

The Gospel of John (103): Our Lord's High Priestly Prayer (4)

Introduction:

Today is the fourth Lord's Day on which we are examining our Lord's high priestly prayer that is recorded before us in John 17. We are considering the second portion of this prayer in which the Lord Jesus is praying for His apostles, which includes verses 6 through 19. We have already considered verses 6 through 8 in which Jesus rehearsed before His Father His efforts to glorify Him before His disciples. In all that Jesus had said and done before His apostles Jesus had pointed them to His Father as the one to be glorified, or, given the credit for the source of His teaching and the power by which He performed His miracles. And then beginning with verse 9, we read of the specific nature of His prayer to His Father for His apostles, which continues through verse 19. Let us read these verses once again. Jesus petitioned His Father,

⁹"I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. ¹⁰And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. ¹²While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. ¹⁸As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

Last Lord's Day we examined verses 9 through 12. We might say that in these verses,

1. Jesus set forth the grounds for His prayer for His apostles (vs. 9-12)

We closed with **verse 12**, in which the Lord declared what He had done for His disciples while they had been with Him during His ministry. Jesus said, "***While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.***" He had kept them in His Father's name. In other words, Jesus had kept them securely in their faith and faithful adherence to Him. The reason that He did so was because they had belonged to the Father. The Father had given them to His Son and had entrusted them to Him. Jesus had been wholly faithful and successful in guarding and preserving them from defection and departure from Him and His Father. The one exception was Judas Iscariot, but the reason that he was lost to Jesus was because it had been declared in the Holy Scriptures that He would be damned.¹

2. Jesus prays that His disciples would be protected. (17:13-16)

In verses 13 through 16, Jesus prays that His disciples would be protected. In **verse 13**, which reads, "***But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in***

¹ Cf. Psa. 41:7-9; 109:6-8.

themselves.” Jesus first declared what was immediately before Him. He said to His Father, “***But now I come to You.***” Now He was about to be arrested and would then experience many hours of extreme pain and humiliation. He would then be crucified and undergo three days of death. He would then rise to ascend to His Father in heaven. But He did not recount what great difficulties were immediately before Him; rather, He recounted what was most important to Him. He declared to His Father, “But now I come to You.” He was filled with joy at the certain and immediate prospect, but at the same time it brought great concern for the ones He was leaving behind Him in this hostile, fallen world.

He then declared, “***and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.***” Jesus had spoken directly to His disciples of what He was securing for them from His Father. He had also prayed these words in their hearing. All of His speech was expressed in their hearing in order to encourage them and equip them to deal with His departure and the difficulty they would then experience without His physical presence to encourage and strengthen them.

What were included in “these things” that He had spoken in the world? He had spoken to them regarding the true nature of eternal life, and of His ability due to His authority to confer eternal life to all the ones the Father had given Him in eternity. He spoke in their hearing of the mutual love and concern that both He and His Father had for them, that they could be assured of their preservation due to God’s commitment to keep them safe. He spoke of their redemption that He had accomplished on their behalf and He spoke of the glory that His Father would confer upon Him for having secured them unto Him. He confirmed before them that He had kept them secure, and He prayed that His Father would continue to secure them unto their everlasting glory.

Jesus declared the purpose for having told all of these things in their hearing: “***that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.***” And so, Jesus spoke these things so that His joy for them might be their joy within them. And why would it not be? Why would it not be for us? These words of Jesus to His Father, which were expressed in the hearing of His disciples, were recorded for us that we who believe as they did, may also have His joy fulfilled in us.

