

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

John 17:6-19 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 19 July 2009 00:00

John 17:6-19 *Jesus Prays for His Disciples* ***A Tale of Two Churches*** I'd like to start this morning by telling you the story of two different churches.

The first is the First Church of the Shuttered Door led by the Reverend Hezekiah Stale. First Church of the Shuttered Door meets in a century-old brick building that has seen better days. The paint is peeling on the bell tower and the parking lot is filled with weeds. The congregants rather like their building a little run-down, though, as they consider too much money spent on property as a sign of worldliness.

Inside, the sanctuary is a bit dark. There used to be a large window above the pulpit that let in the morning sunlight but the Rev. Stale had it covered because he feared the view of the outside world was too distracting for his flock. On Sunday morning the congregants sit in rows of straight-backed pews. No cushions on the pews. If there were cushions, the congregants might get comfortable. And at the First Church of the Shuttered Door comfort is considered worldly.

The Rev. Stale wears a clerical collar and flowing black robes when he preaches. He prefers an expository style, going through the Bible verse by verse. Each week he begins where he ended the week before, and talks for about an hour. He never tells a joke or uses an illustration—too worldly.

There are no drums or guitars at First Church of the Shuttered Door. In fact, there are no instruments at all. There used to be an organ, but the Rev. Stale decided a while back that all musical instruments are of the world and had it removed. During worship the congregants chant Psalms.

If you were to visit the First Church of the Shuttered Door, you'd feel like you had entered another world, and that's exactly how the Rev. Stale and his followers like it.

The second church is called The Happening and is led by Pastor Johnny B. Kuhl. The

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Happening meets in a converted shopping mall. The only thing that identifies the building as a church is a large electronic sign along the highway that invites people to “check out” one of the many “gatherings.”

Inside, The Happening looks a lot like a shopping mall. There’s a coffee shop, a bookstore, and even a little boutique selling The Happening t-shirts and travel mugs. The worship space is a converted movie theater complete with over-padded stadium seating and cup holders. There are no crosses visible in the worship space. It was discussed, but Pastor Johnny ran a focus group and discovered that crosses make people feel bad about themselves, so it was left out.

The worship music at The Happening rocks. Electric guitars, bass guitars, two sets of percussion, keyboards and professional singers. Worship at The Happening is like going to a concert, complete with smoke machines and strobe lights. Not too many of the congregants sing along with the band, but that’s o.k.—you wouldn’t be able to hear them above the surround sound anyway.

Pastor Johnny prefers to wear Hawaiian shirts when he preaches—only he doesn’t call it preaching. He prefers the word “teaching”—tested better with the focus group. He chooses his topics by studying the felt needs of the community. He likes to use psychology to help people make positive changes in their lives. He never uses the word “sin”—again, it makes people feel bad about themselves—and instead focuses on building up people’s self-esteem.

Lately, Pastor Johnny hasn’t been planning his teaching time at all—instead, he encourages people to Twitter questions to him and he answers people’s tweets right there in the service. He doesn’t have the opportunity to use the Bible much when he’s doing that—but that’s o.k., the Bible didn’t do well in the focus groups either.

A Long Term Dilemma

Now I made both those churches up. And I hope you can tell I was trying to create extreme examples. I don’t know of any churches that are exactly like The First Church of the Shattered Door or The Happening, and my point is not to pick on any particular church. I’m afraid I can see parts of myself in both Rev. Stale and Pastor Johnny (I almost wore a Hawaiian shirt this morning.)

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But I tell you this story of two churches because I think it illustrates a dilemma that has confronted Christians since the days of Jesus: What is our relationship to the world? How are Christians, who are saved from the world but also called to share Jesus with the world, supposed to relate to the world?

Historically, the church has swung between two extremes. One extreme is the shuttered door approach. Christians view the world as a very bad and very dangerous place and so they try to remove themselves from it as much as possible. Legalism creeps in as fences are erected to create separation. Questions about style and personal preference get turned into matters of holiness. This is the classic error of fundamentalism.

