

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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TRUTH AND SANCTIFICATION

The world and the devil are daunting enemies, and Jesus' concern about them in his prayer is a summons to vigilance and prayer for protection. D. A. Carson pointedly observes: "The spiritual dimensions of this prayer of Jesus are consistent and overwhelming. By contrast we spend much more time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family, and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one."¹ John 17 has come to be known as the high priestly prayer of our Lord. We have here the only long prayer of the Lord Jesus that is recorded. We know that He prayed often and for long periods of time. During His earthly life He prayed with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7); He prayed at His baptism (Luke 3:21); at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-29); in the hills (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12); in solitary places (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18); and at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36, 39, 42, 44; Mark 14:32, 35, 39; Luke 22:41-45). He prayed for Simon Peter that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32); He interceded for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12); He always lives to make intercession for His people (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34). Here we have recorded the prayer of the second Person of the Trinity to the Father, and we enter into the Holy of Holies. "The prayer which Christ made for us," said Augustine, "He hath also made known to us. Being so great a Master, not only what He saith in discoursing to the disciples, but also what He saith to the Father in praying for them, is their edification."² The chapter opens with the Lord Jesus praying for Himself, for His being glorified (vv. 1-5); the rest of the prayer concerns His own sheep. He prays that the Father would keep them, and since they are to remain in the world, He prays for their protection. Because they are to be His witnesses, they must be sanctified. They are to be kept through the name of the Father, and Christ prays that His people partake of the Father's holiness. This work of holiness or sanctification is to be accomplished *in* the truth (or *through* the truth). This is Christ's request; this is what He prays for; this is the desire of His heart.

- I. **THE REQUEST: *SANCTIFY THEM*.** The word translated *sanctify* is *hagiazō*, "to sanctify, to set apart and dedicate."³ This is the same word that is translated "Holy" in v. 11 in reference to the Father. Contrary to what most people think, the word does not have reference to inward cleansing, still less to the eradication of the sin nature. Note how Jesus uses the word in 17:19 (cf. also John 10:36). The word stresses *separation*. What does this involve?

- A. ***Set Apart By God.*** The believer is set apart by God, *in* time (in our experience) and *before* time (in God's decree) (Ephesians 1:4). Sanctification is actually the fruition of election (James 1:18). "This sanctification can take place only if the entire personality is desirous of being governed by the truth; i.e., by God's redemptive revelation in Christ, as the ultimate standard of life and doctrine. This truth is embodied in Christ, in him alone. He is *the truth* (see on 14:6). However, *the word* of the Father, which had been given to the disciples, must be the source of truth for these men when Jesus is no longer personally with them. That word is truth. It is wholly infallible. Without it the work of sanctification is entirely impossible. Jesus requests, therefore, that the Father may cause these men, in an ever increasing degree, to love *that word*, and to live according to the truth of God revealed in *this message* which *they* had received from him, and which *he*, in turn, had received from the Father."⁴
- B. ***Purged By Degrees.*** Sanctification, in one sense, takes place at the moment of belief (1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13); but the word also refers to the *process* of sanctification. We are not only accounted as holy, but we are being made holy. "No one is a believer who is not holy," wrote Calvin, "and no one is holy who is not a believer."⁵ Sanctification, therefore, is the renovation of the Christian by which God delivers His child, who has been justified by faith in Christ more and more from his native depravity and transforms him into His own image (by the Word and the Spirit). This renovation refers not only to outward acts, but to man's nature (1 Thessalonians 5:23), which includes the mind and will (Ephesians 4:22-24) as well as his desires (Galatians 5:24).
- C. ***Endowed With God's Image and Likeness.*** Not only is the believer cleansed from sin and its guilt (positionally via justification), the believer is adorned with grace (Ephesians 5:26-27). "The Church's honour," comments Manton, "lieth not in pomp and outward ornament, but in holiness."⁶
- D. ***It is the Work of God.*** The prayer is made to God the Father. The New Testament tells us that the Triune God is involved in this work. "To them that are *sanctified* by God *the Father*" (Jude 1), *the Son* "gave himself for the church, that he might *sanctify* and cleanse it." (Ephesians 5:25, 26), and "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through *sanctification* of *The Spirit*" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

II. **THE MEANS: THROUGH THY TRUTH.**⁷ "Truth," declared John Howe, "is the means of holiness."⁸ What is this *truth*? The word occurs over 182 times in the New Testament, 82 times in John's writings, so this alone shows that the Bible places great emphasis upon truth. Sometimes the word simply refers to the plain facts of a case (Matthew 5:33; Luke 22:59). Most of the time, however, the word is used of God and righteous conduct. Truth is manifest in the Son (John 14:6; 2 Corinthians 11:10; Ephesians 4:12). He speaks Truth (John 8:30, 45, 46; 16:7). The Spirit is Truth (1 John 5:6) and is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17); 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6). God's judgment is according to truth (Romans 2:2). The Gospel is truth (Galatians 2:5, 14; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5). Note also how the *absence* of truth is described. There is no truth in the devil (John 8:44). Paul described the wicked as "holding down the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). They exchanged the truth for a lie (Romans 1:25), disobey the truth (Romans 2:8;

