 and those of you who are regulars will remember that chapter 13 in John's gospel is the occasion when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and the Master becomes the servant. Then he gives this wonderful discourse to them: at first it's almost a dialogue, he speaks and they ask questions and then as he begins to unfold to them what is about to happen, they fall silent and then they begin to ask questions again and the whole section closes with Jesus allowing them to overhear his prayer. John 17 is both the longest of Jesus' prayers recorded in the gospel and, actually, the longest prayer recorded anywhere in the New Testament and this is the third and final section of it and Jesus prays, "I do not ask for these only," those for whom he's been praying, "but also for those who will believe in me through their word." He's speaking about his disciples, his contemporary disciples and he's praying not only for them but for those who will believe through their word and this is particularly interesting because all of us in the room who are Christians, maybe some of us aren't Christians, but all of us who are in the room have become Christians through their word. It may be that some individual Christian has spoken to us about Christ but our only real source to know Christ is found, of course, in the Scriptures that the apostles wrote. We don't really know anything about Jesus apart from what we find in the Scriptures which the apostles wrote. So, we are among those who believe in Jesus if we're Christians today, through their

words, which means if you follow the logic, that included in his prayer here are ourselves. This is Jesus' prayer for us.

“20 I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

I'm not sure if I've mentioned that the previous two Wednesdays when we've been looking at John 17 but throughout the history of the Christian church, this particular prayer of the Lord Jesus has often been described as “Jesus' high priestly prayer.” Jesus' high priestly prayer. You remember how the New Testament teaches us that the figure of the high priest in the Old Testament Scriptures was intended by God to be a kind of working model. A working model to help people before Christ came, to help them understand what it was that the Lord Jesus Christ would do. When he came, the picture was telling the people when the great high priest came, he would do two things for his people: he would make the final sacrifice to take away their sins and he would intercede for them, he would pray for them. Of course, we learn a great deal about that in the New Testament book called Hebrews, how Christ has sacrificed himself for our sins which we remember in Passion Week and how Christ prays for his people.

Here, we have a kind of transcription of the way in which the Lord Jesus prays for his people, how he comes into the presence of his Father to pray for his people. It is, actually, very interesting that although nowhere in this passage does it speak about Jesus being a high priest. The way in which this prayer moves is very similar to what it was that the high priest did, particularly when he was going to make the great sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. He would pray, first of all, for himself. Early on in this chapter, Jesus has prayed about his own relationship with his Father and then he would move on to pray for his immediate family circle, his immediate circle of friends and Jesus has now moved on to pray for his apostles, for the disciples and he has this beautiful way of describing them: he talks about them as “those you have given me.” Marvelous way that Jesus taught about those who had come to trust in him, that they were actually those who had become the love gift of his Father to him. That was why they were so infinitely precious to him and he wanted especially to pray for them. Not that the Father would just take them out of the world but that he would keep them there in times of stress and trial and that he would use them there to bring honor to the Lord Jesus.

Now, at this third stage, the high priest would then pray for all the people of Israel. Of course, you remember that the very garments he wore reminded him that that was what he was to do. He wore a breastplate and on his shoulders there were two precious jewels: there were 12 precious jewels on the breastplate, each of them with the name of one of the tribes of Israel and on each of the jewels on his shoulders, there were the names of six of the tribes of Israel. He was a working model of someone who would pray for all the people of God. So now, Jesus follows this pattern and his third stage of prayer extends beyond his immediate family. Remember how he had said, "Who is my Father? Who is my brother? These ones are my family." Now he's finished praying for his immediate contemporary family and he's beginning to pray for all the people of God in every age. So, if you ever want to know: does Jesus care about me? And what does he want for me as one of his children? Here in John 17, verses 20-26, we find the marvelous answer to this question.