The other extreme is the hip and happening approach. Here, the desire to be relevant to the world is so great that Christians try to look as worldly as possible. The tendency here is to stick one's finger in the air and go wherever the wind is blowing. Key doctrines and beliefs might get shoved aside or obscured in the effort to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. This is the classic error of liberalism.

Like I said, Christians have struggled with this issue since the days of Jesus. I'm sure you can see elements of both these extremes in our church. You probably look at me and place me in one camp or the other.

But I don't believe either is God's desire for us. Instead, I believe Jesus wants us to find a middle path. I believe Jesus wants us to be set apart from the world even as He sends us into it.

Jesus wants us to engage the world without become like it.

Jesus' Prayer

We've been working our way through the gospel of John and the past few months we've been looking at Jesus' final discourse—the things He said to His disciples in the hours just before His arrest and crucifixion.

Last week we came to John 17, which is commonly known as Jesus' High Priestly prayer, the

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longest prayer of Jesus recorded in the Bible. This is a chance to hear Jesus' heart. And last week, we saw that Jesus' one, driving passion is for His glory. His desire is to be glorified by the cross and to heap glory on His Father.

Now, this week, Jesus' prayer focuses on His disciples. Specifically, He is praying for the group that has been with Him for the past 3 years. And His primary concern for them is how they are going to relate to the world.

You can see that throughout verses 6-19. Jesus is praying for those that have been given to Him, and His concern is that they be protected. The verses which probably best summarize His prayer are verses

14-16

:

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.

Remember, the word "world" in the gospel of John is a way of talking about the majority of humanity that is in rebellion against God. It is fallen humanity and it is opposed to God. For the most part, the "world" in the gospel of John is not a good place. And yet, God loves the world and He sent Jesus into the world. It is for the world that Jesus died.

And so, while the world will hate Jesus' followers (John 15:18-19) and be a source of trouble (John 16:33), Jesus is not asking God to remove them from the world. He's not praying for His disciples to be zapped straight to heaven. Instead, He prays for their protection from the evil one. He prays that they'll be able to stand up to the difficulties. But He is leaving them there.

And in the process of praying for those who were closest to Him while He was on earth, I think Jesus answers the question of how all His followers should relate to the world around us. Jesus'

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prayer for His disciples is that they be in the world, but not of it. And that's His prayer for us as well. That we engage the world without becoming like it.

There are two parts to this prayer, and they emerge in the next couple of verses. In order to live out Jesus' prayer for us we need to think of ourselves as set apart, and sent.

Sanctified

First, we need to think of ourselves as **set apart.** Verse 17

:

17

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

The word sanctify simply means to set apart for special use. It has to do with holiness, being separate from evil or sin. Only God is truly holy, but He calls those who belong to Him to be set apart for His purposes. Thus, if we belong to Jesus there must be a sense in which we are different from the world around us. There must be something about our commitment to Jesus that sets us apart.

Our example here is Jesus Himself. In verse 16 He says "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it." Jesus was sent from the Father's side into the world He had helped to create. He took on human flesh and blood and subjected Himself to all the trials and tribulations of being human. And yet there is a definite sense in which He never really fit in here: He never sinned, He understood God in a way nobody else could, He never swerved from His mission to fulfill God's purpose for Him. He was in the world, but not of it.

So it should be of Jesus' followers. Disciples are different from the world. There's a sense in which they don't belong. The world is square, the disciples are round. The world is green, the disciples are red. The world is stripes, the disciples are polka dots. The world rejects, the disciples believe. The world is heading to hell, the disciples are called-out and walk in the light. They are at odds.

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As Jesus' followers today there has to be a sense in which we are different. Living for Jesus means leaving old, sinful, worldly habits behind. It means rejecting the materialism and greed of our culture that says we always have to have more and more and more; and instead learning to be content with what we have. It means opposing the selfish hedonism that says we should always live for our own pleasure; and instead thinking of others as better than ourselves. It means a different set of values. A different set of priorities. A different way of thinking.

