

Chapter 35: The Sanctification of Jesus

John 17:6–19

In the previous chapter, we began exploring the nature of Jesus' prayer in John 17. We call this the High Priestly Prayer because Jesus is not offering general prayers and petitions to his Father; rather, he is interceding for the full acceptance of his sacrifice. In John 17:1–5, Jesus prayed for his Father to glorify him and to give eternal life to his people in light of what he was about to do at the cross. In this next major section in the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus intercedes explicitly for his disciples. To begin, Jesus testifies that he has begun the work of setting apart the Father's people up to this point. Then, on that basis, Jesus he prays that the Father will both safeguard and sanctify his disciples for the success of the mission that he is sending them to accomplish. Jesus is not praying for the mere survival of his people, but for the flourishing of his people as they bear witness to Jesus in a hostile and evil world. In John 17:6–19, *Jesus intercedes for the sanctity of his people.*

“Father, I Have Set Apart Your People” (John 17:6–10)

The transition from Jesus' prayer for himself (John 17:1–5) to his prayer for his disciples here in John 17:6–19 is subtle: “a fine, organic transition...natural and very gradual, like the colors of the rainbow which seem to blend where they touch. The glory of Jesus is the salvation of *his followers*. So, directing his attention to *his work for them* the Son declares that to them has *manifested* or *made known* the Father's name.”¹ Jesus has prayed that the Father will glorify him, and now he prays that the Father will fully sanctify the disciples as the outworking of Jesus' own glorification. Jesus did pray that those whom the Father gave him would receive eternal life in John 17:2–3, and now Jesus pleads further for his disciples. In part, we see the full extent of Jesus' love for his disciples in this prayer.² More than that, we also see what Jesus believes that his disciples *need* from the Father after Jesus departs from them.

Manifesting the Father's Name

To begin, Jesus testifies that he has completed the work of revealing the Father to his disciples: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world” (John 17:6a). By “name,” Jesus means that he has manifested the Father's honor, character, and identity.³ Essentially, the idea of manifesting the Father's “name” means that Jesus has revealed “the whole person...the essential nature of God to people.” This revelation is intrinsically important, since Jesus just proclaimed that *knowing* the Father through Jesus Christ is the essence of eternal life: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Not only has Jesus taught his disciples about the Father, but to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9). Therefore, Jesus' testimony that he has manifested the Father's *name* to his disciples is tantamount to saying that Jesus has already given his disciples the first installment of eternal life.⁵

The People of the Father

Notably, Jesus does not speak of a general revelation of the Father's name to the world. Rather, Jesus prays that he has specially revealed the Father's name "to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (John 17:6b). In these words, Jesus describes three aspects of the election of the disciples.⁶ First, Jesus acknowledges that these people belonged in a unique way to the Father: "Yours they were...." In the larger sense, Jesus is referring to the Father's eternal election of his people, where he chose them out of the world before the beginning of time. John Calvin writes, "Christ declares that the elect always belonged to God. God therefore distinguishes them from the reprobate, not by faith, or by any merit, but by pure grace; for, while they are alienated from him to the utmost, still he reckons them as his own in his secret purpose."⁷ The entire human race deserved death and eternal condemnation because of the original sin of Adam; however, out of God's free grace, he chose to save *some* of those who fully deserved to perish along with everyone else.

In a more immediate sense, though, the first disciples belonged to the Father by virtue of their membership in the old covenant: "The eleven were believing Israelites; as such at least six of them (1:35, etc.) had been with the Baptist and were induced by him to follow Jesus. All the eleven were given to Jesus as former true members of the old covenant. What that covenant promised they had found in Jesus."⁸ Sending Jesus to become the Mediator to bring salvation to God's elect was not an afterthought that God began to pursue once the old covenant began to prove ineffective. Rather, this was God's purpose from before he even began to undertake the work of creation. All the covenants God created with his people along the way provided salvation to Old Testament believers only insofar as they those covenants pointed forward to the final work that Jesus would accomplish in the fullness of time. But, until Jesus actually underwent the entirety of the work the Father gave to him, he had not fulfilled the fullness of his role as Mediator.

