Jesus Prays
John 17:1-19

As some of you know, our little car has failed its expertise, and at the end, the man who failed it gave me a long list of everything wrong. But hey, it's just a car! But what if such a test existed for our spiritual lives, for your life as a Christian. What would feature on a list that tested the road worthiness of you faith?

Or think when you go to your doctor and he takes your temperature and checks your bloods. Well, what are the markers of Christian health?

Wouldn't prayer come right at the top of the list? As one writer puts it, prayer is *the* litmus test of your Christian life. It's *the* temperature gauge for the warmth of your faith. It's *the* ECG for the health of your heart.

It's not your politics, or the fact you're supporting this cause or that. It's not your morality, or church attendance, or spiritual zeal, or even how often you're talking to your colleagues about Christ. Those are all important, and all of them *may* be a marker of your spiritual health, but they may also be you trying to look good to others.

But prayer, when it's you alone with God, when no-one else can see or hear - that's when you get a real feel for the warmth of your heart and the depth of your love.

And yet, prayer's not just a test of our lives, is it? It's also *the* thing that can make a difference in our lives. I mean, when someone asks me, 'Martin, what can I pray for you?' I'll often say, 'pray for my prayer life' because when that's not going well, I'm not going well - and I get more grumpy and frustrated than I should.

And Martyn Lloyd Jones, the great British pastor of a previous generation, had a huge impact through his preaching and writing, but his wife said of him, 'no one will ever understand my husband until they understand that first and foremost he's a man of prayer.' Just prior to his death a couple of years back, Tim Keller the American pastor, was asked whether, looking back on nearly 50 years of Christian ministry, there was anything he'd have done differently, 'Absolutely', he said, 'I should have prayed more.' And while it's almost certainly apocryphal, Martin Luther said, 'I have so much to do today that I shall have to spend the first three hours in prayer.' But apocryphal or not, Luther *was* a man of prayer - but so is almost anyone who has left a lasting Christian legacy for good - even if that's just as a parent.

Now, does any of that mean prayer is easy? No. But, as Tim Keller said, what of any of the truly great things in life *are* easy? And yet here, in today's passage, we see the greatest of men, the man who has left a legacy and exerted an influence like no other, praying. And as you watch him, I want you to see three things: His attitude in prayer, his theology in prayer, and his requests in prayer.

Jesus' Attitude in Prayer
Look at v1: 'When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father…"'.

'When he had spoken these words': and it's the night of Jesus' betrayal, and he's been pouring truth into his disciples. But now, as we get to chapter 17, he doesn't just preach and teach, he prays. It's interesting, isn't it, how often those two things - preaching and praying - go together. Fast forward to Acts 6 and the church is growing, and practical needs are multiplying, and the apostles, the men

Jesus is praying for here, appoint faithful servant-hearted guys - deacons - to step in and step up and take charge of all the practical stuff. Why? Why not just do it themselves? So that, in their words, 'we' - and by extension every elder in every church - can "devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Because that's what they'd seen Jesus devote *himself* to.

But notice, it's not just that he *prays*, it's the *way* he prays: v1 again, "*Father*…". And then, v11, "*Holy* Father…" So he's coming before God with all the intimacy of a child - because he is. But he's also coming knowing his Father is the holy, transcendent God.

And prayer, right prayer, always combines those two things in one heart - intimacy and awe, confidence and humility.

Because if you're a Christian, like Jesus, you are a child of God, you're adopted into his family. And that's your identity. It's why he taught us to pray, "Our *Father* in *heaven." S*o when you shut your door, and get down on your knees, and you're heavenly Father sees you and hears you approach him, he's watching his beloved child come to him.

And your identity always determines your access, doesn't it?

When I used to work on the intensive care unit, I had an identity badge, and if I swiped that badge the doors would slide open. Why? Because I was a doctor. But if a visitor came, they'd have to ring the bell at the door and before letting them in the receptionist would ask, who are you?

But if you're a Christian, heaven knows who you are. You're a child of God. So as you come in prayer its as if the doors of heaven slide open - no questions asked, you're welcome here. It's why Paul writes, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1) - there's zero risk of you being turned away.

But what if you were truly to begin to grasp that? Then prayer won't just be a theoretical exercise, of you going through the motions, it will become *the experience* of knowing God as your Father and you as his child.

Because again, your access is always dependent on you identity, isn't it? Who you can talk to, when, where, and about what. I mean, can you talk to your CEO about that issue? - well it depends who you are. Or think of me sat at home, and there's a knock at the door, and I go open the door. How do I respond to the person on the other side? Well, it depends on who they are. If it's one of my daughters I'll go 'Poppet!' And hug them. But if it's a door-to-door salesman, I probably won't.

Or imagine a king on his throne, in the throne room. In all his kingdom, who can knock on the door, day or night, and ask the king to get him a glass of milk? His little child. Will the guards block the way? No! They'll smile and open the door. Why? Because he's the beloved son, she's the beloved daughter of the king, the apple of his eye. And in Christ you are that child and you have that access, and he will never turn you away.