Romans 12:2 says: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Jesus' desire for us is that we be set apart. That there be a distinction between us and the world.

The sad thing is, it can be hard to tell the difference between those who follow Jesus and the rest of the world. A recent survey by the Barna group attempted to measure the number of people who hold what it calls a "Christian worldview." The report said:

For the purposes of the survey, a "biblical worldview" was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview.

Overall, the current research revealed that only 9% of all American adults have a biblical worldview... [Among those] labeled "born again Christians," the study discovered that they were twice as likely as the average adult to possess a biblical worldview. However, that meant that even among born again Christians, less than one out of every five (19%) had such an outlook on life.

(<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years>)

In the same way, studies of behavior often reveal that there is little appreciable difference between Christians and nonChristians when it comes to matters like: marital unfaithfulness, pornography use, problem drinking, gambling and so on.

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This shouldn't be. We have to make sure our attachment to the world is not greater than our allegiance to our Savior. We have been set apart for Jesus. Separated for Him. The old negro spiritual has it right when it says: "This world is not my home, I'm just a- passin through." There has to be a sense in which that is our attitude.

And the key, Jesus is says in verse 17, is for us to be sanctified by the truth. He says to God: "Your word is truth." He's talking about the Bible.

It is so important that we let the Bible be our guide. We need to make sure that our values and beliefs are being shaped by the Bible and not by our culture. Again and again we need to return to the Bible to learn God's will for us, to hear His rules, to gain His heart.

And so, the first thing we need to think about when we think about our relationship to the world is that we are set apart. We are not of this world. We are different.

Sent

Second, we need to think of ourselves as **sent**.

Here comes the tension. Because even as Jesus tells His disciples that they are not of the world, He sends them into it.

Verse 18

:

18

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Jesus has a mission for His disciples. The reason He doesn't just zap everyone who believes in Him straight to heaven is because He has a purpose for them here on earth. He's sending them into the world. Acts 1 says they are to be His "witnesses." Matthew 28 says they are to go into all the world and make disciples.

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If we belong to Jesus then there is a sense in which we represent Him to the world He came to save. It is our job to tell His story, to invite people to believe in Him, and to build up His church.

Again, Jesus serves as our example, for He too has been sent into the world. Even though He was set apart, even though He never sinned, Jesus was not afraid to mix with the basest elements of the world. He allowed his feet to be washed by an immoral woman. He attended parties thrown by tax collectors. He was accused by His enemies of being a drunkard and a glutton and spending way too much time with sinners.

Leighton Ford, a long time associate of Billy Graham's, writes:

"If Jesus came back and mingled with gamblers, the skid-row crowd and the cocktail set, a lot of shocked Christians would throw up their hands and say He was too worldly."

And yet, Jesus says His example should be our example. He's sending us into the world. It is our job to be salt and light to the world that is living without Jesus. To share the good news. To help them escape the darkness. The great English theologian John Stott says:

"We are to go as He went, to penetrate human society, to mix with unbelievers and fraternize with sinners. Does not one of the Church's greatest failures lie here? We have disengaged too much. We have become a withdrawn community. We have become aloof instead of alongside."

Jesus practiced a sort of holy worldliness. He was able to be in the world—to connect with sinners and have influence on them—while still not being corrupted by it. In the same way, Jesus is now asking us to be in the world, even while not being of it.

The point is, if we are going to carry out Jesus' mission for us, then we cannot shutter our doors and hunker down in our Christian bunkers. We must be conversant with the world. We must be able to speak the world's language. We need to go where the people of the world are.

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Let me give you an example:

Craig Gross is the founder of XXXChurch.com, a ministry which reaches out to those struggling with sexual addictions and working in the pornography industry. He is also helping to start a church in the heart of Las Vegas called Strip Church.

He says, "It makes perfect sense for who we're trying to reach, the temptations that this city has to offer, and the call that we feel that God's put in our lives to do this. Las Vegas is known as sin city and that's where we need to be."

