

**“Touching Heaven;
A PRAYER OF GLORY”**

John 17:1-5

*God is glorified by our faith,
our unity, our joy, and our witness.*

A sermon preached by
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In our success-oriented, production-driven, possession-dominated world, it often seems like we lose touch with who we are. We know what to do; we know how to get the job done, whether it is at work or at home or at our doggedly determined pursuit of leisure. But we forget in the process the reason we are doing all this. What does it mean? Where are we going? Why do we live like this? Someone has suggested that instead of calling ourselves “human beings,” we should call ourselves “human doings,” because it is what we do that defines us to the world, not who we are.

Personally, I run into this many times on the golf course. Sometimes I go out to play by myself, and I get paired up with one or more strangers. On the first tee, there are usually introductions and jokes about how badly we all play. But by the third or fourth hole, curiosity has taken hold, and you want to know who these people are. So inevitably the question comes up, and it goes something like this: “So, what do you do?” or “What business are you in?” You never ask, “So, who are you really?” or “What do you find meaningful?” or “What is your mission in life?” It’s just not done. It’s bad enough when they find out I’m a Methodist preacher, and for some reason they feel like they can’t use their “golfing words” any more, and it messes up their game!

This morning I want to think about the question, “What business are you in?” What business are you in as a Christian? What is the purpose of your life? What are you called to do and to be on this earth? I think the Christian writer C. S. Lewis gave a good answer to that question when he said, “The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life.”¹

Or, if you have some Presbyterian blood in your veins, you remember the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1646. This was a set of questions and answers teaching the basic beliefs of Christianity. The first one: “What is the chief end of man?”

Every good Presbyterian can tell you: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”²

Jesus was all about the business of glorifying God. His primary purpose was to glorify his Father, and to do that he even went to the cross to save us from our sins. In this prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus had reached the climax, the summit of his ministry on earth. In a few hours he would die. Still he prayed for the glory of God: “*Father, the hour has come; glorify the Son so that the Son may glorify you.*”³

In this great prayer of Jesus, he prayed for many things. He prayed for **faith**. He thanked God that the disciples had received his word and believed in him. He also prayed for those who would receive his word through the testimony of his disciples, that they would come to believe as well.

Jesus prayed for **unity**. Three times he asked God to hold the little band of disciples together, “*that they may all be one.*”⁴ I’ll say more about that in a minute.

Jesus prayed for **protection**. He prayed that God would protect his disciples. He had protected them while he was on earth, but now that he was returning to the Father, they needed supernatural protection from God to survive the attacks of the evil one.⁵

Jesus prayed for **truth**. Earlier, Jesus told his disciples, “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*”⁶ In the great prayer, he asks God to “*sanctify them in the truth.*”⁷ Jesus is the truth—“*the Way, the Truth, and the Life*”⁸—if we know him, we know the truth.

Finally, Jesus prayed for **love**, the crowning experience of the Christian life. He prayed for his disciples to have the love in them that the Father and the Son had for each other. The Christian life is all about love.

The whole prayer, which takes up an entire chapter in the Gospel, is as difficult to read as it is important to understand. Some have called it the real Lord’s Prayer, since it is the prayer of Jesus to his Father.

Some have called it the high priestly prayer of Jesus, since he prays for his disciples like a priest interceding for his people. What I want to do is to take just a few of the most important ideas out of this chapter, and to see how these impact our real business in life. How can we glorify God as disciples of Jesus and as a church? What can we do or be so that God receives the same honor and worship and praise and glory that God did when Jesus was praying to him the night before he died? The prayer itself offers four ways God is glorified.

God is glorified by our faith. Nothing delights the heart of our heavenly Father more than to have one of his children believe in him. When we believe, we honor God. When we claim a relationship with him, all heaven rejoices. The primary thing the disciples did was to believe that Jesus was the Son of God and to receive his words and to live by his commandments. That was the whole purpose of the Gospel. John 20:31 says, *“These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.”* When we believe, that means that we trust in God, and trusting in God, we ensure our place in eternal life. We know that one day we will join the throng gathered around the throne and worship God eternally. That faith gives God glory.

I have been blessed with two wonderful sons, and they have both given me many things to be proud of. Through their growing up years, we celebrated every accomplishment, whether it was athletics or academics or music. Whatever they did, we were proud of them—well, mostly. But two days when I was so proud I could hardly speak were the days each of my boys knelt at the altar of the church and were confirmed in the faith. Of course, they were baptized as infants, but at confirmation, they accepted that faith for their own. I laid my hands on them and spoke their names and said, “Remember your baptism and be thankful. The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”⁹ Both times I could hardly get the

words out, my throat was so thick with emotion. At that moment, they were claiming the faith that they had been taught since birth. They were accepting the vows that were made on their behalf when they were babies. They were entering a saving relationship with God through the grace of Jesus Christ, forgiven of their sins, heirs with all other believers of the great promise of eternal life. It was one of the proudest moments of my life. It was a moment of glory.

If this sinful human heart can feel that way about my own kids, think how our heavenly Father, whose love is pure and unconditional, must feel when any of his children believe in him. It must be a glory!

Second, God is glorified by our unity. I think Jesus knew this was going to be a problem. That's why he prayed three times in this one chapter that his disciples and those who came after them would all be one. Jesus wanted unity in his followers. But before that night was over, one of his chosen twelve had defected to his enemies and betrayed him. And when the church got started in Acts 2, it took only four chapters before there was disunity over the treatment of the Jewish and Greek widows in the church.