And yet, even with Jesus, there's not just intimacy is there? There's also reverence and awe. Verse 11 again, "*Holy* Father." It's why he taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven, *hallowed* - holy - be your name.' And look at Jesus praying, because he's even displaying it in his body language: v1, '*he*

lifted up his eyes to heaven.' Now does Jesus believe that God is somehow boxed in up there. No! He's expressing with his body the lifted-up-ness of God.

Sometimes we need those physical reminders, don't we? John Calvin wrote of Jesus lifting his eyes: 'Lifting up the hands in prayer makes the same point, for people are spiritually lethargic by nature, and their earthly spirit pulls them downwards; they need to be stirred up like this - they need vehicles to raise them to God.' So if even Calvin says you should raise your hands, maybe you should! You see, we live in a world that tells you, you're the king, you're the one who should be lifted up, you're the one everyone should bow to. But lifting your eyes, or bowing your head, or raising your hands, or bending your knees, reminds your heart, 'God is my Father, *and he is holy*.'

So, how's the awe and wonder going? In Psalm 27, David wrote, 'One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, *to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord*.' How's the gazing going? As you pray are you revelling in your status as a beloved child, are you delighting in him for who he is, or has your heart grown numb to his beauty and holiness? Or maybe you've never experienced it.

But if either's the case there is a way to light the fire.

Jesus' Theology in Prayer

Now, I don't know what strikes you about this prayer, but it's almost like you have to sift through all the theology Jesus is praying to find his requests. It's not that requests aren't there, it's that they're dwarfed by the truth he prays.

Think how that might compare to us. Because if you're facing trouble, or there are things you really want to see happen, and you examine your prayers, they may be animated, even impassioned, but might they also be one-request-after-another? And we can present God with a list of all the things we want him to action, while adoration for who God is really doesn't feature.

Or maybe it does. Maybe theology does matter to you, and you can spot error at a hundred paces, and it features in your prayers. But there's a dryness to it all. As my father-in-law once told me, Martin, you can be perfectly orthodox, and perfectly dead. Because your theology never travels from your head to your heart and from your heart to heaven.

But listen to Jesus pray and it's like he's taken a textbook of theology, poured a tank of petrol on it, and lit the match. And so it's not just that prayer can turn the truth that 'God is your father' into experience, it can also turn right theology into a flame of thanks and praise.

So look at some of what Jesus prays.

Firstly, ***the authority of Christ***. Verse 2, "You have given him [he's talking of himself] authority over all flesh." Think of the scope of that. There is not a child born, nor a person breathing, not a man walking, or a woman working, over whom Christ is not Sovereign.

Imagine if you were to begin to pray that truth up. Think of the impact it would have on your praying *and* on the peace of your heart, as the truth that Christ is on the throne of the universe begins to grip your heart, and your life, and the lives of those you love, or don't, are in his hands. And that you can trust those hands.

Secondly, ***the only true God***. Verse 2-3: "You have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you *the only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Now, our prayers - or lack of them - can tell us a whole lot about what we're looking to for life, can't they. Because if we *want* something, or feel the loss of something, there's something we want to see change, that something can say a lot about what we're looking to for our significance, security, or happiness. And we need this thing, or this outcome to be happy, or to feel like we're really living life, so we keep asking God for it. But that raises a question, doesn't it, especially if God's not answering: is it God I want, or what I can get from him? Is it my Father, or more of my Father's stuff?

Now, do you need a job? Yes. Would it be great to find a partner? Yes. Would it be good if this person's attitude changed? Yes, probably. And all those things are good and we absolutely should pray about them. But they're not God.

And Jesus is saying, God is the only true God, He's the only one who can ever deeply satisfy you. And eternal life, Jesus says, is not life that never ends, it's knowing *the One* who never ends, the One who never fails to satisfy. And when you know him, all these other good desires find their right place.

Thirdly Jesus prays out ***the doctrine of election***. Verse 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." Verse 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."

Now, if you get chosen for a sports team, it might give you a certain swagger, mightn't it - because you've made the grade and you are in. Except, there'll always be an anxious edge to the swagger, because you've got to keep those performances coming or else.

And Jesus is saying, God had chosen these disciples and given them to him. But what the rest of the New Testament makes clear is that, if you're a Christian, what's true for them is true for you. And God hasn't chosen you based on your *good* performance, so he'll never drop you based on your *bad*. He's chosen you because of his grace, because he has simply chosen to set his love upon you.

What if you were to pray that in? What if when you're comparing yourself to others, or feeling slimed and stained by sin, you meditated on, and prayed in the truth that God has chosen you *because he loves you?* Which means, there's not a snowball's chance in hell that he'll ever dump you.

Or look at Jesus praying, verse 9, "I am praying for them." In fact, the writer of Hebrews says, 'he [Jesus] *always lives* to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25). And who's the them? It's those, he says, "Who draw near to God through him." Which means it's you! That every time you begin to pray, Jesus is already at the Father's right hand, praying for you.

What would praying in and praying up that truth - that God has chosen you and Christ is praying for you - do for the health of your heart?

