

Building a Community of Prayer in a World of Despair

Rich Nathan

September 20-21, 2003

John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair Series

John 17:1-5

Over the past several months I've been doing a series from the gospel of John. I mentioned to you that I'm taking a sort of parenthesis in the series for this Fall and we're going to spend the autumn in just one chapter of the gospel of John, John 17.

John 17 contains Jesus' longest recorded prayer. Mostly in the gospels we have Jesus' messages, Jesus' teachings, Jesus' actions, and Jesus' miracles. While we frequently find Jesus praying, we don't hear his prayers. John 17 records for us the longest prayer of Jesus in the New Testament. The other prayers of Jesus that we read tend to be very short. They are prayers like, "See," or "receive your sight," or "hear." And in this chapter we get to kneel down next to Jesus and listen to our Savior pray.

The prayer that we are going to be looking at was prayed by Jesus on the night before he was going to be crucified. Jesus had just finished giving his disciples some last minute instructions about the things that were nearest and dearest to him. He taught his disciples about the nature of God, and the way of salvation. But a dominant theme in what has become known as the Upper Room Discourse, John 13-16, is the opposition that followers of Christ would face from the world.

We've spoken about that over the past month or two. I don't think I can emphasize it enough, because in my experience, Christians are almost always surprised that life is so hard. We have gotten the message in America that life ought to be easy, essentially trouble free, certainly free of serious crises. We ought to have plenty of free time and lots of disposable means. And we Christians are constantly shocked; we think something is desperately wrong and entirely out of place because for us life seems so hard. We're surprised by trouble. We're discouraged and depressed because we have problems.

And we are particularly stunned by the fact that it is so difficult to move forward in our Christian lives. Why, despite the fact that I'm trying as hard as I can, do I seem to be making so little progress? Of course, very few of us try as hard as we can as Christians. But Jesus reminds us that over and over again you can expect hostility, opposition, and difficulty as you try to live your life as a Christian in this world.

It is hard to be a Christian. Indeed, the summary statement for the Upper Room Discourse is found in John 16:33:

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I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

The context of Jesus' prayer, therefore, is the opposition he predicted for his disciples from the world and the cross, which was in his immediate future.

The world is in a desperate place today. There are signs of cultural decline everywhere you look in 21st century America. I was just reading a movie review in the Friday edition of the Dispatch. The reviewer was covering a new movie that's just come out titled "Thirteen." Here's what the reviewer writes:

Thirteen is a horror movie for parents. Ghosts, goblins, and ghouls aren't nearly as terrifying as a child diving headfirst into a cycle of drink, drugs, sex, and self-mutilation.

The film revolves around Tracey who, at the title age of thirteen, enters Junior High with a passion to fit in. She is devastated to realize that her cute fashions and perkiness are fatally out of date.

Tracey decides to make herself over in the style of the hottest girl in school, Evie, whose look includes hoop earrings, ironed hair, abundant lip-gloss, and an exposed stomach. It's like watching Tracey graduate overnight from Hilary Duff to Christina Aguilera.

So begins Tracey's toboggan ride into delinquency, from beer to booze, from pot to pills, from flirtation to sex, from tattoos to piercing. It doesn't help that she lives in Los Angeles, the city of bodily love. Doing most of the leading is Evie, a skilled manipulator with no home life. She's officially staying with Brooke, a club dancer whose idea of parental discipline is "no more than one beer—you have homework."

Tracey still has a home life. Her divorced mother, Melanie, cuts hair in their home to support Tracey and her older brother. Melanie is juggling her own problems, struggling through a Twelve Step program and always ready to let a hard-living boyfriend back in the house. Mom is shaken by the sudden changes in her previously sweet daughter. She tries to handle her by being a buddy; by the time she decides to be a firm parent, it's close to too late.

Tracey's dad—no surprise—is a blur who races through her life, always canceling a promised weekend because of job pressures. So Tracey spirals downward, egged on by Evie, who knows no boundaries.

Two Junior High School girls whose lives have become a blur of booze, drugs and sexual relationships. Raised by overwhelmed parents in a society in which every single family is left to fend by themselves. And the only thing that connects us culturally to each other are TV and movies and MTV images of dysfunctional families and out of control kids.

Do you know what's really troubling about the movie "Thirteen"? Apparently, the story is true. The girl who plays Evie is 14 and the screenwriter wrote this movie as a way to rescue her from the life described in the movie.

