

1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

ON BEHALF OF OTHERS

Georgia-born author and humorist, Lewis Grizzard wrote in one of his newspaper columns about growing up in church and attending Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) every Sunday night. He said that a couple of rowdy brothers in town broke into a store; as punishment, the judge ordered these juvenile offenders to attend MYF for 6 months. First night they were there, they beat up two fifth graders and threw a Cokesbury Hymnal at the lady who met us and always brought us cookies. She ducked in time then looked them squarely in their devilish eyes. Soft as the angel she was, she said, “I don’t approve of what you boys did here tonight, and neither does Jesus. But if he can forgive you, I guess I’ll have to.” She handed them a plate of cookies. Then Lewis Grizzard added this note: “And the last I heard both are daddies with steady jobs and rarely miss a Sunday.” (*Biblical Preaching Journal*, Spring 2009, p. 22)

James L. Brewer-Calvert, who shares that Lewis Grizzard story, goes on to say that Jesus’ prayer changes lives. Imagine that “the lady who met us and always brought us cookies” surely had an active prayer life in order to be able to respond with such grace to flying hymnals and juvenile offenders. Jesus spoke to God while he was preparing his disciples for life after the resurrection. Based on the cookie lady’s willingness to receive and forgive the rowdy boys, it appears that Jesus’ prayer took. (*Ibid*, p. 22)

We will come back to that story before long but, for now, let’s turn our attention to the Gospel of John text. Chapters 14-17 in John’s Gospel form what are commonly called the “Farewell Discourses.” Jesus was about to leave his disciples. His public ministry and their training as his disciples were at an end. Thus, these four chapters contain a record of Jesus’ final instructions to his students. Just prior to Jesus’ betrayal and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus offered prayer on behalf of others. Doesn’t it boggle the mind to learn that, rather than pray for what he was about to endure in terms of betrayal, arrest, beatings, humiliation and death on the cross, instead Jesus prayed for others? Jesus prayed to the Father on behalf of his disciples; and, not just the eleven, who remained with him, but for all of his disciples, who would follow him down through the centuries, which surely includes you and me! Here is the grace of God in action: right now, today, Jesus is praying for us! Wow!

That knowledge, that certainty, of Jesus praying on behalf of others (on our behalf!) also is overwhelming. In his prayer, Jesus acknowledged that his disciples – then and now and into the future – were gifts from God the Father to him. And, since Jesus was leaving the world but his disciples were staying behind (for the time being), Jesus prayed for their protection. After all, the world sees them as a threat, just as it did Jesus. Once again, Jesus prayed (and prays) for his disciples’ safety: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”

Because we Christians are “in the world but not of the world” Jesus prays that all of his friends throughout the centuries will remain strong. We derive strength and comfort from each other when we are going through difficult times and, over and over again, we hear people say to us, “I am praying for you.” Even more, to learn that Christ

Jesus is praying for us, interceding for us, and asking God to watch over us and guard us gives us great assurance. Notice: Jesus didn't pray that his disciples would be released from their problems; he prayed for all of us to be strong enough to resist the evil one and stand strong within the world.

Terry Anderson is no stranger to difficult times. He was held hostage longer than anyone else in Beirut: for seven long years. Not everyone would have been able to survive what Terry did, day after day, week after week, year after year. Terry will be the first to tell you that he survived because of prayer. After a month of captivity, Terry and the other hostages were given Bibles. With nothing else to occupy his time, Terry read and reread the Bible. He was particularly drawn to the Apostle Paul. Paul struggled with his weakness and his pride just as Terry did. And through Paul's struggles, Terry drew closer to Christ and was able to express his love of God. He was also given another book while being held as a hostage, a book on prayer. But it was not helpful. The author claimed that prayer is always answered. But Terry Anderson says, "I'm not sure anymore that it is even right to ask for anything except patience and strength to endure whatever comes, and help in understanding." (*Den of Lions*, 1993, p. 264)

While Terry Anderson's experience was extreme, nevertheless, he speaks as one with authority. The one prayer that God always answers is a prayer for the strength to endure. Jesus prayed for the disciples so that they would find strength during their times of suffering. That was a prayer that was answered time and time again. It's a prayer that God hears and honors in our own lives because it is in accordance with God's will. God is faithful and will not forget us in our time of need.

