

“The Lord’s Prayer for Us”

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Let me start today with a story. It’s a true story. It happened not too far into my ministry. It’s one of those experiences that (in some ways) has repeated itself over the years, but in other ways, it continues to stand out as one of the most personal and privileged experiences (as a pastor) I’ve ever had.

The setting was in a hospital room. For the past several weeks, the family had known that the grandfather’s life was coming to an end. He was well-advanced in years. He’d lived a good and a full life. He’d watched his children grow; even his grandchildren were no longer young. And now it was time for his earthly life to come to an end. And it was time for him, also, as a result, to say goodbye.

And so, there they were, standing by his bedside, fully aware that this may well be his last night. And that’s when he opened his heart, when he shared with them, not so much any secrets that he had kept from them in the past, but desires he’d shared openly with them throughout his years. And, as a last will and testament, in a chance to speak to those he loved, in what (did end up) being his final words, he shared with them one last time the things on his heart that mattered most. I was privileged to listen in on such an intimate conversation.

Today you and I have the privilege of listening in on one of the most intimate conversations Jesus ever had during his years on this earth. And it comes at a time in his life when he knew that his days, if not hours, were soon to come to an end. And it’s not a conversation he had with any of his followers. In fact, in the strictest sense, it’s not a conversation at all. It’s a prayer. And it’s a prayer Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father. It’s a prayer he prayed for us.

Often times referred to as his “High Priestly Prayer”, Jesus is praying, in our text today, on behalf of his disciples, as well as for those who would later on come to follow. It’s called his High Priestly Prayer for two reasons. One, because Jesus was preparing to offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, much like the High Priest would prepare to offer a sacrifice (in the Temple) on behalf of the people. And two, because he was interceding on behalf of his disciples, in the same way that the High Priest would intercede (serve as a go-between), between God and the nation of Israel as a whole.

Jesus was preparing to go to the cross. He was praying for those who were and who (would become) his followers. And in his High Priestly Prayer, he’s sharing with them (and with us) some of his most intimate thoughts.

In that sense, (you might say) this passage, this “High Priestly” prayer, truly is the Lord’s Prayer. Some have called it the “real” Lord’s Prayer. (More than the prayer he gave to his disciples. More than the one he has given to us.) This is a prayer Jesus actually prayed. On the night before he was to die. Not long before he was to go to the cross. Jesus offered a prayer, and it’s a prayer he prayed for you and for me.

Before saying too much about the content of Jesus’ prayer, about what it is he’s praying for us, just think for a moment about the very fact that he did. Jesus prayed for you. Jesus prayed for me. And he prayed for us at a time when it would have been easy for him to be more concerned about himself.

Just think about it. After all, he was going to the cross, where he would soon suffer one of the most torturous experiences ever known to man. They’d beat him with 39 lashes. They’d press a crown of thorns into his skull. They’d pound nails into his hands and his feet. And then they’d hoist him up where he would hang until he could no longer take a breath. And he knew it was coming. He knew what it meant for his life. And yet, in spite of knowing what was (soon to come), Jesus prayed for us. Jesus prayed for you.

Now, I think we all know what it’s like to pray for someone we love. I would imagine most of us pray for our families. Certainly, when a friend (or a family member) is facing a crisis, I trust (we find) and make time to pray. But just think (for a moment) what a difference it would make in all of our relationships if, on a continuing basis, we lifted up the names of others in prayer.

You tell me. (It’s easy to forget the power of a simple prayer.) What if, on a regular basis, you prayed for your friends? What if, each day of the week, you prayed for your neighbors? What if you made it a regular

habit (and pattern) to pray for your colleagues at work, or for your teachers or your classmates, or for those who are partners with you in the church?

Jesus prayed for us. Jesus prayed for you. And he prayed for you because there's power in prayer. (Don't ever underestimate the power of prayer.) And he prayed for you (he prayed for us) because he knew that God hears and answers our prayers.

And so, what did Jesus pray? (More specifically?) Before He was to die, before he was to go to the cross, what was it that the Lord brought (in prayer) before his Father? (Remember the prayer?)

Jesus said, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are in the world. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, so that they may be one as we are one." "Protect them by the power of your name, so that they may be one as we are one."

I read an article (a while back) that was talking about the difference between an audience and a church. It said, "An audience is a crowd. A church is a family. An audience is a gathering. A church is a fellowship. An audience is a collection of people. A church is a body of believers. An audience is a bunch of random stones. A church is a temple (of living stones) committed to the work of God."

When Jesus first offered that prayer, the church (as we know it today) was not even in existence. At that point, it was still a handful of followers – twelve to be exact – in just a few hours, down to eleven. But even then, it was the prayer of Jesus (an essential prayer) that his followers be united (as one) in him.

Now, turn the clock ahead 2000 years. If it was important when there was only a handful of followers, how much more important is it for us today? Because, we're not, (in the church), simply a collection of individuals. (That's not who we are.) We are the body of Christ. We're not a gathering of people (each one) doing his own (each one) thing. We are the ones Jesus has called (together) to represent him in this world. We are the ones Jesus has chosen (as one) to be the hands and the feet (and the face) of Christ.

Jesus prayed for his Church. He prayed for us. And he prayed for (our unity) in the church, because we all know what happens to a house divided. There's never unity when it's divided. And if there's not unity, then there's no common purpose or goal, and nothing is accomplished.

It's like the recording on the answering machine in a church that was having troubles. (I might have shared this before. Maybe you've heard it.) It said, "Thanks for calling St. Stephens. If you want information about our ministries, press 1. For our worship times, press 2. If you have a complaint for the pastor, press 3. (And), if you have a complaint about the pastor, press 4, 5, or 6."