Everywhere that you look you see a world that can only be described as a world of despair. But rather than wring our hands and immediately pack up our families and head for the country, Jesus prays. He prays that a community of hope would be raised up in this world of despair. He prays that there would be a refuge, a community of people coming together, mutually supporting each other, assisting one another in finding truth, and learning together how to have functional relationships. He prays. He prays that a light would be set up that would dispel the darkness. Jesus prays.

And as we continue to look at John 17, I've called today's talk, "Building a Community of Prayer in a World of Despair." Let's pray.

John 17:1-5, After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

All hope begins with getting clear about who God is and who we are. AW Tozer, in his wonderful book titled, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, begins the book this way:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshipper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "what comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.

Nothing is more important to the building of an individual life, or the building of a community of hope, than that we get clear at the front end about who God is and who we are. You see, the root of most of the fundamental problems in our lives, our fears, anxieties, insecurities, addictions, and dysfunctional and sinful behaviors, are wrong ideas and wrong images of God and wrong ideas and images of ourselves.

So what is the beginning point of our proper conception of God? Where do we start as we approach this infinite all-powerful, all knowing, holy Being? What's the beginning point of relating to God truly and clearly?

The beginning point in thinking of God clearly is the first word of Jesus' prayer, "Father..." "Father, the time has come." And verse 5, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence."

We see this in Jesus' great lesson to us regarding how to pray in what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, which is probably better titled, "The Disciples' Prayer," *Our Father in heaven*. Every time you approach God, this thought ought to be in your mind, "I am approaching my Father in heaven."

Most of us don't realize how radical, how absolutely unprecedented and outrageous it is in all of religious history for someone to look up to heaven and call God, "my Father." New Testament scholars tell us that in the entire history of ancient Judaism we have no example of any individual ever saying to God, "my Father" until Jesus came alone. Hundreds of thousands of Jews prayed to the One True God before Jesus, but not one of them in any ancient Jewish writing, in any holy book, in any prayer, in any commentary, no where in the vast literature of the Jews, did anyone ever look up to heaven and say to God, "Father," before this one person we know as Jesus Christ.

You know the word that Jesus used in calling God, Father, was a Hebrew word. It is the word "Abba." This was one of the first words I learned as a little Jewish boy when I went to Jewish parochial school. Abba. It means "daddy," or "my loving dad." The most impressive thing about Jesus' prayers is that he approached God and called God in heaven "Abba." This left such a vivid impression in the minds of his followers that the early church prayed exactly the same way down to the second and third generations. They called God Abba even though they were in a Greek-speaking world. They still held onto this one little Hebrew word.

Paul mentions this word in Gal. 4:6.

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Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts. The Spirit who calls out, "Abba Father."

We read the same word used in Romans 8:15

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For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of Sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Only 15 times in the Old Testament is God called Father. And he is never called the Father of a private individual. He is always called the Father of a nation, or he speaks in general terms about being the Father of the king. Nowhere do we read of someone praying Abba. But 245 times in the New Testament God is called Abba, Father, Daddy.

The starting point of a healthy life for us as individuals, the beginning point for us in building a community of hope, a refuge, a light in this dark world, is for each of us as individual men and women, boys and girls, to see ourselves as God's children by way of adoption through our faith in Jesus Christ. The Fatherhood of God is the fundamental starting point of the Christian life.

You know, it is interesting in 1 John 2:12-13, John addresses three groups of people. Some people say that all three are really the same group. Others see them as stages of maturity. I lean towards the latter view. We read in 1 John 2:12-13,

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I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who was from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one, I write to you dear children because you have known the Father.

The apostle John says that there are two essentials for even getting out of the blocks of the Christian life. One is that you know your sins are forgiven. You can make no progress as a follower of Christ until you know the saving power of the Cross of Jesus Christ and that you are set free from your past. You can't move on beyond the Cross, and you can't make any progress unless you understand that God forgives you by virtue of the death of his Son for your sins at the Cross.

It is interesting that the apostle John says you also can't make any progress in the Christian life until you know God as Father. "I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father." Before you can overcome the evil one and engage in great exploits of ministry and spiritual warfare, you have to know God as Father.