We may have this joy now in great measure, but we will experience its full realization when we join our Savior before the throne of His Father. But it should be a source of great joy to us now, in this life, because of all that our Lord Jesus accomplished for us and prayed to His Father on behalf of us. As one once wrote:

This joy in Him is a grace of the Spirit, and is attended with faith in Christ; it should be constant, but is frequently interrupted; though the ground and foundation of it is always the same; it is therefore at present imperfect, but may be increased; it is unknown to the world, and inexpressible by the saints; and may be said to be “fulfilled” in them, when it abounds in them more and more; when they are full of it, and that is full of glory, and which will be fulfilled in glory. (John Gill)

We next read in **verse 14** that Jesus prayed to His Father, “***I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.***”

Jesus said, “***I have given them Your word.***” Here again we have affirmed to us that the words that Jesus said and taught were the words given Him from the Father. What is implied by these words and what will be stated later in a forthright manner is that the Lord gave His Father’s word to His apostles so that they in turn will declare that word to the world. Later in John 17:20 we read our Lord Jesus praying, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word.” Their word, that is, the word that the apostles will declare and publish, will be the word of the Father declared to them by Jesus Christ.

Here we see a principle that is commonly seen throughout Scripture. God has purposed to reveal Himself and make Himself known through the instrument of human agency. God could have sent His angel to speak the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, but instead sent His angel to Philip, whom He then sent to tell the Ethiopian of the way of salvation (Acts 8). Jesus Christ Himself could have revealed the way of salvation to Paul when He appeared to him on the road to Damascus, but He chose to send Paul into Damascus and there meet with Ananias, who would tell him the way of salvation (Acts 9). God could have sent His angel to reveal the gospel to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, but He chose rather to send the angel

to him to instruct him to send for Peter in Joppa, who would then travel to speak to Cornelius and his household regarding their salvation (Acts 10). God has ordained that His elect, whom He has purposed to save from their sins, hear and learn the gospel from those who had already heard and learned the gospel. May He bless our efforts to tell many of our Savior and may He bless our efforts to the conversion of many into His kingdom.

But the love of the Father that the elect enjoy, which had brought them to the Savior, comes with a caveat; the world hates them. Again, Jesus prayed, Jesus prayed to His Father, “I have given them Your word; *and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*”

The fallen world hates Christians. The people of the world hate God who made the world. There can be no peace between them. Most people of the world would deny that they hate God, but it is a truism. The God they believe in and claim to love is not the God of the Holy Scriptures. For if and when God is revealed in truth for who He is and what He is like, the hatred for God that is characteristic of the world will be stirred up toward Him and His people. **John Gill** (1697-1771) wrote,

The inhabitants of the world, worldly men, such as are what they were when they first came into the world; are under the influence of the god of the world, and led by the spirit of it, and are wholly taken up with the things thereof: the unbelieving Jews are chiefly designed, who bore an implacable hatred to Christ and His apostles; and the same fate do the faithful ministers of Christ and His members have, in all ages and places, more or less: the men of the world gnash their teeth at them, secretly plot against them, and inwardly curse them; rejoice at any evil that befalls them; greedily catch at anything to reproach them; stick not to say all manner of evil of them, and to do all manner of evil to them.

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) wrote of this:

Let us not fail to remark that true believers must expect the hatred and enmity of the wicked in every age. They must not be surprised by it. Christ and His disciples had to endure it, and all real Christians must endure it too. The reason of this enmity is the continued testimony which believers bear against the world’s opinions and practices. The world feels itself condemned, and hates those whose faith and lives condemn it. If believers were more bold, decided, and consistent, they would soon find these things out more than they do now. The good opinion of the world is about the last thing a true Christian should expect or desire. If all men speak well of his opinions and ways in religion, he may well doubt whether there is not something very wrong and defective about them. We are not to court the world’s enmity. A narrow, morose, uncourteous, and exclusive spirit, is downright wrong. But we are never to be the least surprised by the world’s enmity if we meet with it; and the more holy we are, the more we shall meet with it. Christ was perfect in holiness; but the world hated Him.²

The Lord Jesus was pleading with His Father to guard His people for they have His word entrusted to them and because they are in need of His protection, for the fallen world hates them. And yet it is to these people that hate God and hate God’s people that we are called to bring to salvation through the gospel. We are to tell fallen people what they do not want to hear, even as they view us as people they do not want to hear from, for they believe us to be ignorant, errant, and opposed to what they think is good and right for them.

