

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² *While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.*

¹³ *“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.* ¹⁴ *I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.* ¹⁵ *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.* ¹⁶ *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.* ¹⁷ *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸ *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹ *For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. (John 17:11b-19)*

The Finishing Touches on Jesus’ Ministry

A number of years ago, my parents’ congregation built a new church. After months of work, they finally reached the point where they were ready to move in. There were still a few finishing touches to take care of, but nothing that would keep them from dedicating the building and having services – or so they thought. The building inspector disagreed. He held up an occupancy permit for months because he wasn’t satisfied with the exterior lighting. Now, there was no danger of anyone being injured because the lights weren’t right. There was no threat of a lawsuit from the neighbors. But that one finishing touch created a huge and expensive headache.

Finishing touches can be minor things. But in many cases, you can’t call a project finished until you take care of them. In the word of God we have before us this morning, Jesus took care of some finishing touches. It was the night before he died. Jesus was so close to finishing his work on this earth that he began to speak as if it were already done. But he knew better than anyone that before he died and rose and ascended into heaven, he needed to complete his ministry here on earth. He needed to make arrangements for that ministry to continue. That’s what we see this morning: **the finishing touches on Jesus’ ministry.**

I.

He put those finishing touches on with a prayer. It’s not the prayer he offered in the Garden of Gethsemane. Many Christians, myself included, have often thought it was. But actually, Jesus offered this prayer before he and his disciples left the upper room after the Passover. In this prayer, Jesus put **the finishing touches on his ministry: he handed his disciples over to his Father’s protection.**

This whole chapter of John is sometimes called Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer because in it Jesus approached his Father in our place. That’s what the high priest did in the Old Testament. He offered sacrifices for his people and he prayed for them. Jesus was about to lay down his life so that we, his people, will live forever. Before he did that, he came to his Father in our place and he pleaded for all Christians everywhere.

But in these verses that we have before us today Jesus was specifically praying for the eleven disciples he had left. We can understand why he would feel the need to do that. They were about to go through an enormously difficult weekend. He would die and they would not understand that he was going to rise again. But Jesus was already looking beyond the next 72 hours. He knew that forty days after he rose, he was going to ascend into heaven and they wouldn’t see him anymore. He was going to send them to the ends of the world with the gospel, but they would not see him standing next to them.

Because he loved them, he placed them in the best hands that he could: the hands of his Father. He prayed, **“Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.”** For three years, Jesus had personally protected his disciples. He kept them safe from storms and hunger and contagious diseases while he healed people. Jesus kept them safe from demons and mobs and Pharisees and Sadducees and temple guards. For three years, the Son of God walked next to them hidden in human flesh and he kept them safe from every evil that surrounded them.

But as he prepared to leave them, he called on his Holy Father to protect them by the power of his name. What does that mean? If you ask my confirmation students, hopefully, they’ll tell you that God’s name is all the names and titles that the Bible uses for God. Things like Jesus and Lord and King of Kings. In that sense, Jesus was speaking of the fact that he puts his name on us. My wife has a baseball glove that she’s owned since

before we were married. It has her maiden name written on it in indelible ink so that no one can steal it or mistake it for theirs. God put his name on his disciples. The devil cannot pretend they belong to him.

But I'm sure that my confirmation students will tell you that there's more to God's name than just the names and titles. God's name is everything that he reveals about himself. It's doctrine. It's the law and the gospel. It's the Word of God. There is no greater power in the universe than the Word of God. God's Word created this universe when God said, "Let there be light." God's Word claimed us as his children when he said, "I forgive you all your sins." God the Father gave his Son that word of life. Jesus set that word, that gospel, that name on his disciples. Its power was their greatest protection.

They were going to need that protection because their enemy was the Evil One. You know who that is, right? It's the devil. Satan is a fallen angel. He is dangerous and powerful. He would dog them every step of the way from the day of Pentecost until they died. Without God's protection, they would've been helpless. So Jesus prayed all this for those eleven men who were about to go to the Garden of Gethsemane and fall asleep three times while he prayed again and then watch him get arrested. But he wasn't only praying for them. In the verses that follow, Jesus prayed for all those who will ever come to faith through the work of these men. He prayed for us. All that he prayed for the disciples that night, he still prays for us. The disciples were not the only ones who were in danger from the devil. He's our enemy, too. He is full of wrath because he's going to spend eternity suffering in hell. And his only joy is to spread that hell around. He will do as much emotional, physical and spiritual damage to us as he can. Without God, we would be helpless before him. We would be like Judas, who fell into sin and unbelief. We would be doomed to destruction.

