

May 16, 2021

John 17:11b-19

“Jesus Prays for Our Sanctification!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Ave.
Decatur, Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our Gospel lesson for this morning Jesus is praying to his Father in heaven: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth ...” Not only was he praying for his apostles but also for all those who would one day believe in him through their message (John 17:20). That’s you and me! So, in our Gospel lesson **Jesus Prays for Our Sanctification!**

So, what exactly is Jesus asking of his Father? What is sanctification? To be sanctified means to be made holy. The Holy Spirit working in the truth first sanctifies us by creating faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to receive the forgiveness of sins. By faith we are counted as clean. Secondly, because there is still the sinful nature in us, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith while giving us new desires to refuse sin and bear good fruit. Because of our sinful nature we are exposed to a multitude of dangers without and within.

Now, the fact that Jesus asks his Father to sanctify us points to the truth that sanctification does not come from ourselves. It must be given. Moreover, Jesus was praying for his apostles who were already called “clean,” which is impossible without faith (Jn. 13:10 and 15:3). And, in verses 14-15 of our gospel lesson, the apostles are counted as those who are not of this unbelieving world but who are left to face this unbelieving world. What that means for us is this: Jesus is specifically praying that our existing faith in him will be strengthened so that we will have new and increasing desires to refuse sin and bear good fruit. He is praying that we will grow and live in truth that we may not be overcome by this unbelieving world. Jesus is praying that our sinful natures would daily die to avoid overturning truth and destroying faith.

Our sanctification is utterly impossible without the Father’s continuous, almighty power and undeserved kindness. The strengthening of our faith, and having new and increasing desires to refuse sin and bear good fruit, is of the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit working in the Word, which is truth. This Word is law and gospel. It is the letter that kills, by daily making sin utterly sinful which empties us of ourselves and any notion that we can save ourselves. It is the gospel of forgiveness that raises us unto newness of life and promises perfection only when we depart to be with the Lord. This dying and rising was poured out on us in the washing away of our sins in Baptism, which has sealed in us the identity of Christ’s death and resurrection as an ongoing dying to sin and rising in forgiveness. This exercises faith, which is the daily overcoming of this unbelieving world and our sinful nature through the truth. And in the Lord’s Supper we are given further strength to endure with a foretaste of what is to come so that we may not lose heart.

Most Christians today do not see sanctification in the way in which I have just described it to you. Most people see it quite differently. The vast majority of Christians view the Christian life in the following way: You repent and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and then you leave that behind, or graduate to focus your attention on what is more important, which is being a good Christian. This kind of thinking is wrong and leads us to three horrible misconceptions. First, being a good Christian is our cooperation with God where our role is critical for success. Secondly, if we do what God wants us to do it will obligate him to do certain things for us. And finally, this leads one into the thinking that being a good Christian is either a part of how you are saved or is entirely how you will get to heaven.

When **Jesus Prays for Our Sanctification** is he really praying for us to move beyond dying and rising in order to focus on empowering ourselves to be good Christians to get stuff from God, even heaven? Verses 17 through 19 of our gospel lesson emphatically rejects this. Listen carefully. Jesus prays to his Father in heaven, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. *As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* And for their sake *I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*” Jesus is praying for something to happen to us that begins with him.

Okay. Let’s think it through. The Father sent Jesus into the world to do what? To die and rise. He daily died to himself, lived a perfect life, and gave himself up on the cross for you and me. Furthermore, Jesus says that he sends us into the world as he himself was sent. He was sent to die and rise and now sends us to do the same. In fact, for our sake he consecrated himself to die and rise, that is to say, his whole existence on earth was dedicated to this. Why? So that we might be sanctified in truth. Consequently, such sanctification can only happen when we are also dying and rising as Jesus died and rose.

It all boils down to a question. What is the power of our sanctification, does it rest with ourselves or with God? The power of sanctification rests in Jesus’ love for us and the forgiveness of sins. And, because this unbelieving world and our sinful nature is daily opposed to the gospel, we must daily die to that which is opposed to us and rise with Jesus in his love and forgiveness. In his love and forgiveness, faith endures and grows stronger and new desires flourish and are strengthened to refuse sin and do good works. And what shall we say of these good works? Are they done to get stuff from God, even to obtain heaven for ourselves? By no means! The apostle Paul says of our living faith: “... by grace you have been saved ...”, and of works he further states that, “... we are his [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:5, 10).”

In Galatians 2:20 Paul writes: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. *And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” Those words are powerful and demand a closer consideration. Faith in the Son of God is to have his love and forgiveness which is the source of the Christian life, or as Paul puts it, “the life I now live.” We live in the flesh but not according to it. We live by faith in the one who loved us and gave himself up for us. So the spiritual life of the Christian comes from Jesus’ love and pardon for our sins. Luther writes: “this life is in the heart by faith, where, after the flesh has been killed, Christ reigns with His Holy Spirit, who now sees, hears, speaks, works, suffers, and does all things in him, although the flesh does resist (St. L. IX:232).”

The birth of a Christian and his or her new life in Christ comes through faith in the love and forgiveness of Christ. The Christian and the new life is preserved by the same. Faith in Jesus and his powerful pardon keeps us clean with a peaceful conscience. In the challenge of this unbelieving world that would drag us down, the love of Jesus and his forgiveness keeps us from the evil one. And in the face of our sinful nature with its daily sin and guilt, confession and forgiveness keeps us strong in Jesus. Faith in the love of Christ and the forgiveness of sins sanctifies, that is, creates in us new desires and good works. When **Jesus Prays for Our Sanctification** he is praying for us to remain in the power of his love and forgiveness, and this love and forgiveness is found only in the Gospel and the Sacraments.

The reconciliation of Christ is not an event that happens once in our lives so that we can graduate and move on to more important matters. Instead, the love of Christ and the forgiveness of sins is the daily fuel that powers the engine of the Christian life. Without that fuel there is no Christian life. There is no resisting the unbelieving world and the lies of the evil one. There is no overcoming the sinful nature and its desires to overturn the truth and destroy faith. In this life we do not move away from the reconciliation that requires a daily dying to sin and rising in Jesus and his forgiveness. Rather, we continuously wear the clothing of reconciliation so that by it we may remain in our sanctification. As Dr. Steven A. Hein puts it in his book called *The Christian Life*:

Through the Gospel, God dresses the sinner in the righteousness of Christ which is worn and lived through faith ... to put on the righteousness of Christ is to put on Christ. The holy clothing has a powerful renewing effect on us. We are regenerated into a righteous reflection of what we wear by faith in our Baptism. As faith grows and matures, Christ's righteousness develops a new creation into a mature likeness of His human nature. As Jesus according to His human nature grew in wisdom and stature, so also does the new creation that has come forth in Baptism. The more we grow in Christ the more daily living can take on a reflection of His righteousness and the fruit of faithfulness increasingly accents our life. This is what is called "sanctification." It is a lifelong growing and maturing process of the Christian's new life in Christ that Baptism has created.

Indeed! This is what Jesus is asking his Father to do for us. **Jesus Prays for Our Sanctification!** And that prayer is being answered right now and every day as we find ourselves in his love and forgiveness through the means of grace. We are clothed with Jesus in the Gospel and the Sacraments. Christ is saving and protecting us so that we may be with him forever!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott