

OUR LORD PRAYED

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 22, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In a day when men are so busy--so preoccupied--that they do not pray enough, it is good to remember that our Lord prayed often. He sometimes prayed all night. He prayed at moments of special significance. For example, he prayed all night before he named the twelve apostles for their work. He prayed just before he raised Lazarus from the dead. He prayed earnestly and repeatedly in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion. Not only did our Lord himself engage often in prayer, he also taught his disciples to pray. The model prayer which he gave his disciples, as we find it in Matt. 6:9-13, is familiar to us all: "Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

The seventeenth chapter of John records his "intercessory prayer." It is part of that group of chapters, John 13 through 17, which have been called the Holy of Holies in the life of our Lord. It is in these chapters that we have our most intimate and most meaningful glimpse into the very heart of the Lord. John 17, even among these special chapters, is the most intimate of them all.

As we look at this special prayer, may we think of it in terms of the circles, the smallest inside the next and both inside the last. The first circle, verses 1-5, presents Christ praying for himself, though it is in no sense a selfish prayer. The next circle, verses 6-19, presents Christ praying for his faithful apostles. The last circle, verses 20-26, presents Christ praying for his disciples in the universal sense--all who shall believe on him down through the centuries, of whatever race, nationality, and geographic location. This last portion of the prayer includes us, if we are his disciples.

Circle One

At one time or another the Bible presents four different physical postures for prayer. There is the bowing of the head, kneeling, falling prostrate, and, as in the case of our Lord on this occasion, the lifting up of the eyes to heaven. While no one of these postures is necessarily the best way for all occasions, it can be observed that whatever the posture it is important that prayer begin with one's lifting up of his heart to God. Our text begins, "These things spake Jesus; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee."

This opening sentence of Christ's prayer undoubtedly referred to the cross. Throughout history we occasionally see that it is in death that great men and women find their glory. For example, Plato tells the story of Socrates' death. Because of his unwillingness to believe in the fictional mythological gods of ancient Greece, and to give lip service to them, Socrates was to be banished from the land or was to be forced to drink the poisoned hemlock. His banishment was set for the time of the arrival of a certain ship in the port. In the meantime, he was imprisoned. Some of his close friends came to him and urged him to allow them to buy his freedom. They had the money and would gladly use it; they knew the right persons to see. They even urged that he had the moral obligation to live in order to provide guidance and help to his two sons. His answer was simple but remarkable. He refused to allow them to secure his freedom in this unworthy manner. He confidently expressed the faith that good friends such as they would provide for his sons whatever they might need. He concluded by saying, "My sons are in greater need of a father who lives up to his convictions than they are of a father who compromises his principles even to save his own life." In death Socrates found his greatest glory.

The same might also be said of Joan of Arc. It might also be said of Lincoln and many others. If it is sometimes true that mortal men find their greatest glory in death, how much more true, infinitely more true, is it that the divine Son of God was glorified in his death? On the cross God did glorify his Son. Similarly, on the cross the Son did glorify the Father by being obedient to the Father's will. What better way is there for a son to honor and glorify a father than through obedience to the father's will?

Our text continues, "Even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh, that to all whom thou hast given him, he should give eternal life." In verse two of our chapter we have this sentence concerning eternal life. The word in the Greek is the word "Aionios" which means not just length of life but a quality of life. This is seen in the following sentence, "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ. Eternal life is not merely endless existence, but is a special kind of life in which one has come to know God and Christ.

The first portion of our text closes with the words, "I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do. And now, Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." The cross was the completion of Christ's work. There was no limit to what God's love would do for man. If God had loved man up to but not including his willingness to give his Son on the cross, then God's love would have been a limited love. It would have been love "up to a point" but no further. This was not the case, however, for God loved man all the way, even to and including the cross. It was also

true that the cross was not the end. The resurrection followed and Jesus had been restored in heaven to the same glory which he had before the world was.

### Circle Two

Christ continued his prayer, "I manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them to me; and they have kept thy word. Now they know that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are from thee: for the words which thou gavest me I have given unto them; and they received them, and knew of a truth that I came forth from thee, and they believed that thou didst send me." (John 17:6-8). Christ's purpose in coming to the earth was to reveal God to men. This he did by speaking the words which God had sent him to speak, and by living a perfect life which reflected the purity and glory of God. It was in John 14:9 that Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

"I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me; for they are thine: and all things that are mine are thine, and thine are mine: and I am glorified in them. And I am no more in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are. While I was with them, I kept them in thy name which thou hast given me: and I guarded them, and not one of them perished, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled. (Reference is here made to Psalm 41:9 which reads, "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.") But now I come to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy made full in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." (John 17:9-14).

Next, our Lord prayed, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one." Jesus never prayed that his disciples might find escape; he prayed that they might find victory. There are no monasteries or convents in this verse of scripture. It is not God's will that his disciples should withdraw from the busy avenues of life to some secluded, high-walled spot, but rather it is his will that his followers stand in the very midst of the world's problems and that they exercise an influence to help solve those problems.

"They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, even so I send them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." (John 17:15-19). The key thought in these sentences is expressed by the word "sanctify" which means "to set apart from the world by actual sanctification of life, so that in heart and mind, in thought, words and deeds, one begins to live more and more in accordance with the law of God." It means to consecrate oneself to God's way of life. In the 17th verse the means of achieving this separation from the world, while yet remaining in the world, is found. "Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth." It is by taking God's word into our lives and hearts that we are insulated against evil and begin to influence the world for good. The word of God is moral, ethical and religious truth, and through its power we are consecrated and separated from the world.

### Circle Three

Now, our Lord turns to the disciples of the ages and includes us. "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20-21). Here, Christ makes his powerful plea for unity. He desires unity of all his disciples, whether it be unity in the home, in the community, in the congregation, in the entire religious world, or among the nations of the earth. This is the same sentiment expressed by the apostle Paul in I Cor. 1:10-13, which reads in part, "I charge thee ... That ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment." From this text of our Lord, John R. Mott, one of the founders of the Y.M.C.A. movement throughout the world said, "The price that has been paid for a divided Christendom is an unbelieving world."

Christ's prayer continued, "And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and lovedst them, even as thou lovedst me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world." (John 17:22-24). It is in this last sentence that we Christians of this day can find great comfort. The fact that our Lord desires that we be where he is has great power for encouragement and strength. Earlier he had said, "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:2-13). Think how much it does mean to realize that our Lord wants us to be where he is and to spend eternity with him there.

The prayer of our Lord closes with the words, "O righteous Father, the world knew thee not, but I knew thee; and these knew that thou didst send me. And I made known unto them thy name, and will make it known; that the love wherewith thou lovedst me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:25-26). It is in the last sentence of the prayer that we find additional great encouragement and strength. Jesus was making known God in order that the love of God might dwell in our hearts.

## Conclusion

We are made in the image of God. This is our finest quality. It is also true that our souls are never at rest until they rest in Christ. May we come to Christ, confessing his name before men as our Savior, repenting of all our past sins, and being buried with our Lord in the likeness of his death, burial and resurrection, in order that he may come into our lives. We have learned much about the love which Christ bears for us as we have listened while he has prayed to the Father. May we return our love to him as an evidence of our gratitude for the great love which he had for us.