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Jesus' Prayer for the Church

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Scripture Lesson—John 17:1-3, 6, 11, 15-23, 26c (the thread of Jesus' prayer)

Introduction--This high priestly prayer of our Lord has been called the New Testament Holy of Holies. And indeed it is. Here on the eve of His crucifixion Jesus draws back the veil and permits us to look into His inmost soul, as He is about to offer up himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.

First, He prays for himself. *"The hour has come. Father, glorify thy Son, that thy Son may glorify thee."* The hour of Jesus' crucifixion was at hand, when His glorification would begin.

Earlier He had announced: *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying the death that he should die"* (John 12:32-33).

Jesus' death would be followed by His mighty victory over the grave and His exaltation to the Father's right hand, where He received the promised Holy Spirit, with whom He would baptize His church on the Day of Pentecost. *Thus being glorified himself, Jesus glorified the Father, by inaugurating God's redemptive plan for the world, which has touched each of us gathered here today!*

But the burden of Jesus' prayer was for His disciples and the church which would believe on Him through their word. It was a threefold prayer: *"Sanctify them... Make them one, as we are one... Consecrate them."*

Beyond question, this prayer was *literally* answered for the one hundred twenty gathered in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost. Exalted at the Father's right hand, Jesus baptized that company, sanctifying them, forming them as His Spirit-filled body, and sending them out in the power of the Spirit to turn their world upside down!

But Jesus said, *“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those whom thou hast given me.”* This, then, was Jesus' prayer for you and me here today who have believed on Him through the word of the apostles recorded in Scripture and proclaimed to us by His anointed preachers.

I. FIRST, “SANCTIFY THEM” -- literally, “separate them.”

A. Adam Clarke explains that the Greek verb *hagiadzo* is derived from two roots, *ha* (negative) and *ge* (“earth”), and literally means “de-earth” them. *Separate them from the earthly and sinful TO the heavenly and the holy—that is, purify them as gold or silver.* This is an ancient metaphor for sanctify, as we see it in Malachi 3:1-3: *“BEHOLD, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.”*

John the Baptist saw himself as the fulfilment of this prophecy. On the banks of the Jordan he announced, *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”* (Matt. 3:11).

Dr George Buttrick sees here a picture of the ancient refiner, who keeps the silver in the crucible, until all the dross comes to the surface and is removed; until all agitation ceases in the molten metal, and the refiner can see his own face reflected as in a mirror in the surface of the molten silver!

*Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me,
All His wonderful passion and purity;
Oh, Thou Spirit Divine, all my nature refine,
Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me!*

B. Observe, this purification is a two-fold process:
First, the silver is mined from the earth;
Second, it is placed in the crucible to be refined.
So, sanctification is a twofold process...

(1) *“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world—Sanctify them.”*

(2) But it is one thing to be taken out of the world—another thing to have the world taken out of us!

We must remain in the crucible of the fiery baptism, said John Fletcher, until all the corruption in our souls comes to the surface, and is confessed and removed; until all selfish agitation ceases and we rest in Christ’s promise—till refined and purified, only pure love to God and man remain, and we reflect the image of the Refiner!

*Refining fire, go through my heart,
Illuminate my soul,
Scatter Thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole.*

—Charles Wesley

II. SECOND, JESUS PRAYS FOR THE CHURCH, THAT IT MAY BE ONE, AS GOD IS ONE—

“...that they all may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, ... that they all may be one as we are one, I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfectly one” (vs. 21, 22b, 23 RSV).

A. Here we are introduced to the central mystery of the Christian faith: the mystery of the Triune God. The Triune God is not a solitary individual—He is *in himself* a fellowship of holy love. As Isaac Watts penned it,

*Glory to God in Trinity,
Whose names have mysteries unknown;
In essence one, in Persons three;
A social nature, yet alone.*

Now, Jesus prays that WE be introduced into this Divine Fellowship: *“As thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may in us”* (v. 22).

In this Fourth Gospel, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit re revealed as displaying patterns of personhood within an essential unity, and displaying love as servants of one another, always deferring to one another. The Son loves the Father and glorifies Him; the Father loves the Father and glorifies Him; the Spirit loves the Father and the Son and glorifies them. Now this is the pattern of the Christian fellowship.

B. This unity is Christ's *gift* to us in the Spirit. By baptizing the one hundred twenty with the Holy Spirit He truly sanctified them and formed them as His Spirit-filled Body. Pentecost was the birthday of the Church as the Body of Christ. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). *To be quickened by the Spirit of God is to be incorporated into Christ's body, signed and sealed by baptism.*

*In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North,
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

*Join hands then, brothers of the faith,
Whate'er your race may be,
Who serves the Father as a son
Is surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both East and West,
In Him meet South and North,
All Christly souls are one in Him.
Throughout the whole wide earth. —Charles Oxenham*

C. This unity is indeed Christ's gift—but a gift to be appropriated by obedience to Jesus' New Commandment: "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35).

The early church took this commandment with all seriousness and by their obedience to it penetrated the Roman culture with the spirit of Christ. The early Christians lived out this love not only within the fellowship of the Church but also in the world—forgiving those who were persecuting them and putting them to death. It was a love that world had never before seen. It was by their chastity and charity, their purity and their love, that the early Christians turned their world upside down (Adolph Harnack).

III. FINALLY, JESUS PRAYS FOR THE CHURCH, THAT IT MIGHT BE CONSECRATED TO HIS REDEMPTIVE MISSION ON EARTH

"Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the

world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may be truly consecrated” (vs. 17-19).

In case you question this translation, hear Nazarene theologian H Orton Wiley commenting on these last two verses:

“As there is a human consecration that precedes entire sanctification, so there is a Divine consecration that demonstrates it.”

A. As the Father consecrated the Son and sent Him into the world (John 10:36), so Christ sanctifies/consecrates the Church and sends it into the world. *To be truly sanctified is to be truly consecrated.* “The church exists by mission,” says Emil Brunner, “as fire exists by burning.” When fire ceases to burn, it ceases to be; and when the Church ceases to burn with a sense of mission, it ceases to be the Church. And what is the mission of the Church? *“That the world may believe that thou hast sent me ... and hast loved them as thou hast loved me” (v. 23).*

Archbishop William Temple once said: “The Church of Jesus Christ is the only institution on earth that exists primarily for non-members!”

B. Our Lord closes this prayer with this petition: *“that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them and I in them” (v. 26b).* In his book *My Lady of the Chimney Corner* Alexander Irving tells of his mother Anna, who was a quiet, unobtrusive Christian, but a woman powerful in prayer: One day one of her neighbours came to see her saying, “Anna, I am so depressed, I don’t believe I can make it through the day unless the Lord touches me. Will you pray for me?” Anna quietly replied, “Of course. Get on your knees, and I will ask the Lord to touch you.” Wiping the flour from her hands on her apron, Anna began to pray; and as she prayed she reached a trembling hand out over her burdened neighbour. When she had finished her prayer, the lady rose to her feet and said, tears streaming down her face, “He touched me, Anna—but it felt like your hand, Anna.” “It was my hand, but it was His hand too; sometimes He takes the hand of a bishop, sometimes He takes the hand of a surgeon, and sometimes He takes the hand of a poor old creature like me—it was my hand, but it was His hand too. He takes a hand wherever He can find it.”

Take my life, and let it be, consecrated, Lord to Thee....

Take my hands and let them move, at the impulse of Thy love....

Take myself, and I will be, ever, only, all for Thee!