I am presently reading a book of a relatively unknown preacher of the 19th century. **John Ashworth** (1813-1875) lived and served in England among the poor. He started and pastored what he called the Church of the Destitute. The book is entitled, **Amazing Conversions; John Ashworth and His Strange Tales**.³ After about a 75 page biography of Ashworth, there are a series of short accounts of remarkable conversions that had occurred under his ministry. One common trait that seemed to characterize many of them was an intense hatred of Christians, of their churches, and especially of their “parsons.” But upon

² J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 3 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 216.

³ John Ashworth, **Amazing Conversions; John Ashworth and His Strange Tales** (Tentmaker Publications, 2009).

their conversion they became lovers of Christ, His church, and of those who tell forth His word. True conversion results in a great change in a person. So much so that he is a new creation in Christ Jesus. Upon becoming a Christian, a person comes to love the things of God that he had formerly hated and he hates the things he formerly loved.

Ashworth told the story of the conversion of a hardened man in his town named **Sanderson**. Here is a description of his condition before conversion.

The old lady's description of Sanderson's creed, or, rather no creed, I found to be correct. His hatred to "parsons" (as he called ministers) was intense; the sight of one of them operated on him like the sight of water to a mad dog, and made him howl almost as loud as his own old Fox (his dog)... He was about thirty-five years of age, when his neighbours began to talk of his altered looks; his stout form was giving way, severe coughing set in, and he was, in the opinion of many, a marked man. In misty or cold weather he kept his room, and ultimately became unable to walk up and down the stairs. An old shoemaker, named Philip Powles, became much concerned about the spiritual state of his dying infidel neighbour; he, however, durst (dared) not go to see him himself, but earnestly entreated Mr. Britton, a zealous Primitive Methodist minister, to undertake the hazardous task.

Mr. Britton went to see Sanderson, at the request of the anxious shoemaker. On entering the house, he informed Mrs. Sanderson of his wish to see her husband, adding, that he was informed he was an infidel (a hardened unbeliever), but he had come to talk with him about his soul, for he was sure he had one.

"I am very sorry you have called on such an errand, for I am sure my husband will not see you, and it would very much vex and disturb him if he knew you were in the house. I am pained it is so," observed Mrs. Sanderson.

"I am come purposely to disturb him; for he had better be disturbed here than damned hereafter. If God, in His mercy, does not disturb him, he will be lost forever! Just go upstairs, if you please, and ask if I may see him."

Poor woman! She knew not what to do. She was afraid to offend her husband or the minister; but Mr. Britton persisted, and at last she went upstairs, and began quietly to arrange the various little things about the room, fearing to tell her real errand; but Sanderson had heard a strange voice in the house, and inquired who was below.

"A gentleman of the name of Britton, whom Philip Powles requested to call and see you; I think he is the minister of Philip's church."

"Tell him I shall not see him, and when I need him or any other parson, I will let them know." He spoke these words so sharply that Mrs. Sanderson quickly left the room, and closed the door after her.

"Well, what does his say?" asked Mr. B. "That he will not see you or any other minister," was her reply.

"I have a good mind to kneel down at the bottom of the stairs and pray so loud that he will hear. The Lord have mercy on him before it is too late!"...

Mr. Britton's colleague, hearing of the matter, charged him with being too "soft," and determined to go himself and see the infidel, whatever the consequences might follow.

Sanderson had strictly order his wife not to allow any parson, or professor of religion by any means enter the room. She knew his temper, and when the second Primitive minister came, she told him of her preemptory orders.

"Well, but I have come to see him, and intend to see him," was the answer; "and if you dare not ask permission, I will go up at once, and take all consequences."