The People Given to Jesus

Second, Jesus describes the Father's *giving* his people to the Son as Jesus accomplishes everything the Father has given him to do: "I have manifested your name *to the people whom you gave me out of the world*. Yours they were, *and you gave them to me*...." In some sense, this giving is accomplished in eternity past. The Apostle Paul, for example, writes this in his letter to the Ephesians:

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed us in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] *even as he chose us in him* [in Christ] *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5] *he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ*, according to the purpose of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved [Christ]. [7] *In him* we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, [8] which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight [9] making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, *which he set forth in Christ* [10] *as a plan for the fullness of time*, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph. 1:3–10)

Notice here that the Father *blessed* us in Christ (Eph. 1:3), *chose* us in Christ from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and *predestined* us for adoptions as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5), and all according to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has *blessed* us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6). All of this predestinating love, mercy, and grace takes place (in some sense) in eternity past. From another perspective, however, this plan is not actually accomplished until the Father actually *sets forth* Christ (Eph. 1:9) as a plan *for the fullness of time* (Eph. 1:10) to secure our *redemption through his blood* (Eph. 1:7).

As Jesus prays in John 17, this plan for the fullness of time is well underway and nearing completion. The Father has given this first group of disciples to the Son for his protection, care, and love, and the Son has done everything necessary so far to set them apart from the world as his own unique people. Jesus is citing his faithfulness with his disciples up to this point as a part of his intercessory petition for the Father to save his people for Christ's sake. Insofar as Jesus has manifested the Father's name to the people whom the Father has given to him, Jesus has faithfully executed the mission of redemption. He must still go to the cross, but Jesus prays for his people by citing everything that he has already done for them.

The People Keeping the Father's Word

Third, Jesus prays that his ministry to the people whom the Father has given to him has already begun to bear fruit: "...and they have kept your word." By saying that his people have kept the Father's word, Jesus is first of all saying something about *himself*—namely, that he is the final Prophet who speaks the Father's word to the people (cf. Heb. 1:1–2).⁹ Primarily, though, Jesus is emphasizing the genuineness of the faith of the disciples. The fact that they keep the Father's word serves as evidence to prove that they are, in fact, the people whom the Father has given to the Son for salvation: "Having been received by Christ, we are gathered by faith into the fold. The word of God flows out to the reprobate, but it takes root in the elect, and hence they are said to keep it."¹⁰ The Father's eternal decrees to give a people to his Son as a possession take on concrete meaning in time and space in the way that the people of God *keep* the word that the Father has given us through the Son.

Nevertheless, we should be clear that the people of God—and especially the first disciples—are not able to keep God's word perfectly. Jesus cannot mean to suggest that the disciples have kept or will keep his word without failing, since he has just sharply criticized the way in which all of his disciples will be scattered to leave him alone in his darkest hour (John 16:32). Jesus has not forgotten about their failures, but he is advocating with his Father for them from love as their high priest.¹¹ The disciples have genuinely kept the Father's word to prove the genuineness of their faith, and Jesus silently promises to cover over any of their lapses when he goes to the cross.

Believing that the Father Sent the Son

Jesus continues to testify to the completion of his work, clarifying further that his disciples believe that Jesus has come from the Father: "Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (John 17:7–8). Throughout his ministry, Jesus has insisted that he does not come in a private capacity separated from his Father; rather, he cannot do anything apart from his Father (e.g., John

5:19). The goal of Jesus' ministry has not been to lead his disciples to follow him *apart* from his Father, but to convince his disciples that he is the full, true *revelation* of the Father as the Father's true Son.

Of course, this does not mean that Jesus is not fully God, but only that he has veiled his glory by taking the form of a servant. He reveals his Father not by a dazzling display of his infinite glory, but through faithfully serving his Father as a true human being. John Calvin explains the relationship between the Father and the Son during Jesus' earthly ministry this way:

He speaks according to his ordinary custom, in the person of the Mediator or servant of God, when he says that he taught nothing but what he had received from the Father; for, since his own condition was still mean, while he was in the flesh, and since his Divine majesty was concealed under the form of a servant, under the person of the Father he simply means God. Yet we must hold by the statement which John made at the beginning of his Gospel, that, in so far as Christ was the Eternal Word of God, he was always one God with the Father. The meaning therefore is, that Christ was a faithful witness of God to the disciples, so that their faith was founded exclusively on the truth of God, since the Father himself spoke in the Son.¹²

The success of Jesus' mission, then, is in the fact that the disciples finally understand that Jesus received everything he possesses from his Father—including the utterances of his mouth that he has spoken in their midst.¹³ The disciples now believe that Jesus comes from the Father, and that the Father has sent Jesus. What Jesus has revealed about his Father is true and trustworthy, even though Jesus has “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). The disciples believed because of the power of the Holy Spirit, who gave them eyes to see the truth about the Father in the lowly form of Jesus.

Not Praying for the World

Strikingly, Jesus clarifies that he is praying *only* for his elect people and *not* for the world: “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:9). Certainly, Jesus elsewhere prays for the world (cf. Luke 23:34). Furthermore, the Scriptures command that *we* pray for everyone (1 Tim. 2:1). Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus here prays exclusively for his people, explicitly *excluding* the world from his prayer, as he prepares to go to the cross. As William Hendriksen writes,

It is *with reference to* (περί) the elect that Jesus is making request, in order that the full merits of his redemption may be applied to them, namely, to *the given ones* (see on 6:37, 39, 44; 17:6). It is for these given ones that he lays down his life (see on 10:11, 14); hence, it is also *for them*—for them *alone*—that he makes (is constantly making) this request....All this is particular, not universal....Not all were given. Jesus did not die for all. He did not pray that the saving merits of the cross might be applied to all.¹⁴

To the modern mind, this does not seem fair. Why should Jesus die for some and not for others? The answer is that God's election is not in accordance with *fairness* but *grace*. It would be *fair* for *all* to perish, since no one deserves salvation because of our shared guilt before God. Instead of abandoning

all to condemnation, God chooses to save *some*—not because those he chooses are more deserving than others (they are not), but purely because of God’s free grace and mercy. Here, Jesus intercedes as a priest that God will hear his prayers in regard to those for whom he will offer himself in death.

Why, then, does Jesus here pray particularly for his people *only*, when he elsewhere prays for the whole world, and when he commands that we pray for *all* people? To begin, we must distinguish between the *sufficiency* of Christ’s death and the *application* of Christ’s death. William Hendriksen, after insisting on the particularity of this prayer *for the elect*, continues by emphasizing that we must proclaim the gospel to *all*: “the Gospel must be earnestly proclaimed *to all*; Christ’s death is sufficient *for all*; God draws his people *from among all* the nations of the world; he exercises authority *over all*; and is glorified *in all*.”¹⁵ Jesus’ death is powerful enough to save any and all who trust in him by faith. Jesus himself insists that there is no sin—and no sinner—too great for him to forgive: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). So, Jesus does not limit his prayer because of any limitations to the sufficiency of his death.

Additionally, we must distinguish this prayer as the prerogative of Jesus which is not given to us as an example to follow. Jesus intercedes as high priest for his elect in a way that we may not imitate, for we do not hold his same office. Furthermore, we cannot distinguish the elect from the reprobate, for we cannot peer into God’s eternal decrees in the way that Jesus could. John Calvin contrasts our universal prayers with Jesus’ particular prayer in this way:

We ought to pray that this man, and that man, and every man, may be saved, and thus include the whole human race, because we cannot yet distinguish the elect from the reprobate; and yet, while we desire the coming of the kingdom of God, we likewise pray that God may destroy his enemies.

There is only this difference between the two cases, that we pray for the salvation of all whom we know to have been created after the image of God, and who have the same nature with ourselves; and we leave to the judgment of God those whom he knows to be reprobate. But in the prayer which is here related there was some special reason, which ought not to be produced as an example; for Christ does not now pray from the mere impulse of faith and of love towards men, but, entering into the heavenly sanctuary, he places before his eyes the secret judgments of the Father, which are concealed from us, so long as we walk by faith.¹⁶

Therefore, we must devote ourselves to intercessory prayer, both for ourselves and for all others, pleading that God will apply the merits of Christ’s redemption to us all. God will call some out of the world to believe in Jesus (John 17:20), but God has not given the identity of those people to us—that knowledge rests with our High Priest Jesus Christ alone. We must preach the gospel and pray, leaving the final work of redemption up to God.

Mutual Possession

With his attention still on his own, Jesus prays, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them” (John 17:10). The first phrase in this prayer is not unique, for all of us must acknowledge that anything we have belongs finally to God, and not to us. We are, at most, stewards of God’s possessions. The second phrase in this prayer, however, is absolutely unique: “...and yours

are mine.” It would be blasphemous for any of us to lay claim to God’s possessions as *ours*. Only the Son of God, who mutually possesses all things with his Father, could possibly pray such a thing. Martin Luther makes this point clearly: “Everyone may say this, that all we have is God’s. But this is much greater, that he turns it around and says, all that is thine is mine. This no creature is able to say before God.”¹⁷

In the third phrase, Jesus brings home the significance of stating that the Father and the Son mutually possess the elect: “...and I am glorified in them.” Jesus is glorified *in* his elect, who are his. Therefore, he willingly undertakes everything—including the cross—for their salvation.¹⁸ Earlier, Jesus stated that the Father has not forced Jesus to go to the cross. Instead, Jesus says that “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17–18). William Hendriksen writes, “This mutual *ownership* implies mutual *interest*, and this mutual interest assures mutual *action*.”¹⁹ The Father exercises possession of the elect *by* giving his people to his Son, who lays down his life for their salvation.

“Father, Safeguard Your People” (John 17:11–16)

Again, we may divide the entire High Priestly Prayer of John 17 into three sections: first, Jesus prays for himself (John 17:1–5); second, Jesus prays for his disciples (John 17:6–19); and third, Jesus prays for the church (John 17:19–26). Then, we may also divide this section into two general parts: first, Jesus establishes the basis of his claim for his disciples (John 17:6–10); and second, Jesus intercedes for disciples *on* the basis of his established claim (John 17:11–19). Now that Jesus has established that the Father’s elect do truly belong to Jesus, our Lord turns to intercede for them as he prepares to depart from the world. First, Jesus intercedes for the Father to *safeguard* his people.

“Holy Father, Keep Them”

Now that Jesus is departing from the world, Jesus prays that his Father will *keep* his people: “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11). We should observe that Jesus only in *this* connection expresses any anxiousness about going to the cross in this prayer, and not for the reasons we might have thought. Jesus does not pray for his own endurance through the agony of what he is about to experience; instead, he prays that his Father will *keep* his people safe as Jesus departs from the world to return to the Father. On the eve of the cross, Jesus was more concerned about *his people* than he was about *himself*! And if Jesus expressed such tender concern for his people at that point in time, why should we think that he will not pray for us now? John Calvin writes this:

It yields no small consolation to us, when we learn that the Son of God becomes so much the more earnest about the salvation of his people, when he leaves them as to his bodily presence; for we ought to conclude from it, that, while we are labouring under difficulties in the world, he keeps his eye on us, to send down, from his heavenly glory, relief from our distresses.²⁰

What a merciful and faithful high priest we have (Heb. 2:17)!

Notice also that Jesus here addresses his Father as “Holy Father.” While Jesus calls the Spirit of Truth the “Holy Spirit” (John 14:26; 20:22), this is the only place that Jesus uses the phrase “Holy Father.” Typically, Jesus simply addresses his Father as “Father” (cf. John 17:1, 5, 24), but he does use the phrase “righteous Father” in John 17:25. Certainly, the holiness of God is not in question, so Jesus is not trying to correct some misconception of his Father. Instead, the full significance of this phrase will come into view in John 17:17–19 when Jesus speaks of *sanctification* (*hagiasion*) and *consecration* (*hagiazō*). Although these two English words do not appear to have any connection with the word *holy* (*hagie*), they are very closely related in Greek. As we will see, it is the *Holy* Father who will make his people *holy* according to the *holy* sacrifice that Jesus offers for them.²¹

For now, Jesus prays that his disciples “may be one, even as we are one.” While the full unity that the three persons of the Trinity have enjoyed from eternity past cannot be fully *duplicated* in finite creatures like us, Jesus prays that we would nevertheless *imitate* that unity.²² The church of God should seek to be united in the gospel of Jesus Christ as we proclaim salvation in his name to a dark and dying world. This is an important petition that Jesus expands upon in John 17:20–23. Therefore, we will consider that prayer and its implications in more detail in the next chapter.

“Not One of Them Has Been Lost”

Although Jesus already established his claim to the disciples in John 17:6–10, he returns one more time to that theme: “While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). In context, Jesus prays this as a part of asking his Father to keep his disciples in his absence. In other words, Jesus is pointing to the work that he has done toward this end, so he is asking that his Father not allow his disciples to fall away once Jesus is removed from their presence.

Jesus now mentions Judas Iscariot, “the son of destruction.” Every last one of the disciples that the Father gave to Jesus have come through because Jesus has “guarded them,” and not one of them has been lost—all except Judas. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Jesus failed in the case of Judas. Quite the opposite, for Jesus is saying that Judas’ falling away happened to fulfill the Scripture passages that prophesied about the Messiah’s betrayal (cf. Ps. 41:9; Zech. 11:12–13).²³ Furthermore, at many points throughout this Gospel, John has pointed out to us places where Jesus revealed his knowledge of Judas’s treachery (John 6:64, 70; 13:10–11, 18, 21–22).²⁴ Jesus extended extraordinary grace to Judas by permitting the traitor to be a part of his twelve disciples, so the fault does not rest with Jesus. Neither does the fault for Judas’s sin rest with God, even though “nothing happens but what was appointed by God,” for it is not as though God constrained Judas to do what he did not wish to do in order for the Scriptures to be fulfilled.²⁵ No, Judas betrayed Jesus because of the sin in his own heart; and yet, his betrayal took place exactly as the Scripture had foretold. Judas, then, is the exception that proves the rule in terms of Jesus’ success in protecting the disciples whom his Father had given him.

Joy Fulfilled

Next, Jesus, prays that the Father would give fullness of joy to the disciples in his absence: “But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled

in themselves” (John 17:13). This is the positive prayer that Jesus offers on behalf of his disciples in view of his coming absence. This phrase, “joy fulfilled,” essentially refers to “complete salvation” so that the disciples “could not wish for themselves a better preservation and a more certain future than what Jesus, as his last word and deed in the world, places in the hands of the Father.”²⁶ Jesus asks that nothing be lost, omitted, or stunted for his disciples in applying all the benefits of the salvation that he will purchase for them at the cross. Jesus summarizes all these benefits under the phrase “joy fulfilled.”

The Hatred of the World

And yet, Jesus does not only pray *positively* to give certain things his disciples, but he also prays *negatively* to keep certain other things from his disciples. Namely, Jesus asks that his disciples be kept from the evil one:

[14] 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. [15] I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. [16] They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14–16)

Because Jesus has given his disciples the Father’s word, the world hates them, just as the world hated the word-giver, Jesus (John 17:14). It is not enough for Jesus to warn his disciples about the coming hatred of the world (John 15:18–25; 16:1–4), but Jesus also prays for them in this regard.

Just as Jesus does not here ask to be protected from the world’s hatred by avoiding the cross, so Jesus does not ask that his disciples may be taken out of the world (John 17:15). If the disciples were no longer in the arena of hatred in the world, then they could be safe from the vitriol, rage, and violence of the world. That kind of escapism, however, is not what Jesus has in mind. Instead, Jesus asks that the Father “keep them from the evil one.” Jesus prays that the Father will protect them in the *midst* of the hatred, and not that the Father would remove the hatred from the disciples altogether. On this basis, John Calvin writes these comforting words: “If, therefore, we wish to be kept according to the rule which Christ has laid down, we must not desire exemption from evils, or pray to God to convey us immediately into a state of blessed rest, but must rest satisfied with the certain assurance of victory, and, in the meantime, resist courageously all the evils, from which Christ prayed to his Father that we might have a happy issue.”²⁷

We are not of the world, just as Jesus is not of the world (John 17:16). Jesus said much the same thing to his disciples: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). The world loves its own, and hates those who live according to a different principle. Therefore, the fact that we are not of the world is a strike against us in the world’s eyes. But Jesus here also offers us hope by pointing out that we are not of the world, just as *he* is not of the world. Jesus is of heaven, which is why his Father loves him. Therefore, because we are not of this world in the same way that Jesus is not of the world, the Father also loves *us* as he loves *Jesus*. Jesus is once again establishing that we belong mutually to the Father and the Son, and that the Father should therefore keep us from the evil one on the basis that we belong to him.

“Father, Sanctify Your People” (John 17:17–19)

Importantly, though, Jesus is not praying merely for the *survival* of his disciples. In this second part of Jesus’ intercession for his disciples on the basis of his established claim over them (that is, the latter half of this passage in John 17:11–19, as described above), our Lord prays for something much bigger and more important for his disciples: *their holiness*. Jesus prays:

[17] Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. [18] As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. [19] And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:17–19)

As we mentioned earlier, we should remember that the words *sanctify* and *consecrate* are closely related to the word *holy*. Jesus is petitioning his *Holy* Father to ask that his disciples would be *sanctified*—that is, *made holy*. Here, Jesus prays that the work of his sacrifice will have its full effect in the sanctification of his people.

Importantly, then, we should begin with a basic definition of *holiness*. In the Bible, the word *holy* is a word that captures the unimaginably distinct nature of God from all creation.²⁸ God is not just a better, stronger, older version of us; he is radically *other* than us. Even when God *makes* us *holy*—that is, when God *sanctifies* us—he is not transferring the fullness of his holiness to us. God’s holiness is infinite, so that the four living creatures around God’s throne never cease day and night to declare, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). That is, they are perpetually finding some new facet of God’s holiness to praise.

And yet, the Bible says that God does, in some sense, make us holy. In that sense, the idea is not that we become like God by transforming into new, radically holy creatures to rival our Creator’s holiness. Instead, when God makes us holy he sets us apart from the world in relation to himself, and for his own purposes. In the old covenant, this word *sanctify* was often used to describe the way that a person (a priest) or an object (a piece of furniture or a utensil) was *made holy* before it could serve or be used in the tabernacle (cf. Ex. 29:37, 44; 30:29; 40:10, 11, 13; Lev. 8:11, 12; 21:8). This process of sanctification distinguished the person or the object from common things of the world. Then, common things could either be classified as clean or unclean. Allen Ross explains it this way this:

Under the law everything was classified according to the categories of holy or unholy, with only the holy being permitted in the presence of God. What was not holy (i.e., what was common) included two subcategories: clean and unclean. The normal state or condition of most people and things was clean; what was clean could be elevated to holy through sacrificial ritual, but it could also be degraded to unclean by pollution or sinfulness. Accordingly, the Levitical ritual was designed to cleanse and sanctify: something that was unclean could be made clean by purification, and then what was clean needed the blood ritual to make it holy.²⁹

So, there was nothing wrong with common things in themselves, and God’s people were expected to interact with common things all the time in their normal lives. The only true problem, in terms of day-to-day living, was when something became unclean, which could pollute and defile God’s

people and, by extension, God's tabernacle.

But, before something could enter into God's presence, it had to be set apart for God's service through the process of sanctification. This was unique, uncommon, and costly. God owns all things, but God held a special possession over the things that had been sanctified to him. Here, Jesus is praying that his disciples will be set apart as a special possession and for the special use of God. Part of being sanctified conveys a sense of privilege to enter into God's presence, but another aspect of sanctification refers just as much to the mission and work of God in the world. God sovereignly uses all things in creation to accomplish his purposes, but for certain tasks, God only uses what he has previously set apart as holy. Jesus is praying that his mission will be a success in sanctifying his people for the Holy Father's holy work.

