

# Jesus' Prayer

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

John 17:6-19

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*Thirty years ago, the Judeo-Christian ethic was embraced by virtually everybody.*

I came to this church in 1979, 30 years ago. Jimmy Carter was president in those days. ESPN made its debut that year. Michael Jackson released his first breakthrough album. Lest you think the current automotive bail-out plan is a novel idea, Chrysler was pitching Congress in those days as well for a billion dollars to stave off bankruptcy. The movie Star Trek made its premier. It was the last time the Washington Bullets (now called the Wizards) played for the NBA championship. The Pittsburgh Steelers won Super Bowl XIII over the Dallas Cowboys. The Three Mile Island Nuclear Accident occurred in 1979; the same year Sony introduced the Walkman.

Letters were written on electronic typewriters in those days. The year 1979 was well before the days of home computers and cell phones. Phone answering machines for the home were not available until 1984. I taught Confirmation Class using an overhead projector.

Church dinners in those days were strictly "pot luck." Sunday attire was strictly coat and tie. Everything was done by committee. Young mothers reentering the work force was a relatively new phenomenon. Couples living together before marriage were frowned upon.

Spirituality was not part of our religious vocabulary. Islam was considered a non-western religion. If a church had "Bible" in its name, it was considered suspect by mainstream culture. Stores opened late Sunday morning and were closed on Easter.

Thirty years ago, the Judeo-Christian ethic was embraced by virtually everybody. Like I said, it was a vastly different world!

One thing that hasn't changed in the last 30 years; the gospel! God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption is still wonderfully the same. What has changed is the medium, not the message. The way we do ministry is virtually unrecognizable from the way I remember it back in 1979.

"World" is an important word in Jesus' vocabulary. World appears 78 times in John's gospel. In the immortal words of John 3:16 we read "God so loved the world..." Jesus prays for the world 17 times in the 17th chapter alone. The world is much on Jesus' mind as he prepares for his departure.

A year or so ago, we were preaching a sermon series on human sexuality. After worship, I was greeting at the door when two sisters of elementary school age told me I said the word "sex" 96 times in my sermon. "How did you know that?" I asked with obvious surprise. They showed me the raw numbers. They

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had kept a running tally. I suppose that's one way to pass the time while listening to a sermon!

In coaching, we call this repeatable pattern a tendency. If a team kept running off tackle or throwing the ball to their wide outs, we called it a tendency. Jesus' reoccurring prayer for the world could be called a tendency.

Jesus prays in John 17 for his disciples who are in the world. "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world" (17:11). Jesus isn't praying in verse 17 for God to take his disciples out of the world. He prays in verse 18, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

The Greek word for world, *cosmos*, doesn't refer to the sphere we call planet earth. *Cosmos* represents human life; what we call culture.

There are two dangers Christians can fall into regarding culture. The first danger is for Christians to reject culture categorically. The logic goes something like this: since the world is literally going to hell, why bother with the environment or waste your time on politics. It's all going to be destroyed by God's judgment. Our Christian duty is to rescue people off this burning ship on earth for heaven above.

Christians of this persuasion write off secular culture. They don't form meaningful friendships with non-believers. They huddle together in separate Christian enclaves.

The other danger is that Christians will embrace our secular culture uncritically. If culture-rejecting Christians risk separatism, these cultural affirming Christians gravitate toward syncretism, which is conforming to prevailing cultural values and attitudes.

The Christian church has a long history of cultural accommodation.

Foreigners to our American way of life are often able to see our cultural captivity most clearly. I participated in a conference earlier this year with Christian leaders from other parts of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly. I was struck by something that Peter Kusmic, a Romanian seminary professor, said about Christians in America. He observed that the U.S. church seems far more American than biblical. Christian leaders from around the world are asking whether the American church will offer a prophetic voice to our culture or will we be content to simply mimic our culture and entertain our members.

It's far more tempting for churches like this one to accommodate ourselves to culture than reject it outright. Presbyterians have a particular aversion to being counter-cultural, since historically we have been a vital part of culture.

Jesus calls us to engage our culture critically. Jesus teaches a middle way, rejecting the extremes of separatism as well as syncretism. It's a delicate balancing act to walk a center course. It's easier to sell out or bail out! It's messy to engage the culture critically. Hey, it's messy for God to become involved in human

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affairs. Some religions want God to stay aloof from human life. The God who is known to us through Jesus Christ gets involved. Redemption, as evidenced in the cross, is messy business.

Jesus prays in verse 18, “As God has sent me, so I am sending you.” Jesus doesn’t pray for his disciples to be taken out of the world. He asks for God to send his followers into the world. The Greek word for sent, *apostellos*, is where we derive the word *apostle*. The Apostles are literally Jesus’ “sent out ones.” “As you have sent (*apostellos*) me into the world, so I have sent them (*apostellos*) into the world.”

I came across in my reading this week a second century letter to Diognetus. This anonymous author describes to a ruler named Diognetus a rather striking description of a new breed of people called Christians:

“For Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle....They follow local customs in clothing, food and other aspects of life. But at the same time they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship. They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with others; but like aliens, suffer all things....They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children,

but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. They are present ‘in the flesh’ but they do not live ‘according to the flesh.’ They busy themselves on earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor. Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given a new life....To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.”

Where do you think this writer arrives at the belief that Christians are in the world but not of the world? Jesus’ prays in verse 11 for his disciples who are in the world. Yet, later in verse 14, Jesus acknowledges his followers do not belong to the world; or alternatively, are not of the world. Christians are “in the world,” but not always “of the world.”

## ***How can Jesus live inside people?***

How will we fulfill Jesus' prayer for his disciples? The key in John 17 is the little preposition "in." Prepositions, you'll remember from English class, are little connecting words like "in" or "with" or "among." A preposition is a figure of speech that specifies the relationship between two objects.

The preposition "in" suggests location or placement. We are not only in the world, we are in Christ. Jesus prays in verse 21 for all believers to be one. "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may know that you have sent me."

We often tell children that Jesus lives inside their hearts. I wonder how their little minds process this information. How can Jesus live inside people? How can one person be inside another person, especially someone separated by 2000 years, and earth and heaven?

Jesus lives in people by means of the Holy Spirit. God the Father and Jesus the Son live in us through the Spirit. As I said last Sunday, the Holy Spirit is our paraclete; our divine advocate, counselor, comforter and helper.

Every time I breathe, I draw air into my lungs, so I might say that the air is in me. Yet, I could also say that I am in the air. Just as I am in the air and the air is in me, so I am in the Christ and Christ is in me.

Is Christ living in you? Are you living in Christ? God the Father and Jesus the Son seek to live in you through the Holy Spirit. When

you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you are inviting him to take up residence in you!

