

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 22: The High Priestly Prayer

John 17:1-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 17 is the High Priestly Prayer, the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, offered on the eve of the cross. Doctrinally, it reveals the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son (the glory and love shared “before the world existed”), affirming the eternal existence and deity of the Son; it defines eternal life as knowing God; it shows Christ interceding for His people’s keeping and sanctification; and it grounds Christian unity in the unity of the Father and Son, tying that unity to the world’s believing. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9 (the eternal Son), with significant weight at Questions 5 and 7.

At the same time, the prayer is profoundly moving and formational. Jesus prays for His disciples and explicitly for all who would believe through the apostolic word, including us. He prays that we be kept, sanctified in the truth, made one, and finally be with Him to behold His glory. The teacher should let students feel the wonder of being prayed for by Christ and let the prayer shape their longing to know God, to be sanctified, to pursue unity, and to be with Christ.

So aim at both: a clear grasp of the eternal deity of the Son and the great themes of His prayer, and a heart stirred to know God, pursue holiness and unity, and long to be with Christ. The disciple we are forming lives as one kept, sanctified, united, and destined for Christ’s presence.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus prayed, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (v. 4), even before the cross. What does it teach us that Jesus could speak of His work as accomplished, and how does this shape our understanding of His mission?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus prays, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (v. 4). Remarkably, He speaks of His work as accomplished before the cross has even happened. The cross is so certain in His purpose that He can speak of it as already done.

Draw out the sense of a finished mission. Jesus’ life was not an aimless wandering but the deliberate accomplishment of a work the Father gave Him. He came with a mission, to reveal the Father, to gather God’s people, and to lay down His life, and He could say, on the threshold of the cross, that He had completed what He came to do. This anticipates His cry from the cross, “It is finished” (19:30).

Stress the purposefulness this reveals. Jesus lived with a clear sense of the Father's calling and pursued it to the end. His was a life of completed obedience. This shapes our understanding of His mission as intentional and accomplished, not tragic or accidental. He glorified the Father by finishing the work.

Apply it to the students. There is something to learn here about living for the work God gives us, with focus and faithfulness, so that we too might one day say we have completed what He called us to do. And there is comfort: the work of our salvation is a finished, accomplished work, not a project still in doubt. Ask students how Christ's accomplished work gives them assurance, and how it challenges them to live purposefully.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus speaking of His work as accomplished before the cross (John 17:4).
- The cross as the deliberate completion of the Father's mission.
- A life of completed, purposeful obedience.
- The finished work of salvation as the ground of assurance.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it teach that Jesus called His work accomplished before the cross?
- How does His finished work give you assurance?
- How does His purposeful life challenge the way you live?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus defined eternal life as this: "that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (v. 3). How does defining eternal life as knowing God reshape what you are seeking in your own walk with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus gives a definition of eternal life that reframes everything: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (v. 3). Eternal life is not merely endless existence; it is knowing God.

Draw out the relational heart of eternal life. Eternal life is defined not by duration alone but by relationship, knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ. To "know" here means more than knowing about; it means personal, intimate, relational knowledge. Eternal life is, at its core, a relationship with God that begins now and lasts forever.

Reframe what we seek. If eternal life is knowing God, then the goal of the Christian life is not mainly to acquire information, perform duties, or secure a future destination, but to know God

Himself more deeply. This reorders our priorities around relationship with God as the central pursuit.

Apply it. Help students examine what they are actually seeking in their walk with God. Is it knowledge, experiences, blessings, or God Himself? Eternal life is found in knowing Him. Ask each student how defining eternal life as knowing God reshapes what they are seeking, and what it would look like to pursue knowing God more this season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Eternal life defined as knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3).
- Eternal life as relationship, not merely endless existence.
- Knowing God as personal and intimate, not merely informational.
- Relationship with God as the central pursuit of the Christian life.

Discussion Prompts

- How does defining eternal life as knowing God reshape your walk?
- What are you actually seeking in your relationship with God?
- What would pursuing knowing God more deeply look like this season?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus prayed that the Father would “keep them in your name” and “keep them from the evil one” (vv. 11, 15). What does it mean that Jesus prays for the keeping and protection of His people, and how is this a comfort in a hostile world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus prays for the protection of His people: “Holy Father, keep them in your name... keep them from the evil one” (vv. 11, 15). He commits His disciples, whom He is about to leave in a hostile world, into the Father’s keeping.