Sanctify Them in the Truth

To begin, Jesus gives a very clear definition of *how* his disciples will be sanctified: in *the truth*. This means much more than saying that God will *use* his truth (whether as his agent or as his instrument) to sanctify us, although he will certainly do that. In other words, the way Jesus prays about God's truth demonstrates that the truth is more than a means to the end of sanctification. Rather, by praying that we will be sanctified "in the truth," Jesus is saying that the truth must become the *sphere* of our existence. Or, to put this another way, uniting us with the truth *is* the end goal that God seeks in our sanctification. R. C. H. Lenski explains it this way:

It now surrounds their souls, lifting them away from the world and upward to God. And this is to continue, to be intensified, perfected in all directions and thus carried forward to its ultimate goal: all in union with the truth. As to the ways and means and the agency Jesus has already said, "by "the Spirit of the truth" remaining permanently in the disciples (14:17), teaching them, etc. (14:26), bearing witness to them of Jesus (15:26), and guiding them into all the truth (16:13).³⁰

We must live in God's truth, diving ever-deeper into the stores of the wisdom in the mind of God that we have in Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Therefore, as Calvin reminds us, "sanctification is not instantly completed in us on the first day, but that we make progress in it through the whole course of our life, till at length God, having taken away from us the garment of the flesh, fills us with his righteousness." It takes time for this truth to invade every part of our being, to expose every dark part of our hearts, and to purify every unclean part of our lives. Nevertheless, God sets us apart for his holy work by causing his holy truth to have its way with us increasingly over time.

More than that, Jesus identifies his Father's *word* as truth. It is hard to see how we could overstate the significance of the role of God's word in the teaching of Jesus. The fruit that proved the genuineness of his disciples' faith was that they "kept your word" (John 17:6). One of the critical elements of the mission that the Father gave to the Son was to give the disciples the Father's words (John 17:8). The word of God is even the primary reason that the world hates the disciples of Jesus so much (John 17:14). God's people will be sanctified only in and through God's word. The word is not a bolt-on addition to how God purifies his people in holiness, nor is it a take-it-or-leave-it option. Jesus prays that his disciples will be made holy not through a supernatural zap from heaven, but through the Father's word.

Sent into the World

Next, Jesus explains the *need* for their sanctification: just as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so also Jesus has sent his disciples into the world. It is interesting that Jesus does not pray for advanced leadership training courses, or for resources to fund their mission initiatives, or for anything else that we would normally ask for as we seek to fulfill the great commission. Instead, Jesus prays for the *holiness* of the leaders in his church—a holiness that God brings about in the sanctifying truth of his word. These first disciples will be sent as *apostles*, which is the noun form (*apostolos*) of the verb used here for *sent* (*apostellein*).³¹ With this sending, the first disciples will have unique authority to preach and proclaim the gospel of Jesus as eyewitnesses of his majesty during his earthly ministry (Acts 1:21–22; 2 Pet. 1:16). The confirmation of their teaching ministry will not be their superior knowledge or skill in debating, but rather the palpable sense that these disciples have been with Jesus (Acts 4:13), the Holy One.

Beyond the specific sending of the first disciples, Jesus sends *all* Christians into the world in a general sense. Jesus calls us to bear witness to his gospel, being ready to give an account to the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15). In so doing, we do not go as eyewitnesses to what Jesus has done, but as those who bear witness to the truth of the gospel as outlined in the truth of God's word by the apostles who *were* eyewitnesses. For this mission, we also need the sanctifying holiness of God's truth in the word. Jesus must set us apart unto holiness in order for us to carry out the holy mission that he wants us to accomplish in the world.

"I Consecrate Myself"

Finally, Jesus relates the sanctification of the disciples to his own consecration: "And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in the truth" (John 17:19). Again, this word for *consecrate* is the same word as *sanctify* and *holy*, although Jesus is using this word in a different sense. While the word *consecrate* often means set aside to a specific office (e.g., priestly or prophetic ministry; cf. Ex. 28:41; Jer. 1:5), it can also mean to set something apart as a holy *sacrifice* (cf. Deut 15:19, 21).³² For Jesus, it means both. Jesus consecrates himself by taking up the office of a priest to offer himself as a holy sacrifice. This sacrifice will function as the source from which "sanctification flows, which is completed in us by the doctrine of the Gospel."³³ It is the work of Jesus on the cross, proclaimed in the truth of the gospel, that sanctifies us for the mission that God is giving us in the world.

