

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
17:17-26

17. Sanctify them through your truth; your word is truth. 18. As you sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. 19. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. 20. Neither do I pray for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on me through their word; 21. that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. 22. And the glory which you gave me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one; 23. I in them, and you in me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them as you have loved me. 24. Father, I will that they also whom you gave me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25. O righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you; and these have known that you sent me. 26. And I have declared to them your name, and will declare *it*, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.

17.--[*Sanctify them, etc.*] In this verse our Lord proceeds to name the second thing He asks for His disciples in prayer. Preservation was the first thing, and sanctification the second. He asks His Father to make the disciples more holy, to lead them on to higher degrees of holiness and purity. He asks Him to do it "through the truth"--by bringing truth to bear more effectually and powerfully on their hearts and consciences and inner man. And to prevent mistake as to what He meant by truth, he adds, "Your Word, Your revealed Word, is the truth that I mean."

Some, as Maldonatus, maintain that the sentence only means "sanctify them truly," in opposition to that legal sanctification of priests of which we read in Exodus and Leviticus. This, however, seems a very cold, thin, shallow sense to put on the words.

Some, again, as Mede, Pearce, and Burgon, maintain that our Lord is only praying that His Apostles may be consecrated, fitted, and set apart for the great work of the ministry, and that this is all the meaning of "sanctify." This appears to me an imperfect and defective view of the sentence.

No doubt the word "sanctify" originally and primarily means "set apart, separate for religious uses;" and it might be used of a vessel, a house, or an animal. But inasmuch as in human beings this separation is principally evidenced by holiness and godliness of life and character, the secondary sense of "sanctify" is "to make holy," and holy and godly people are "sanctified." This I hold to be the meaning here most decidedly. It is a prayer for the increased holiness and practical godliness of Christ's people. In short, the petition comes to this: "Separate them more and more from sin and sinners by making them more pure, more spiritually minded, and

more like Yourself." This is the view of Chrysostom and all the leading commentators.

Four great principles may be gathered from this text.

(a) The importance of sanctification and practical godliness. Our Lord specially asks it for His people. Those who despise Christian life and character, and think it of no importance so long as they are sound in *doctrine*, know very little of the mind of Christ. Our Christianity is worth nothing if it does not make us value and seek practical sanctification.

(b) The wide difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is a perfect and complete work obtained for us by Christ, imputed to us, and external to us, as perfect and complete the moment we believe as it can ever be, and admitting of no degrees. Sanctification is an inward work wrought in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and never quite perfect so long as we live in this body of sin. The disciples needed no prayer for justification; they were completely justified already. They did need prayer for their sanctification; for they were not completely sanctified.

(c) Sanctification is a thing that admits of growth; else why should our Lord pray, "Sanctify them"? The doctrine of imputed sanctification is one that I can find nowhere in the Word of God. Christ's imputed righteousness I see clearly, but not an imputed holiness. Holiness is a thing imparted and in-wrought, but not imputed.

(d) The Word is the great instrument by which the Holy Ghost carries forward the work of inward sanctification. By bringing that Word to bear more forcibly on mind, will, conscience, and affection, we make the character grow more holy. Sanctification from without by bodily austerities and asceticism, and a round of forms, ceremonies, and outward means, is a delusion. True sanctification begins from within. Here lies the immense importance of regularly reading the written Word and hearing the preached Word. It surely, though insensibly, promotes our sanctification. Believers who neglect the Word will not grow in holiness and victory over sin.

Calvin remarks: "As the apostles were not destitute of grace, we ought to infer from Christ's words that sanctification is not instantly completed in us on the first day, but that we make progress in it through the whole course of our life."

Hutcheson remarks: "It is not enough that men have a begun work of sanctification in them, unless they grow up in it daily more and more. Christ prays for those who were already converted and sanctified."

Augustine thinks that "Your Word" in this place means the Personal Word, Christ Himself. But in this opinion I can find no one holding with him, except Rupertus.

18.--[As you sent Me, etc.] The connection between this verse and the

preceding one seems to me to be this: "I ask for the increased sanctification of my disciples, because of the position they have to occupy on earth. Just as You did send Me to be Your Messenger to this sinful world, so have I now sent them to be my messengers to the world. It is therefore of the utmost importance that they should be holy--the holy messengers of a holy Master--and so stop the mouths of their accusers." Believers are Christ's witnesses, and the character of a witness should be spotless and blameless. For this reason our Lord specially prays that His disciples may be "sanctified."

