

† The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Praying Savior – John 17

The Lessons from Jesus’ Prayer – John 17:1-26

Seven Characteristics of the Church: Truth (John 17:17-19)

17 Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. 18 As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

How would you respond to the following question if it were asked of you? “*What proof or evidence do you have for your religion that would help me decided to choose it?*” Or this question, “*What distinguishes your religion from all others that would help me discern that it is true while the others are not?*”

Apart from the often stated, “Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship” tact, what is it that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions? In the final analysis, what it all comes down to is truth. What is truth and how does that truth affect or change a person’s life. Every religion does indeed profess to have the truth, but no other religion, or relationship, has as their leader One who died and rose again so that by following and imitating His life, we might truly live. Every other religion’s leader is dead and rotting in a grave somewhere; all except One, Jesus Christ, who is truth and it is the truth that He indeed died for our sins, according to the Scriptures and that rose again on the third day according to Scriptures. And further, as I have become so accustomed to quoting 2 Corinthians 5:15, and a verse that identifies for us an aspect of the distinguishing quality of Christianity; Jesus Christ died so that those who live and believe in Him, **“might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”** Beloved, the truth changes lives. The truth transforms lives. And may I say boldly, that if your life is not being changed and transformed more and more into the image of Christ, into His likeness so that you walk and talk and live and act even as Jesus did, then you are not living according to the truth. For what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions is that its truths change a person so that that person lives more and more according to God’s Word rather than according to the world.

When we last considered our Lord’s prayer, we were discussing the trait of holiness; that Godlike characteristic of being a cut above; being uncommon and unlike anything earthly. The church, those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, are to be a people of holiness; a people of God and a people like God as expressed in Jesus Christ. The church is to be a people distinguished from the world in both thinking and behavior. This idea of being the particular or peculiar people of God is a constant theme throughout the Bible. Israel was called to be distinguished. In Deuteronomy 7:6 we read of this truth concerning Israel...

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

This is the call and the truth, but why was Israel called to live in light of this truth? We read the answer to that in Deuteronomy 4:5-7 where Moses declared:

5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for

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that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him?

We see in this passage a connection between being distinguished for the Lord and the Word of God. And likewise, in the church today, you and I are to be distinguished. Even as we read in Philippians 2:14-16a:

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life...

Again we see a connection between being distinguished from the world by means of “holding fast the word of life”; the Word of God. As we come to the next distinguishing characteristic of those who follow Christ, that is the church, we are offered in effect the source of our holiness. We are presented with the very means by which we are made daily and practically holy. We find the answer to the question, “How can I be holy everyday? How can I be distinguished for God?” What could be more important to the believer than to discern how we can daily and even moment by moment be more and more like Christ? The answer is simple of course; we are made daily and practically holy by means of *the truth*, which, as our text in John 17:17 informs us is the Word of God. The church of Jesus Christ, each and every member, from the youngest to the oldest, is to be resolved and committed to the truth as found in the Word of God. But while the answer is simple the application of that answer is often difficult and allusive, is it not? Daily our resolve to read; to study; to apply and actually attempt to live out the principles of God’s Word is tested and taxed. Every morning sleepiness lingers in our bodies and makes our minds fuzzy. Every day is filled with activities, both routine and non-routine that seem to push out commitment to God’s Word. Every evening we want to relax and unwind and we find ourselves again too tired to commit to God’s Word. And if we are not careful, the very means of being more and more like Christ, that is a resolve and commitment to know and live out the truth as found in God’s Word, is compromised.

But the truth remains; Jesus declares that one of the fundamental characteristics of the church is its commitment to being holy by means of the truth; that is the Word of God. When people ask us, “What distinguishes your religion from all others, it ought to be said and demonstrated that we live by a life transforming truth that has been spoken by the one true God. As we read our text then, we are to see that John 17:17-19 shows us *Jesus praying for His people to be distinguished from the world and He declares that what distinguishes them is God’s working of truth through them*. Beloved, we need to see more and more of God’s working of truth in us.

