

# John 17

by William Fitch

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*The church is a gift of God to his Son, and it must live apart from the world in order to remain pure and holy.*

**Duration:** 39:18

**Scripture:** Genesis 19:1

**Topics:** "Sanctification", "Worldliness"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the issue of the corruption and immorality that exists in the world, including the entertainment industry. He highlights the fact that movies and media that promote family values and ideals do not perform well at the box office because people are more interested in and attracted to scandalous and immoral content. The speaker emphasizes the importance of sanctification and purity within the church, as Jesus prayed for his followers to be sanctified through the truth. He also discusses the responsibility of the church to be a light in the world and to not be influenced by the corrupt desires of the world. The sermon references biblical teachings, such as Jesus' command to not love the world and the apostolic council's instructions to the church, to support these points.

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## Transcript

During the Sunday mornings of January, we are, as you know so well know, having a series of studies on the Church and the world. We have already noted some of the distinctive emphases of our Lord's teaching, as well as some of the apostolic counsel to the Church on this all-important issue. We've been in St. John's company and we've heard him say, Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, are not of the Father, but are of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof. But he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.

We have also lingered in the company of St. Paul, as he speaks to this theme, and we have heard him counsel, Be not conformed of this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. Our Lord had taught that conformity to the world would be one of the greatest perils the Church would face in the latter times. And it's of this that the Apostle Paul is warning the Church, with all the energy of his flaming heart and burning pen, be not conformed to this world.

Don't become conformed to the wisdom of this world, or to the cares of this world, or to the course of this world. Let all suffer the Holy Spirit to renew you in heart and in mind, so that the entire spectrum of

experience will come under the floodlight of God, and you will know his good and acceptable and perfect will for you. All this we have been noting, and now today I want to draw near with you to what must be regarded by us all as the holy of holies of the entire Bible.

And by that I mean, of course, the seventeenth chapter of the gospel according to Saint John, and our Lord's great high priestly prayer. It is, of course, one of the most remarkable elements of our Savior's life that he prayed, that he prayed at all. And yet he was constantly praying.

He was the strongest of the strong, and yet he prayed. Frequently we read this kind of saying, he departed into a solitary place and there prayed. It's obvious as we study the life of our Lord that prayer was his vital breath, his native air.

He would continue all night in prayer, and then face the day with its rigorous demands and perplexing hours. And inevitably you and I must ask ourselves, if he needed to pray like that, how can we hope to get through without it? Well, by the grace of God and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, there has been preserved for us this wonderful great high priestly prayer. How it was preserved, we cannot tell.

Did John and some other of the disciples share that holy season with the Lord? And were his words as he lifted up his eyes to heaven so burned into their hearts as to become indelible forever? Who can tell? What is clear is that at this hour of his agony, with Calvary so near, with the bitterness of the cross already entering deep into his heart, our Lord gives himself, gives himself to prayer, gives himself to the ministry of intercession, gives himself that he might pray for his disciples with such a passion and with such a holy earnestness and with such a burning heart that at no point in all this story of revelation and inspiration is there anything so wonderful, so exalting, so humbling, so divine. This is holy ground, and perforce we know it. And for myself this realization is very intense this morning, for as I have read and reread and studied and meditated upon these gracious words of our Savior's prayer, I have cried out within me, who is sufficient for these things? What more can one add to the perfection of this record so eloquently and graciously treasured for us by the Holy Spirit? What more can we say? And is it not likely, the most likely of all things, that in trying to see anything we will mar the perfection of our Savior's ministry? We can only look to him and beseech him to stand amongst us and to shine upon the sacred page and to flood it with the light divine and to draw out all our hearts to himself in a holy wonder and a fervent devotion.

Surely in such an hour as this our prayer must be, Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, my sinful maladies remove. Be thou my light, be thou my guide, or every thought and step resign. Now one of the very remarkable facts about our Lord's great high priestly prayer is this, that though he is so manifestly near to the throne of grace, and though he is so manifestly raised to that throne which is on high, yet nonetheless the world is continually before him.

And the relationship of his church to the world is one of the sovereign subjects of his intercession, fifteen or sixteen times no less. In this great high priestly prayer our Lord refers to the world and the supreme burden of his prayer concerns the ministry and concerns the witness of his own church, of his own disciples, of his own believing band in the world. Let me remind you, I have manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me out of the world.

And thus he speaks of his church, and he proceeds, I pray for them, I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me, for they are thine. And further, now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those that thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one, and yet more.