Another feature of the prayer Jesus prays on behalf of others is found in the latter half of the eleventh verse; Jesus prays for us saying, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that *they may be one, as we are one.*" Jesus prayed then and he prays now that his disciples would be united. While Jesus prayed for God to protect and strengthen his disciples because they were in the world, at the same time, Jesus knew that some of the greatest threats to the community of faith would come from within the body of Christ. Jesus prays for us, yearns for us, to be one in the Lord.

The story is told about a newcomer to the area, who called a neighborhood church after working hours and got the following message: "Thank you for calling our church. If you want information about the worship services, please press 1. For information about our programs and events, please press 2. If you would like to complain to the pastor, please press 3. If you want to complain about the pastor, press 4, 5, or 6." It seems that quite a few folks were upset with the pastor.

When I was in my second pastorate, thirty miles north of Dallas, TX, I went to a neighboring Presbyterian church for a meeting. The previous pastor had been well loved by the congregation. However, the current pastor had problems from the beginning. John, who was a recovering alcoholic, was somewhat high-strung and aggressive in his approach to people. Consequently, I was aware that there was quite a bit of tension and conflict within that congregation. As I pulled into the church's parking lot, I glanced over at their church sign. The letter "r" had come loose and fallen off the sign. Thus, instead of First Presbyterian Church, the sign now read *Fist* Presbyterian Church. And, I wondered to myself if that was a sign of the times.

We laugh, and yet, we too have had our share of problems in our church over the past several years. There have been disagreements about whether to have a contemporary

service and, if so, where it should take place; we didn't all see "eye-to-eye" on where to place the grand piano in the sanctuary; and, of course, there were a lot of problems as they pertained to personalities and conflicts within the youth ministry program – to name a few. While Christians can and do disagree over matters, the key is to do so while remaining agreeable and civil to one another. However, we have seen some people leave the church or become less active in terms of their involvement; some have ignored and even have refused to speak to others; there has been a growing level of negativity, and complaining abounds. All the while, Jesus prays continuously that we may be one.

I would like to suggest a possible solution to the problem. I propose that we take a good hard look at Jesus, and that we then "go and do likewise." In other words, since Jesus prays for us, we need to pray for each other – especially those with whom we disagree. Rather than avoid someone or complain to others about a particular person or situation, how much more Christ-like it is to pray to be united with that person or to lift up a frustrating situation to the Lord and seek God's will and guidance. After all, Jesus not only models praying on behalf of others for us, he also models sacrificial love for us in that he would soon go to Calvary on our behalf. At the very least, we too are called to pray for others, who differ from us, and to reach out to them in godly love. What a different place this could be if we opt to pray and love more instead of complain so much.

That brings me to the final point I want to make about Jesus' prayer on behalf of others. In verses 17 and 18, Jesus prays that God will "sanctify them in the truth," and, "as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." To be sanctified means to grow in holiness. Jesus doesn't want us to stay in the same place. He desires that we will grow from one degree of glory to the next as we grow in our understanding of and our practice of the faith. Furthermore, he doesn't want his disciples to remain behind closed doors, playing it safe. No, he sends us out into the world in order to transform it. We are called and sent into offices, classrooms, shopping centers and malls, the grocery store, the post office – there to live and love, speak and bear witness to our risen and ascended Lord in the middle of the world.

In the opening story Lewis Grizzard told a story about a cookie lady's willingness to pray to receive and forgive two rowdy boys, and how Jesus answered her prayer. Are we also willing to be used by God to make a difference in the world? We are called as Christians to be a positive influence in the community.

Christ Jesus prays on our behalf. He wants all of us to be one and to do that we need to pull together. Back in 1957 the first Brethren Church of Sarasota, FL had a groundbreaking service. Instead of bringing a few shovels for a few special people to use in the ceremony, they brought an old one-horse plow. They borrowed an old yoke and two stalwart laymen were hitched up. But the two were unable to pull the plow. Then the members of the Building Committee were put on the rope, but even they could not move the plow. Other church officers were added, including the Sunday School officers and teachers, but still the plow did not move. Finally, every member of the congregation present took hold of the rope, and with every member pulling together, the plow moved, and the ground was broken.

Jesus is praying for us, pulling for us to be strong and to work together to be one in the Lord. Jesus prays for us. By the grace of God, and with some hard work on our part, may we do everything possible to see that Jesus' prayer is answered – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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