

ACTS 1:15-17; 21-26 (p. 882)

MAY 16, 2021

JOHN 17:6-19 (p. 877)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Make us one Lord, just as Jesus prayed that we would be. Sanctify us through and through. Make us Holy Lord. Set us apart by your Truth and your Word. Cause us to be “ever in the world”, but “never of it”, for we are Disciples of Jesus Christ. And in His Name, we live, and breathe, and bow before you now. Amen!

“SANCTIFIED”

Sometimes, when we read Scripture, we do it “Devotionally”. It just resonates with what is happening in your life at the time. You get it! It fits, right! It’s as if the Lord is speaking directly to you. I love that! And I love it when that same text, at a later date, addresses something else entirely! It’s just as powerful, of course, but it speaks in a brand-new way!

At other times, though, we read Scripture “Exegetically”, like a Bible Study. We ask questions of the text. What is it saying, to whom, and why? What is the original context and setting, and how do we bridge that to today? We look at the History, and draw out Theological Truths! I love that too! I do! It takes more work! But there are just times when you open up the Word and all you see are questions!

In our second lesson, for instance—we see Jesus, walking through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane. That seems rather self-evident to me. What He prays is powerful, though! “Sanctify those who follow me Father! Set them apart! Make them Holy, Holy Instruments for a Holy Purpose!” And “when” He prays that prayer, is powerful as well, on the night that He was betrayed by one of His closest Followers! Devotionally, it speaks to me!

But our first lesson for today, simply raises questions in my mind. I mean, the Disciples are at a First Century equivalent, of Congregational Board Meeting, running through a list of nominees, trying to find a replacement for Judas! How is that applicable to us? Why would Luke write about that? And why would he address it to Theophilus, to “One Who Loves God”? It raises questions! Maybe it does for you as well? So, I thought, why not just wrestle through these together! And as with any good Bible Study, why not begin with the context.

Judas has betrayed Jesus. You probably knew that. He sold out the Lord to the Chief Priests, for Thirty Pieces of Silver. You probably knew that too. Afterwards, Judas felt remorse. So much so, that he went and killed himself. You may have known that as well! So now the Church, a group numbering about a hundred and twenty at the time—most likely one hundred and twenty men, plus women and children, because that’s how they counted things back then—with Eleven of those men in positions of Leadership—now that group needs to find a replacement “Apostle”. Are you with me so far?

But why? That's my first question! Why do they have to fill Judas' spot? Any thoughts? Oh, I get that they need another spokesperson for the Good News. More is always better! But why only one? Why not fifty, or a hundred, or a hundred million? I also remember that back in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus sent them out to preach in pairs. So, an uneven number doesn't work real-well. But again, why only one? Is that, even the point?

Clearly, part of God's design is that the Body of Christ is Whole. We all have a job to do. I get that. Each one of us has a role in the Kingdom. There are different parts, of course, but one Body. We hear that elsewhere in Scripture. And we certainly don't want any missing parts, right! But could it be that simple? Do we, in order to be an effective Witness to the Truth of the Gospel, need to be complete?

If a Church were to lose a Key Person today, we would probably form a Nominating, or Search Committee to fill that vacant Leadership role! We might involve the Denominational Office, or take out an Ad in a Nationally Syndicated Religious Magazine. We'd most likely post something on-line, right! Ask those on Facebook and Twitter to get the word out!

We would definitely begin with prayer! At least I hope we would. Followed by talking among ourselves. We would most likely ask friends and family for recommendations wouldn't we? And who knows, maybe the Disciples did all that as well! Not the Internet part, of course. That wasn't invented it yet! But they do want the right person for the job, right?

It should be someone in the know, don't you think? Someone who has witnessed the Truth for themselves. Someone who knows what Jesus has done. Someone who, right from the beginning, right from the time of John the Baptist, has experienced Jesus' Presence! That makes sense, doesn't it? So, they deliberate for a while. And then present two names. That also happens today. You boil down the options. Settle on a couple of candidates. And for the Eleven, it came down to Joseph, the son of Sabbas, also known as Justus—and a man named Matthias.

They then pray over these men, something that makes perfect sense to me! And then they cast lots, which doesn't make any sense to me at all! Are you kidding? We are going to roll the dice on something as important as this? We'll draw names out of a hat! Throw darts at a board with the candidate's pictures attached! Draw straws and see who gets the shortest one? Are you serious? That's how we are going to decide? See, I told you, I have questions?