One of the distinctives of Vineyard as a church movement has been this emphasis on the Fatherhood of God. It is the Fatherhood of God and the embrace of God as Father that will create in our church a community of hope.

I heard Ed Piorek, who is a wonderful conference speaker and Vineyard pastor, say a number of years ago that prodigals would return to the church when they see and experience the love of the Father in the church. So many people experience so much rejection in this world. So many people live with such a broken image of themselves. They cannot conceive of themselves as beloved children of God.

Let me ask you an honest question. If you have received Christ into your life, is the image that you carry around most of the time regarding yourself is that you are a beloved child of God? That God sees you as his beloved daughter, or his beloved son? And that he is eager to lavish grace and mercy upon you?

Friends, seeing God as he is and seeing yourself as he says you are is the starting point, it is the foundation for healthy living. And this is what the world is yearning for, though many don't even know it. The world is yearning for an experience of the Father's love.

When we are approaching God as Father, it is absolutely imperative that we not project onto him our faulty experiences of our own fathers, or our faulty attempts to demonstrate fatherhood. Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, said that for years he had trouble praying the "Our Father" because he thought of his own father when he began his prayers with those words. And his own father was a brutal and hard man. Each of us has to wrestle with what we really believe God is like. When you strip away the formulas and the creeds you have learned, and you're lying in bed at night upset, afraid, guilty, or insecure and you choose in the darkness of your rooms, office, fields, or in school to call God "Father" do you project onto him the faulty image of father that you experienced growing up in your homes?

Be honest, friends, in the deepest part of your heart, what do you feel like your Father in heaven is really like? When you are scared, in need, or have blown it, what is your Father in heaven really like?

Like Martin Luther many of us have had very poor models of father in our own lives. And even in the best of families, all of us have been raised with imperfect fathers who failed to model God's fatherhood in some significant way. Today in America, life without a father is the norm for more than a third of all children. Fatherlessness is the product of record levels of divorce, and the massive rise in childbearing outside of marriage. The phenomena of fatherlessness afflicts rich and poor, black and white, in an increasing way.

And the results of fatherlessness are devastating. David Popenoe, a sociologist, wrote a hugely important article a few years ago in the *Wilson Quarterly* titled, "The Vanishing Father." Here is what he writes:

The collapse of children's well being in the United States has reached breath-taking proportions. Juvenile crime has increased six fold in the last forty years, a period in which the total number of young people in the population remained relatively stable. Reports of child neglect and abuse have quintupled since 1976 when data was first collected. Eating disorders and rates of depression have soared among adolescent girls. Teen suicide has tripled. Alcohol and drug abuse among teenagers, although it's leveled off in recent years continues at a very high rate. Scholastic aptitude scores have declined nearly 80 points. And most of the decline cannot be accounted for by the increased academic diversity of students taking the test. Poverty in America has been shifted from the elderly to the young. Of the nations' poor today, 38% are children.

One can think of many explanations for these unhappy developments: the growth of commercialism and consumerism, the influence of television and the mass media, the decline of religious influence, the widespread availability of guns and addictive drugs, and the decay of social order and neighborhood relationships. None of these causes should be dismissed. But the evidence is now strong that it is the absence of fathers from the lives of children that is one of the most important causes.

David Poponoe goes on to write:

Many people intuitively believe that fatherlessness is related to delinquency and violence and the weight of evidence researched supports this belief. Having a father at home is no guarantee that a youngster won't commit a crime, but it appears to be an excellent form of prevention. 60% of America's rapists, 72% of its adolescent murderers, and 70% of its long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes.

In terms of boys, fathers are important to their sons as role models. They are important for maintaining authority and discipline. And they are important in helping their sons to develop both self-control and feelings of empathy towards others.

Regarding girls, the presence of fathers is linked to better academic achievement, stronger verbal ability, a greater sense of empathy, and of course, fathers play a key role in the development of their daughters sexual behavior.

Let me ask you a question. Were you raised, or are you being raised for a significant period of your life with an absent father? Did you feel like, or do you feel like there is a hole in your life as a result of dad's absence? Some of you

had dads who were not physically absent, but who could certainly be called emotionally absent from your home. Your dad was or is so preoccupied with work or an addiction like alcohol that for many practical purposes they could be categorized as absent.

