

## Passionate about Eternal Life

John 17:1-5

The term “eternal life” is familiar to most people. If you’ve been to football games you’ve seen John 3:16 in end zones. If you’ve grown up in church you know that John 3:16 is about eternal life:

16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Jesus entire mission on earth is associated with us having eternal life. And yet it’s easy for the term “eternal life” to become very ho-hum to us. This can happen if we mainly think of eternal life as something we experience after we die. This can happen if we think of eternal life as primarily “living forever.”

I’m not suggesting that we have to maintain some type of emotional excitement about eternal life. But it does seem to me that our experience of eternal life should reflect the centrality of eternal life in Jesus’ mission. Toward that end we are going to examine the first five verses of John 17 this morning; these verses express how passionate Jesus is about giving us eternal life.

John 17 records what has come to be known as Jesus’ “high priestly prayer.” Jesus has spent one last night with His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion. He has communicated things that would be vital for their perseverance: the importance of serving and loving one another, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in their witness, the reality of persecution, and the confidence that He has overcome the world. After speaking these things, Jesus lifts His eyes toward heaven and prays. The passage we’ll consider today (17:1-5) reflects how passionate Jesus is about giving the gift of eternal life. Next week we’ll see how Jesus prays for our unity and the following week our protection.

The main thing I want us to understand this morning is that ***since Jesus is passionate about giving the gift of eternal life, we should be passionate about experiencing eternal life.*** We’re not merely supposed to read this prayer, shrug our shoulders, and say, “Nice prayer, Jesus. . .” Rather, this prayer reminds us that Jesus was passionate about giving eternal life. And since we take our cues from Him, we should in turn be passionate about receiving and experiencing eternal life.

Notice how verse 1 links Jesus’ prayer with the Farewell Discourse (chapters 14-16). “These things” refers to the teaching He had just given the disciples.

1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.

Looking toward “heaven” (i.e., upward) was a common posture for prayer in Jesus’ day. Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed, “Father, the hour has come.” He acknowledges that the hour of His crucifixion and resurrection had finally arrived. And then He prays that that “hour” is that it would fully accomplish its’ purpose.

Specifically, Jesus prays in verse 1 that God (the Father) would “glorify” Him (the Son). This is an incredibly insightful way for Jesus to describe what would soon happen. Remember that to “glorify” someone is to put on display just how glorious that person really is. The event that would display Jesus’ glory more fully than anything else would be the cross. This is more ironic than we can really grasp because in Jesus’ day, hanging on a cross was the ultimate display of humiliation and shame - NOT glory. But the cross would glorify Jesus because there people would see His true glory.

For example, while hanging on the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they have no idea what they’re doing.” He appealed to God’s mercy on behalf of the people who had just driven spikes through His hands and feet. That simple prayer displayed the glory of Jesus’ forgiveness. That’s just one example. The cross also displayed how glorious Jesus is in relation to compassion, in relation to self control, in relation to being the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

By praying “glorify Your Son,” Jesus is also expressing to God His willingness to go to the cross. He will soon be agonizing in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane; there He would pray, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). But before He prays those prayers in the Garden, Jesus prays, “Father . . . glorify Your Son.”

There is progression in Jesus’ prayer. Jesus prays, “Father. . . glorify [Me], that [I] may glorify You.” The thought is that as the Father puts the Son’s glory on full display, the Son will simultaneously put the Father’s glory on display. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is a display of God’s glory because it demonstrates God’s compassion for us. Paul put it this way in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God the Father really couldn’t give a more extravagant gift than His one and only Son. So if you want to see the glory of the Father’s love, look at Jesus on the cross.

In verse 2 Jesus gives the basis/ground of His request in verse 1. He basically says, “Father, I am asking you to glorify Me so that I might in turn give the gift of eternal life.” Notice how Jesus appeals to the fact that God had given Him authority over humanity:

1 . . . glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.

Ultimately all of humanity (i.e., “all flesh”) is under Jesus’ authority. ***During His earthly life*** Jesus’ authority over all flesh meant that nobody was beyond His reach. Jesus never came across anyone who was off limits. He never had to say, “Sorry, you’re a

Pharisee so I have no right to say anything to you.” He never had to say, “Too bad, but I don’t have any clout with Gentiles.” No, God gave Jesus authority over all humanity.

