

Mission: We Go for Christ

Pillars Sermon 4

John 17:1-19 | September 24, 2023

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See page 10 for small group discussion questions

There are at least three things on my mind as we turn, as a church, to the subject of mission. Three reasons I feel this is an important moment and an important topic. First, because it will be clarifying. There are so many important and good things we could do as a church; we have so many ideas and passions. How do we know what to focus on? Only as God impresses upon us His mission, will we gain clarity about our church's mission.

Second, because people are leaving—both the faith and the church. In their new book, *The Great De-Churching*, Jim Davis and Michael Graham note that over the last 25 to 30 years around 40 million people have stopped attending church. They *de-churched*. Researcher Ryan Burge, who helped with the book, adds:

It's the largest shift in religiosity in America over the last 200 years... [in these past 30 years] there's actually more people (who) left religion than joined religion during the first Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, and all of a Billy Graham crusades combined.¹

Living in Western culture in 2023 means a missional moment—we must reach the West again.

Third, because our local Anglican community is not seeing adults come to faith. In our Diocese, which stretches from Roanoke up past Baltimore, we are seeing almost no adult conversions. Yes, people are being served by our churches, but we are not seeing people being saved by Jesus Christ. We are good at gathering. Good at worship. Good at serving. We must learn how to be good at evangelizing.

So, I am asking God, as we turn to the theme of mission in His Word, that He kindle a passion in us for mission. That God would teach us how, at this moment, in this place, *to make Jesus non-ignorable in Washington D.C. and beyond*. We leave results in God's hands, but we are asking Him to teach us how to do the work. I am also aware that the topic of Christian missions is controversial. Isn't it about Christians forcing their views on others? Isn't it a bit imperialistic?

I hope we'll see today that this is not the case. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it from the grip of sin and lostness it finds itself in. And Christians, when they've been touched by the love of God, liberated by the power of Jesus, they can't help but want to offer this love to others. Haven't you noticed, that when people experience something amazing, they want to share it with you—they go on mission about it? A good movie, a great vacation spot, a new workout regime—they share with you all about it, trying to persuade you how much you'll be blessed by it. That's all Christian missions is—not trying to get something from people, but hoping to give something to them.

So, what is mission?

What is the mission of God, the mission of the church, the mission of Christ's people?

Where might we turn to answer these questions? There are many places we could go in the Scripture. We begin today by turning to John 17, a passage I have come to refer to as, "Jesus' Missionary Prayer."

John 17 concludes Jesus' final words to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It all happens in a single night. Jesus shares the last supper with them and washes their feet (John 13). He offers words preparing them for his death and departure (John 14-16). Finally, in John 17, he prays.²

First, he prays for himself, that he would complete his mission (vv 1-5). Then he prays for these disciples, that they would be upheld in their mission (vv 6-19). Finally, Jesus prays for all those who would believe in him through the ministry of these disciples—including us—, that we'd be upheld in our mission (vv 20-26).

The verse I want to begin with is 17:18, where Jesus' mission and our mission are forever linked. Jesus prays to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them" (John 17:18). Jesus repeats this in a direct commissioning of the disciples after his resurrection, in John 20:21, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

What is our mission? It's the continuation of Jesus' mission. We're sent, just like Jesus was sent. This doesn't mean we are Jesus. It doesn't mean we die for the sins of the world like Jesus. But it does mean that Jesus' mission is the model and foundation for ours.

So today we will consider the mission of the Son, so we can better understand the mission of the Son's people. And we'll notice these three things about the Son's Mission: Jesus' mission involves (1) Life, (2) Consecration, (3) and Joy. And so must ours.

I. Life: *What He Came to Do*

In verses 1-5, Jesus prays to the Father concerning his own mission. His death is approaching—his “hour has come” (17.1). He steals himself through prayer. We see here that Jesus' mission—why the Father sent him—revolves around life.

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him (17:1-2).

Some say Christianity is all about condemning the world. Not at all. It's all about giving life to the world. Jesus came that we might have life, abundantly.

What is this life like that Jesus gives?

Quantity: By calling it “eternal” life (17:2), Jesus conveys its duration. It never ceases. It goes past the grip of death. But there is more.

Quality: It is unique not only in the quantity of days but the quality of experience. It's about being reunited with God:

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (17:3).³

Eternal life is being reconciled to God. This is about relationship, it's about fullness. Early in John's Gospel, Jesus is described as “the light of the world” (John 8:12). As light, the life he brings draws people out of darkness and ignorance. Jesus describes himself as bread, “I am the bread of life” (6:48). As bread, the life Jesus gives means deep sustenance. Jesus also says he is water, “if anyone

thirst, let him come to me and drink” (7:37). As water, the life Jesus gives satisfies the deepest spiritual longings of the soul.

Jesus’ mission centers upon bringing fullness of life to a world that is dying—emotionally, psychologically, relationally, and spiritually.

How, exactly, does Jesus give this life?

We might be tempted to think, that because Jesus is light, he gives life through teaching us the way. Perhaps he’s a better Aristotle. Or, because Jesus is bread and water, we might think he gives life by being a better Revolutionary, able to give us the secret to a politics and economics that will result in true flourishing. But the way Jesus gives life is much deeper. Jesus gives us life, by dying.