And here is biggie! Why would Luke even bother to mention this piece of "Church Business" here, in his "Acts of the Apostles"? It seems like an aside, doesn't it? And why, for Heaven's sake, sandwich it between two such grand events? I mean, this Nominating Meeting takes place after the "Ascension of Jesus into Heaven" following the Crucifixion, and before the "Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost"! So, does that make this Church Board Meeting, anti-climactic, or something important?

Again, is this about making sure the Body of Christ is whole? You know, prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Could the “Calling of Matthias” be an intentional reminder of how critical our role in the Church, and as the Church, really is? Because if that’s the case, then how does that make you feel?

Like Matthias, each one of us has been given a job, called into Service. Commissioned, really, and Sanctified, set apart for a specific task! As Believers, Followers of Jesus, we all have an assigned role, to witnesses to Almighty God. Our mission is to point to the Love of God, especially and particularly as witnessed to in the Life, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! That’s why we are here! That’s the “bottom line”! The “all in”, “all done”, “final answer”! Everything else we do as a Church, or as individuals within the Church, really comes down to “how” we accomplish that God-Given Mission, right!

Our weekly Worship, our Bible Studies and Small Groups, our Fellowship times, our Mission Outreach, are all designed to point to God! Flip through the New Testament, and you will find confirmation of that everywhere!

In the Upper Room, for instance, Luke tells us that the Resurrected Jesus commands the Disciples to go “be Witnesses”, to preach “Repentance for the Forgiveness of Sins”! In Mark, Jesus says, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation!” John quotes Jesus saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you!”

And in the very first chapter of Acts, we're told that, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"! We've talked about that a lot lately!

At the Empty Tomb, the Angel shares the very same message! "Go quickly," he says to Mary, "and tell His Disciples that He has Risen from the dead!" Go witness! Go share! That's the basis for the Great Commission in Matthew 28 too, Jesus' last word to Believers before His Ascension into Heaven; "Go and make Disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you!" Again, and again, and again, we're told in Scripture, that our job is to Witness to the Truth, to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ! And that each one of us is important in that mission!

So, is it fair to say that the Church needed Matthias? Is it fair to say that the Church even needed Judas? And that the Church needs you and me, each one of us, each and every day? We are part of the Plan, part of the Kingdom, part of God's Design! It's not just when we feel like it either! And certainly not just when we feel up to it! As Followers of Jesus, we have a Mission, a Daily Mission! We, the Church, matter! And in order to do our job, we have to be whole! How does that make you feel?

I remember learning some things in Seminary, that at first, seemed a bit odd! I guess I have always had questions. One biggie though was a Theological Statement of Faith from way back in the Early Days of the Church.

In Latin, it's; *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "apart from the Church, there is no Salvation"! My first reaction in hearing that was shock! That, was quickly followed by rejection! It seemed like "Trademark Protection"! Of course, the Church is going to say that you can't get right with God in any other way! I railed against the concept! I started to argue with it in my head! What arrogance, I thought! What exclusiveness thinking!

I've been around the Church all my life! And I can tell you, we can be pretty screwed up at times! So, if we are the only Avenue of Salvation, then the world is in really big trouble! I fought it biblically too! The Bible clearly states that Salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone! Not in the Church alone! The goal is for each of us to develop a personal relationship with the Lord, right, not join a Church?

But sit with that question for a moment. Wrestle with it, if you have to! Ask more questions maybe! I sure did! Then consider, if you will, how a personal relationship with Jesus could even happen without the Church?

Wasn't it members of the Church who wrote the Scriptures? And members of the Church, the Body of Christ, who still study it today, and share it with others? Isn't it the Church who publicly witnesses to the Presence of God by Worshipping together each and every week? Isn't it the Church who embodies the Love of Jesus, or is supposed to embody the Love of Jesus, who reaches out to the world, demonstrating through our actions what Love really means? So, does it follow, then, that without the Church, the Good News couldn't be known? I know, it took me a while too!

