

## TEXT:<sup>1</sup>

Some of you know this, but my first vocational ministry job was that of College Pastor to students on the campuses of Duke University, University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State. And I'd been on the job for all of about 7 minutes when I got a call one day. One of the students in my ministry/young guy named Jason, who also happened to be the mascot for North Carolina's Men's Basketball team - had traveled to NJ to be a part of the team's first-round March Madness game. And upon leaving his hotel/crossing the street...he was hit head-on by a bus! And so I got the call that he'd been placed on life support. And the church at which I was serving was really great. They bought me a plane ticket. And I got to NJ within just a few hours of that call...But the reason I'm sharing this with you is cuz, I don't know if you've ever sat with people before they died/family of loved ones who're dying, but I can tell you that, in those moments, you really are stripped of everything except that which is truly on and in your heart. It's in those moments that you really see what a person's made of...THAT is what we have here in **John 17**. Jesus, in His final moments...praying! Not teaching us to pray, like say with the Lord's Prayer. But Himself actually praying in such a way that we/**think about this**: get to overhear God...not talking to us/us not talking to Him...but Him/the Son talking to the Father, about the real stuff on His heart, in His final moments...**And what is that stuff?** You! Us! This whole prayer, Jesus is praying about the most important thing to Him, which is you/us...the church. And He prays **4 Things** I want us to look at today. Prays that church would be **Central** to your life...That we, AS the church, would be **Counter-Cultural...Compelling...Connected By His Love**. *Central, Counter-Cultural, Compelling, and Connected!* Let's look at those 4 things...

**First, The Centrality of Church:** And what I mean is, ya gotta notice in **vv.1-5**, Jesus is praying for Himself. HOWEVER, He's praying, you see, that the Father would glorify Himself BY glorifying Jesus. **You see that?** Which is to say, He's praying that the Father would bring to a conclusion His plan of redemption, THROUGH Jesus' crucifixion - what Jesus calls in **v.2**, "*giving eternal life.*" In other words, Jesus is praying, in His final hours, that everything He and the Father set out to do, since the beginning of time, with respect to loving, serving, bringing salvation and redemption into the world...would finally be finished. And so while it's true that Jesus is literally praying for Himself, you gotta notice; He's REALLY praying for you, me, His church...AFTER WHICH, ya see, He prays specifically for His church - starting with His Disciples, and then those, like us, AFTER His Disciples. So again, what really you have here is 26 verses of Jesus praying for us! And really diligently so, since you see there in **vv.11, 15 and 18**, He says, "*since I'm coming to you Father, and leaving them, and they're still gonna be in the world, keep them in your name. Don't take em out of the world, but protect em, and even send em INTO the world.*" In other words, in His final moments, what's on the top of Jesus' mind/in His heart, is DEEP, passionate concern for you and me, as His church!

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<sup>1</sup> Works Consulted:

- Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King! With Study Guide*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 236-252  
- S. Lewis Johnson, "Jesus Praying for Himself An Exposition of John 17:1-5," *Emmaus Journal* 7, no. 2 (1998): 199.  
- D. A. Carson, "The Supremacy of Christ and Love in a Postmodern World," in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016), Jn 17.  
- "Holy Father - Gospel of John, Part 2—March 1, 1992 - John 17:1–20" // "The Lord Praying for Glory - The Lord's Prayer - August 15, 1999 - John 17:1–5, 24" // "The Church - John 17:6–11" - Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).  
- "This Is Eternal Life" - Feb. 14, 2023 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000599535900>

So here's what this means: One of the big issues, as it relates to the church, in our current, kinda anti-establishment/anti-authority culture is that we should be free to practice whatever faith, spirituality, morality, immorality you have untethered from any kind of institution **right?** That's the thought! Even within Christian circles, statistics tell us that a large majority OF Christians believe that to be a Christ-follower doesn't have to include deep connection to a church body. That by-and-large, we can do faith and Christianity on our own. I mean we got YouTube sermons, podcasts, Bible apps, everything, so why be committed to something that very often is uncomfortable and inconvenient? ***Ya ever felt this?*** We all have! ***But let me ask you to consider:*** If at the very end of Jesus' life, the main thing on His heart was His church, how could we ever assume that Jesus would be good with us NOT being truly committed TO His church. Like that we can somehow love Jesus, without really loving what Jesus loves? Ya can't!...Incidentally, this is why, the Apostle Paul in His letter to the ***Ephesians*** calls the church "Jesus' Bride." Cuz if one of you came to me and said, "*Pastor Charlie, I really love/appreciate you. I wanna be YOUR friend...But I gotta tell ya, I'm not a fan of Abby.*" Not that that would EVER happen. If anything, it'd be the reverse. But let's just say someone said that. What I would have to tell them is: "*I really appreciate it, but sorry, we're not gonna be friends.*" You don't get to love me and not my bride! ***How much more with Jesus?*** And please/hear me: I'm not saying that you need to belong to a church family to BE saved. What I'm saying/in part what I think Jesus is saying here, is that being deeply committed to a church family is one of the main marks that you ARE saved! That Jesus actually IS your Lord and Savior, because His priorities are YOUR priorities! ***Do you see how central Jesus wants the church to be in your life?...Is it that central for you? Is it what you prioritize and plan around vs simply and occasionally fitting into your life?***