Fortunately, her husband heard all the conversation, and called from the top of the stairs, that "if any parson dared to enter his room, *he would smash his brains out with the poker.*" I give his own words, that the reader may better understand the morose, untamed character of the man. He also ordered his wife to fetch a policeman to turn him out immediately. This caused our good Primitive brother to beat a retreat, and rather altered his opinion of Mr. Britton's "softness."

The matter was brought up to Pastor Ashworth, who, after prayerfully pondering the matter, determined to send one of his little girls from the Sunday-school. Apparently the infidel thought a great deal of this neighbor child who would come often to see him. The pastor taught the little girl to memorize a short hymn, and then go recite it to Mr. Sanderson. Here is his account:

She attended well the directions I gave her, and about three in the afternoon went up to the sick infidel's room.

"Well, Alice, you are come to see your sick friend," observed Sanderson.

"Yes, I have learned a new piece, and am come to say it to you. Will you let me?"

Sanderson was quietly rocking himself in his arm-chair, with his feet on a small footstool, and his back towards the window. He took the child's book, saying,--"Now, then, be very careful and say it well; mind you do not miss a word."

Alice stood before him, folded her hands, and in a full clear voice, began:--

"When life's tempestuous storms are o'er,
How calm he meets the friendly shore,
Who died on earth to sin!
Such peace in piety attends,
That where the sinner's pleasure ends,
The good man's joys begin.

See smiling patience smoothes his brow,
See the kind angels waiting now
To waft his soul on high;
While, eager for the blest abode,
He joins with them to praise the God
That taught him how to die.

The horrors of the grave and hell,
Those sorrows which the wicked feel,
In vain their gloom display;
For He who bids the comets burn,
And makes the night descend, can turn
His darkness into day.

No sorrows drown his lifted eyes,
No horror wrests the struggling sighs,
As from the sinner's breast;
..His God, the God of peace and love,
Pours sweetest comforts from above,
Then takes his soul to rest."

When the child had finished the hymn, Sanderson handed her back the book, and quietly said,--"That will do, you may go down and take Fox (his dog) with you; I want to have no company at the present."

I (Ashworth) sought an early interview with the child. On asking what Sanderson said, her artless answer was,--"He put the book on his face, *and I think he cried.*"

Ashworth was able to establish communication with Sanderson, and before long the man came under great conviction of sin accompanied with the desire to be converted unto Jesus Christ. It was clearly a work of the Holy Spirit in His heart. Ashworth gave this account:

Still walking about the room, he took out his handkerchief, and putting it to his face, he groaned out at last with a choking voice,--

“O, Mr. Ashworth! Mr. Ashworth! I am a miserable man. That child’s hymn, and ‘Poor Joseph,’ have crushed me to dust! I have held out as long as I can; whatsoever must I do?”

Ashworth then told of his conversion:

For several days Sanderson remained under the lashings of a terrified, guilty conscience, still wrestling for pardon and peace. But the moment of deliverance came. Sanderson was on his knees; the earnest cry,--“O God, for Christ’s sake, blot out mine iniquities, and save my poor guilty soul,” burst from a heart of anguish. Those words were the sublime strain that reached the Majesty on High; the swift-winged messenger of reconciliation, with the still small voice, whispered,--Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven. “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.”

Sanderson rose from his knees a new man; he was now unspeakably happy. Heaven had supplanted hell; his enraptured soul burst forth in praises and thanksgiving. The change made a noise in the neighbourhood; his old acquaintances reported that he was wrong in the head; and, if they were right, he was wrong, for now they were wide as the poles asunder. He sent an apology to the two ministers he had insulted, shook hands with old Philip the shoemaker, and for several months tried to undo the injury he had done, by speaking to old and young of the power of saving grace. Reading the Bible was his delight, and many passages in the New Testament he committed to memory. He was now a happy man.⁴