19.--[*And for their sakes I sanctify myself.*] This is a rather hard passage. In one sense, of course, our Lord needed no sanctification. He was always perfectly holy and without sin. I believe, with Chrysostom, the meaning must be: "I consecrate myself, and offer myself up as a sacrifice and a priest, for one special reason, to say nothing of others--in order that these my disciples may be sanctified by the truth, and made a holy people." Is it not as good as saying, "The sanctification no less than the justification of my people is the end of my sacrifice. I have to have a people who are sanctified as well as justified. So much importance do I attach to this that this is one principal reason why I now offer myself to die as a sacrifice"? The same idea seems to lie in the text, "He gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people." And again, "Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify it." (Titus 2:14, Eph. 4:26, 1 Pet. 2:24.)

Melancthon remarks: "The word 'I sanctify myself' in this place, without doubt, is taken from priests and victims."

20.--[*Neither do I pray for these alone, etc.*] In this and the three following verses our Lord proceeds to name another thing that He prays for His people. He asks that they may be "one." He had already named this on behalf of the eleven Apostles. But He takes occasion now to enlarge the prayer and to include others beside the eleven--the whole company of future believers. "I now pray also for all who shall believe on Me through the preaching of my disciples in all future time, and not for my eleven apostles only." All believers needed preservation and sanctification in every age; but none so much as the eleven, because they were the first to attack the world and bear the brunt of the battle. In some respects it was more easy to be "one" at the first beginnings of the Church and harder to be kept and "sanctified." As the Church grew, it would be more difficult to keep unity.

Let us mark how wide was the scope of our Lord's intercessory prayer. He prayed not only for present, but for future believers. So should it be with our prayers. We may look forward and pray for believers yet to be born, though we may not look back and pray for believers who are dead.

George Newton observes what an encouragement it should be to us in praying for others, for a child or a friend, to remember that perhaps Christ is asking him or her of God too. He here prays for those who did not yet believe but were to believe one day.

Let us mark how the "word" preached is mentioned as the means of making men believe. Faith comes by hearing. The Church that places Sacraments above the preaching of the Word will have no blessing of God, because it rejects God's order.

Hengstenberg thinks that the "word" here must include the writings of the Apostles as well as their sermons.

21.--[*That they all...one in us.*] The meaning of this sentence I take to be: "I pray that both these my disciples and those who hereafter shall become my disciples may all be of one mind, one doctrine, one opinion, one heart, and one practice, closely united and joined together even as You, Father, and I are of one mind and one will, in consequence of that ineffable union whereby You are in Me and I in You."

Here, as in verse 11, we must carefully remember that the unity between the Father and the Son is one which the unity of believers cannot literally attain to. They must, however, imitate it.

The true secret of the unity of believers lies in the expression "one in us." They can only be thoroughly "one" by being joined at the same time to one Father and to one Savior. Then they will be one with one another.

Ferus thinks that one thing in our Lord's mind in this sentence was the union of Jew and Gentile into one Church, and the removal of the "wall of partition."

[*That the world may believe that you sent Me.*] Here our Lord brings in one important reason why He prays for His people to be "one." It will help to make the world believe His Divine mission. "When the world sees my people not quarreling, not divided, but one in judgment, heart, and life, then the world will begin to believe that the Savior, who has such a people, must really be a Savior sent from God."

Let us carefully note how well our Lord foresaw the effect which the lives, ways, and opinions of professing Christians have on the world around them. The lack of unity, and consequent strife, among English Christians in the last 300 years has been a miserable example of the enormous damage that believers may do their Master's cause by neglecting this subject. "How much," says George Newton, "our blessed Savior and His Gospel suffer by the hot contentions of those who call themselves saints."

22.--[*And the glory, etc.*] In this verse our Lord repeats His deep desire for the unity of His people. He declares that in order that they may be one, He has given them the glory which the Father gave Him. This is a very difficult expression, and one that seems to puzzle all commentators. The whole question is, what did our Lord mean by "the glory" which He gave?

(a) Some, as Calvin, think that "glory" means the image and likeness of God, by which the disciples were renewed. (2 Cor. 3:18.)

(b) Some, as Bengel, think that "glory" means that insensible power, influence, and authority which accompanied all our Lord did and said during

His earthly ministry. Thus Moses had "glory" in his countenance when coming down from the mount. (2 Cor. 3:7.) This same power and influence Christ gave to the Apostles. (See Acts 4:33.)

(c) Some, as Zwingle, Brentius, Gualter, and Pearce, think that "glory" means the power of working miracles, which was the special and peculiar glory of our Lord while He was on earth. Thus we read, "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Rom. 6:4).

(d) Some, as Augustine, Ecolampadius, Bullinger, and Manton, think that "glory" means the heavenly glory and immortality which our Lord promised to His disciples--a glory which they should have after faithfully serving Him on earth. (Rom. 8:18.)

(e) Toletus makes the strange suggestion that the "glory" means that which is communicated to us in the Lord's Supper! Burgon seems to take the same view.