Draw out the comfort of being kept. Jesus does not pray that His people would face no danger, but that the Father would keep them through it. The believer is held by the Father in answer to the Son’s prayer. This is profound security: we are kept not by our own strength but by the keeping power of God, in response to Christ’s intercession.

Connect it to Christ’s ongoing intercession. The prayer of John 17 is a window into the intercession Christ continues to make for His people: “he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). The same Christ who prayed for the disciples’ keeping prays for us still. Our security rests on His unceasing prayer.

Apply it to life in a hostile world. In a world that opposes Christ and where the evil one is at work, believers can feel exposed and vulnerable. This prayer assures us that we are kept by the Father and intercede for by the Son. Ask students how the truth that Christ prays for their keeping comforts them in the face of spiritual danger and a hostile world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's prayer for the keeping and protection of His people (John 17:11, 15).
- Believers kept by the Father's power, not their own strength.
- Christ's ongoing intercession for His people (Hebrews 7:25).
- Security in a hostile world grounded in Christ's prayer.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Jesus prays for our keeping and protection?
- How is this a comfort in a hostile world?
- How does Christ's ongoing intercession steady you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus prayed not that we would be taken "out of the world" but kept "from the evil one" while sent "into the world" (vv. 15, 18). Where are you tempted either to withdraw from the world or to be conformed to it, and what would faithful presence in the world look like for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the balance Jesus strikes: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" (v. 15), and "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (v. 18). Believers are kept from evil yet sent into the world.

Draw out the two opposite temptations. One is withdrawal, retreating from the world into a Christian bubble, avoiding the messy, hostile world rather than engaging it. The other is conformity, becoming so immersed in the world that we are indistinguishable from it, absorbing its values. Jesus rejects both: His people are in the world but not of it, sent into it yet kept from its evil.

Define faithful presence. To be sent into the world like Christ is to engage it, to live, work, and witness among people, while remaining distinct, shaped by Christ rather than by the culture. It is neither retreat nor compromise but faithful, distinctive presence, salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13–16).

Press for specifics. Ask each student which temptation pulls at them more, withdrawal or conformity, and what faithful presence in the world would look like in their actual context, their

work, neighborhood, relationships. The aim is to be neither isolated from nor absorbed by the world, but sent into it as Christ was, kept from its evil.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Believers kept from evil yet sent into the world (John 17:15, 18).
- The twin temptations of withdrawal and conformity.
- Faithful, distinctive presence as salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16).
- In the world but not of it as the calling of Christ's people.

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more tempted to withdraw from the world or to conform to it?
- What would faithful presence in the world look like for you?
- How can you be in the world without being of it?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17). What is sanctification, and what role does God's word play in making us holy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (v. 17). He asks the Father to make His people holy, and He names the means: the word of God, which is truth.

Define sanctification. To sanctify is to make holy, to set apart for God and to be progressively transformed into Christlikeness. Sanctification is both a status (we are set apart as holy in Christ) and a process (we are being made holy throughout the Christian life). Jesus prays for this ongoing transformation of His people.

Draw out the role of the word. Jesus ties sanctification specifically to the truth, to God's word. We are made holy as the truth of Scripture works in us, exposing sin, renewing our minds, shaping our desires, and conforming us to Christ. There is no sanctification apart from the truth; the word is the instrument the Spirit uses to make us holy (compare Ephesians 5:26).

Apply it. Help students see why neglecting God's word stunts their growth in holiness. If we are sanctified by the truth, then a life starved of Scripture will be a life that struggles to grow. Ask students how central God's word actually is in their lives, and connect this to the next question, where they will identify a specific area needing the word's sanctifying work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sanctification as being made holy and conformed to Christ (John 17:17).

- The word of God as the means of sanctification (Ephesians 5:26).
- Sanctification as both a status in Christ and an ongoing process.
- No growth in holiness apart from the truth.