Along with being called light, bread, and water, Jesus is given another name, early in the Gospel. Upon seeing him, John the Baptist exclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29). Jesus is the Lamb.

For a Jew in the first century, this meant only one thing: Jesus is the sacrifice. Not just another sacrifice. But *the Sacrifice*. Jesus gives life, by giving his life. And this means that the decisive work he came to accomplish was the work he did on the cross. When Jesus says in verse 4, “I have glorified you [Father] on earth, having accomplished the work that you have given me to do” (John 17:4), he has in mind the Cross. This is what “his hour” (17.1) is all about.⁴

What does this tell us about Jesus’ mission, about our mission?

It tells us that along with offering the world instruction and inspiration, Jesus came to offer us something no one else could: *atonement*. Atonement means he made a way for us—sinful people that we are—to be forgiven and made right before God. On the cross, Jesus pays the penalty for our sin, bringing us back into a right relationship with God.

Fullness of life, if you want it, will require more than some new learning or new inspiration. It will require something being *done for you, done to you*. On the Cross, Jesus absorbs the judgement of God, so you don’t have to.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).

How does this impact how we think of our mission?

It means that our mission must be both broad and deep. Broad, in the sense that once we are connected to this life, we know it will overflow in how we live and love others. It should touch all aspects of life. But we also must see that it goes deep. Deep, meaning that we don't just bring people a little light, or bread, or water. But that we bring them the Lamb that was slain. They must meet Jesus at the cross.

It can be tricky to hold together the breadth and depth of Christian mission. Christians may focus on most good deeds and social action (breadth), and forget about evangelism and conversion (depth), or vice versa. Perhaps an illustration might help us think about how this relates but in an order of priority.

Imagine a family with a large estate. On this estate is the family business. The father and mother (patriarch and matriarch of the family), their kids, and many workers live there. But things have fallen apart. The father and mother don't speak to each other, and this has led to discord with the kids, and thus with the workers. Wages aren't being paid, work is not getting done, and life is just bad.

How might you fix this home? You could come in and address the wage problem, or make sure work is done better. You could repaint the house or restock the shelves. All these things would be *connected* to fixing the home. But until the relational brokenness is healed, the home will not be healed.

In a similar fashion, there is so much we can fix about the world. But until people are reconciled, relationally, with their Maker, the world will not be home—not truly, not deeply. And this reconciliation can *only* happen through the Son's Mission on the Cross.

In our movement into mission, we must ask God to show us how to have a truly evangelistic encounter with our world right now—not just letting them feel the effects of Jesus in our lives; but

helping them meet Jesus themselves. This will take courage, prayer, and creativity, as we think about how to make Jesus non-ignorable in Washington DC.

That is something of the work of Jesus' mission—to give life. Let's notice something about the way of his mission, how he went about it, and his heart's posture.

II. Consecration: *How he went about doing it*

Jesus prays that his followers would be sanctified, but also states that he's been sanctified, or consecrated:

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

The words "consecrate" and "sanctify" come from the same Greek work—it's the word from which we get "holy." Used in this context, it carries two senses: First, to be consecrated or sanctified means to be *set apart* for God's use. Second, it means to keep oneself unstained from sin.

Consecration means to be separated from worldliness and set apart for godliness.

For Jesus, this takes the form of his total obedience to the Father—no matter what, no matter where, he said yes. For Jesus, this also meant being free from the pull of the world. Notice that even in his deep motivations, Jesus was free from the desire for praise from men. He was, instead, totally consecrated to the honor and glory of God:

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do (17:4).

We are here getting a window into Jesus' heart: *it belonged to God. It was for God. It was pure.* There has never been a human being like this.

Jesus was not only open to God's call. Jesus was free from the noise of the world. Jesus was utterly untouched by the glory that comes from men. He did not need our praise or affirmation, so he was free to love us completely.

Individually, we must ask if we are set apart for God. Are we living for his praise and honor? Often what keeps us from mission is the fear of man—we want to impress people. But this is really just a symptom of us still seeking the glory that comes from man more than seeking the glory of God.

Also, notice that this has corporate implications—this idea of consecration. Jesus has the church in mind here:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me (17:20-22).

We have said much about this in weeks past and will turn to it again in a few weeks. But our mission is not less than the quality of our own lives and of our life together. God desires that we not only proclaim but also embody the Gospel.

III. Joy: *What he received in return*

Finally, notice that Jesus brings up joy in this prayer:

But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves (17:13).

What is interesting about this verse is that Jesus is not simply praying that the disciples would have joy. He is praying that they may have **my joy. His joy.** Jesus has a type of joy that the world does not have, nor does it understand.

What was Jesus' joy? There is a passage in Hebrews that gives us a clue:

Jesus endured the cross *for the joy* that was set before him (see Hebrews 12:2).⁵

Obedying his Father, and being about His Father's business, made Jesus happy. It was a joy that the world did not know, nor could it take it from him.