Friend, do you see in your life, in terms of your perception of God, that much of the time you perceive God as unavailable or as distant? Do any of you feel that it is unlikely that you will ever physically feel the presence of God? Do you see the connection between your father's absence and your feeling of God's absence in your life? The work of the Holy Spirit is designed to allow you to feel the Father's love for you even as Jesus, God's Son, felt the Father's love for him.

There are, of course, achievement oriented fathers – fathers who give love as a reward for performance in education or in sports. If you did well academically, you could expect to experience your father's love. But if you were merely average, or did poorly in sports, or poorly with respects to a sister or a brother, you would not experience the achievement oriented father's love. A person raised in an achievement-oriented home perceive that their Father in heaven only loves them when they perform.

Friends, how many of you experience the Father's love only in a fleeting, occasional way because you don't feel like your performance is up to snuff? I wonder how many of you have burned yourselves out religiously and spiritually trying to some how gain your Father in heaven's approval. Have you ever watched a Christian literally driving themselves to the point of illness or exhaustion? When you look at a person who is driven, do you say, "there is a person who is secured by the love of the Father," or do you say, "There is a person with a great hole in their life that has not yet learned how to fill that hole with the love of the Father."

Of course, some fathers are downright abusive either emotionally or physically or sexually. The result for an abused child can be to perceive God the Father as harsh, abusive, and unforgiving. Many people run from the Father and are angry with the Father because they perceive him to be an abuser like their fathers growing up.

And finally, in terms of distorted image, a common father type in the 21st century is the accommodating father, the father who is just concerned about being a good guy and being liked by his children. The accommodating father offers his children no discipline, and no direction. Often the accommodating father is deeply resented by mom in the home. She is fighting a pitched battle by herself to try to keep her children's lives on the rails. She is trying to establish some rules and order to protect her children. But the accommodator keeps working around her by undermining her authority. He gives his children everything they ask for.

And this overly permissive accommodator raises kids who have little self-discipline, who can't be said "no" to, who reject authority as being oppressive because they've never experienced the authority of their father. These folks struggle with the discipline of God their Father, they do not practice self-denial, and often they find their lives often going off the rails into sexual immorality because they haven't learned how to say "no" to themselves.

Do you see any of these flawed views of God in your own spiritual life? Do you see the connection between the way you were raised and your own spiritual struggles with God? Jesus says in John 17:3,

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Now this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

This word "know" has a rich Jewish background behind it. Jesus is not saying that a community of hope is built on an intellectual discussion about God. Jesus doesn't say that the hope of the world rests in a church having a theologically precise doctrinal statement about God. Our hope as individuals, and our hope as men and women, is to know God in the way that the Jews spoke of knowing God. The background of Jesus' statements rest in a Hebrew word that he would have used. It is the word "yada." It means to know personally. It means to know intimately. It means to know experientially. In the Old Testament the word "know" was used euphemistically as a synonym for sexual intercourse between a husband and his wife. Adam knew his wife Eve not just as an object of philosophical speculation, but as the subject of his love and affection.

Jesus says this is the way to life. This is the way out of the distortions handed down to you by your father. To intimately know God.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who is one of my favorite preachers and who has influenced my own Christian thinking as much as almost any Christian writer ever has, said this, "The ultimate object of salvation is not merely to keep us from hell, not merely to deliver us from certain sins; it is that we may enjoy 'adoption' and we may become 'the children of God' and 'joint heirs with Christ'."

The *Sunnum Bonum*, Lloyd-Jones writes, in other words, the greatest good is to know God as your Abba, Father. Lloyd-Jones asks, "Have you ever known it? This is what is offered to us in the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God forbid that any of us should ever stop at any point short of it."

What does it mean in terms of your relationship with the Father? It means you can always ask your Father for blessing today. You can always ask your Father in heaven for more. Some of you think you are being ungrateful when you ask your Father for blessing or help. You say, "Well, God was good to me yesterday, last week, or last month. Therefore, I shouldn't ask him for more today." You

don't realize how dishonoring you are to your Father, if you think that he is tired of giving to you, or that his grace has been exhausted in your life, or you've asked him for too much.

The most honoring thing you can do with your Father is to view him as someone who is generous. Your Father is not a piker. He is not stingy. And I'll tell you one simple way you can determine whether you view your Father in heaven as being generous and open handed. Do you ask God for what you really want in the secret recesses of your heart? If you were to take a blank sheet of paper and write down what you really want, do you say those things to God?