But think back. Who first told you about Jesus? I'll bet it was a member of the Church! Who first introduced you to Scripture? Who first read it to you? Who first taught you to pray? My guess is, it was a member of the Church! Maybe it was your mom or dad, your grandma or grandpa, a Sunday School Teacher or Preacher! But it was a Believer, right? And as a Believer, they are a member of the Church!

We're told in Galatians and Romans that we are "Justified by Faith", made right with God through our Faith. And "Faith comes from hearing the message", it says. And "the message is heard through the Word of Christ". So, think that through! Follow it logically if you will! You can't have Faith in something if you don't know about it! And you can't know about something unless someone has actually told you, right! Hence, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, "there is no Salvation apart from the Church"!

I have to tell you, that Statement of Faith now makes sense to me! Salvation requires the Church! Not as a Gatekeeper, mind you! Not as the purveyor of a "get into Heaven Free Card"! The Church is not in charge of Salvation! But we are Witnesses to the Truth, or supposed to be Witnesses to the Truth! So here is the thing! Our role then, as the Church, our Mission, as individuals within the Church, is one of tremendous responsibility! Not for ourselves! But for those who will hear the Good News through us!

Consider that, in light of our second lesson this morning. Because that's part of Jesus' prayer! Our Lord has just prayed for Himself, that He would Glorify the Father. And that the Father would Glorify Him.

In a few moments, Jesus will pray for Future Disciples, in every time and place, for those who will hear the message “through the Church”! And in between, Jesus prays for us, for those who already Believe. He prays for our protection, and prays that we will one, whole, complete!

Jesus prays that we will be Sanctified, Set Apart for a Holy Purpose! Scholars call this the Lord’s “Legacy Prayer”! He prays on our behalf! And He begins with our Mission clearly in mind! “I have revealed you (Father) to those whom you gave me out of the world. Glory has come to me through them. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your Name, keep them faithful to your Name. Sanctify them by the Truth; your Word is Truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world”! Imagine! The Church, right here, is prayed into existence!

Jesus and His Disciples have just left the Upper Room, where He washed their feet, and told them again that He’ll be leaving soon. Jesus has just spoken with them of betrayal and abandonment, of persecution and pain—of His plans to head to the Mount of Olives, where He will be arrested and taken away. Then, as they walk through the streets of Jerusalem, down through the Kidron Valley, and up to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus stops along the way and prays. He beseeches His Father in Heaven on our behalf, prays for those of us who will be left behind! “I won’t be around much longer, Father. Soon my family and friends will not see me anymore. And I’m okay with that. I know it is part of the plan. But I am a little worried about them when I’m gone. So please Father, protect them.

I have revealed you to them. I have taught them all that I could in the short time that we've had together. I've shared with them my love, and demonstrated happiness and joy. I've helped them to see what really matters in life, Father, and how Eternal Life comes in knowing you! And most importantly, Father, I have given them the Truth, your Word to share.

I have protected them from the evil one Father, by your Name. And now I am asking you to personally take over that task! Give them a unified spirit Father! Cause them to be one, united in me, as I am in you! You see I love them Father, more than I can ever explain!

I need them to be together, Father, just as you and I are together. I need them to be united, so that they can love others in my Name. I need them to witness to my love, to your love. So, I have set them apart Father. I have Commissioned them for this specific task, to make you known in the world! They are Sanctified now, Holy, Ordained, Consecrated for a specific purpose! Just as you have sent me into the world Father, I have now sent them! They are to carry our Banner, to raise our Torch, to tell the Truth, and share the Good News! So, Father, please, protect them, and empower them to shine brightly, even in an ever-darkening world! Equip them to share the Good News to the very End of Time!"

I don't know about you, but I find that incredibly humbling! Right in the middle of what can only be called the most important night of His earthly life, Jesus stops and prays for us!

On the way to the Cross, the ultimate expression of self-giving love, our Lord pauses and beseeches Almighty God on our behalf! He is about to be arrested, and questioned, and beaten, and humiliated, all through the night! Then early in the morning, as the Cock Crows, He is going to hear one of his closest friends betray Him, three times! He is going to have a Crown of Thorns pressed down into His head, drag a Cross through the jeering crowds in the city streets, and be savagely nailed to that Cross by the Romans!

And yet knowing all that is coming, Jesus stops and prays for you and me! “Be with them Father. Don’t leave them alone. Comfort them and fill them with all joy. Sanctify them Lord, by your Truth. Set them apart, because they are not like the rest of the world! And Father, please, empower them to spread the Good News throughout the world!”

