

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)*

What would you Like Jesus to Pray for You?

Today is Mother’s Day. While I don’t usually preach on this secular holiday, I always try to remember to have a special prayer on Mother’s Day thanking God for the gift of mothers and asking him to bless our mothers and the mothers of our children. Of course, I’m not a mother. I’m married to one. I have one. I know lots of them. But I’m not one myself, so maybe I’m not the best person to decide what we should pray for on Mother’s Day. What do you think your mother would want you to pray for her? You children who are here today, what do you think? You adults, what do you think? My guess – again as a clear non-mother – is that moms want us to pray for their children. They want us to ask God to keep their kids faithful to the Lord and to keep them safe and make them happy and successful in life. Mothers probably also want us to ask God to give them strength to do the job God has given them. Moms don’t get to call in sick, as a cold medicine commercial keeps reminding us. I would guess that they want us to ask God to strengthen their faith and to give them a special measure of wisdom and patience and love, so that they can help and guide and discipline their children well.

But now, flip the question around: what would you want your mother to pray for you? Your mother has a unique view of your life – she’s known you for as long as you’ve been on this earth. She holds a special place in your life and in your heart. Her prayers might be different even from the prayers that your husband or wife would offer for you. Jesus also holds a special place in your life. He also has a unique view of your life. He’s known you since you were conceived and he can see all that is in your heart and all that is in your future. He knows all that his Father has planned for you. **What would you like Jesus to pray for you?**

I.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus is praying. It was the night before he died, but this wasn’t the prayer he offered in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wasn’t there yet. In fact, he probably offered this prayer in the upper room just before they left to go to the Garden. In the prayer, he prayed for those eleven disciples who were still with him and then he went on to pray for all believers of all time. He prayed for you and me. In reality, the words we’re considering are from the part of the prayer that he offered for those eleven disciples that he would send out to found the New Testament Church. But what he asks his Father to do for them, he truly does desire for all of us. We can trust that he prays these things for us now in heaven. **What would you like Jesus to pray for you? How about for protection?**

Twice in this prayer, Jesus prays for protection for his disciples. He was leaving them, at least in a physical sense. While he was with them, he had protected them, but now, he asks his Father to take on that job. They needed that protection because the world we live in is very much our enemy. 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.”** Jesus gives us his word when he gives us faith. That changes us. It moves us from being on the side of the devil and the unbelieving world to being on God’s side. That means that by definition, we are the enemies of the world. Our unbelieving society hates us, and it always will. The only religion you can criticize publicly in America is Christianity. The only ministers that you can portray on TV as hatemongers are Christian ministers. When Christians are invited to dialogue with other faiths, the point is always that Christians need to back down from their beliefs, but other faiths don’t.

We need God's protection. So Jesus prayed, **"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me ..."** God's Name is real power. In catechism class, I teach the kids that God's Name has two parts. It's all the names and titles the Bible uses for God and it's everything that God teaches us about himself. In the Old Testament, God called the temple "the place where my Name dwells." When Moses asked to see God's face, God passed in front of him proclaiming his Name, **"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness."** Yet, part of that name was his declaration that he **"does not leave the guilty unpunished."** God punishes those who hate him—and those who hate him, also hate his children in the church. God has placed his name on us. Just like moms write their children's names on their coats and baseball gloves, God wrote his name on us. That name says that we are his. That name puts his power on us to protect us.

Protect us from whom? Jesus said, **"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."** Finally, all the evil in this world and all the opposition to our faith is organized and led by the devil. Now, many people who hate and criticize Christianity would absolutely deny that. They don't believe that they're following the devil. In fact, they might say we are. But Jesus makes it clear: the devil hates our faith. The devil leads every evil attack against us. The sinful world around us and the devil are in lock step. But we don't get to leave this world until our time is done. Most of us will live decades here and we will face the devil and the sinful world over and over again. And Jesus called on his Father in heaven to protect us. What better prayer could we ask for?

II.

