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Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden
at Blunsdon Hill
on Wednesday evening 4 May 1960

John 17 v 20 and 31

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also
which shall believe on Me through their word; that they
all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and
I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the
world may believe that Thou hast sent Me"

How very solemn is this chapter! How we need to approach it as
it were with unshod feet! They are the words of the Lord Jesus,
spoken evidently audibly before the disciples, the eleven, on the way
from the upper room to the Garden of Gethsemane. Only the eleven,
evidently, heard the discourse and this prayer. Judas had gone out;
after receiving the sop, it is said, he went out, "and it was night;"
and evidently Christ alluded to that in this prayer. He says, "None
of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might
be fulfilled". O, solemn! One of the twelve, unsuspected by the
eleven, known by the Lord, but allowed to consort with them until
almost the end; and then he went out. It does make one tremble at
times to think how far a person may go in a profession, and how he may
pass current among his fellow-professors as a real character, and yet
be a bastard.

There is another case connected very nearly to this one - that of
Peter. Peter even denied his Lord, after being solemnly warned by his
Master concerning the purpose of Satan. He said "Simon, Simon,
behold Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat:
but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not: and when thou art
converted, strengthen thy brethren." The secret, then, of Peter's
recovery to repentance, (for we read that when Christ looked upon him
he "went out and wept bitterly,") was Christ's intercession for him.
Sovereignty made the difference between those two men, Judas who went
to his own place, and Peter who fell but was brought to repentance, and
was honoured to be a servant and an apostle, and, indeed, a martyr of
Jesus. How solemn is the sovereignty of God! And how true is that

word in Timothy, "The foundation of the Lord standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His. And let every one that nameth the Name of Christ depart from iniquity."

It was a solemn moment, a solemn hour; for the Lord Jesus, having discoursed, as recorded in the 14, 15 and 16 chapters, then "lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come". "The hour is come;" the hour for which He came into this world. He came into this world in order that He might obey and obey unto death; and His death was the climax, as it were, of His obedience. He died in obedience to His divine Father. "I lay down My life for the sheep. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of My Father."

This prayer seems to give us an insight into Christ's sacred communion with His divine Father with respect to His own Personal glory, and also with respect to His unworthy people for whom He came down to suffer, bleed and die; and if I may, without doing despite, just hint at this, (for it does seem to be a blessed point in this chapter) - how the Lord Jesus over and over again addresses His divine Father in such terms as seem to manifest the sacred intimacy and reality of that relationship in which the Father and Son were from eternity! If anyone can read this chapter and deny the relationship, the eternal relationship, between the Son and the Father, - well, it is very mysterious. I know we need the blessed Spirit to show us what is in the Scripture. There is a depth couching beneath the words that only the Spirit can guide us into, and there is an unction in the word, in the truth of the gospel that, when it touches the heart, makes a mark. It will endear the Lord Jesus to you, and enhance all that He said, all that He did, and all that He suffered, as you are enabled to perceive who He is. In the fifth verse He says, "And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine Own Self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was". He came into the world which He created: He was a Man amongst men, a poor and despised and afflicted Man, unknown, rejected by His own nation. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." But He came for that great purpose to redeem His people. He laid aside, for the time, His glory; not emptied Himself of His Deity; that could not be; but He laid it

aside as it were, and came down and took our nature; and He wears our nature still. That prayer of Christ's must have been answered, and He is now entered into His glory in human nature. A mystery; a blessed truth! He is seated "on the right hand of God" in our nature, the Son of Man, the Man of God's right hand; and if our eyes are taken up to Him, if we are enabled by faith to look up and see Him there with His divine atonement, and see Him there as the great Intercessor, Forerunner, Mediator and King, it will fortify our minds, draw us up from the earth, and strengthen us for our pilgrim way. And it will enable us to pray. To see Him there with His divine atonement and in the attitude of an Intercessor, will embolden us, notwithstanding all that we feel of unworthiness and guilt, and our deep and pressing needs and impossibilities, to bring all our requests before Him, believing that there is nothing too great that we can ask in and through His blessed Name.