(f) Stier and Hengstenberg hold that the "glory" means unity of mind and heart.

(g) Some, as Gregory Nyssen, Ammonius, Theophylact, and Bucer, think that "glory" means the Holy Ghost, who is elsewhere called "the Spirit of glory" (1 Pet. 4:14).

The question will probably never be settled. If I must give an opinion, I prefer the last view to any other. It suits the end of the verse better than any other. Nothing was so likely to make the disciples "one" as the gift of the Holy Ghost.

23.--[*I in them and You in Me, etc.*] In this verse our Lord simplifies His declarations about unity and expands them more fully in order to show emphatically how great importance He attached to unity. I take the meaning to be something of this kind: "I pray that my disciples may be so closely united, I dwelling in them and You dwelling in Me, that they may be compacted and perfected into one body--having one mind, one will, one heart, and one judgment, though having many members--and that they the world, seeing this unity, may be obliged to confess that You did send Me to be the Messiah, and that You love my people even as You love Me."

In leaving this deep and difficult passage about unity, it is well to remember that the Church whose unity the Lord desires and prays for is not any particular or visible Church, but the Church which is His Body, the Church of the elect, the Church which is made up of true believers and saints alone.

Moreover, the unity that our Lord prays for is not unity of forms, discipline, government and the like, but unity of heart, will, doctrine and practice. Those who make uniformity the chief subject of this part of Christ's prayer entirely miss the mark. There may be uniformity without unity, as in many visible churches on earth now. There may be unity without uniformity, as between godly Episcopalians and godly Presbyterians. Uniformity no doubt may be a great help to unity, but it is not unity

itself.

The unity that our Lord prays about here is that true, substantial, spiritual, internal, heart unity which undoubtedly exists among all members of Christ of every church and denomination. It is the unity which results from one Holy Ghost having made the members of Christ what they are. It is unity which makes them feel more of one mind with one another than with mere professors of their own party. It is unity which is the truest freemasonry on earth. It is unity which shakes the world and obliges it to confess the truth of Christianity. For the continued maintenance of this unity and an increase of it, our Lord seems to me in this prayer specially to pray. And we need not wonder. The divisions of mere worldly professors are of little moment. The divisions of real true believers are the greatest possible injury to the cause of the Gospel. If all believers at this moment were of one mind and would work together, they might soon turn the world upside down. No wonder the Lord prayed for unity.

24.--[*Father, I will...behold...given Me.*] In this verse our Lord names the fourth and last thing that He desires for His disciples in His prayer. After preservation, sanctification, and unity comes participation of His glory. He asks that they may be "with Him" in the glory yet to be revealed, and "behold," share, and take part in it.

"I will" is a remarkable phrase, though it must not be pressed and strained too far. (See Mark 6:25, 10:35.) The daughter of Herodias, asking the head of John the Baptist, said, "I will that you give me." It may be nothing more than the expression of a strong "wish." Yet it is the wish of Him who is one with the Father, and only wills what the Father wills. It is probably used to assure the mind of the disciples. "I will," and it will be done.

Hutcheson says: "'I will' does not import any imperious commanding way, repugnant to His former way of humble supplication, but it only imports that in this His supplication, He was making His last will and Testament and leaving His legacies, which He was sure would be effectual, being purchased by His merits and prosecuted by His affectionate and earnest requests and intercessions."

Traill remarks: "Christians, behold the amazing difference between Christ's way of praying against His own hell (if I may so call it) and His praying for our heaven! When praying for Himself, it is 'Father, if it be Thy will, let this cup pass from Me.' But when Christ is praying for His people's heaven, it is 'Father, *I will* that they may be with Me.'"

Stier maintains that "I will" "is no other than a testamentary word of the Son, who in the unity of the Father, is appointing what He *wills*, at the second limit of the prayer where petition ceases."

Alford says: "This is an expression of will founded on acknowledged right."

The expression "Be with Me where I am" is one of those deeply interesting phrases that show the nature of the future dwelling-place of believers. Wherever it may be, whether before or after the resurrection, it will be in

the company of Christ. It is like "with Me in Paradise," "depart and be with Christ," and "forever with the Lord." (Luke 23:43, Phil. 1:23, 1 Thess. 4:17.) The full nature of the future state is wisely hidden from us. It is enough for believers to know that they will be "with Christ." It is company, and not place, that makes up happiness.

Traill remarks: "Heaven consists in the perfect immediate presence of Christ. Perfect presence is when all on both sides is present--all of Christ and all of the Christians. But now all of Christ is not with us, and all of us is not with Him. On His part we have Christ's Spirit, word, and grace. On our part there is present with Him our hearts and the workings of our faith and love and desire toward Him. But the presence is imperfect and mixed with much distance and absence."