Jesus' joy was not the opposite of sadness. Jesus was sad at times. Jesus' joy was not the opposite of pain. Jesus felt pain—great pain. Jesus' joy was the opposite of meaninglessness. The opposite of hopelessness.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said—of all people to quote in relation to Jesus!—, in his book, *Twilight of the Idols*, “If you have your *why* in life, you can get along with almost any *how*.”⁶

Jesus knew his *why*. He knew why he came to earth. He knew why he was going through the cross. He was here on the Great Errand, on his Father's business, on mission to honor God by bringing God's people back to Him. And this gave Jesus a meaning, a purpose, a hope—a joy!—that was indestructible.

Do you know this connection between joy and mission? We have a Fellows Program that helps recent college graduates understand how their faith impacts all of life. In this program, there are many conversations about vocations and jobs. Do you think when these 22- or 23-year-olds are asked what they want to do, they say, “Eh, just get by. Just hoping to clock in and clock out.” No! They want to do something that *matters*. Why? Because so much of our sense of joy and meaning comes from feeling like we are on a mission.

This is what Jesus wants for us, what he prays for us—that we would have *this* joy. When Jesus sends us into mission, it's to liberate us from the other gods we serve, so we can serve the only God who will give us true joy.⁷

People for others; Christ for others.

Now, few people in Washington are living idle lives. Most come here on mission to change the world or make a name. What would it look like to live on mission for Jesus instead?

In her recent NYT Bestseller, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About it*, Jennifer Wallace recounts the story of a hard-working student—let's call her Amanda.

Amanda excels at school. She's a pianist, a varsity athlete, an honor student, and the president of the debate club. She gets early acceptance to an elite university, lands the right summer internships, and, after graduation, secures the job of her dreams. Amanda has run the race; she has hit the mark; she

has lived up to her potential and fulfilled the ambitions of her parents. Unfortunately, she's also a mess. For years, despite the accolades, Amanda has felt utterly vacant inside.

Why? Because all Amanda is living for is metrics. She needs something more. She needs real meaning.

Near the end of the book, Wallace describes an impactful visit to an all-boys Catholic school in Cleveland, *Saint Ignatius High*, where teachers encourage students to develop not only their brains but also their hearts. Students engage in daily reflection and give time to service—and not to pad their resumés, but for becoming, as the Jesuits say, *men for others*.⁸ That last phrase struck me, *men for others*— as surely it emerged from the schools' biblical underpinnings.

Jesus was a man for others. He came not to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many. And he is sending us to continue this mission. Not that we are this life, but that we bring him to others.

We are called to be more than just people for others. We are called to be Christ for others—people who bring the message of Jesus Christ to a world longing for true life.

In all we do—in the little things and big things—in the overall sweep of our lives, may we be ambassadors for Jesus Christ, on Mission in this world, to make Jesus Christ non-ignorable in our homes, our neighborhoods, our very world.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading John 17:1-19. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Does your school (current or alma mater) or business have a mission statement? If so, what is it? What does it mean?
2. Take a shot at writing a mission statement for yourself, or for your family. Share it with someone.
3. Could Jesus' mission have been successful without the cross? He healed a bunch of people, taught a bunch of people, and had a following *before* he went to the cross. Why did he have to go to the cross?
4. How does the cross factor into our—TFCA's—mission? How do we introduce people to Jesus at the cross?

Endnotes

1. Cited here, Nicholas Kristof, "America Is Losing Religious Faith," *NYT*, Aug 23, 2023. Access online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/23/opinion/christianity-america-religion-secular.html>
2. The night begins with the last supper, and with Judas going out to betray Jesus, "After receiving the morsel of bread, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night" (Jn 13:30). The night doesn't break until Jesus is brought from the house of Caiaphas to see Pilate, Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning" (Jn 18:28).

3. "Men must know God. That is the one thing they must do. And this can mean nothing less than that God is eminently worthy to be known in all the length and breadth and height and depth of His Character. The Christian is a God-explorer. The Christian vision is the vision of God" (Tom Well, "A Vision for Mission").
4. The Cross and all that surrounds it is what Jesus means has in mind when he says in 17:1, "Father, the hour has come." The "hour," all across John's Gospel, points to the decisive event when Jesus is arrested, sentenced, crucified: i.e., And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:23-24).
5. "...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2).
6. In the original: *Hat man sein Warum des Lebens, so verträgt man sich fast mit jedem Wie*. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Maxims and Arrows," in *Twilight of the Idols*. Access online: <https://www.handprint.com/SC/NIE/GotDamer.html>
7. As John Piper said in his book, "Let the Nations be Glad": *Missions is not a recruitment project for God's labor force. It is a liberation project from the heavy burdens and hard yokes of other gods*.
8. The book is reviewed here, Meghan Cox Gurdon, "'Never Enough' Review: How to Give Your Kid a Life: A childhood spent sprinting toward high grades, admission to elite schools and other rewards may, in the end, not be rewarding at all," *WSJ* Aug. 17, 2023. Access online here: <https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/books/never-enough-review-how-to-give-your-kid-a-life-f6cde35d>