But in the text He says "Neither pray I for these alone". That is to say, as I view it, not alone for the immediate disciples who followed Him when He was upon earth, but for all who shall "believe on Me through their word". To the end of the world He prays for His people, the election of grace, those who, in eternity, were given to Him and for whom He died. His intercession is in consequence of His sacrifice. Apart from that, His intercession would be invalid. As you were just now singing

But with authority He asks
Enthroned in glory now

because He has made atonement for His people's sins, rendered satisfaction to divine justice, satisfied God, and destroyed the power of Satan and his works, redeemed His Church, wrought out and brought in an everlasting righteousness, and is in heaven as the Forerunner of His people; and it is said of Him by Paul in the Hebrews, "He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them."

"But for them also which shall believe on Me." This is a distinct number, a number that we do not know, a number that none can number but God, a company of elect people out of every nation, tongue

and tribe, each one of whom shall believe. There is no doubt about this. God's "shalls" can never be overthrown. However far a child of Adam may wander and become entangled in evil, and disregard all the warnings he gets, the time comes when each one will be gathered in. In the covenant of grace they are by God's decree, and redeemed they are, each one by the blood of the Lord Jesus; and they shall believe.

It says here, "shall believe through their word". That invests the ministry with a very solemn importance. When you consider the connection between divine decrees and the ministry of the word, and the ingathering of the Lord's people, what a solemnity it puts upon the ministry! How it makes poor men, specially some of us, tremble, lest we should presume into such an awesome, difficult and important position! We have no importance of our own; unworthiness and unfitness is tremblingly felt; but the position is important, and it is the Lord's will, according to the Scriptures, for the most part to use the preaching of the gospel for the salvation of the elect. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God". "It pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." That is very solemn; and it is said, in the case of the disciples, soon after the churches were beginning to be planted and the disciples went everywhere preaching, that "as many as were ordained unto eternal life believed". These are very solemn truths. The sovereignty of God runs through the whole of His dealings with men and it runs through the whole of Scripture; and what are we to say? I know one thing we shall say, if the Lord is dealing with us, and has given us repentance unto life, and granted us faith in the Lord Jesus and an assurance of interest in His precious death; we shall say,

Why was I made to hear Thy voice
And enter while there's room;
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?

And the poet answers His own question. He says,

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

It is the work of the Holy Ghost to make the believer, and Christ gives him his crown.

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word." And the word of the ministry is a word of life. It is to be preached, the word of life. It is to be preached to sinners, and sinners are to be told of their sin. There can be no appreciation of Christ, His Person or His work, apart from a knowledge of sin. For sinners He came to die. He came "not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance". He came to lay down His life to make atonement for sin, to bear sin. "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world". The margin is, "beareth". Not the sins of all the human race; the Scripture does not tell us that. But He did bear the sins of all the election of grace; and who knows who they are? Only God. We have given to us in the Scripture a gauge: "By their fruits ye shall know them;" but our knowledge is not infallible. We may make many mistakes. We may be as much deceived as, apparently, the eleven were deceived in Judas. We may deceive ourselves. But God cannot be deceived. He knows who are His; and I believe one of the first motions in those who are wrought upon by the Spirit is an anxiety about being one of those elect, about being one for whom Christ died; because when conviction of sin is borne into the conscience that person is so singled out in his feeling experience that he is brought away from all other creatures. Naturally we are apt to gauge by comparisons; we look about us and see so many people so much worse than we are, as we think, and derive some kind of calm, some sort of hope, on the ground of comparison. But when the Lord opens our hearts, looks into our conscience, shows us our motives, makes us see our secret things, then we have enough to do to think about our own sins and wretched state before God, and we are made to feel we are ruined and helpless and sold under sin. I do believe that the Lord does bring each one of His people to destruction in their own feelings. He turneth man to destruction. A good thing to be turned to destruction in self! There are so many pleasant