Additionally, this word gives us a sense of what it will mean to be *sanctified*. Jesus does not ask us to become the substitutionary, atoning sacrifice that *he* became for us, but he does ask us to take up our own crosses to follow him (Matt. 16:24–26). That is, we must die to ourselves in order to live for Jesus in the way he calls us to live. We must *consecrate* ourselves to the good works that Jesus has set out for us—not as though we can earn or merit our salvation by those good works. Instead, Jesus explains to us that he saves us *so that* we may walk in the good works that God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). Jesus is interceding that his sacrifice will be a success *so that* we may be sanctified for the work he has prepared for us in proclaiming his gospel throughout the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Jesus do during his earthly ministry in relation to his disciples? How did he teach them? What did he accomplish for them in the short amount of time for his public ministry before his death? Why is Jesus so careful to recount all that he has done for his Father? How does what Jesus has already done affect the success of his intercession?
2. Do we belong to the Father or to the Son? Do we belong to both? In what sense? What does that tell us about the love of God for us? How do we see that love of God played out in the mission of Jesus in the world?
3. What fears and threats have a tendency to gain a foothold of fear in your life? What comfort can you draw from the fact that Jesus intercedes for you, asking the Father to safeguard you in this wicked world?
4. What does sanctification mean? Why does God need to sanctify us in order to use us? How does your sanctification relate to the good works that Jesus calls you to do?

Notes

1. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 352.
2. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1128.
3. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1056.
4. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 640.
5. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 353.
6. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 170–71. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>
7. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 170. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>
8. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1129.
9. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1056.
10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 171. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>
11. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 353.
12. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 171. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>
13. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1131.
14. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 354–55.
15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 355.
16. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 172–73. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>
17. Martin Luther, cited in Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1133.
18. “*And I am glorified in them.* This is connected with the second clause of the verse, and thine are mine;

for it follows that it is reasonable that he, for his part, should promote their salvation; and this is a most excellent testimony for confirming our faith, that Christ never will cease to care for our salvation, since he is glorified in us.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 173–74. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>)

19. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 356.

20. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 174 Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.ii.html>>

21. “The thought, as we shall see, is that the holiness of the Father establishes what it means for the Son and his followers to ‘consecrate’ themselves—the Johannine equivalent of ‘I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because of I am holy’ (Lv. 11:44; cf. 1 Pet. 1:16; Mt. 5:48; Barrett, p. 506). The root of Jesus’ ‘holiness’ and of ours is tied up in our respective relationships with the holy Father.” (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 561.)

22. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 357.

23. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 358.

24. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 563.

25. “That the Scripture might be fulfilled. This relates to the former clause. Judas fell, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But it would be a most unfounded argument, if any one were to infer from this, that the revolt of Judas ought to be ascribed to God rather than to himself; because the prediction laid him under a necessity. For the course of events ought not to be ascribed to prophecies, because it was predicted in them; and, indeed, the prophets threaten nothing but what would have happened, though they had not spoken of it. It is not in the prophecies, therefore, that we must go to seek the cause of events. I acknowledge, indeed, that nothing happens but what has been appointed by God; but the only question now is, Do those things which it has foretold, or predicted, lay men under a necessity? which I have already demonstrated to be false.

Nor was it the design of Christ to transfer to Scripture the cause of the ruin of Judas, but he only intended to take away the occasion of stumbling, which might shake weak minds. Now the method of removing it is, by showing that the Spirit of God had long ago testified that such an event would happen; for we commonly startle at what is new and sudden.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 176–77. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.iii.html>>)

26. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 554.

27. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 179. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.iv.html>>

28. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 565.

29. Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 243–44.

30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 1146–47.

31. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John’s Gospel*, 1150.

32. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 301.

33. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 180. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.vii.iv.html>>