Henri Nouwen, talking about Jesus’ “Legacy Prayer” for the Church, says it can be summed up in two short sentences. “What I have done, you will do! And what I have been, you will be!” Think about that! This prayer, on our behalf, is Jesus’ “Last Will and Testament”! And with it, we are Empowered to be the Body! More importantly, we are Commanded to be the Body, and to make that Body larger and larger, until we fill the entire world with the Good News! Like Matthias, you and I are now Replacement Witnesses to the Truth! And here is an even more staggering thought! Any one of us might be the only Witness someone else ever sees! Talk about responsibility!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was such a Witness. He was a Lutheran Pastor in Nazi Germany, who opposed Hitler, and was arrested for his stance. On April 9, 1945, less than a month before the end of the war, Bonhoeffer was hanged.

In a movie about his life, *Bonhoeffer, Agent of Grace*, there is one particularly moving scene. Bonhoeffer lies in his darkened prison cell, and hears through the concrete wall a weeping prisoner in the adjacent cell. Speaking through the wall, Bonhoeffer identifies himself as a Pastor, and assures the man that he is not alone. He even asks him if he would like to pray. The muffled reply comes back, "I don't believe in God". Just then a German guard looks in and says, "It won't do any good. He is going to be shot any day now".

Undaunted, Bonhoeffer leans against the cold, cell wall, and calls out to the prisoner, "If you can hear me, put your hands on the wall as if we were touching. Mine are here too". Bonhoeffer then puts his hands on the wall. Unfortunately, no hands appear on the other side. As the guard continues to look on, Bonhoeffer prays, "Lord, it's dark in me; in you is day. I am alone, but you will stay. I am afraid; but you never cease. I am at war; in you is peace." Slowly, we see a second pair of hands reach up and touch the wall opposite Bonhoeffer's hands.

As dawn breaks in the next scene, a single rifle shot shatters the morning calm. The same German guard, now more somber and less cynical, appears again at Bonhoeffer's cell. "I thought you might like to know," he says, "the boy in the next cell—he was very calm. It surprised everyone. He was executed this morning".

We are called to be Witnesses to the Truth! In fact, we have been Sanctified to do so, set apart for that very purpose! That's all that's needed, all that God requires! So, maybe ask yourself a couple more questions, if you will. "If not you, then who?" "And if not now, then when?" And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we stand in your Presence today, awed by your Love. Your Grace is so great, and your Blessings are so grand. And we so are aware that we deserve them not. We are truly humbled, Lord, by your Majesty, and by our sinfulness. And yet, we are overjoyed to be lifted up by your own Hand.

Lord God, this morning we ask for your Presence—your Presence in this Church, your Presence in our hearts, and your Presence in our lives. We ask for your Holy Spirit to be poured out upon us, and upon our world. And we ask for your healing touch on the lives of our loved ones. Please be with Please heal their broken bodies, Lord, and calm their troubled minds. Please still their fears, Lord, and grant peace upon their lives. And please, pour out wisdom, and knowledge, and understanding, on each and all, and on each one of us, so that together we may serve your world in Jesus' Name.

Lord, in this special season of the church, between the time of your Ascension and the gift of your Holy Spirit poured out upon us at Pentecost, we thank you for the gift of your witness to this world. We thank you for your Love and your Grace and pray that it will fill every corner of our lives. We thank you for peace and justice and pray that it will prevail, that compassion and understanding will flood the hearts of all people. And we thank you for your Unconditional Love and pray that this will be our primary tool in witnessing to you. We also thank you for each other Lord, for your Church, for support and companionship along the way. Father, we share our praises and requests today, and place them together on your Altar of Grace in the Name of our Risen Savior. And as we do, we pray together the very prayer that He has taught us saying, Our Father...

BENEDICTION

(Thomas a' Kempis, Author of *The Imitation of Christ*)

Jesus has many who love His kingdom in heaven, but few who will bear His Cross.

He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering.

He finds many to share His feast, but few His fasting.

All desire to rejoice with Him, but few are willing to suffer for His sake.

Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of His Passion.

Many admire the miracles, but few follow Him to the humiliation of the Cross.

Many love Jesus, but only as long as no hardship touches them.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?...