The expression "Behold my glory," of course, must not be confined to the idea of looking on as spectators. It includes participation, sharing, and common enjoyment. (Compare John 3:3-36, 8:51, and Rev. 28:7.)

The expression "which You have given Me" seems to point to that special glory which the Father, in everlasting covenant, has appointed for Christ as the reward of the work of redemption. (Phil. 2:9).

[*For You loved Me before the foundation of the world.*] This sentence seems specially inserted in order to show that the glory of Christ in the next world is a glory that had been prepared from all eternity--before time began and before the creation of man--and that it was not only something which, like Moses or John the Baptist, He had obtained by His faithfulness on earth, but something which He had as the eternal Son of the eternal Father, from everlasting. "You loved Me, and did assign Me this glory long before this world was made," that is, from all eternity. This is a very deep saying and contains things far above our full comprehension.

25.--[*0 righteous Father, etc.*] In this verse our Lord begins the final winding up of His wonderful prayer. He does it by declaring the position of things in which He was about to leave the world and His disciples. I take the meaning to be this: "I come to You from a world that knows You not, and has refused to know You throughout my ministry. But in the midst of this world, I have known You and steadily adhered to You. And these my disciples have acknowledged and confessed that You did send Me to be the Messiah."

It is not clear why our Lord uses the expression "righteous Father." It is one that stands alone. It may possibly be intended to bring out in strong contrast the wickedness of a world that "knew not the Word" when the Word was in it (see John 1:10), and the justice of God in punishing this world, which refused to know Christ while the disciples received Him.

The expression "I have known You" seems to point to the veil of humiliation that covered our Lord during the whole period of His incarnation. "Even then," He seems to say, "I never ceased to know and honor You."

The high testimony borne to the disciples once more deserves notice. With all their infirmity, "they have KNOWN my Divine mission."

26.--[*And I have declared...declare it.*] In this sentence our Lord briefly sums up what He had done and was still doing for the disciples: "I have made known to them Your name and character and attributes, as the sender of salvation to a lost world, and will continue to declare it after my ascension, by the Holy Spirit."

Here, as elsewhere, our Lord again declares that to make known the Father was one great object of His ministry.

The expression "I will declare it," says George Newton, is a proof that "Jesus Christ will be continually making further declarations of His Father's name to other nations and other persons, to the end of the world. He will be ever teaching new scholars to spell it and understand it, in every generation, while the world endures."

[*That the love...may be in them, and I in them.*] Our Lord ends His prayer by expressing His wish that the Father's love may dwell in the hearts of His disciples, and that He Himself may dwell in their hearts. "My great desire is that they may know and feel the love wherewith You love Me, and that I may ever dwell in their hearts by faith."

Let us not forget that one great wish of St. Paul in his Epistles to the Ephesians was that "Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith" (Eph. 3:15). He also tells the Romans, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts" (Rom. 5:5).

The expression "I will declare my love" is a difficult one. It can only mean, "I will declare it personally during the interval between my resurrection and my ascension," or, "I will continue to declare it by my Spirit's continual teaching after I leave the world." The latter seems the more probable meaning.

The expression "Your love may be in them" is another grave difficulty. It must either be "that Your love, the same love with which You love Me, may be directed on and toward them," or else, "that they may feel in their own hearts a sense of that same love toward them with which You love Me." I prefer the latter sense.

George Newton remarks on this verse: "If Christ is in you, let me give you this caution: Let Him live quietly in your hearts. Do not molest Him and disturb Him; do not make Him vex and fret. Let it not be a penance to Him to continue in you. But labor every way to please Him, and give Him satisfaction and contentment so that the house He has chosen may not be dark and doleful, but delightful to Him."

Manton remarks: "If an earthly king lie but one night in a house, what care there is taken that nothing be offensive to him and that all be neat and sweet and clean. How much more careful ought you to be to keep your hearts clean, to perform service acceptable to Him, to be in the exercise of faith, love, and other graces so that you may entertain, as you ought, your heavenly King, who comes to take up His continual abode in your hearts."

We may well feel humbled, as we leave this chapter, when we think of our ignorance of the true meaning of many of its phrases. How much of our exposition is nothing better than feeble conjecture! We seem only to scratch the surface of the field. Let us only remember that the four things prayed for by our Lord are things that every Christian should daily desire--preservation, sanctification, unity, and final glory in Christ's company.

George Newton closes his exposition of the whole chapter with these touching words: "How earnest and importunate is Christ with God the Father, that we may be one here, and that we may be in one place hereafter! Oh, let us search into the heart of Jesus Christ, laid open to us in this abridgment of His intercession for us, that we may know it and the workings of it more and more, until at length the precious prayer comes to its full effect and we be taken up to be forever with the Lord, and where He is there we may be also!"