I want us this afternoon to notice two very obvious things about these verses, chapter 17, verses 20-26. The first is this: I want you to notice the basis, the foundation, the basis on which the Lord Jesus prays. Now, a good way into thinking about this is to remember that within a matter of hours, Jesus will pray again in the Garden of Gethsemane. Actually, I think, most Christians are more familiar with that prayer than they are with this prayer. What does he pray in the Garden of Gethsemane? He says, "Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass from me." And he's thinking about his death on the cross and what that will mean in terms of the face of the heavenly Father being hidden from him which he's never experienced. Not only in all his life but in all eternity, he's never experienced his Father's face being turned away from him and so it's right and natural for him to pray, "Father, if it is your will, find some other way. Nevertheless, not what I will but what you will."

Do you notice the difference in this prayer? He doesn't come in this prayer and say, "Father, if it is your will." He comes, you notice, in verse 24 to say, "Father, this is my heart's desire," and the reason he's able to pray like this is actually because he began this prayer in early verses of chapter 17 by saying, "Father, the hour has come and I've really finished the work that you gave me to do." He hasn't yet died on the cross but his death on the cross is absolutely certain, absolutely fixed and he's coming now to his Father, see how almost he reverses the order. In Gethsemane, he looks to what he's going to do and he says, "O Father, not my will but my will would be that there might be some other way," but he knows there is no other way and so even before that, he's able to come to his Father just as though he had already completed the work and say to him, "Father, now that I've completed everything that you wanted me to do, this is what I want more than anything else."

Now, remember saying to your children or if you haven't said to your children because child-rearing has changed over the years, hasn't it? Your parents said to you, "I want never gets," unless I want is attached to a promise that the Father has given. You see, everything Jesus had done, he had done on the basis that his Father had given him a promise. You find it way back in the second Psalm when the Father says to the Son in Psalm 2:8, "My Son, ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance."

That's actually wonderful to sit here in Columbia, South Carolina in the year 2007 and realize the extent to which that promise is now being fulfilled. All over the world and all the nations of the world, perhaps not yet in every tribe, not yet is the Bible in every language but throughout the world there are Christian believers that have never actually – for all we sometimes feel there is an assault on the Christian church in the Western world, there have never been so many Christian believers in history as there are spread throughout the world today. That was what the Father promised his Son, “My Son, if you will die for them, I will give them to you, from every tribe and people and nation.” They will come. They'll even come from Columbia, South Carolina or from the Highlands of Scotland or from the Far East or from Europe and there are some of us in the room from all of these different places, from Africa. You see, it's on the basis that you and I would come to our fathers and say, “But you promised me. You promised me,” and then the father remembers his promise and smiles and gives us exactly what he promised and so Jesus is saying, “Father, I'm coming to you on the basis of the promise you gave me and this is my desire.”

Do you notice how marvelously he puts it in verses 23 and 24. He says this at least twice, he says, “You loved me. I'm coming to you,” he says, “because you have loved me.” You know, it's a very interesting thing in John's gospel that John records more frequently in his gospel the Father's love for his Son than he even does of the Son's love for the Father. We often think about Jesus and the marvel of his love for the Father but John actually says even more about the wonder of the love that the Father has for the Son and so Jesus is coming and saying to his Father, “Father, you love me. Father you have promised me and now as I'm about to face this last great crisis, even as I sense,” and remember how earlier on in the Upper Room the disciples noticed how distressed and troubled Jesus was as he began to think about what was going to take place in the next 24 hours and he's coming and saying, “Father, you love me and I know that even when your face is turned away from me on the cross, you won't have stopped loving me and so I'm praying, I'm praying before all I can pray is, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I'm praying that you will give me my heart's desire on the basis of the way in which I've finished all the work. I'm going to die for those you have given me and I'm praying that they may be mine.”

That's the basis on which he prays. But notice a second thing here and this is so wonderful to see: the basis on which Jesus prays and the desires for his people that Jesus has. The basis on which he prays to his Father, the desires that he has for his people. You'll notice there are two of them. He's praying first of all, look for example at verse 21, he says, “I'm praying for all who will become Christian believers throughout the centuries and I am praying for their unity.” Verse 21, “That they may be all one.” Verse 22, “That they may be one.” Verse 23, “That they may become perfectly one.” Now, if somebody repeats something, you know it's important. If some of you repeat something twice, you know it's really important. This is Jesus' desire for his people, that we may be one.