An article about Gross on [Christiantoday.com](http://christiantoday.com) says:

Gross doesn't blame "the dark for being dark" spiritually, or Vegas for being Vegas. He instead blames "the light for not shining on the darkness". In other words, the church needs to do a better job at telling people about Jesus.

"I think the church does a poor job overall when it comes to evangelism," Gross told ABC News. "We get content with our members and then we spend time satisfying just our members and we lose that focus of Jesus [who] said 'I came for the sick, not the healthy'."

Gross first began ministering in Las Vegas in 2002 at a porn show. He and his XXXChurch.com staff have visited the porn conventions passing out "Jesus Loves Porn Stars" Bibles and now they're calling the city their home full time...

"We didn't move here to be Las Vegas, but we came here to change Las Vegas,"

he said. "If that's one family at a time, it's worth

it." (<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/pastor.takes.on.vegas.underbelly/22218.htm>)

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Pastor Gross and his church are an excellent example of Christians who are willing to be in the world, even while they are not of it. They are answers to Jesus' prayer for disciples who will engage the world without becoming like it.

Checklist

My dream is that Hope Church can also be a church that is sent into the world while being set apart from it. I don't want to be like Pastor Johnny and the Happening, mindlessly following every trend and watering down the truth in a hope to be relevant. But neither do I want to be like the Rev. Stale and the First Church of the Shuttered Door, so scared of the world that we look utterly alien. I hope that we can be a church that engages the world without becoming like it.

And while it is easy for me to use churches as examples, I hope you can see that Jesus' prayer here is not just for congregations, but for all of His individual followers. You too are called to be in the world but not of it. Each of us is called to engage the world without becoming like it.

And so, to close, I have a sort of

checklist

that we can all use to see how we are doing in this respect. Here are four things you can check:

First, c

heck your values.

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Jesus says we need to be set apart. If we are going to be the salt of the world, then we can't lose our saltiness. So we have to check our values and compare them to that of the world around us. The world's values are: money, possessions, success, fame, security, sexual hedonism, autonomy from authority, and disdain for the things of God. Do we reflect those values, or will people see something different when they look at us?

Second

, check your friends.

□

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Jesus has sent us into the world. He's given us a mission. But if we are going to carry out that mission, then we need to be out in the mission field.

It used to be that Christians would boast that all of their friends were in the church, as though there were some sort of extra credit for staying away from "those people." But imagine a missionary to Africa who never knew any Africans. It just wouldn't work. In the same way we need to make sure we are developing friendships with people who don't know Jesus yet. Bill Hybels calls them "redemptive relationships". If we only hang out with people who already know the Savior, we won't have a lot of opportunities to share Jesus.

□

Third, check your weaknesses.

If sexual temptation is a struggle for you, then witnessing on the Las Vegas strip is probably not for you. If you have a problem with drinking, then you don't want to be building relationships in bars. Being in the world doesn't mean we have to put ourselves in situations where we are likely to stumble. But we can bring the light of Christ to dark places.

Which leads to the final thing on the checklist:

□

Finally, check your influence.

Make sure that you are influencing the world, and not the other way around. Our goal in being in the world is to bring the positive influence of Christ, and not be swayed the other way.

A Christian's relationship to the world is a constant challenge—it's like a dance. Jesus' prayer for us is that we engage the world without becoming like it. He's left us here so that we can positively influence this world for Him. So let's follow His example: let's be in the world, but not of it.

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John 17:6-19 (ESV)

6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.

8 For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

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

14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

[\[1\]](#)

16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

17 Sanctify them

[\[2\]](#)

in the truth; your word is truth.

18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

19 And for their sake I consecrate myself,

[\[3\]](#)

that they also may be sanctified

[\[4\]](#)

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in truth.

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[ESV](#)
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Footnotes

[1] 17:15 Or *from evil*

[2] 17:17 Greek *Set them apart* (for holy service to God)

[3] 17:19 Or *I sanctify myself*; or *I set myself apart* (for holy service to God)

[4] 17:19 Greek *may be set apart* (for holy service to God)