christians, as they call themselves, who have had just a scratch, and plaster the scratch over with a little correct religion, and go on their way in an ungracious confidence; but when a person is killed, when he is wounded in the heart - as they were when Peter preached; they were stabbed in the heart, and you cannot be stabbed in the heart without being killed. Others were "cut to" the heart, and they gnashed against the disciples. The difference is very great. Many people get cut in the flesh and are stirred up in rebellion and enmity; but when a man is killed he is killed, and only the Lord can make him alive. He feels dead, feels he is lost, condemned. He is alone. A mercy to be alone, my friends. You young people, if the Lord deals with you, you will find it will take you alone. You will have your acquaintance, and as you fear God you will try rightly to sustain your relationships; but you will have more to do alone with your own conscience before God than any external religion. "He sitteth alone, because he hath borne it upon him". Ah, how solemn it is to be a sinner and to feel all over sin, to feel that your motives have been wrong, that your words have been wrong, your thoughts have been wrong, you have never aimed at the glory of God! That is where we are crooked. We may be formally right in much, but if our motives are wrong we are altogether wrong. We come short of the glory of God, we rob God of His glory by our lives, and our lives really are a tremendous lie when there is no aiming at God's glory.

And that is felt! O, what a burden some have felt on their hearts in looking back over their mis-spent lives, their coming short of the glory of God, their self-will, their pride, their carnality, their lust, their worldliness, leave alone outside things. There are plenty of inside things that the Lord brings to light when He shines into the conscience.

But this is preparatory to a sense of need, and to make room in the sinner for the Lord Jesus. I know the pain and the difficulty of this, to be a lost sinner and to have nothing you can say, and to be incapable of doing anything, and to be cast upon the mercy of God in Christ; but it is a good place to be brought to, and these people are brought to believe by the revelation made to them of the Saviour by the Holy Ghost. O, how wonderful that is! I think it is very remarkable to observe that, throughout the whole world, in every age

and in every clime and among every nation, the same teaching is given to every one of the Lord's people. It does not matter what their language is, they are brought to the same point, to be lost and to be brought to a sense of the need of a Saviour. Different administrations there are, and different methods the Lord uses, but He brings all His people down to the place of stopping of mouths. Every mouth shall be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God. In some cases there is the judgment in this life, in mercy; in some cases men are made dumb before God in the judgment. Very solemn! O very solemn! How many there are who die in their sins, who have never been brought to be dumb before God in this life, never been brought to repentance, and who, in the great day, will be speechless when they are cast out for ever! Therefore it is no little mercy to be brought to confess that God is just. O, I do believe the character of God is made to be attractive in its solemn integrity in the consciences of those who are convicted by the Spirit so that they feel that they are wrong and God is right. Whatever comes to us, God must be right. He would be just if He sent us to the bottomless pit. Have you been brought there sinner? I believe the Lord brings His people there in this life. I know the solemnity of it myself. O, how solemn to feel, and to be brought to confess, that

If our soul were sent to hell
His righteous law approves it well

But O, when to that same person the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord Jesus, the Man Christ Jesus, God's eternal Son, wrapped in humanity to die for His people's sins, and to fulfil that law which condemns our sins, so that God's law is not against the people who are under the blood of Christ, that gives him a hope. O, it will raise up in the heart such a hope; and that sinner will be a believer. He will believe that Christ can save him, and he will be a praying man, too. When you are under condemnation you may go about groaning and trembling and despairing, but you will never find power to approach God; you will feel afraid at times to look into His Word, and afraid to pray; and sometimes you may be so stirred up through your enmity that you may be angry with God for giving you a being, a being capable of eternal punishment. That is an extreme case, I know, but some have known that. But when the Lord Jesus is revealed that poor sinner will go

out after Him, and plead and confess and pray for Christ's sake for the mercy of God, for the forgiveness of his sins, for deliverance from a deserved hell. And what a thing it is, to pray! O, what a thing it is, to find one's mouth opened before a holy God because Christ has died! O, I say, when that poor believer gets a glimpse of Christ on the right hand of God, how it does embolden him to confess and pour out his heart before the Lord, to lie low in the dust, if so be he may obtain mercy and find grace in the Lord's sight.