Now, oftentimes that has been misunderstood. Actually, probably no more frequently than in the last hundred years of the church's life when people – and this usually happens

when the church is crumbling as it has been in the Western world over the last century. People say, "We need to get organized," but Jesus' prayer is not about the church getting organized. This isn't a kind of prayer that says, "You know, if all the Baptists became Presbyterians and all the Presbyterians became Congregationalists and then all that lot became Episcopalians, if we could just have one organization, well, we know we could organize ourselves to death and never have any real spiritual life." Now, is that just a matter of prejudice saying that? No, it's actually very clear from what Jesus says in this text. What is the model that he gives? What's the pattern? What's the blueprint? If you have difficulty with my accent, either model, pattern or blueprint, one of them will kind of ring rightly in your ears. What's the blueprint? The model? Of this unity that Jesus is praying Christians will have? It's the unity, the love that the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father.

Now listen, they don't have that unity because they formed an organization committee, do they? They have that unity because the Father, as we hear here, loves the Son, the Son loves the Father and as Christians have often said, the Holy Spirit is like the bond of love between the Father and the Son. This unity of which Jesus is seeking, is not an organizational structure but the joy of a family life. The joy of a family life and that's not something that can be created by committees. That's something that can be created only by the power of the Holy Spirit and here's how Jesus has been teaching how the Holy Spirit does it. Those of you who have been here, you know the answer to the question: how does the Holy Spirit bring Jesus' people into this marvelous unity? His answer is this: the Father and the Son have in common their fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Christian believers have in common with one another the indwelling power and presence of the Holy Spirit. I often like to put it like this: every true Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

I wonder how many Christians there are in the room today? There must be 200-250 of us so how many Holy Spirit's are there? One. Now there's a great mystery there but don't you see how closely united Christians therefore are to one another? It's one of the marvelous things about being a Christian. You bump into somebody who comes from another world altogether, another part of the world, does something completely different from you. His experience is totally different from yours but you recognize that in Christ you are one. Deeply one and this is what the Lord Jesus is praying for, that we may be one.

There's another reason why I think this is so obviously true: why does Jesus pray this? Well, notice that his motivation is not organization but evangelism, "I'm praying that they may be one so that the world may be," impressed by how well we run our organization as the church?" No, "so that the world may actually come to believe that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." What's he talking about here? Well, he's talking about something very simple that by God's grace, every true church of Jesus Christ manifests and that is, that when people who are not Christians come into our midst, they say there is a love and an affection and a devotion and a humility and a unity here that I can't find anywhere else in the world. Where? Well, I suppose they would say, "Where on earth does it come from?" But the real question they should be asking is, "Where in

heaven does this come from,” because you see it's an outworking of the intense love and mutual devotion that the Father and the Son have for each other. You know, particularly, I want to say this just in passing, particularly what people call this post-modern world where everybody is obsessed with their individuality and, interestingly, our community life has become more dysfunctional than at any period in Western history and people who aren't Christians encounter this kind of fellowship, totally different people with totally different personalities bound together as though by some heavenly super-glue, they say and often they don't have the vocabulary to describe it so don't expect that they'll quote verses from the New Testament and say, “I don't know what there is about you lot, but there's something different,” and the Lord Jesus begins to draw them in.

Notice that the desire he has for his people, for us, and he is now praying for us, think of him praying this for us in this room and some of us are Baptists and some of us are Congregationalists and some of us Episcopalian and some of us are Presbyterian but there's something much deeper than that, that strangers who come into this room on a Wednesday or a Thursday can say, “This isn't like going to any other lunch I ever go to. There is a something here.” Of course, it's only as they begin to understand that they realize it's not a something, it's a someone.

Then there's more. He's not only praying for their unity. This is wonderful. This is absolutely wonderful and I've only a minute to talk about it, he's praying that they will be with him in his glory. This is why this talk is called, I think, Jesus' last will and testament. He says, “Father, here is my final will,” verse 24, “that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” Now, it's very interesting, you know, the Bible teaches us that because of sin we lose three things: first, we lose peace with God; second, we lose joy in God; and third, we fall short of the glory of God. Jesus has been teaching his disciples and now he's saying, “I'm giving you my peace,” and he said, “Now, I'm saying these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.”