This is the test of your view of God's generosity. Do you pray specific prayers, rather than general prayers? It's fine to pray for a peaceful spirit. It's fine to pray for contentment. It's fine to pray the Serenity Prayer. That's a good thing. But Jesus is often looking at us and screaming, "What do you want me to do?"

"Father, bring along a father for my child, that's what I want," some of you single moms might be saying.

"Father, bring along a mother for my children," some of you single fathers might be saying.

"Father, revive my marriage."

"Father, please let this loved one of mine be saved."

"Father, open the door for this ministry."

"Father, help me or a loved one in an area of a health need."

Your Father in heaven is more generous than you imagine. And your Father in heaven is more available than you hope. Do you know that when we call upon God our Father, we never get a busy signal. We never get an answering machine saying, "Call back later," or a voicemail saying, "He's on the other line or away from his desk." Morning, evening, in the middle of the night, your Father in heaven is always there.

So let me tie this up. The way that you and I come to know the Father as he is, without the distortions, is to draw near to him in prayer. A community of hope is going to be a community of prayer. If all we do is focus our eyes on the world around us, we will despair. Hope arises when you come into the presence of the Father and focus your attention upon him. Only as we pray will we have hope. If we want to make a difference to this world, if we want to be the kind of church that people come into and say, "You know, there is something here. There is something of the Father's love. There is something of the Father's mercy. I feel the Father's acceptance. There seems to be an answer for my messed up life in

this place.” We must pray individually, and we must pray often together. If we want to be a light in this dark world, we will, as individual men and women, become people of prayer. If you want to be a light in your own family, at your job, or at your school, you must pray.

Why should we pray? Jesus prays for the Father’s glory.

John 17:2

SLIDE

Father, the time has come, glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you.

John 17:5

SLIDE

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

Some of you may have asked yourself the question at some point in the past, “Why does God require me to pray and ask him for things? Why doesn’t he just give me those things?”

Do you understand that God gets more glory when something is an answer to prayer as opposed to just a happenstance in life? Have you not seen in your own life how much gratitude grows and how you are stimulated to worship God when after seeking God over and over about a matter, you finally receive your answer?

Let me share with you a wonderful answer to prayer that I heard about just this past week. I have a friend who was put up for adoption as a baby. My friend came to know Jesus as her Savior when she was a teenager. In 1991 just after the birth of her son, she began praying about reuniting with her birth mother. About the same time, her birth mother put her name into an agency that said she was interested in meeting her daughter. And just a few years ago as an adult, she finally established contact with her birth mother — first by letter, then with phone calls.

Well, it’s not always the case that it works out this happily, but in their particular case there was a joyful reunion. The birth mom lived in Europe and she came over to see my friend and visit. My friend and her husband have been praying for her birth mom, that she would come to know Jesus even as her daughter knew Jesus. They asked that this loved one would be saved dozens and dozens of times over the last decade. This past weekend at church, her mom stood up and received Christ as her Savior and Lord.

Now, do you think that there is a daughter that is giving glory to Christ? Years of prayers, first to find her mom, and then to see mom come to know Jesus. And her prayers were answered.

Why does God require us to ask and keep on asking? So that we might give him glory when we finally see his answer.

And for what should we pray? Pray for everything. Pray about your spiritual condition. Pray for your physical needs. We Christians, as we increasingly come to know God as Father, will pray about everything and worry about nothing. The apostle Paul says, “Be anxious about nothing, rather in everything pray.” Pray all the time for everyone everywhere about everything. Pray about your spiritual condition. Pray for more spiritual gifts in your life. Pray for contentment. Pray for a grateful heart. Pray for holiness. Pray that there would be power on the gospel. Pray for open doors of ministry. Pray for missionaries. Pray for the church. Pray for salvations of lost loved ones. Pray for a baby if you want to have a baby. Pray for a spouse, if you want to get married. Pray about bodily habits that you struggle with – habits of smoking, drinking, and sexuality. Pray about losing weight. Pray for your finances. Pray, and pray, and keep on praying.

Brothers and sisters, the culture around is falling apart. You cannot run off somewhere and find a safe refuge. But your Father in heaven offers this world a lifeline—a community of hope that chooses to pray. Let’s pray.

Building a Community of Prayer in a World of Despair

Rich Nathan

September 20-21, 2003

John: Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair Series

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