I have given them thy word, and the world have hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. And he goes on, I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that in the midst of the world thou shouldst keep them from the evil. Perhaps that's enough to indicate that the world is before him, and his church within the world is his abiding concern.

And that certainly suggests to myself that the nearer we get to God, the more clearly will we see the issues between the church and the world. So that's what's happening here. Drawing into the very secret place of the Most High, our Savior sees in all its stark reality the world and his church within the world.

Cheap in the midst of walls, and yet sent forth into the world to be the extension of his incarnation, and to be the ministry of his life. To draw nigh to God doesn't mean that we get our eyes off the realities of the world around us. On the contrary, it's only as we get near to the throne that we really see the world as it is.

It's only as we get near to God that we really see the world and the true ministry of the church in the world. The dignity and the responsibility of the people of God, of the church of Jesus Christ, which he loved, in the world. And if that be so, we might well say that worldliness is manifestly godlessness.

But true godliness, the life that is lived in the sight, and in the light, and in the fear, and in the nearness of God, that is the life that has overcome the world. For this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. And all this, I suggest, our Savior shows us here on this mountaintop of intercession.

He's praying for his church. He's praying for you and me, those that have believed on him. And he prays for them in the world.

And there's a sense in which the great burden of his prayer is that his church should come to have the right kind of relationship to the world. That to his church they might be given clear sightedness. That they might know the responsibility, and their dignity, and their glory.

That they stand for God in the midst of a corrupt world, as a light in a dark place. The light of the world, and the salt of the earth. Very well then, having noted this, let's go on to underline some of the special emphasis of our Lord, as he prays for his church.

First of all, I want to suggest that we cannot but marvel as we hear him, and hear him meditating on the mystery of the gift of the church out of the world. And that is all important. It's inescapable, it's decisive.

The gift of his church, out of the world. And our Savior meditates on that. Listen.

Verse 2, As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And the stress, you see, is this, as many as thou hast given him. The church is a gift of God, to the Son of God.

And they are a gift out of the world. Because look at verse 6, I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world. Thine they were, and thou gavest them me.

Again it's the same stress. Thou gavest them me, out of the world. Yet again in verse 9, I pray for them.

I pray not for the world, but for them that thou hast given me. You see, church is the gift of God to his Son, and she is the gift of God out of the world. And this is fundamental.

Perhaps it would be true to say that in our studies thus far, we have come to nothing more fundamental than this. Even though it be mystery, nonetheless, it is absolutely basic. The church is a called out company.

The church is a particular community, separated by a decisive act of God, from the rest of humanity. And as such, given to his Son. And you see, in this the will of God is absolute.

There is no mistake. Listen, all that the Father giveth me shall come to me. Could anything be more profound? Could anything be more extraordinarily gracious and absolute? All that the Father giveth me shall come.

And him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out. It is the same emphasis. The church is a gift of God unto his Son, and a gift chosen out of the world.

The church is a new creation of God, out of the old humanity of the earth. There is no continuity between the kingdom of this world, and the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The church is elect, from every nation, and yet one o'er all the earth.

And perhaps this is the lesson that we all supremely need to learn. We certainly need continually to be reminded of this, of the true nature of the church. Because in these days, when the dividing marks twixt the church and the world have become so obscure, and the fog has come down, and it's so difficult to see just the delineating lines of separation, is it not vital that we get back to the Word of God again, and hear what the Bible says concerning this? What does our Lord say? Christian friends, the Bible says that God has finished with this world.

The Bible says that God has nothing more to do with this world, save to destroy it. That's the clear teaching of the Bible. For judgment am I come into this world, says our Lord, but out of this world he is calling his own.

And God, having called, gives his called ones unto his Son. Here in this hour of exalted intercession, our Savior prays, for them whom thou hast given me out of this world. Now I repeat that this is mystery.

This is the mystery of divine predestinating grace. This is the mystery of electing grace. This is the mystery of irresistible grace.

It's mystery, but O is absolute, them whom thou hast given me. And I can think of no more perfect illustration than the illustration that Ian gave to us so forcibly last Wednesday night, as we came to the study of the book of Joshua in the earlier chapters, and came to the story of Rahab, and saw the city of Jericho and the other side of Jordan, and saw that great city standing right in the way of the onward march of the people of God into the promised land. And there was a great city that was devoted by God to destruction.

Nothing else had to happen. It had to be razed to the ground, and the memory of it erased forever. And yet at the heart of that great city there was one woman, and she was a prostitute.