Before we look at how this prayer of Jesus for the trait of truth to be manifest among His people, let us first quickly define to reoccurring terms in the passage. Those two terms being “sanctify” and “truth”. On the heels of declaring that His people are not of the world even as Jesus Himself was distinct and separate from the world, Jesus then prays to the Father, “sanctify them.” The word “sanctify” in our text means “*to separate or set apart for a specific or intended purpose.*” While we often make the word lofty, you actually practice sanctifying things all the time. Each of you is sanctifying the pews you are sitting in. They were intended to be sat in while the Word of God was preached. You sanctify your Bibles every time you open it intending to hear

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God’s message to you. You sanctify the lunch hour to eat lunch. Each of these items or times has an intended purpose. So, in the context here, when Jesus says, “**Sanctify them...**” – He is saying in effect, “use these people for their intended purpose.” We will consider this more in a moment.

The second term we come face to face with is the word “truth.” In the most simple of terms, truth in this context is all that is true about God. Perhaps a more complete definition is this, “*truth is anything that is consistent with the principles and practices of God.*”

Now then, let us look at the prayer of Jesus as He beseeches the Father to distinguish His people from the world and declares for us that what does distinguish us is God’s working His truth in us. I intend to do this by means of five questions.

I. How is a believer distinguished from the world? (John 17:17a)

“*Sanctify them in the truth...*”

To begin with, I would have you notice that according to this prayer of Jesus, the whole process of being set apart for the intended use of God is first and foremost the work of God. A believer is distinguished from the world by the three-fold working of God.

First, please realize that it is God the Father who does this work of setting us apart for His use. Jesus is asking the Father to do something here. Jesus doesn’t pray, “Father, please help My disciples distinguish themselves among the nations.” He does not pray, “Father, grant them the grace to make themselves holy.” Rather, what does He pray? Jesus prays, “Father, by Your will, by your doing, make those who follow Me set apart for Your special purposes.” And so we need to learn that we don’t distinguish ourselves. Strictly speaking we don’t make ourselves holy, God does that. God is in the business of distinguishing Himself through us. He is the Musician and we are the instruments. He is the Carpenter and we are the tools. According to Ephesians 1:4, God the Father, from all eternity, chose us to be holy, to be set apart for His purposes. God initiated it and God completes it. This does not mean I do not participate in the process, but beloved, let us never forget all anything we do that brings glory to God is based first upon this truth, that God set you apart for that God-glorifying work. We do not receive the credit, He does.

Second, in addition to seeing that it is God the Father who does this work, we can ask ourselves this question, “What is Jesus doing here with this statement?” We find Jesus praying. Jesus, our Savior, our Brother, and our Priest began a prayer for His people that they would be used by God for God’s special purposes. And let me ask you this, “Where is Jesus right now?” He is at the right hand of God the Father. And what is Jesus doing now at the right hand of the Father according to Hebrews 7:25? Jesus is making intercession; that is Jesus is praying for His people. And just what do you suppose Jesus is praying for His people? That’s right, He is praying for our sanctification, that we would be set apart for God’s special purposes. Oh blessed thought, that the Savior of our souls has resolved to pray for our being more and more made like Him; to pray that we be increasing light in increasing darkness; to pray that we might be the holy and distinguished people of God.

But there is yet another at work in this process of sanctifying the people of God. While not mentioned specifically here, we have ample references to the work of the Holy Spirit in this process of being distinguished. Let me remind you by looking first at John 14:16-17, spoken just moments before our text where Jesus says,

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16 I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

Jesus says here that the Spirit of truth will be at work in His disciples. And even more to the point we read in John 16:12-13 these words:

12 I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

It is the Spirit of truth that will guide us into all the truth; the very truth that we see is the means by which we are set apart for God’s special purpose. So, how is the believer distinguished from the world? The believer has God working His truth in them as the Father chose you to be changed by truth; the Son died and rose again to confirm that truth and now prays that this truth will transform you; and the Spirit conforms you to the truth. It is the conforming process that distinguishes, that sets us apart from the world. And so I might ask, “The truth...is it in you?” Do you see your life being transformed daily?