I would like to relate another example. Ashworth told the story of **Emmot**, an older shop keeper who kept his shop open on Sundays and decried the Christian Sabbath. He was a miserable man, who whose hard heart and hard speech was known by everyone. When Ashworth spoke with Emmot one morning, he responded to the pastor, “If there is aught I delight in, it is to choke a parson. I wish I could choke them every one, so that they could never speak again.” Ashworth went on to tell the story of his witness to this hardened man who over time came under great conviction of sin. The time came when Emmot’s opinion was quite different toward the Lord, his church, and those who proclaimed Christ to him. Here is the record of his conversion:

The change that Emmot was so troubled and anxious about came at last. He had been very attentive at the means of grace on the Sabbath (he had been attending church), and requested he might be allowed to attend a week-night meeting for Christian experience. From one of these meetings he returned in deepest distress, and for four days sought mercy in prayers and tears. “O Lord, wilt Thou not pardon me? If Thou wilt not, I cannot be surprised, for I have laughed Thee to scorn, and thousands of times insulted the very name of Thy dear Son that died for sinners. I have indeed been the chief of sinners, but wilt Thou not save me? O, do Lord, do; for Christ’s sake, that died for sinners, do save me!”

That heart-broken prayer was heard, and again the power of Christ’s blood was made manifest in being able to save the chief of sinners, for Emmot became a child of God, a sinner saved by grace.

In a letter I received immediately after, in which he gives this prayer and deliverance, he says:--“For a moment I felt as if I had left the earth, and that my spirit was soaring aloft into heaven. I felt my faith to be as strong as Samson. My wife says I am happy as a king, but no king is half as happy. This is the brightest day of my life, and I now truly begin to live, for I am a child of God, bought with the blood of the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. I hope I shall walk humbly before Him, and daily ask His blessing and grace to guide me, and help me to live at peace with all mankind.

Emmot’s conversion produced great astonishment amongst all who knew him in Oldham. That the sneering, mocking, scorning, scoffing, Sunday-shop keeping, infidel book-selling, thirty-year

⁴ Ibid, pp. 152-156.

secularist should become a Christian astonished all, and greatly pleased many, but it was like a bombshell thrown among his old companions in infidelity. Many of these called to see if what they had heard was true, and found it true indeed. But when it was reported that Emmot was expected to give public confession of his conversion at the church he attended, many went who are not often found in a place of worship.⁵

I suppose if there is one main lesson that stands out from this book it is that the nature of true salvation is not merely or simply obtaining God's forgiveness of sins. Becoming a Christian is transformative of the whole person, from the heart outward. The true Christian is a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17). To become a Christian is not merely receiving God's forgiveness of sins, it is experiencing new life in Jesus Christ.

Now again, Jesus declared to His Father in John 17:14, "I have given them Your word; **and the world has hated them.**" This has always been the experience of those who have furthered through their witness the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And so, we are called to take a message to world that hates us and inherently hates our message, for it hates the true God of whom the message reveals. But it is to this fallen, hateful world that we are sent. We can expect the hatred and opposition of those before whom we represent Christ faithfully and declare His word fully and forthrightly. Paul would be a great evangelist, but the Lord said of him, "For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name" (Acts 9:16). And as our world grows darker and darker, farther from the light of God's holy Word as the divinely ordained standard for mankind, the hatred of that world will intensify. We must be willing to face it and endure it, declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly, boldly, and shamelessly.

The Lord explained further why the world hates those who attempt to make Him known to the fallen world. Again, John 17:14 reads, "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them **because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.**" When we were converted to Christ we became citizens of another world. Before conversion, we were of this world. We had the world's values, affirmed the world's beliefs, desired to achieve and obtain the world's pleasures and goods. But when we were converted to Christ we were snatched out of this world and transported, as it were, into Christ's kingdom, becoming citizens of His "world", His kingdom. Paul wrote of this citizenship in the kingdom of God:

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. ¹⁸For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: ¹⁹whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on **earthly things**. ²⁰**For our citizenship is in heaven**, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:17-21)

And as Paul expressed to the church at Colossae:

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³**He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love**, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:9-14)

⁵ Ibid, p. 226.