And to one woman God's grace came. And out of that great city there was one chosen of God as a gift for his Son. Can you understand that? Of course you can.

This is mystery. This is sovereignty. This is God in action.

And who are we to question what God will do? Shall the clay say unto its Creator, What doest thou? It's the mystery. The church are called out company, called out of this world. And therefore the church denies her own essential nature if she tries to get back into the world and to imbibe its spirit.

We're called to be different. We are called to be separate. We are called out of the world.

And that's the first great emphasis. Our Savior meditates on the mystery of the gift of the church out of the world. Then here is a second great emphasis.

For as we study this prayer we see that our Savior intercedes for the purity of his church in the world. Holy Father, Holy Father, keep through thine own name them whom thou hast given me. Keep them.

And again, sanctify them through thy truth. Thy word is truth. This prayer is repeated again and again.

It's the burden of his prayer that the church might be pure, that those that have been given to him out of the world might be sanctified and made holy as he is holy. Holy Father, keep through thine own name them that thou hast given me. Do you recall how Paul lifts up this same great truth when he writes to the Ephesians in the fifth chapter? Christ loved the church, he says.

Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of the water by the word, and that he might present her unto himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be holy and without blemish. Not having spot, that she might be holy without blemish. And in his love Christ prays for this here.

Holy Father, keep through thine own name those that thou hast given me. Because while he knew that the church would be continually tempted to become soiled and stained with the things of the world, and that the only hope of remaining as a vital instrument in his hand would be that she be pure and to be holy as he himself was holy. And for this Christ prayed.

And Christian friends, let's bring it up to the present. For this Christ prays. The work of our Savior there before the throne is the work of intercession.

And this is the burden on his heart this morning for us, that we too might be kept from the evil, and that we might be sanctified and made holy. Praise for the purity of his church in the world. Now you and I must never forget that we live in a fallen world.

You and I are pulling the bandages right across our eyes if we forget that. If we begin to think that this world, after all, it's not so bad as God says it is. You and I live in a fallen world.

You and I are set in the midst of a sinful world. That's what God says. And let God be true.

Listen. Peter speaks about the corruption which is in the world through lust. What does that mean? That means that the world all around us is inimical to our best and truest and highest interests.

That means that the world is continually trying to come between us and God. That means that if we listen to the world as we all do by nature, it will make us not only think less and less about God, but even make us feel that God is against us. That means that the world is full of things that will drag us away from God.

Things that will debase us. Things that will lower us from the heights. This world is a corrupt world.

This world is a world that is defined by the apostle as a world of corruption through lust. Do I need to develop that? For one could, but surely there is no need. We do not need to dwell this morning on the kind of corruption that is in the world through inordinate desire.

You and I need only to look around us to see exactly what I mean. You need only look at your newspapers to see what I mean. Why do they give these lengthy reports of police court cases? Why do they give these constantly lengthy and increasingly lengthy reports? One sometimes thinks of scandal cases.

Why is it that they give themselves to the continual reporting of things that we would in our own hearts know by God's Spirit to be wrong? The answer is that they know that that is what people like. The answer is that the lust and the gloating and the peculiar interest in that which is unclean, the morbid curiosity of the human heart and mind and the like, all that has to be met and that has to be satisfied. And this, look at the newsstands.

Think of the multi-millions in our generation spent on pornography. Think of the gutter levels of so much so-called entertainment. This year, 1961, is going to see the presentation to this generation of more movies of the class that ten years ago would have been called the kind of movie that couldn't be made, that dared be made.

Why? Recently there were appeals made for more movies of a family kind, that these were the kind of things that this generation wanted. But the simple facts are these, that the box office doesn't bear it up. There are some people still with some idealisms in that industry who are prepared to produce that kind of thing, but they simply don't pay.

The kinds that pay are this other kind. I know the facts of which I speak. Of course, I daren't speak without having checked fundamentally and basically on all this.

And this is the corruption which is in the world through lust, and in the midst of this is the Church. And our Lord prays, oh listen, as he prays for the purity of his Church, sanctify them through thy truth, make them holy. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those that thou hast given me.

Thank God it's possible. This isn't a council of the impossible. Our Lord writes to the Church in Sardis.

Sardis, that ancient city where there was a little church surrounded on every side by the heaving seas of iniquity and corruption and lust and sin. And he says, there are a few names there which have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with me and fight. Dear friends, in the midst of the corruption that is in the world through lust, it is possible to live for God.