Jesus, of course, knows what we need. It's good for us to look at what he prays for and ask ourselves if that's what we would put on our list. When he prays for us in this chapter, Jesus doesn't pray that our kids find good jobs or that they get into a great college. He doesn't pray that we can make our mortgage payments or that we learn to get along with our co-workers. He doesn't pray that the economy holds or that our retirement investments grow. He prays for spiritual things. Now, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't pray for those things. God tells us to bring everything to him. And in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus did teach us to pray for what we need here. But he lumped it all into one very general request: "Give us this day our daily bread." Today, we see Jesus praying for people he loves. **What would you like Jesus to pray for you? How about for unity?**

That's a big part of what he asked for those eleven disciples and he did repeat that request when he got to the part of the prayer where he specifically mentioned all of us. In the part of the prayer we're considering, Jesus said, **"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."** So all the protection and all the other blessings that come from God's Name lead to one very specific blessing: unity. Jesus prays that we may be one just as he and the Father are one. I don't think we can even imagine that level of unity. Sometimes we parents wonder if our kids will ever get along at all, let alone demonstrate real unity. Sometimes we pastors wonder the same thing about our congregations. I bet you do, too.

God is very concerned about unity in his church. Again and again, God tells Christians to forgive each other. Why does he do that? Because, believe it or not, sometimes we Christians sin against each other. Sometimes we hurt each other's feelings. Sometimes we're selfish and egotistical and downright unfriendly. All that sin hurts our unity. Jesus died and paid for that sin. But the sinner in our hearts doesn't go away. So Jesus prayed for unity among us because only God can give it. It's a fruit of faith. Jesus calls us to work for that unity by living in love and forgiveness towards each other.

But there is another level to unity: unity in the truth, unity in our confession, our doctrine. Jesus was praying for that, too. Jesus told his disciples that if we hold to his teaching, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. He commanded us to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything he has commanded us. Not just the most important things, but everything. And you know what? Most of the St. Paul's epistles were written to promote or to repair unity of teaching. Again and again, St. Paul addresses false teachings, about communion, about grace, about Jesus' return, about the church. And he doesn't tell us to respect each other's ideas about these things. He tells us to listen to what God says and to grow up in the truth so that we aren't tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine and the craftiness of the devil. Today, Jesus prays that we may be one, just like he and the Father, are one. One in love, certainly. But also one in purpose, one in teaching, one in the gospel.

That unity leads to joy. Being one with Christ is a gift of God. Being one in love and fellowship, being one in purpose and doctrine, does lift up our hearts in this world where so many people are against us. Jesus prayed that his eleven disciples would have that joy. And he prayed and still prays that you and I have that joy, too. Truthfully, on Mother's Day, isn't it a joy when a mom has her children sitting next to her in church, sharing her faith? May God grant that unity to all of us here and to our families, too.

Who prays for us does matter. My mom turned 80 in April. I imagine she still prays for all her children. My children are all legal adults now. I'm sure their mother will pray for them for as long as she lives on this earth – and even in heaven, if we're allowed to do that there. I would be willing to bet money that every mom here prays for her children. Those prayers are special because you know your children in a way that nobody else does. But today, we also see that it's even more important that Jesus prays for us. He knows us like no one else ever could, not even our mothers. Not all of us have mothers to pray for us, but we will always have Jesus.

But there's more to it than that. Jesus loves us in a way that even our mothers can't match. Jesus left heaven itself for us. The maker of universe took on the nature of a real human being and lived in the womb of his mother and was born in a stable and nursed as a baby. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords was obedient to sinful parents and lived as a poor carpenter's son and walked the dusty roads of Israel and dealt with Jewish and Roman rulers who cared nothing about the truth. Then that almighty Son of God laid down his life for us. He suffered an eternity of hell on the cross and then died to pay for all our sins. That is who prays for us. The Lord who took all our sins away.

But even that isn't all there is to say. Because he also rose from the dead for us. He broke the power of the devil and the hold that death has on you and me. He freed us from hell and promised to rule all things for our good. The Maker and Ruler of the Universe, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the one who was dead and is now alive, has all power over everything in this world. He prays for us today and every day. His Father will most certainly answer. Amen.