But Satan is powerless to harm us. He cannot snatch us out of Jesus' hand. Jesus today is still our High Priest. He has died. He has risen. He has ascended, and now in heaven, he repeats this kind of prayer for us every single day. He represents us in the very counsels of God. Because he and the Father are one, the Father loves us just as much as Jesus does. So our Father in heaven listens to Jesus' prayers for us. He holds his hand over us every day that we are here. And when our time comes, he will take us to be with him in heaven. And when Jesus returns visibly to reclaim this world, he will raise us to live with him forever in perfect unity with God and with each other.

II.

All that is ours because Jesus has changed who we are. Each of us was born here in this sinful world. We inherited its sin. We belonged to it and shared God's judgment on it. But Jesus changed all that. As they prepared to leave the upper room, Jesus put **the finishing touches on his ministry. He took his disciples away from this world.**

Of course, he didn't do that physically yet. Every one of these eleven men would live to see him rise and ascend. They would all go out and work in his kingdom to spread the gospel. Eventually, they all would depart this life and join Jesus in heaven. But long before they died, they had already left this world. They no longer belonged to it. Faith changed them into children of God.

Of course, that change really took place very early in Jesus' ministry. He wasn't giving them faith for the first time that evening. But on that night, at last they were beginning to understand what faith really meant. Jesus finally broke through to them. They began to understand that belonging to him means that we cannot belong to this world any more. You can't be on both sides. This world that we know here is on the devil's side. As much as we love our country, our society is made up of sinners. Sinful attitudes rule. If we follow what any human society wants and believes and thinks, we aren't following God.

The disciples spent a lot of time trying to have it both ways. They did not easily give up on ideas they had grown up with. Jesus spent three years breaking those ideas down and even on this night, they weren't completely free of them. His resurrection caused a radical change in their thinking. But the total victory over their hearts and minds didn't come until Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended. We are in very much the same boat. It's hard for us to let go of the prevailing attitudes of the society we live in. We want to believe that being good people makes us acceptable to God. We want to think that showing up for church earns us something that other people don't have. We lift up "spirituality" as if that was the same thing as faith. We keep one foot in the congregation when we hear the gospel, and one foot in the society around us, as we let television and music and the internet determine what we think is important.

We are sinners, and it's never easy to let go of what the world around us thinks. But it must happen. Jesus said, **"I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any**

more than I am of the world.” If you belong to Christ, the world hates you. It’s just that simple. Why does the world hate you? Because it hates him. It hates the fact that he tells it all its best efforts are worthless in God’s sight. Accepting God’s word means turning traitor on this world. It means inviting them to regard us as fools and fanatics.

Today in the church, we want people to like us. We want people to respect us. We want to sound reasonable. But you know what? Unbelievers will never respect the gospel. I can’t tell you how many times people have looked at me like I’m crazy when I told them that all people are totally sinful and they deserve to go to hell. That’s not what the world believes. The world believes that people are basically good and if they learn the right way to act, or if they just make a sincere effort and do their best, God will take them to heaven. That’s not the gospel.

The world out there believes that sexual orientation is your business and if you’re gay, God made you that way. The world out there believes that women have just as much right to being pastors as men do, and any church that doesn’t believe that is just prejudiced. The world out there believes that refusing to accept people into membership because they don’t confess our faith is just being divisive – which is about the worst insult you can hear in America today. When the world out there finds out that we do believe all these things, well, it can’t help but hate us.

At the moment you were baptized, the Holy Spirit made you an enemy to the unbelieving world. But like the disciples, if our faith is immature, we could spend years trying to keep a foot in both camps, trying to ride the fence and be respected by both sides, trying to just get along and not judge anybody else. To grow up in our faith, we need to learn that you can’t have it both ways. You belong to Jesus or you belong to the world. Which is it going to be?

The sinner in our hearts wants it to be the world. That should be enough to condemn us to hell, because it means we are sinners. But on the day after he spoke these words, Jesus died because we are sinners. He paid the penalty of hell that we deserve because we were born on the wrong side and we still carry inside us a part of us that wants to go back to that side. Jesus died and paid for all the years we tried to compromise and get along with both sides and for our refusal to take a stand firmly with him.

Then Jesus rose and declared that all that sin was gone. Now, he has given us his word to protect us from the lies of the Evil One, to protect us from the false ideas of the world around us, to protect us from our own evil hearts. The gospel in that word says that Jesus has won us. That gospel is the power to hold all that evil at bay. It is the power to change us so that we live on God’s side – and so that we don’t apologize for it. That gospel is what sent those eleven men forward into the world. And it is what will send us forward, too. Cling to the gospel of Christ! Finishing touches can make the difference between a good job and a poor one. Jesus put the finishing touches on the disciples so that we would hear their message and live. Every time you hear the gospel, he’s putting the finishing touches on you and your faith. Keep hearing that message! Keep growing in your faith! Amen.