It seems like Christians often would rather be divided than unified. One group who believes this way will pit itself against another group who believes another way, then both groups will subdivide because of internal disagreements, and before you know it, you can go to the online Yellow Pages and find 389 references in Fort Smith for the category "church." I know; I did it this week. The result of disunity is that the Body of Christ is chopped up into so many little pieces that no piece can be as strong on its own, and the Kingdom suffers.

The illustration the Bible uses is that of a rope made of various strands. The wise writer of Ecclesiastes says, "*though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.*"¹⁰ The tiny strands that make a rope are not that strong. But if you weave many of them together, you can perform great feats of strength. The wisdom of Jesus is that a church that is

unified will be a church that is strong and effective and powerful in its witness.

We struggle with unity—as one church, as a denomination, as the Christian church universal. Unity does not mean unanimity. We will not always have the same opinion; there will be differences of thought as we struggle to know and do God’s will. Our unity comes from a fundamental agreement on our mission—to make disciples of Jesus Christ—and knowing what business we are really in—glorifying God.

Third, God is glorified by our joy. Our heavenly Father wants us to have a life that is overflowing with blessings. Jesus said he came that we might have life abundantly. He told his disciples the secrets of the Kingdom of God so that his joy might be in them and their joy might be full. In his great priestly prayer, he said, “*I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.*”¹¹ When we share the joy of Christ, we can enjoy a wonderful freedom in the way we live.

Several years ago I read a very interesting little book called simply *Fish!* It was about the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle. In an environment many people would consider nasty, the men at the fish market have such a big time that they actually draw crowds to watch them handle the seafood in their market. They shout; they throw fish; they play games with the customers. Their joy is contagious. CNN named the Pike Place Fish Market as one of the top three fun places to work in the country.¹²

According to the book, four practices make the fish market a joyful place:

- intentionally choosing a positive attitude
- introducing playful elements into their everyday routine
- doing their best to make the customer feel important
- being fully present in their job each day.¹³

The fishworkers’ “doing” is the same kind of fishmongering that happens in every seacoast town in the world. But their “being” is powerful and energetic and effective and fun! Shouldn’t Christians

live that way? When your daily routine brings you joy and laughter and fun, it is attractive to others. It glorifies God. Jesus prays for his disciples to live this way.

Finally, God is glorified by our witness. Jesus prayed in the high priestly prayer, *“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ...As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*¹⁴ Witness is the big idea in the background of all the ways we glorify God. If we believe, and others know we believe, we make a witness. If the community outside our church sees a congregation that is unified and motivated to make a difference for God in the world, that’s a witness. If we live with the contagious joy of a disciple, the way Jesus intended, that makes a witness and draws people to Christ. In fact, any way and every way that we can communicate the good news of God’s salvation—through worship, through study, through hospitality, through missions in the community and abroad—we give glory to God. That’s the business we’re in.

The last hard-line Communist leader of the Soviet Union was Leonid Brezhnev. He died in 1982. Vice-President George Bush (who later became the first President Bush) was assigned to attend the funeral on behalf of the United States. He later reported seeing an amazing thing happen at the funeral of this Communist leader. The ceremony was strictly in accord with the atheistic beliefs of Communism. Everything was very militaristic and cold and hollow. There was plenty of Marxist rhetoric, but no prayers, no hymns, no mention of God whatsoever. At the very end of the funeral, Brezhnev’s widow stepped forward to the coffin for one last look at her husband’s body. Then, in front of dignitaries from all over the Soviet Union and the world and millions of people watching on TV, she reached out and traced the sign of the cross on her husband’s chest. In that simple but profound act, she made a witness. The Gospel penetrated the walls of Communist ideology, and God was glorified.¹⁵

How about you? Is your faith making a witness in the hostile territory of the world? Are you known as a disciple of Jesus Christ in your workplace, your school, your circle of friends, your community?

Maybe you feel like you need help achieving that level of witness in your life. Don't feel alone. The first step toward success is the acknowledgment of our need for help.

Johann Sebastian Bach, arguably the greatest composer of all time, whose music has touched the hearts of generations for God, began his compositions with a two-word prayer. On his original manuscripts, you can see the letters "J. J." That stands for "*Jesu juva*," the Latin words for "Jesus, help." At the end of each Bach manuscript are three more letters that he always put there: "S.D.G.", which stands for "*Sola Deo Gloria*." In Latin it means "To God alone be the glory."¹⁶

If you want to glorify God with your life today, start by asking Jesus to help you. You cannot do it on your own. But this life is what God wants for you; in fact, Jesus has been praying for this. Ask for help, and have faith in him to provide it. Ask for help, and work for unity in the Body. Ask for help, and receive the joy. Your life will be your witness, and God will be glorified. That's the business we're in.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 31, cited on *PreachingToday.com*.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Shorter_Catechism.

³ John 17:1.

⁴ John 17:21.

⁵ John 17:11, 12, 15.

⁶ John 8:31-32.

⁷ John 17:17.

⁸ John 14:6.

⁹ *United Methodist Hymnal*; p. 37.

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 4:12.

¹¹ John 17:13.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pike_Place_Fish_Market.

¹³ Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul, and John Christensen, *Fish!* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2000), p. 78.

¹⁴ John 17:18, 21.

¹⁵ George Bush, quoted in *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1987, cited in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 15.

¹⁶ <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/bach-created-music-to-gods-glory-11630186.html>.