But fourthly, Jesus prays ***his word.*** Verse 6, "They have kept your word." Verse 8, "I have given them the words that you gave me." Verse 14, "I have given them your word." And v17, "Your word is truth."

Now, if your idea of God is *not* being formed by his word, then who are you praying to when you pray? You're talking to a god who reflects your priorities and your prejudices, aren't you. A god of your own making. Which means, you're talking to yourself. And you might be full of passion, and you might be full of zeal, and you might be deeply sincere, but if it's not the God of the Bible you're praying to, it's not God you're praying to. It's an image made in your likeness.

But the same goes for our desires and requests in prayer. Because we can spend our prayers trying to get God to follow our agenda. But what if his word was shaping our agenda and our desires?

You see, as we allow God, by his Spirit, to reveal himself to us from his word, then that right theology - kindles delight and adoration, but it also ignites intercession.

Jesus' Requests in Prayer

When Augustine was asked by a friend, 'what should I ask for in prayer?' he answered, 'pray for a happy life.''Great', we might go, 'God, you can start by fixing my wife, or by giving me one. And there's that new car, and my job. Give me those and I'll be happy.'

Except, Augustine says, before you ask for anything, you have to be the right kind of person to ask. 'You must' he says 'account yourself *desolate* in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be.' In other words, before you start asking for anything, you have to understand that ultimately none of the stuff we're asking for can ever give us the deep heart satisfaction and rest we're looking for; that God is the only true God.

So what does Jesus ask for?

Well, in verses 1-5 he prays for himself. Verse 1, "Father, the hour has come…" And throughout John's gospel *'the hour'* refers to the moment of Jesus suffering. And that moment has come, Jesus says. Which means, he's praying in the shadow of the cross. But isn't that true for so many of our requests? That they're made in the shadow of something? The shadow of need, or the shadow of loss; the shadow of hurt, or simply the shadow of realising we cannot do this ourselves.

But in this moment, what does Jesus ask for? "Father… glorify your Son." But the shadow that's falling on him is the shadow of the cross! So he's asking God, "Father, glorify me through the most shameful and humiliating of deaths.' And in his death, Calvin says, 'we see a boundless glory.' Because it's through his death that sins are forgiven, and the curse is blotted out, and you are reconciled to God, and satan is vanquished, and death itself dies.

And look at his motive: v1 again, "Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." And how does this death, of all deaths, glorify his Father? Because it's there that God's justice and mercy meet. It's at the cross that his wrath and his love are mingled. It's there, in the darkest of all places, that God is clothed in splendour as he gives his beloved Son to make us, his enemies, his friends.

Verse 5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." So the gospel doesn't end with Jesus' death. Instead, to misquote CS

Lewis, all that has gone before is but the cover and title page: it's the beginning of Chapter One of the Greatest of Stories, which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Because if Christ was glorified in his death, think of the glory of his resurrection and ascension and enthronement above every other power. And it's that glory that tells you, you're not talking to yourself, when you pray to him.

But then, in v6-19, Jesus prays for his disciples. Firstly, ***for their protection***. Verse 11-12, "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… While I was with them… I have guarded them." You see Jesus knows that they, and you and I, live in a spiritually hostile environment, v14: "The world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." A world where you're going to face criticism, or worse, for your allegiance to Christ.

And yet, Jesus doesn't pray for their withdrawl - either from the world or the trials of the world: v15, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." And that protection we need, he says, is in God's name. Because when you're growing in your knowledge of God, of his beauty and holiness and all-satisfying love, it's like your defensive wall against the temptations and lies of the enemy is growing taller, brick by brick, each day. It's like you're sharpening the sword of the Spirit and polishing the shield of faith.

And yet, it's not just attacks from without Jesus prays about. Verse 11, "Keep them in your name… *that they may be one, even as we are one*." And Jesus is on the verge of sending these men out into the world with the gospel. But what could destroy or discourage the work of God more than disunity or division among the workers? So make them one, Jesus says. And in a few minutes, in the members' meeting, we're going to have a wonderful opportunity to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer: as we unite around the spread of the gospel and the cause of Christ here in out little corner.

Secondly, he prays ***for their joy.*** Verse 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." So Augustine's not wrong is he? Pray for a happy life - pray for a life filled with the joy of Christ. Because prayer's not just an opportunity to experience God as your Father, or to know right theology ignite your heart, it's an invitation to enter the infinite joy of God himself.

But thirdly, and finally, he prays ***for their sanctification***. Verse 17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." And to be sanctified is to be made holy. To daily become more like the God whose word is shaping us. And Jesus prayed it, but ultimately he died for it, so let's pray it and live it ourselves.

But to be sanctified is also to be set apart. Set apart for sending and service. Verse 18-19, "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."

So as you shut the door and get down on your knees, you're not escaping the world. If you're a Christian you're chosen *from* the world and hated *by* the world. But you've also been set apart to be sent *into* the world. For God *so loved* the world that he sent… first his son… and then you and me, his church… into the world to win the world.