Galatians 5:7), do not have the truth (1 Timothy 6:5), lie against the truth (James 3:14), and wander from the truth (James 5:19). Truth, therefore, is connected with righteousness. The truth of Scripture is *not* the same thing as “truth” in other spheres. God’s truth always is related to God’s character. Truth leads to godliness (Titus 1:1). “The New Testament inspires us to be obedient to the truth (1 Peter 1:22), to put on the new nature of truth which God has created for us to wear (Ephesians 4:24), to let truth gird our loins for action (6:14), to believe truth (2 Thessalonians 2:12, 13), to teach in truth (1 Timothy 2:7), to walk in truth (2 John 4; 3 John 3, 4) to be fellow-workers with the truth (3 John 8). Most of all, it inspires us to *love* truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Bare truth can be cold and forbidding, but not in the New Testament. Love rejoices with the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6). Three times over in his letters St. John links love and truth (1 John 3:18; 2 John 1; 3 John 1). *Whom I love in truth* – that is how he thinks of his dear readers, and he speaks of God’s grace, mercy and peace being given to us in truth and love (2 John 3). And so Paul when he bids the Ephesians deal truly (4:15), says that this must be in love, for only so will the Body be truly built up, that Church of God which is the pillar and the ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). John describes the true Christian as being *of the truth* (1 John 3:19), and the test whereby we can prove that we are of the truth is that we have learnt how to love both in deed and in truth (3:18).”⁹

III. THE REASON: *THY WORD IS TRUTH.* This expression, “Thy word is truth,” is found in the Old Testament. “Thy law is the truth” (Psalm 119:142), “thou art God, and thy words be true” (2 Samuel 7:28). “The phrase,” notes Westcott, “occurs in one of the Jewish prayers for the new year. *Purify our hearts to serve thee in truth. Thou, O God, art Truth* (Jeremiah 10:10) and *Thy Word is Truth and standeth forever.*”¹⁰ Please note the words of Calvin, “There are fanatics who indulge in much useless prattle about *sanctification*, but who neglect *the truth* of God, by which he consecrated himself to us. Again, as there are others who chatter quite foolishly about *the truth*, and yet disregard *the word*, Christ expressly says that *the truth* by which God sanctifies his sons, is not to be found anywhere else than in *the word.*”¹¹ It is by means of the Word that Christians grow (1 Peter 2:2). “When men neglect and contemn the word of God, they dam up the fountains of holiness.”¹² Note this: truth *separates* from error, and, therefore, from evil. Error leads to evil conduct. The relationship between the two petitions of Christ underscores this: *Keep them from the evil one* (v. 15), and *Sanctify them by thy truth* (17:17). The latter secures the former.

CONCLUSION: The late James Boice observed, “It is a striking thing, which we realize more and more as we grow in the Christian life, that nearly all that God does in the world today, he does by the Holy Spirit through the instrumentality of his written revelation. This is true of sanctification. Sanctification means to be set apart for God’s use. So our text tells us that the only way this will ever happen to us is by an appropriation of God’s truth as is recorded for us in the Bible.”¹³ What is our attitude toward the Bible? In many ways the most obvious indication will be seen in your devotion to mastering its contents. Are you committed to a regular and systematic program of Bible reading? There is a marked tendency today to

pay lip service to the Bible as the Word of God and to *use* the Bible to support *insights* gained from other sources (psychology, business management, science, etc.). The justification for this is, “All truth is God’s truth.” Often one encounters the direct statement that the Bible is not *completely* sufficient today. It does not address all the issues that we face, so we must turn to other sources for help. This mentality is seen in the tendency among Evangelicals to yield to some of the *modern* demands for *relevancy*. The general depreciation of theology and among Evangelicals to yield to some of the *modern* demands for *relevancy*. The general depreciation of theology and a lack of clarity in stating doctrine are two of the most glaring features of this mindset. God has never promised to sanctify His people except by means of His Word. This is our most crying need in this world. We *need* to be growing in holiness – we. Need this more than anything else, and it can come only through the truth of God. **Thy Word is Truth.** May God grant each of us a burning desire this year to grow in our knowledge of God’s Word.

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 1993), p. 245.

² As cited by J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels IV* (Baker, 1977), p. 171.

³ More fully stated, the verb *hagiazō* means “to set apart from the world by actual sanctification of life, so that in heart and mind, in thoughts, words, and deeds, one begins to live more and more in accordance with the law of God.” Cf. W. Hendricksen, *The Gospel of John* (Baker, 1954), p. 361.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 43.

⁶ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton X* (Marantha, N.D.), p. 412.

⁷ The Greek text is *en te aletheia*, which may be rendered in the truth, or by the truth, or through the truth. It is in the sphere of God’s truth that is meant. Truth is the element in which the sanctification takes place.

⁸ *The Works of the Reverend John Howe (1630-1705) I* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 249.

⁹ H. K. Moulton, *The Challenges of The Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied In Depth* (Bagster & Son, 1977), p. 167.

¹⁰ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Baker, 1980), p. 254.

¹¹ *Commentary on the Gospel According to Joh II*, trans., W. Pringle (Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 179-18.

¹² Thomas Manton, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

¹³ J. M. Boice, *The Gospel of John IV* (Baker, 1985), p. 1311.