II. What distinguishes the believer from the world? (John 17:17b)

“Sanctify them in the truth...”

This brings us to the second question [read it]. This is not the how question we just asked, but rather the “what” question. By what means are we made holy, sanctified and distinguished from the world. And Jesus says that His people are set apart by what? They are set apart by the truth. But just what is truth? We already defined truth as *anything that is consistent with the principles and practices of God*. Sometimes we Christians get easily confused and sidetracked. We can have our mountaintop experience and become committed only to find ourselves the very next day in the valley, in the slough of despond. And sometimes we begin to entertain other thoughts and ideas as that which will make us special, which will distinguish us.

As I have mentioned before, so many have come to believe that so long as the word “Christian” is in front of the subject, then it must be holy, it must be distinguished. And so we have Christian t-shirts; Christian coffee shops; Christian bookstore and there is even a website called Christian Gays (hardly holy or set apart). But truth and God’s purposes for us are not found in what we wear, or in what we eat, or by where we live. God’s people are not to be defined by such things. Rather, God’s people are to be defined and distinguished by how they live out and live according to the truth of God’s Word. Truth is anything that is consistent with the principles and practices of God. That means that anything that is not consistent; or anything that contradicts God’s principles and practices are falsehoods.

Jesus prays that His people be **“in the truth”** – the idea here is to be engulfed in and surrounded by truth. Drop them into the ocean of Your truth. Have them drink from the roaring rapids of Your wisdom. Let them eat of the fat of Your knowledge. Jesus does not ask for some. Jesus does not ask for a little. Jesus prays with full authority and confidence that His people would be found fully absorbed in God’s truth. And so, we must conclude that we need to know

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and to then practice God’s truth – for Jesus asked the Father to set apart His people by means of the truth. And this then begs our third question.

III. Where is this distinguishing characteristic found? (John 17:17c)

...Your word is truth.

Where is this distinguishing characteristic of life changing truth found? The answer is easy. Jesus tells us, **“Your word is truth.”** In the Word of God we find everything for life and godliness. If you want to be more like Jesus; if you want to see this prayer of Jesus be the reality in your life, then you need to find yourself increasing in the word of God.

Have you noticed that thus far every characteristic we have looked at; joy in verse 13; holiness in verses 14-16; and now truth in verses 17-19 have been linked to the words of God. Jesus spoke the truths previous to verse 13 so that the disciples’ joy would be made full. Joy is found in the words of Christ. Jesus gave the disciples the word of God according to verse 14, and it is this Word that sets them apart from the world; that makes them holy. And here in verse 17 we see that the truth is the Word of God.

And so, let me be a broken record. Let me tell you what you already know in your heads. Let me reiterate a fact that needs to be found increasingly evident in your life if you confess Jesus as Lord. You need to be a person of the Book. You need to be increasingly a study of the Bible. Be not content with where you are, or with what you know – work harder, read more, study with more diligence. I am amazed at how little time most Christians spend with the Word of God. This is a tragedy. The Word of God is our necessary food for health and joy in our spiritual lives. At your fingertips daily is the “pure milk of the word” for the newborn babies (1 Peter 2:2). Do you long for it? Before you is the feast of “solid food” for the mature (Hebrews 5:14). Do you eat it? Offered to you are God’s words which are to be regarded as “honey to my mouth.” Do you find God’s Word so sweet? The Word of God is called “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). Is your way being lit by it? The Word of God is the seed of the gospel (Luke 8:11). Are you sowing it? The Word of God is the only offensive weapon of the Christian’s arsenal being called the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). Are you wielding it? The great testimony of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 is this,

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Are you profiting from the word of God? Are you finding yourself adequate and equipped for every good work? If we find ourselves coming up short then we must realize that we are not swimming the ocean of God’s truth. Let us be a people of the Word. Let us be known by the epitaph Spurgeon gave to John Bunyan, the humble preacher and author of Pilgrim’s Progress. Spurgeon said that Bunyan’s blood bled bibline; meaning that he was saturated in the Word of God; in the truth of God.