Discussion Prompts

- What is sanctification, and what role does God's word play in it?
- Why does neglecting Scripture stunt our growth in holiness?
- How central is God's word in your life right now?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus prayed for our growth in holiness through His word (v. 17). Where do you most need God's truth to sanctify you right now, and how can you give His word a greater place in that work?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question applies Jesus' prayer for sanctification (v. 17) to the student's own life. The truth of God's word is the means by which the Father makes us holy; the question is where each student most needs that sanctifying work now.

Help students locate the specific area. Sanctification is not abstract; it happens in concrete areas, a besetting sin, an unholy pattern of thought, a relationship, an attitude, a habit. The truth of God's word, brought to bear on that specific area, is what the Spirit uses to transform it. Ask students to identify where they most need the word to do its work.

Connect the area to the word. Once an area is named, the path forward is to bring God's truth to bear on it, to find what Scripture says, to let it expose and reshape, to meditate on it and obey it. Sanctification in that area comes as the truth takes root there. Vague good intentions do not sanctify; the applied word does.

Press for a concrete step. Ask each student to name one area where they most need God's truth to sanctify them, and one way they will give His word a greater place in that work, perhaps a passage to dwell on, a truth to memorize, a command to obey. The aim is to cooperate with the Father's sanctifying work through His word in a specific, named area.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sanctification happening in concrete, specific areas of life.
- God's truth applied to a specific area as the means of transformation.
- Cooperating with the Spirit's sanctifying work through the word.
- Applied Scripture, not vague intention, as the agent of change.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most need God's truth to sanctify you right now?
- How can you bring His word to bear on that specific area?
- What is one concrete way you will give His word a greater place there?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus prayed "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (vv. 21-23). Why does Jesus tie the unity of His people to the world's believing, and what does this teach about the importance of oneness among Christians?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus prays for the unity of His people with a stated purpose: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21). Christian unity is tied to the world's believing.

Draw out the model and depth of unity. The unity Jesus prays for is patterned on the unity of the Father and the Son, a deep, loving oneness, not mere organizational agreement. It is a unity of love, purpose, and truth among His people, reflecting the very oneness of God.

Explain the missional purpose. Jesus says this unity is "so that the world may believe." The oneness of Christ's people is meant to be a witness to the world that the Father sent the Son. When the world sees believers genuinely united in love, it sees evidence of the gospel's power. Conversely, division among Christians undermines the witness.

Apply it carefully. This unity is to be in the truth (it is not unity at the expense of truth, since Jesus also prayed for sanctification in the truth), but it is a real, visible, loving oneness among Christ's people. Help students see their responsibility to pursue and preserve unity (Ephesians 4:1-6), to resist needless division, to love fellow believers, and to recognize that their oneness is part of the church's witness. Ask where they can be a peacemaker and unifier rather than a source of division.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian unity patterned on the oneness of the Father and Son (John 17:21).
- Unity tied to the world's believing, as a witness to the gospel.
- Unity in love and truth, not at the expense of truth.
- The believer's responsibility to pursue and preserve unity (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus tie the unity of His people to the world's believing?
- What does this teach about the importance of oneness among Christians?
- Where can you be a unifier rather than a source of division?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also... may be with me where I am, to see my glory” (v. 24). How does it move you that Christ’s deepest desire is simply to have you with Him, and how does this shape your hope?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the most tender line of the prayer: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory” (v. 24). Christ’s deepest desire for His people is simply to have them with Him.

Draw out the wonder. On the night before His death, Jesus’ great desire is not merely to rescue us from hell or to improve our lives, but to have us with Him, to share His presence and His glory. The relationship is the goal. He wants us with Him. This reveals the heart of Christ and the heart of heaven: to be with the One who loves us.

Reframe the believer’s hope. Our hope is not first a place or a reward but a Person: to be with Christ where He is. This is what He most wants for us, and it is meant to be what we most want too. Heaven is, above all, being with Jesus.

Apply it to the affections. Ask students how it moves them to know that Christ’s deepest desire is to have them with Him, and how this shapes their hope. Then turn it gently: is being with Christ their own deepest desire? The prayer invites us to want what He wants, to long, above all, to be with Him. Encourage students to let this longing grow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ’s deepest desire to have His people with Him (John 17:24).
- The relationship with Christ as the goal of salvation.
- The believer’s hope centered on a Person, not merely a place.
- Heaven as, above all, being with Jesus.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it move you that Christ’s deepest desire is to have you with Him?
- How does this shape your hope?
- Is being with Christ the deepest desire of your own heart?