**After His death and resurrection** Jesus tied His authority to the mission He gave His disciples: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples. . .” (Mt. 28:18-19). Jesus’ authority is the only reason His followers have any effectiveness in making disciples. In Philippians 2 Paul explained that **ultimately one day** “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. . .and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-10). One day Jesus’ authority over all flesh will be universally acknowledged.

But here Jesus indicates that He has prayed for His own glorification because it is so compatible with the authority He’s been given to give the gift of eternal life. This is the first of four times in the first twelve verses of this prayer that Jesus mentions “those whom You have given Me.” Jesus saw His disciples as a precious gift that God had entrusted to Him. Jesus’ emphasis in this prayer is that He had been faithful to teach and train and protect them. His prayer now is that His death and resurrection would be **effective** so that He might give them eternal life.

You might wonder why Jesus is even bothering to pray about all of this. Surely God wouldn’t sustain Jesus all the way to the cross and then fail to glorify Him, would He? Actually I think Jesus’ prayer illustrates something foundational about praying, namely that we are supposed to pray “according to the will of God”; we’re supposed to pray for things that we’re already convinced God wants. We’ll talk about this more in the next two messages, but there are examples throughout Scripture of people praying things that God had promised He would do. Here Jesus’ prayer doesn’t reflect any uncertainty about God the Father’s commitment to glorify Him. It reflects the idea that God has built “asking/praying” into the fabric of the universe as one of the means He uses to carry out His will.

Jesus advances our understanding of eternal life in verse 3.

3 “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

“Eternal life” is a prominent concept in the gospel of John. In the Hebrew mind in Jesus’ day, time was divided into two ages: the present age and the age to come. The adjective *eternal* was used to describe the age to come - the age in which the Messiah would reign. Something was eternal if it pertained to the age to come. We associate the word eternal with something that never ends; that will certainly be true of the age to come. The present age will come to an end, but the age to come will never end. But as many people have pointed out, “The important thing about eternal life is not its quantity but its quality” (Morris, p. 227). If you experience eternal life, you are already experiencing the life of the age to come.

Jesus clarifies this concept when He says that eternal life is knowing God the Father and Jesus the Son. Biblically speaking, if you know God you don't merely have lots of information about Him; you have entered into a relationship with Him that transforms your life. One of the promises God made in the new covenant was, "They will all know Me - from the least of them to the greatest. . ." (Jer. 31:34). As Jesus' prayer reflects, since Jesus perfectly represented God, knowing God the Father can't be separated from knowing Jesus Christ "whom [the Father] sent."

Forty years ago J.I. Packer wrote a very influential book entitled *Knowing God*. In that book he pointed out that "the more complex the object, the more complex is the knowing of it" (p. 30). Getting to know a horse or a dog is more complex than getting to know a table. And getting to know another human is more complex than getting to know a horse or a dog. And getting to know God is more complex than getting to know another person.

Packer also points out that your knowledge of other people is dependent upon them allowing you to know them (and not hiding from you). There are probably people in your life about whom you would say, "We've been friends for years, but I feel like I barely know them." And when it comes to knowing God, we are completely dependent upon God's willingness to be known. The great news from this prayer of Jesus (and the rest of the Bible) is that God has done everything possible for us to know Him. He became one of us so that we might know exactly how He thinks and feels about things, so that we might know how He reacts to sinful people, to hypocritical people, to mean people, to religious people, to profane people, etc. Jesus lived among us and then died on the cross to pay for our sins ***so that we might have eternal life. . . so that we might know God!***

Philip Yancey says that God is like a father playing hide-and-seek with his small children. He hides in the closet but leaves the door open . . . and his foot sticking out. . . and he coughs when the kids get close. God is like that! He wants to be found. He wants to be known. Jesus' prayer reflects how passionate God is about being known. Jesus prays that He might be glorified so that He can give this gift of eternal life - which is knowing God and Jesus Christ whom God sent.

Eternal life is something that we possess/experience in this life. In John 6:47 Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life." Again, in 1 John 5:13 John wrote, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." We can possess eternal life now, but we won't fully experience it until the next life. [At the end of the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus said, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:46).]

In verses 4 and 5 Jesus prays about His glorification beyond the cross and resurrection.

4 “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

Jesus had fully glorified God on earth, doing everything God gave Him to do. He had secured eternal life for humanity. Now He prays that God would restore to Him the glory that He had with God before the world was created.