Now this is the work of the Holy Ghost; and Christ says here, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word". If the ministry is made useful in convicting people, and a person under conviction should be led of the Spirit to the throne of grace to plead the blood of Christ, the issue will be this: that person will obtain in his own conscience the sweet blessing of divine pardon; he will sooner or later feel the love of God shed abroad in his heart; he will know that he is in the covenant of grace sealed by the blood of Christ; and he will have union to Christ. Christ speaks here about union. "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word; that they all may be one". All one in Christ Jesus; all taught the same things, all convinced of their sin, all confessing that they are the worst, all acknowledging that they have no hope apart from the blood of Christ, and all saying, each for himself, that their whole hope is founded upon the Person and merit, the righteousness and the blood, the sacrifice and the resurrection and the intercession in heaven of the Lord of life and glory. That is the oneness. They are one in Christ. There may be many differences of judgment in many things that are subordinate, but in cardinal things they will be one in doctrine; for the Holy Ghost does not teach contrary things; He does not teach some people they are saved by grace and others that they are saved by works; and He does not teach some people the doctrine of free will, that they can believe at will, and others that faith stands in the power of God and is the operation of the Spirit. He teaches them the same things, and they are truths, and His teaching results in each case in humbling the sinner, laying him low, making him surprised that ever he should find mercy from a holy, sin-hating God; and another thing it does - it makes the Lord Jesus inexpressibly precious. It is a doctrine of love, a religion of love,

and the motive of obedience is the motive of love. Legal obedience will never be acceptable to God, because it is stained with man's sin; but gospel obedience is acceptable. It is not meritorious, but it is acceptable; it is from the motive of love to the Lord. One under the law asks "What shall I do to merit eternal life? What shall I do to gain the favour of God? What shall I do that I may make God my debtor?" That is really the plain language of the matter. But what does a poor, lost sinner say when he is blessed with pardon full and free through the merit and sufferings of the Saviour? What he says is this: "What shall I do to praise the Lord? What shall I do to pay the debt of praise I owe? What shall I do to show that I am not my own but am the Lord's by His redeeming sacrifice?" He wants to serve the Lord. It is not a legal service, it is not trying to make up a deficient salvation, but it is from a knowledge of salvation, a feeling sense of it in the conscience, and of the preciousness of the Saviour.

"That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us." This is very mysterious and very solemn, that the relationship, the union between the Lord's people and the Head, Christ Jesus, is as real, as true, and as lasting a union as the union between the Father and the Son. I know the latter is ineffable and has no parallel. That is an eternal union. But the union of the covenant, of the people of God in the covenant, is an eternal union, and when the union is once formed experimentally, nothing will break it, not time, not death, nor eternity. Some of us may be, and feel ourselves to be, unworthy to be the least member of the body of which Christ is the Head, but each one will be a member, and fitted into the body according to the will of God. "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him." One by one He fits them in, turns this man to destruction, and then says "Return ye children of men". He "beats them off" as the word is in Isaiah. "The Lord shall beat off from the channel of the river unto the streams of Egypt, and ye shall be gathered one by one." A secret work going on, and which will go on to the end of time. O to be inside that work, to be one gathered in! Can you - I hope not a few of the few here can - put your hand upon your heart and thank the Lord that He has gathered you, has quickened you into life, given you repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, and a

little love to Him? Though each one will say he is very poor and very deficient, and longs to know more of the Lord, yet Christ will be the chief in your heart; He will be all in all to every child of God. Is He not that to you? Cannot you say sometimes, soberly and solemnly,

Lord, it is not life to live
If Thy presence Thou deny;
Lord, if Thou Thy presence give,
'Tis no longer death to die

and

I could from all things parted be,
But never, never, Lord from Thee

Well, the Lord prays for these people. He intercedes for them. This is a pattern of His intercession. He condescends as it were - and it is true - to let His people into the secret of His heart, His will, His desire and design for His unworthy people before God in heaven. O, what a sacred sanctuary this is, this 17th John! He prays for them. Do you ask Him to pray for you?

There are several things for which He prays. One thing is that they may be kept from the evil of the world. Is not that what you want? There are many professors whose chief anxiety seems to be to have as much enjoyment of the world, to live as near to it as they dare, and yet entertain a hope of heaven. It is very patent today in the professing church that is the attitude of many. But the Lord Jesus said of these people for whom He prays "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world;" and if He deals with us in His saving grace it will be true of us. Grace separates, separates in spirit, in heart affection; and He prays that they might be kept from the evil. Surrounded with traps and gins and snares and evils, and with evils in our own hearts, we need that keeping. What a mercy if we are inside that prayer of Christ in that, because His prayer will be answered!