Not in our own strength, but through the grace and power of our Lord. But we must remember this, that we can help our Savior answer his prayer. Think of Lot and Abraham.

When the choice was given to Lot as to where he would pitch his tent, Lot chose the cities of the plain. He pitched his tent toward Sodom. You see, he hadn't reached the decisive rubicon of his own experience where he saw the separation between the Church and the world.

And he pitched his tent toward Sodom. And I tell you, in the name and by the authority of our Lord, that if you who call yourself by his name set your tents toward Sodom, you will soon be in Sodom, as Lot was. The only hope, I tell you, the only hope is to live apart for God, to have that sense of utter separateness.

We must conspire with our Lord. We must help him. What's the point in asking the Lord to keep us from the evil if we deliberately put ourselves in a place where it's hard for him to keep us? I would say, therefore, this, shun the uncertain, shun the unclean, and choose the pure.

Because blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God. Our Savior meditates on the mystery of the gift of the Church out of the world. He intercedes for the purity of the Church in the world.

And will you note that he declares the authority of the Church as she is sent into the world? One of the most remarkable verses surely in all the Bible, as thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. Now what do you think of that? The same mystic ordination that rested upon the Son of God as he was cradled in Bethlehem, the same ordination that rested upon him in power when he came into Galilee preaching the gospel and saying, Repent and believe, the same ordination that rested upon him as he moved amongst men healing the leper, cleansing the sinful heart, the same ordination that rested upon him as he prayed and as through the eternal Spirit he offered himself without spot unto God, that same ordination rests upon his Church as thou hast sent me into the world. Even so have I also sent them into the world.

Our Lord recognizes that attainment of purity and unworldliness will never be by means ascetic, but by means athletic, not by flight, but by fight, not by indolent retirement, but by rigorousness of spirit. The only defense against ill contagion is exuberant health. It's the man who is run down who most easily becomes the victim of pestilence.

And so in the Christian life, be strong and of a good courage, says our Lord, and then go ye into all the world. You see, monasticism and the sense of fleeing from the world and hiding in dens and caves of the wilderness far, far away, that is not the way of victory. There is a place, no doubt, for men and women who are called apart to pray, and the Lord will so ordain it for them.

Generally speaking, we must recall that our Lord thrust his Church out into the world, and he thrust them out believing that they could be kept, that they could gain the victory, that they could live for God in the midst of the world, and that they could there win through for God. And I tell you, oh, young folks, listen to me this morning, will you? The only sure way to defeat the world and the flesh and the devil is to get yourself so busy about the life and work and ministry of Christ's business that it will be difficult, if not altogether impossible, for the enemy of souls to get in. That's what Paul means when he says, exercise yourself unto godliness, get busy.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that publish peace. And when our feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, why then we're in a way, we're in a way in which, you see, the Lord can bless. And when this happens, this is what transpires, you will be in the world, you'll rub shoulders with men, you won't partake of their spirit, but you'll touch them, and please God of his mercy, you will touch them savingly.

In your office, over there in your classrooms, down there in the residence, on a hospital floor, in the club, wherever you meet with men and women, you will be a light, you will be a light to the church, and you will show the ministry of the church, and you'll be truly the salt of that community and the light of that particular point to which God has sent you, sent with authority and kept. I'm sorry I've spoken so long, time is gone. Let me just say one thing else, we must add it, just to complete the picture.

Our Savior meditates on the gift of the church. He intercedes for the purity of the church. He declares the authority of the church.

And finally, he expects the unity of his church. And if you will read this prayer so carefully, you will find it no less than five times. Our Savior prays that they all may be one, that they may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they all may be made perfect in one, that the world may know that thou hast sent me.

And our Lord expects and demands the unity in love of his church. Do you know one way in which the spirit of worthiness is sometimes most shown at the heart of a church? By the spirit of disunity. But where love is, where God is, there is oneness.

May the Lord grant that his many prayers for us and for his church will be most wondrously answered, and that we will, while yet there is time, determine that we will live for God, for God alone, that for us the time of vacillation and hesitation is over. We're going through with God. Christ is going to have everything that there is of us, and we're going to live for him in the world, for his praise.

O Master, we beseech of thee that thou wilt lead us. We know that the day of march has come. We know that in the fields of conquest thou art leading us.

O, we pray thee, lead us on. We do not ask that we might be taken out of the world. We ask to be led right into it, but with a pure heart and with that holy separateness of spirit that will truly distinguish us as an elect nation, a holy priesthood.

God grant it. For thy love's sake. Amen.

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