In seminary I had a professor of Old Testament who used movie titles to explain the various plot lines of the Bible. When he talked about how God would one day restore everything that was lost because of sin, he called it “Back to the Future.” I’ll let you think about that when you have the chance. . . The point is that everything that was lost due to sin and “the fall” will one day be restored. As His prayer reflects, Jesus will have the glory that He had with the Father before Creation. The main difference - and this blows my mind - is that Jesus will apparently be embodied throughout eternity. Throughout all eternity the scars in His hands, feet, and side will be a tangible reminder of how passionate Jesus was and is about securing eternal life for us!

***Since Jesus is passionate about giving the gift of eternal life, we should be passionate about experiencing eternal life.*** It would be tragic if our response to “eternal life” were a great . . . big . . . yawn. But I’m afraid that’s often the case. In our time remaining I want us to think about a couple of things that can fuel our experience of eternal life. In light of Jesus’ description of eternal life, these are really things that help us ***know God and Jesus His Son.***

I’d like us to first think about ***Cultivating a vision for knowing God.*** We might be tempted to think, “Either you have a desire and vision to know God or you don’t. There’s not much you can do about it.” But that’s not the mindset of Scripture. Many different Scriptures suggest that we should actively cultivate a vision for knowing God. For example, there are some very direct challenges such as Jeremiah 9:23-24.

23 Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.

This is a direct challenge to make “knowing God” the centerpiece of our lives. Honestly, what do you want to be the defining “boast” of your life? What do you want to be the dominant thing people notice and respect about you? Your education? Your money? Your power? No, those things are relatively superficial; and they don’t ultimately satisfy the deepest longings of your soul.

The fact that God even suggests the possibility that our greatest boast ***could be*** that we “understand” and “know” Him should be a powerful encouragement. He wants to be known. He expects His people to know Him. Since Jesus became one of us and

showed off the glory of the Father and dying for our sins, He has made it all the more possible to know God.

Think for a moment what your life might be like if your defining boast were, “I understand and know the one true living God”! In light of the fact that God is the most fascinating, captivating, engaging, creative, powerful Being in the universe. . . if you know God your life will be opened up in vast, expansive ways.

Let’s think through a specific example with me. How might experiencing eternal life and knowing God affect our attitude toward sin? The goal of the Christian life isn’t merely to stop sinning; but sin can sabotage the rest of our lives. I like how Larry Crabb puts it: “. . . when God looks bad, sin looks good” (*Finding God*, p. 104). And when God looks good (which He is), sin looks bad. The more deeply you understand and know God’s compassion, holiness, justice, etc., the less attractive sin will be to you. Instead of being obsessed with the pleasures of sin, you’ll be captivated by the beauty of God. Imagine the freedom you might have if your knowledge of God progressively crowded out the destructive thoughts and habits that enslave you. . . .

*Cultivate a vision for knowing God.* This vision will give you motivation and direction for knowing God.

By the way, knowing God will be the most humbling experience of your life. If someone is arrogant and has the attitude, “I know God so I’m better than you. . .” that person really doesn’t know God very well (if at all). Knowing God humbles a person to the core and makes him/her “gentle and humble in heart” (like Jesus).

When we have a vision for knowing God, we can now profitably **invest time and energy in our relationship with God**. You’re not having a “quiet time” merely because you’re supposed to. You’re meeting with the God of the universe because you want to know Him. You’re not engaging in spiritual disciplines to impress your friends and neighbors. You’re praying and soaking in Scripture because you long to experience eternal life - the abundance of life that Jesus secured for you.

Make no mistake about it: knowing God will involve time and energy. Last week I was talking with a friend who commented, “Relationships are hard work.” You’ve probably noticed that unless you work hard - investing the time and energy necessary to communicate well, show care for one another, etc. - a relationship will suffer. The same is true in our relationship with God. But I always find that when I block out the time and invest the energy, it’s satisfying.

If the thought of sitting in a hard chair completely motionless reading the Bible and praying wears you out, then do something else. I like to ask people, “If you could do anything with God, what would it be? What type of interaction/communication with God might bring you more life? What might help you express yourself to God more freely and listen to His voice more intently?” Someone might say, “Well, I feel closer to God when I’m outside.” Perfect. . . write down a couple of significant Bible verses on a 3x5

card, put on some comfortable shoes, and take a good long walk with God out in the country. Think deeply about those two verses on your card; talk with God about whatever thoughts come to mind; listen to what God might impress upon you.

As they say, "This isn't rocket surgery." Seek God in a way that fits your life and your temperament. Invest the type of time and energy that are appropriate in getting to know the God of the universe. Here's David's advice in Psalm 34:

8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;  
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!