Peter speaks of those who are "Kept by the power of God through

faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time." "Kept by the power of God"; not by sheer omnipotence, but by the power of God through faith. That means an exercise will go through the heart and conscience under the temptation and trial: "Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe." Why, sometimes you may be so beset with temptation and so troubled with indwelling sin, that you almost have to breathe out all your heart in ejaculatory prayer: "Lord, keep me! Hold me up! Save me from sinning!" Well, that is how the Lord keeps His people, not by force, but through their hearts, their affections, and through their consciences, and by prayer.

That brings me to notice just briefly another thing. When the Lord blesses His dear people, mostly when they first get a sense of His pardoning, redeeming love in their hearts, they want to go to Him. I was a young man when He first gave me a sense of His redeeming love. It was very sweet. O, it did me good! It filled me with repentance and love and liberty. But I was afraid to live lest I should sin. The only thing I wanted then was to be with the Lord so that I should never sin again. Well, the Lord could do it. If it were His will He could bless His people and take them home as He blesses them. But He does not do it. It is not His purpose. He has a purpose for them in this life. They are to be His witnesses; the world is to know them and hate them. "I have given them Thy word and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world." And they are not only to be hated by the world, they are to be loved by the Lord's people and to be of some service to them, each one, by union and communion, helpful one to the other, and that will bring in church communion. I believe the Lord's purpose is to have a church in this world until its end. Though the churches are becoming painfully depleted - and I myself feel night and day the anxiety of this; it fills me with reproach and sadness often to think of the little causes coming down and down here and there, and many closed - and yet the Lord has a remnant, and the more wonder, the smaller the remnant, if we are one of it. I feel that. Mr Covell said if there were only two people in Croydon going to heaven he hoped he would be one of them. That sounds selfish, doesn't it? But we must be selfish in that matter, for personal salvation is the chief consideration. But then, if we have knowledge of that, ought we not to seek to live to the Lord's glory? Do we not owe Him all that we have? One of the verses of that hymn -

"When I survey the wondrous cross", which is not in our book, is very sweet

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a present far too small
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all

When you can feel that, the interest of Christ's cause, the good of His people, and the glory of His Name, will be the paramount desires of your life. It will not be to make so much money and enjoy so much pleasure, and live as the world lives. You will want to be a pilgrim and a stranger with the Lord's people. You read the 11th Hebrews, and see what faith did for those people, and what they said; they did not say it perhaps with their lips, but they said it with their lives. They said they sought "a city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God." They declared it plainly by their life. They lived separate from the world; they went out from the camp bearing Christ's reproach, and they endured hardship "as seeing Him who is invisible". They had a hope beyond this life. What a mercy to have a living, well-grounded hope of reaching heaven, away from trouble and away from sin!

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word." I like this "shall". There are "shalls" and "wills" in the word of God, and the covenant of grace is full of "shalls" and "wills". The Lord has said He will put His fear in their hearts, and they shall not depart from Him and He will not depart from them; and He will forgive their sins and iniquities, and remember them no more for ever. What a covenant it is! And it embraces all the election of grace. But the time comes in each individual experience when the person is taken into the covenant. "I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant". "I will make a covenant with you", says the Lord - an everlasting covenant. David found that when he came to the end. O, the end is the thing that matters, my friends; and if the end matters to us, then our lives will matter; we shall want to live as if our end were every day, not to live loosely because we hope to reach heaven. No, he that has a hope of reaching heaven will seek to walk

holily and righteously in this present world. You will want to live to the Lord's glory. O, but how short we come, and what infirmities we have! I sometimes weep in my spirit when I go home and ask the Lord, rather than let me be a cumberer, to take me away. Infirmities come, but what is worse than infirmity, sins rise within, unbelief and many things bring leanness and make one unfit for the solemn work, and we have to confess the sins of our holy things. If I had to answer for the sins of my ministry, I should be in despair, apart from the blood of Christ. But O, that is where our hope is, that is where the union is.

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word; that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me." They shall be a witness in the world. Dr Owen says, "Disunion among the Lord's people is one fruitful way of confirming the world in their unbelief." May the Lord unite us to Himself and to one another in the love of the truth, and what we see not may He teach us!

AMEN.