We read of our Lord's next petition on behalf of His apostles. **Verse 15** records, "*I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.*" There are many Christians who believe that the ideal place for them to live is away from people, insulated from the world. But this is not what the Lord has purposed for His people. We are to be dwelling in the world for it is in this sphere He has given us work to do. And we may perform this work with the assurance that the devil cannot defeat us. While we are on the Lord's errands, the devil can do nothing to prevent us from accomplishing our appointed task.

And so, the Lord Jesus would not have His Father take them out of the world at this time. They had work to perform. Jesus would not ask that they be removed from the place of danger. He was praying to His Father:

'Not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world;' that is, presently glorify them, either by an ordinary death or by an extraordinary translation, as Elijah and Enoch were translated. Christ was not ignorant of their danger, yet He would have them ride out the storm; He would not carry His disciples to heaven with Him, nor doth He pray His Father to do it, though He loved their company, and they His, that they should be content to die with Him; as John 11:16, "Let us go also, that we might die with Him;" yet, 'I pray not that Thou wouldst take them out of the world.'"⁶

No, Jesus did not desire or pray that His disciples be taken out of the fallen world, but that they might live and strive within the world immune from the assaults and harm of the devil. Of course the devil is a very real personal being that has great power in this fallen world. He has the ability to cause both spiritual and physical harm. But here Jesus prayed to His Father that He would protect His apostles from both.

Keep them from the devil, that they may not come under his power; from the world, that they may not be deceived by its allurements. Briefly this keeping may be referred to their life or to their souls; keep them alive as long as they have work to do; keep their souls, that they may neither, by the world or by the devil, be drawn to do anything unseemly or unbecoming their profession: 2 Corinthians 13:7, "I pray God that ye do not evil, but that ye should do that which is honest;" and Revelation 3:10, "I will keep them from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the earth, to try them that dwell upon the earth."⁷

And so it is, that though our Lord speaks here of His concern and care for His apostles, in the same way Christ in His wisdom orders the existence of every one of His own.

Christ continueth them in the world, as the disciples here; partly because He hath need of them, as the disciples were to preach the gospel; partly that they might have more experience, and a more grown faith: they might try God, and God might try them; they might have experience of His faithfulness, and He of their loyalty. The world must have a time of trial, and so must we. Nay, He dealeth thus with believers; they are continued in evil times, either because God hath more work for them to do, or that they may carry more experience with them to heaven.⁸

And so it is that as long as we have opportunity for service for Christ and His people, our desire should be to remain in this fallen world, even though it would be more, even most pleasant to depart to be with Christ. It was his calling and opportunity for service that moved Paul to desire to remain in this world. Here is **Philippians 1:21-23**:

⁶ Thomas Manton, **The Complete Works of Thomas Manton**, vol. X (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), pp. 389f.

⁷ Ibid, p. 390.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 390f.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. ²⁴*Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.* ²⁵And being confident of this, *I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith,* ²⁶that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

We next read in **John 17:16** our Lord declaring to His Father, *“They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”* This is a repetition of what He had stated in verse 14: *“they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”* But in verse 14 Jesus made this statement giving the reason that the world hated them. But here in verse 16 Jesus made the statement in order to give reason for Him to pray for them. **Donald Carson** (b. 1947) set forth the thrust of these verses together:

The death/exaltation of the Master spells the principle defeat of the ruler of this world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11), but that does not rob him of all power to inflict terrible damage on the Lord’s followers, if they are left without succour. Until the consummation, when the last enemy is destroyed, ‘the whole world is under the control of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19). The Christian’s task, then, is not to be withdrawn from the world, nor to be confused with the world (hence the reminder of v. 16, repeating the thought of v. 14b), but to remain in the world, maintaining witness to the truth by the help of the Paraclete (15:26-27), and absorbing all the malice that the world can muster, finally protected by the Father Himself, in response to the prayer of Jesus.⁹