So, he's saying to them, “I've come to bring back peace with God. I've come to bring back joy in God,” and now he adds the third thing. Remember how Paul says we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and now he's praying, “Father, I want them to be with me, to see my glory. I'm wanting them to share that glory.” But I think even underneath that, do you notice the actual thing he prays for? “Father, I really want them to see my glory when I return to your right hand in majesty and power,” and it's easy to understand what he's praying because throughout all his life, they've seen him only in his humiliation and they're about to see him in his awful humiliation on the cross and his rejection. They're going to see him beaten and bruised and bloodied and stripped and exposed to public demeaning. You see, he's like a great athlete who goes through deep agony but when he wins the victory, you notice what sometimes they do, they will run to the people who have loved them most and say to them, “I'm so glad you see it was all worth while and I want you to be with me to share the glory.”

Jesus is really praying – think about this in terms of Passion Week – he's saying, “Father, they're going to see me in these next hours arrested and despised and wrongfully treated

and beaten and that cruel crown of thorns placed on my head and then led out to be crucified and exposed to the world and spat upon and jeered at and soldiers casting lots over my garment. But, O Father, I do so much want them to be with me when I'm in your glory." You see what he's praying, he's praying that his people will be able to persevere to the end. He's wanting to hold onto them and as he holds onto them, he's going to bring them to share the marvels of his glory.

I dream a great deal as many of you already know and troubling me to go to a psychiatrist sometimes about them. But I remember as a teenager – I think it's interesting how things like this happen that are completely unrelated to where you are in maturity. It's a very interesting thing because our dreams are part of God's providences in our lives. Which means, incidentally, we are not very good at interpreting them any more than we are good at interpreting God's providences in the world and we need to understand the same is true of our dreams but our dreams are certainly part of God's providences in whatever way things are brought to the surface and the way in which we think. I remember having this dream, a very weird dream for a teenager, that I had died and had gone to heaven. For some strange reason, almost everybody I knew had got there before me and they were all kind of like a welcoming party. They'd obviously been saying, "You know, he was always slow but we didn't think he'd be this slow." I remember then, as a teenager, I woke up just as the dream came to a climax. They were all crowding around me and I remember, I think this was the last rather nasty act I was allowed before final glory. I remember pushing them all away and in the dream saying, "Let me see Jesus. I want to see Jesus." Now listen, have I told you before of the BBC program I listened to years ago for half an hour in which famous people described heaven? As I listened, I noticed there was a pattern to what they were saying. I listened to the very end and the pattern was this: not one single one of them in describing heaven mentioned the presence of God, far less Jesus.

And Jesus is praying, he's really telling us what heaven is all about in order that we can live a life of heavenly fellowship with him here and now, "I'm praying, Father, that they may see your glory in my glory and that as they live here on the earth and go through so much, they'll never lose sight of the destiny for which I have secured them and about which I am now praying for them."

Dear ones, whenever life becomes dark, whenever the pressures get too great, whenever you're in a time of temptation, just lift up your memory and remember that what he is praying for you is that you will see him in his glory. When you remember that that's your destiny as a Christian, then it transforms life here and now. It's like C. S. Lewis writes somewhere, he really does write this, honestly. He says, "You know, people say he's too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use." That wasn't true of William Wilberforce, was it? Lewis says, "The truth of the matter is that the people who have made the most lasting difference in our world are not the people who have been too earthly minded but who in their earthly mindedness, have a glorious heavenly-mindedness in their service of the Lord Jesus Christ." What a thing to think that way back then and even now, he prays, yes, for little me, for little me.

Well, let's thank him together.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you not only heard this prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ but you have answered it. You have given us here and now an amazing experience of this unity for which the Lord Jesus prayed and you are keeping us for that glory to which he is calling us. We thank you that he is exalted at your right hand for the promise of your word that he ever lives to make intercession for us. Bless us the rest of this day and help us more and more to live in a heavenly spirit even as we live here upon the earth. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.