That's the first thing. ***The Second Thing*** Jesus praying about here is that we, AS the church, would be **Counter-Cultural**. Literally, that we'd be distinct from the culture around us. And you see it there in **v.9**. He says, "*I'm not praying for the world, but for them whom you've given me.*" Now, a lot of people look at that and assume Jesus is saying He doesn't care about the world and that by extension the church needs to adopt a kind of separatist posture FROM the world. BUT if you've been tracking through John, you know that CAN'T be what He's saying, since He already said, back in **John 3:16**, that the very reason He's come to live, die and rise in the first place is because of HOW MUCH God loves the world. So He can't be saying He doesn't care about the world. No! What He's saying is "*I'm praying for my church, because she needs to be utterly distinct FROM the world*"...In other words, ***counter-cultural!***

AND if you look in **vv.6**, and **10-12** there, you see what He means by that. What makes the church/YOU, if you're a Christ-follower **counter-cultural**. He says, "*I've manifested your name to the people whom you GAVE me out of the world. YOURS they were, and you GAVE them to me...All mine are YOURS, and yours are MINE...Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have GIVEN me.*" And again, "*I kept them in your name, which you have GIVEN me.*" ***So you see what He's saying?*** He's saying, you and I...belong to God? Or as Paul says in **1 Corinthians 6**, "*You're not your own; you were bought with a price.*" THAT is what makes Christianity/the church/YOU as a Christ-follower **counter-cultural!** Because let's be honest, isn't one of the bedrock assumptions of modern culture/certainly modern American culture that

we belong to ourselves? Ya know, freedom of self-expression. Radical self-autonomy. To the point that we're now told things like, that we can choose our genders. Destroy babies living inside mothers' wombs. Or that we get to pick how to live out our sexuality, or what to do with our money, what we put in our bodies, even whether or not we should die, which is the question of euthanasia. ALL of these things and more, you understand, are simply an extension of the assumption that we belong to ourselves!...But what Jesus is saying here/what flies completely **counter-cultural** TO that is, "*No! You don't belong to yourself. You belong to God.*"

St. AuGUSTine put it real practically. He said when we understand that we belong to God rather than ourselves, we'll most differ from the world in 3 specific areas: how we treat sex, money, and power/*sex, money, and power*. Cuz he said, "*the world is promiscuous with its sex, but stingy with its money!*" Whereas the **counter-culture** of the church and Christ-followers in it, are to be "*stingy with our sex - reserving it for marriage between a man and a woman - and promiscuous with our money - being generous with what we have. ALL the while, he said, using power to serve rather than for self-promote.*"<sup>2</sup> **Think about that!** How just understanding that you don't belong to yourself, but to God creates a totally different culture in the way in which sex, money, and power are all used...Or just take something as simple as commitment and community: Think about - in our FOMO/non-committal/always-on-the-go/progress equals success culture - how distinct we'd be if instead of seeing people in terms of what they can do for us, instead saw one another through the lens of what we can do for them, BECAUSE of what Jesus HAS DONE for us! How that would lead to a culture of really showing-up for and being sacrificially committed to people. How it'd replace the pressure of always needing to be put-together with the freedom to be who we really are - warts and all. How utterly **counter-cultural** that would be!...So see, a great question to ask yourself is, is your life with respect to things like sex, money, power, commitment, community, rest...more characterized by a worldly attitude of belonging to yourself or Jesus' attitude of belonging to God? Cuz Jesus intends that we be **counter-cultural**.

That's the second thing. **The Third Thing** He prays about is that we, as the church, would be **Compelling**. And frankly, being counter-cultural in the ways I just mentioned WOULD BE compelling. But notice in **vv.13-22** He takes it a step further and prays for the Father to not only help HIS followers, but as He says there in **v.20**, followers AFTER His followers - you and me - help us to live well, while being without Him in the world. For example, you see, He prays that God would "*fulfill His joy in us,*" and "*protect us from the evil one,*" and "*sanctify us in the truth,*" meaning help us to live distinct, as we place our confidence in Jesus, who IS the truth. So He prays all these different things for you and me in His absence, but notice WHY. Look in **vv.21-22**. He says, "*SO THAT the world may believe that you've sent me. (And) the glory that you've given me I've given them.*" **You see that?** It's incredible. Cuz what He's saying is/**listen**: our business as the church/our function as a family of Christ-followers together, is to live in such a way, that the glory of Jesus gets put on display! In other words, be **compelling**. Cuz Jesus is like, "*Father, help my church be filled with joy, and kept from sin, and confident in me, NOT as ends in and of themselves, but SO THAT the world will see my glory and be COMPELLED to*

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<sup>2</sup> Quote adapted from *Gospel: The Revolutionary Power of the Christian Lifel* // "Community" // John 15:12; 13:34-35 - J.D. Greear

