

Called as the Intercessor

John 17:14-24

¹⁴ “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also 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 them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Theme Statement

In this session we explore Jesus' intercessory prayer for his disciples and long for Jesus' prayer to be answered more fully in our lives and in the church. We join together to pray for others and to work for unity in the body of Christ.

Exploring the Word

John devotes quite a bit of his gospel to the final instructions Jesus has for his disciples. Chapters 13–17 chronicle the hours before his arrest and set the stage for the next steps in ministry by the disciples.

In John 13, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and gives them the command to do to others what he has done to them. Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial are also predicted.

John 14 contains comfort for the disciples and the promise of the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, Jesus illustrates the connection he has with the disciples by portraying himself and them as vine and branches. In verses 18-19, Jesus tells his disciples that since they are not of the world, but chosen out of the world, it will hate them just as it hates him.

John 17:14-16 In, not of

Jesus gave his disciples many words, but perhaps his new commandment in John 13, to love others as he has loved them, is what sets them apart from the world in which they live. Demonstrating this love is not what the world expects. The typical human behavior is to watch out for one's own interests, not those of others. This must have made an impression on the writer of 1 Peter, who later wrote, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

There are fifty-three uses of the word *world* in the Old Testament compared to fifty-eight in the Gospel of John alone. *Cosmos* is the Greek word translated in the New Testament as "world." It refers to more than the planet Earth, including what the Greeks believed was an ordered, intentional arrangement—something governed, including all worldly affairs. Jesus states many times in John's gospel that he was not part of this arranged order but brought light and life to those who were caught up in it. In John 18:36 he says, "My kingdom is not from this world."

In the science fiction action movie *The Matrix*, the hero is invited to continue living in the false world that is constructed around him or take the chance to see reality. When Jesus gave the disciples God's word, the commandment to love, he was inviting them into a dangerous new reality.

John 17:17-19 Truth, not just belief

To sanctify—*hagiazō* in Greek—is to make holy, to consecrate, to set aside for a holy purpose. Jesus prays that God will sanctify his disciples in the truth. Another way to say it is for God to make them holy and set them aside to understand and proclaim the truth of this other way of living. Jesus himself is dedicated to living in this truth of sacrificial love for others. He leads by example.

John 17:20-21 First, not last

Jesus was thinking forward, not just about what was happening at that moment. His prayer was for both present and future believers to be one with Jesus and the Father. This is a movement, not a moment.

John 17:22-24 Here, not there

Jesus talks about God's glory in the here and now—not something far away in time or space. Those who follow Jesus are the bearers of that glory.

What is the glory of God? In the Abrahamic religions, the word *glory* is used to describe the manifestation of God's presence as perceived by humans. Jesus has shown God's glory by how he treated others. And he expects his followers to show others God's glory in the same way of living. Paul says in Ephesians 1:12 that we are to "live for the praise of his glory."

The Word Today

Interceding for others can be as simple as asking a question.

Carl noticed that signage for those coming to a Christmas gift giveaway was not communicating what was intended. There were designated registration tables for English and Spanish speakers, but the signs were only in English. Carl asked why none of the signs said "Inglés" and "Español." The organizers of the event first responded with "The Spanish speakers know what the signs mean." So Carl asked, "Wouldn't having signs in both languages create a more welcoming environment?" Attention to small details can create a stronger sense of belonging and unity. Ignoring the same details allows distance to quietly grow.

Interceding for others involves seeing something from a bigger perspective. It takes into account the needs and best interests of another person and then doing something that moves them toward a better state of being. Sometimes we think of an intercessor "standing in the gap" between where a person is and where they need to be.

The church has historically interceded for the poor, the homeless, the widow, and the orphan. These are generally "safe" groups to work to help. In interceding, the church has encouraged and set up programs to meet the needs of these groups.

The church has also interceded on behalf of some "less popular" groups of people in need. Some people in the church feel it is important to seek well-being and justice for immigrants, minorities, and even people of other faiths. Recognizing that people are people everywhere—that is, that we all have our strong feelings and opinions—when the church is asked to speak on behalf of a group there can be discomfort and disunity.

Jesus' prayer was for the disciples present at the time and for all who have followed after that. That means the church today was included in Jesus' prayer. We may still need that prayer. As of fifteen years ago, there were over two hundred recognized denominations of Christianity in the United States and Canada. That doesn't count the many nondenominational church groups that make up at least 7 percent of Protestant churches. Worship styles, understanding of the Bible and its authorship, and social engagement are some of the reasons for division instead of unity. The prayer of Jesus for unity is still as needed today as it was when he first prayed it. May we join him in that prayer for the church of our time, too.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. When have you been part of a group that came together around a specific cause? What was it like?
2. What can a unified group do that a less focused group cannot?

Exploring the Word

1. What harsh realities were part of the disciples' world when Jesus prayed that God would "protect them from the evil one" (v. 15), even though they would *not* be taken out of the world?
2. Make a list of the feelings the disciples might have had when they heard the first part of Jesus' prayer.
3. Rewrite Jesus' prayer in your own words. Keep the focus on Jesus' original disciples rather than the church today.
4. How do you understand "glory"?
5. You know the rest of the story. How did the disciples show God's glory after Jesus' prayer?

The Word Today

1. Have you ever thought that you were included in Jesus' prayer for unity? How does that make you feel?
2. How does unity in the church help and hinder people becoming part of it?
3. What steps or processes could the church use to arrive at and maintain unity?

Closing Prayer

Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, . . . together serving in Christ's mission to the world, and together witnessing to your love wherever you will send us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 75)

Further Study

James 5:13-18; the prayer of faith

Daily Readings

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| M. Acts 12:5-11 | F. Luke 6:22-33 |
| T. Romans 15:22-33 | S. Luke 22:39-46 |
| W. Ephesians 3:14-21 | S. John 17:13-24 |
| T. Matthew 6:7-13 | |

Memorization

John 17:20

[Jesus prayed,] "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."