And so I say to you, if you are engaged in a regular regiment of feeding on God’s word, start eating more. For the Word of God is the only diet in which you can truly eat all you want. And I say to you that are not engage or are faltering in feasting at the table of God’s Word, having

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settled for spiritual Twinkies, come to the table; sit and eat. Resolve today to be found in God's truth. Start reading the Gospel of John. Pick up the church's Bible reading plan and just start with today's reading. Then be determined, be prayerful and do not be dissuaded from the task. For the truth that distinguishes you from the world, that sets you apart for God's special purpose is found in this Book. Let it be your delight, your solace, your guide. For by the truth of God; the Word of God we are prepared for the work of being used by God. Let us now consider the fourth of our five questions.

IV. What example of being distinguished is offered? (John 17:18)

As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

According to verse 18, we have the answer to the question, “What example of being distinguished by truth is offered? The answer is again simple. It is found in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus makes a simple comparison for us. Just as Jesus was an instrument for God, dwelling among the people, proclaiming the life changing truths of God's Word, so He also now sends us out to do the same.

Has there ever been one man in all history that has impacted and changed the lives of so many people as Jesus Christ? I know not one. Jesus came not to do His own will, but the will of the Father who sent Him. Jesus came to offer His life on the cross so that we might imitate His God-glorifying, self-sacrificing ways. Even as Jesus came and lived and died to show us the truth of God and salvation; so now our lives are to be given in life and even death to show the world the truth of God and salvation. And never forget that the same resources that Jesus drew upon to complete His mission in the world are available to us. We have the Word of God and the Spirit of God to complete the work of God.

You have not be left in this world to wallow. Jesus has not left us here; rather Jesus has sent us out to be lights; to allow Him to live out His life through us before an unbelieving world. My son, Luke, just started his first job in the “real” world. And the other day I gave him this bit of advice. I said, “Do not allow your identity to be wrapped up in this job. You are not here on this earth to be a Chic-Fila team member; you are not to find satisfaction by seeing your name on the employee of the month plaque; or being regarded as the best worker. Your task is to be the best Christian and the best testimony of His life changing truth being worked out in your life. If you get to be employee of the month, so be it. If you never are employee of the month so be it. Above all, when people see you, it is to be your desire that they know and see the truth of Christ.” Beloved, we've been sent out to be Christ's representatives and Christ represented the truth of God. May we be increasingly known as a people of the truth. This brings us to our final question, which like the others is a most important consideration.

V. How does one enter into the truth? (John 17:19)

For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

How is it that any one of us might have this truth that changes found within us? Jesus says, “**For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.**” The way by which we can enter into the truth is found first by believing that Jesus fulfilled God's special purpose for Him by dying on the cross for the sins of His people so that they might be forgiven, made righteous with His own righteousness and then set apart for God's special purpose for them; that they would be witnesses of Christ.

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This is what Jesus meant by saying, "For their sakes I sanctify Myself..." Jesus was already perfectly holy, so He did not mean that He was making Himself more holy, rather He was saying that He set Himself apart for this God-ordained purpose, to be the Savior of His people; to forgive all who would believe in Him and call upon Him as their Lord. And as a result of this being set apart is that God's people would be granted the privilege of the Holy Spirit within them by which they would become useful instruments in the hands of God. They would be set apart for God's intended purpose; a purpose that Peter describes in those familiar words of 1 Peter 2:9 -

"A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light..."

Have you come to know the truth; those things that are consistent with the principles and practices of God? Are those truths transforming you? How so? How is the Word of God changing your life this morning? I pray that they are and I pray that they will continue to do so. Each and every one of us has room to grow in the truth. But if are here this morning and you fear that you have not yet been changed by the truth; that perhaps you thought it necessary that you change yourself rather than recognizing that being set apart starts and finishes with God, that today you would call upon the Lord Jesus to save you from your sins, from your own self attempts to be holy and ask Him to sanctify you, to transform you with the truth. This is a prayer Jesus will answer, for all who call upon the name of the Lord, who see their need of Him, will be saved. Let us long to be a people whose blood bleeds bible and are therefore known as a people of the Book, a people of truth.

Soli Deo Gloria

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