3. Jesus prays that His disciples may be sanctified (17:17-19)

Jesus prayed to His Father,

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

In **verse 17** Jesus first asked His Father to sanctify His disciples by means of the Father’s truth. *“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”* To “sanctify” means to “set apart”, or to make “holy.” Again, we may cite **Donald Carson** who set forth the issue quite well:

The ‘holiness’ word-group from which *sanctify* derives is rather rare in the Fourth Gospel. The verb occurs in 10:36; 17:17, 19; the adjective ‘holy’ is found in the expression ‘Holy Spirit’ in 1:33; 14:26; 20:22, and otherwise in 6:69; 17:11. At its most basic level of meaning, ‘holy’ is almost an adjective for God: He is transcendent, ‘other’, distinct, separate from His creation, and so the angels cry unceasingly in His presence, ‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’ (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). Derivatively, then, people and things that are reserved for Him are also called holy – whether a censor for an altar in the temple of the old covenant, or man set apart to be the high priest. The prophet Jeremiah, and Aaron and his sons, were all ‘sanctified’ i.e. set apart for sacred duty, reserved for God (Jer. 1:5; Exo. 28:41). The moral overtones of our English words ‘holy’ and ‘sanctification’ emerge only at this point: i.e. ideally if someone is set apart for God and God’s purposes alone, that person will do only what God wants, and hate all that God hates. That is what it means to be holy, as God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 1 Pet. 1:16).¹⁰

Now we read in **verse 19** that Jesus ‘sanctified’ Himself. He said, *“And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.”* And here in verse 17 He asks the Father to similarly sanctify, or set apart, His apostles by the truth. In John’s Gospel the idea of sanctification is for

⁹ Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 565.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 565.

the purpose of mission. This is evident here in **verse 18**, when Jesus prayed, “*As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.*”

Now whenever we read of God’s work of “sanctification”, we generally think of the progressive sanctification of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians over time making them more like Jesus in holy thinking and behavior. And there are many places in the Scripture where this is the emphasis. But in this immediate context, Jesus was praying that His Father would sanctify, or set apart His apostles, for their service as His apostles in the world. The apostles’ understanding of the truth and their calling and commitment to proclaim the truth will be the purpose for which they are set apart as well as the very means of setting them apart. Once again, here are Carson’s precise and accurate words that speaks to the heart of the matter:

This can only mean that the means Jesus expects His Father to use as He sanctifies His Son’s followers is *the truth*. The Father will immerse Jesus’ followers in the revelation of Himself in His Son; He will sanctify them by sending them the Paraclete to guide them into all truth (15:13). Jesus’ followers will be ‘set apart’ from the world, reserved for God’s service, insofar as they think and live in conformity with the truth, the ‘word’ of revelation (v. 6) supremely mediated through Christ (Himself the truth, 14:6, and the Word incarnate, 1:1, 14) – the revelation now embodied in the pages of this book. In practical terms, no-one can be ‘sanctified’ or set apart for the Lord’s use without learning to think God’s thoughts after Him, without learning to live in conformity with the ‘word’ He has graciously given. By contrast, the heart of ‘worldliness’, of what makes the world the world (1:9), is fundamental suppression or denial of the truth, profound rejection of God’s gracious ‘word’, His self-disclosure in Christ.¹¹

We have now concluded this portion of our Lord’s high priestly prayer in which He prayed chiefly for His 12 apostles. Next week, Lord willing, we will consider our Lord’s priestly prayer for all who believe the witness of these apostles, even us who have come to believe the gospel published by them for us.

And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom.
To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen! (2 Tim. 4:18)

¹¹ Ibid, p. 566.