Now, I'll be honest (in saying) that I've been tremendously blessed (in my years here at St. Timothy's) to have served a congregation that has remained united in its purpose and mission. We've had a unity in this place that has carried far beyond whatever challenges we have faced.

That doesn't mean we've always agreed. (The truth is we haven't.) But it does mean that we've continued working together for a common purpose and goal (in spite of those differences) and we have.

Jesus prayed for his Church. Jesus prayed for us. And he prayed that we would remain united in him. He also prayed for our strength, (for our ability) to remain strong.

Again, remember the prayer? Jesus prayed, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world...My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one."

Now, again, the situation facing those early disciples was much different from the one you and I face today. As far as we know, all but one of those first followers of Jesus was put to death for their faith. Only John died a natural death, but even then as a prisoner on the island of Patmos. Times have changed since Jesus first prayed that prayer (at least for us in this country). But his prayer hasn't changed, nor has the calling we've been given.

We're to be "in" the world, (Jesus said), not "of" the world...but not "out of it" either. In other words, the only place we can live out our faith is where we are. The only place you can live out your faith is in the place where you find yourself in the world.

What that means is...that means that you're to live out your faith in your place of work. If you go to work, (wherever you work), that's the place where you're to live out your faith.

You're to live out your faith in your school. I don't know (where you go) to school, if you're even in school. But, if you are (and you do), that's where you're to live it out.

You're to live out your faith with your friends (keep it going). You're to live out your faith with your family. You're to live out your faith with whoever it is that you cross paths with in life, whoever God has

placed in your life. There's no other place for you (to live out your faith), except for the place in which God has placed you to live.

Jesus wants us in the world. (He wants you in the world.) He wants you to make a difference for the kingdom. But he prayed that we would be "in" the world, but not "of" the world.

In other words, Jesus wants us to be in the midst of all that is happening around us, while (at the same time) to remain outside of its attraction and pull. In fact, in terms of being on the cutting edge of society, (being involved in what was happening), Jesus was right there.

Just think about it. (It was different in those days.) But in a day and age when they were moving from (what was known as) an oral tradition to a written tradition, (a major change in communication) Jesus was making the switch.

In those days, less than 10% of the people could read, but Jesus could read. How do we know? (He read in the Temple.) In those days, less than 5% could write, but Jesus could write. How do we know? We don't know (what he wrote), but he wrote in the sand.

Does that mean (in terms of cutting edge) that we all need to be on social media, "Facebook" and "Twitter" and the rest? (Probably not.) But it does mean that if you're on Facebook, or if you're "twittering" (if that's even a word) that you're to do it as a follower of Jesus and not to get caught up (so much) in what the world is all about.

You see, Jesus didn't come to (isolate us) from the world, to keep us somehow removed and withdrawn. That wasn't his intent at all. But he did come to (insulate us) from the world, and to keep us from being absorbed by it. And so he prayed for our protection, for our spiritual strength, that we would not be overcome.

One of the trends in the church today, at least when it comes to the so-called "Modern" approach to Christianity, is that too many churches are becoming more modern than they are Christian. And for a variety of reasons (and in a variety of ways), they're giving in to the ways of the world and (in the process) failing to have an impact on the world in which they are found.

Any talk about forgiveness without repentance is a move away from God and toward the world. Any message that speaks about our salvation in Jesus, without taking seriously the consequence of sin (and the need for a cross) is a message that finally comes up short.

Jesus didn't come to isolate us from the world (to remove us from it). But he did pray that we would remain protected from it, (insulated) from the attraction and the pull of the evil one.

And that leads to the final part of Jesus' prayer when he prayed for our sanctification. Remember what he prayed? He prayed, "(Father), they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth (he said); your word is truth."

What does it mean to be sanctified? Jesus prayed for our sanctification. What was he praying? (There are two ways to talk about sanctification.) To be sanctified (first) means to be made holy. It means to live a more faithful life. When a person is sanctified, it means their life becomes a reflection of Jesus. The more sanctified you become, the more your life reflects the life of Christ. Jesus wants us to be sanctified. He wants your life to become a reflection of his.

And, (second) to be sanctified also means to be "set apart." In the Old Testament, God "set apart" the nation of Israel for a specific calling. The priests and the prophets were "set apart" to carry out a specific role. In the same way (in the church), you and I have been "set apart" for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus. As we are sanctified (set apart) for Christ, God uses our lives to draw others to him.

Now, put those thoughts together and what do you have? (What was Jesus praying?) He was praying that your life would become more holy all the time. Not a perfect life, but a perfected life. Not a life without sin, but a life (in spite of its sin) that reflects the life of Jesus. He was also praying that your life would be set apart by God. (Set apart by God.) Because we don't set ourselves apart, God sets us apart. And he sets us apart so our lives can make a difference for Christ.

I still remember Billy Graham being asked a question. He was asked (by a young man) who was new to the faith. He said "Mr. Graham, Have you ever seen God?" ("Have you ever seen God?") Billy Graham answered, "No, I've never seen God. But I have seen a number of people who've looked an awful lot like Christ." That's the goal. That's what Jesus wants for us.

In closing, we began (today) by talking about some of the last events of Jesus' life, some of his final words (to his Father) before he was to go to the cross. Before he was to die, he offered a prayer for his disciples. Before he was to give his life, he prayed a prayer for us.

He prayed that we would be united in him (that we'd share a common purpose and goal). He prayed that we would remain strong, ("in" the world, but not "of it; not "isolated" from the world, but "insulated" from its attraction). And he prayed that we would be "set apart," made "holy", that others might come to know Christ.

A "High Priestly" prayer, no doubt, interceding for us. The "Lord's Prayer," without question, for it truly was a prayer Jesus prayed...for his disciples, for his Church, for you and for me. Amen.