*believe in me.*” We’re called to be **compelling**... You say, “*Ok how do we do that? Do we all get cool screen-printed t-shirts? Maybe add a smoke machine or two into this gathering? Or is it just about being nice, moral folks.*” Well, definitely not the former, and definitely MORE THAN the latter. Cuz of course, lots of folks are nice, moral, kind, they help the poor, serve their community, give to charity, do all kinds of things. So obviously that’s not gonna uniquely put Jesus’ glory on display. No, it’s gotta be more than that. There’s gotta be something inexplicable about us. Cuz if you think about it, what made Jesus so **compelling**, was the fact that it was really hard for people to explain Him. Ya couldn’t put Him in any particular box, such that more conservative, religious groups like the Pharisees were often offended by His willingness to do things like, befriend known, egregious sinners. While more progressive groups like the Zealots and Sadducees were offended by His seeming unwillingness to intervene in various socio-political issues and causes. Cuz in Jesus, here was a guy, who looked just like any other guy... BUT who claimed to be God and then validated those claims with the things He did... And then who was all about things like absolute truth, even going so far as to claim to BE the truth - which of course made Him look conservative - but then who said things like we’re only saved by grace through faith, such that we can’t feel superior to anyone and are therefore called to serve EVERYONE - which of course made Him look progressive. ***So what is He? Is He liberal or conservative? Religious or irreligious? A revolutionary or a traditionalist? What?***... The point is: He couldn’t be explained. And even more, all our categories FOR trying to explain Him always fall short. Cuz we say, “*He’s God! No, He’s a man!... Well, He’s a man! No, He’s God!... It’s about grace and faith! No, it’s about holiness... Ok, it’s about holiness and the Law! But you can’t attain to Law, so it’s about grace and faith... It’s about following your feelings! No, it’s about following Jesus!... But Jesus often asked people, ‘what is it that you desire.’*” ***So you see the point?*** What makes Jesus so **compelling** is that, on the one hand, He’s totally explainable - The Gospel’s clear: The only way anyone’s ever freed from the past penalty, present power, and future presence of sin and brokenness, is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone - totally explainable! And YET, so much about Him defies all categories to the point of being inexplicable... **compelling!**... ***Let me ask you: Has anyone ever said that about you? Does anyone say that about US, as a church? Cuz Jesus prayed that we’d be compelling!***

And then **Finally**, He prays that we would be **Connected By His Love**. And in many respects, this is both the predecessor-to and power-for everything we’ve discussed. But ya notice in **vv.23-26** there, the end of Jesus’ prayer is ALL ABOUT how much He longs for you and me to know His love together. Prays, for example you see, that we’d be united to the Father as He is! That we’d be with Him and able to see His glory! And most poignantly there in **v.26**, that we’d experience the same perfect love He experiences WITH the Father. That’s Jesus’ heart! That’s what He longed for in His final hours. Because, as D.A. Carson said, “*THAT’S the purpose of this whole redemptive plan/of this coming to know God and being known BY God/all of it bound up with the glorious prospect of knowing this love which Christ has already known.*” And friend, you understand, this is a love which, as Dane Ortlund says, “*isn’t like an arrow shot with speed, but which then eventually falls, or like a run quick out of the gate but then needs to pace. No! Jesus’ love for you is a love that, like an avalanche, gathers momentum as it goes/like a wildfire*

*increases in intensity as it spreads.”<sup>3</sup> You say, “how’s that possible? How can He be that kind,” especially when I know me, and you know you, and we both know how far short we fall of being lovable. Not to mention, we know Jesus too/see throughout this whole passage just how holy He His in being perfectly connected to the Father and as **v.11** shows, able to go back and be in the presence OF the Father. **How can He be this kind and loving, while also being holy and not overlooking our sin and brokenness?** In other words, **How can He see you to the depths and still love you to the heights?**...Because Friend, of what **v.11** there says. That Jesus went back to the Father. Which is to say, was reunited with the Father...by way of...the Cross. **You see?** He’s the sacrifice for your sins, such that your sins aren’t overlooked or minimized, thereby diminishing His holiness. No! They’re what put Jesus on the Cross. But neither can your sins condemn and shame you anymore. Because Jesus WENT to the Cross and was condemned and shamed in your place. THAT’S how He can see you to the depths and still love you to the heights!...And Friend, it’s what He longs for you to know and US to be united in. Cuz if I could say it perhaps a little simplistically: The Christian life/life as an expression of God’s church really boils down to two simple steps: **You ready? Step 1** Go to Jesus, opening yourself up to Him and letting Him love you with the same perfect love that He’s always known from the Father and has made available to you by His life, death and resurrection. And then **Step 2**...See Step 1. Imagine if THAT/that kind of love was the currency for what it means to BE the church. How easy it would then be to make church central in your life. And how counter-cultural and compelling WE would be AS a church. Go to Him and let yourself be loved BY Him. And may it be that love that unites and sends us out as a distinct, compelling expression of His family!...*

**Let’s Pray:**

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<sup>3</sup> *Gentle and Lowly* - Dane Ortlund