Question 9

Student Question:

This prayer reveals the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son: Jesus speaks of the glory He had with the Father “before the world existed” (v. 5) and the Father’s love for Him “before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). How do these statements affirm the eternal existence and deity of the Son, and how do they deepen our understanding of what it means that this eternal Son prayed for us and died for us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, drawing out the affirmations of the Son’s eternal existence and deity woven through the prayer. Jesus speaks of “the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (v. 5) and of the Father’s love for Him “before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). These point beyond time into eternity.

Establish the eternal existence of the Son. Jesus did not begin to exist at Bethlehem. He speaks of sharing glory with the Father “before the world existed,” that is, before creation, in eternity. He asks to be restored to the glory He had with the Father before the world began. This affirms His pre-existence and eternal being, consistent with the prologue (“In the beginning was the Word,” 1:1) and with His own words, “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58).

Draw out the eternal relationship and deity. Jesus speaks of the Father loving Him “before the foundation of the world.” Before there was anything created, there was the loving relationship between the Father and the Son. This eternal fellowship affirms that the Son is no creature but shares the eternal life of God; love and glory were exchanged within God before creation existed. The Son is fully divine, eternally one with the Father.

Connect the eternal Son to His prayer and His cross, which is where the doctrine becomes worship. The One praying this prayer is not merely a holy man; He is the eternal Son who shared the Father’s glory before the world began. And this eternal Son prayed for us by name (v. 20) and was about to lay down His life for us. The wonder is staggering: the eternal God, who needed nothing, who dwelt in unbroken glory and love before creation, set His love on us and gave Himself for us. The doctrine of His eternal deity does not make Him distant; it makes His love for us all the more astonishing.

Bring it to honest reflection and worship. Help students feel the weight of who prayed for them and who died for them. It was not a creature but the eternal Son, who left the glory He had before the world existed, took on flesh, and went to the cross. This guards against any view that diminishes Christ, and it deepens love and worship. Ask students how knowing that the eternal Son prayed for them and died for them moves them to love and adore Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Son’s glory shared with the Father before the world existed (John 17:5).
- The Father’s love for the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).
- The eternal existence and pre-existence of the Son (John 1:1; 8:58).

- The eternal fellowship of Father and Son affirming the Son's deity.
- The eternal Son interceding for and dying for us, deepening the wonder of His love.
- A guard against any view that diminishes the eternal deity of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How do verses 5 and 24 affirm the eternal existence and deity of the Son?
- What does it mean that this eternal Son prayed for you?
- How does knowing the eternal Son died for you move you to worship?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this prayer, in which Christ prayed for you by name. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to live as one who is kept, sanctified, united with His people, and destined to be with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the great themes of the prayer, being kept, sanctified, united, and destined to be with Christ, and asks students to live in light of them. The aim is to let the prayer of Christ shape the life of the believer.

Help students see that this prayer describes their actual standing and destiny. They are prayed for by Christ, kept by the Father, set apart to be sanctified in the truth, called into loving unity with God's people, and destined to be with Christ to behold His glory. The Christian life is the living out of what Christ prayed for us.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them in light of the prayer, perhaps resting more in being kept, giving the word a greater place in their sanctification, pursuing unity rather than division, or letting the longing to be with Christ reorder their desires.

Close in reverence and assurance. Students have been allowed to overhear the Son praying to the Father on the night before His death, and they have heard themselves prayed for. Let them leave both moved by the love of Christ and assured of their standing: kept, sanctified, united, and destined to be with Him forever. The eternal Son prayed for them, and His prayer will be answered.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's standing and destiny described in Christ's prayer.
- Living out what Christ prayed: kept, sanctified, united, and with Him.
- Assurance grounded in the Son's intercession.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus forming you in light of His prayer for you?
- Which theme do you most need to live in: kept, sanctified, united, or with Him?
- How does being prayed for by Christ shape the way you live this week?