

## Jesus Prays for His Church

### John 17:20-26

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*20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” – John 17:20-26, ESV*

#### **Introduction: The Heart of the Heart**

Today, we come to one of the most wonderful sections in all Scripture. John Knox called John 17 “The Holy of Holies in the Temple of Scripture,” and if that’s a valid analogy, then today, we approach the heart of the heart, the ark of the covenant or the mercy seat itself, especially in verses 22-23.

If you don’t understand that analogy, let me unpack it for you: In the Temple, the most central and holy room was the Holy of Holies, hidden behind a thick veil. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and even he could only enter one day per year, on the Day of Atonement. This room was so holy because it contained the ark of the covenant, which was the physical symbol of God’s presence in the midst of His people. God is holy, holy, holy, and thus His presence makes the room the Holy of holies. When the high priest entered, he had to bring the blood of the sacrifice, and he had to sprinkle the top of the ark, called the mercy seat, with blood.

The ark of the covenant contained the Ten Commandments, written on tablets of stone by the finger of God. These summarized God’s perfect righteous standard for His people. The high priest represented the people, wearing an ephod with twelve precious stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel as he came before the Lord. He came with blood, on the Day of Atonement, to represent the atonement God would make for His people’s sin to appease His just wrath and secure mercy for His people.

Thus, the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat were the heart of the heart of Temple worship, the most sacred meeting place between God and His people. How can God meet with His people? How can a holy, holy, holy God and sinful people be brought together? Only through the shed blood of atonement.

Jesus is praying in John 17 on the eve of the day when He would make the final and satisfactory atonement for the sins of all of His people. After centuries of promissory symbolism, the Day of Atonement would be fulfilled once and for all by Jesus on the cross, as he shed His blood to secure true and lasting mercy for the people of God. To demonstrate that fulfillment, the veil in the Temple separating the Holy of holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom as Jesus breathed His last.

In His prayer on this night before that greatest day, Jesus is praying in anticipation of the fulfillment He is going to accomplish. He has already asked His Father to glorify Him, which means taking Him to the cross to offer the satisfactory atonement. Knowing the Father will keep His promise and will answer Jesus' prayer, He prays in the light of the coming finished work. As He prays, He speaks such wonderful words about His church, His people, powerful words of unity, love and glory.

In fact, the words here in this final section of Jesus' prayer are so wonderful that if anyone but Jesus had said them, we wouldn't be able to believe they were really true. Yet because Jesus Himself said them in prayer to His Father, we know they are true and we know His prayer has been answered and is being answered now. This makes this final section of His prayer a precious preview of His Highpriestly prayer interceding for us at the right hand of God the Father right now, and when we think that these words are really true of us, they should cause us to tremble with holy reverence, awe and delight at the stunning truth they reveal.

Jesus opens this part of His prayer by clearly shifting His focus from the eleven disciples with Him in the Garden to all other believers, those who would come to believe in Jesus through their word. This opening line of today's passage – *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word"* – tells us two things we shouldn't miss:

1. Jesus foresees that these stumbling men, who are deeply flawed but who nonetheless have "kept" His word by believing in Him, would in fact be used by God to spread the word about Him to others, who would come to believe in Jesus through their testimony.
2. That all people who subsequently come to faith in Jesus come through the testimony of these eleven. This is the power of the Apostolic Witness, which we have in Scripture. It is the witness of the eyewitness Apostles recorded in Scripture that is the truly important and saving word of testimony. Everything else that is said in this prayer is true only for those who accept the testimony of the Apostles, those who come to faith through the word of God. If you have come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus through the testimony of the New Testament, Jesus is here praying for you! .

## **I. Unity**

The first and main prayer request Jesus makes for His people is for a true, deep, spiritual unity:

*"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 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."*

### **A. Prayer for Unity**

First, this is very clearly a prayer for unity – "that they may all be one." Jesus is asking for something that is not yet a reality at the time of His praying. We need to see two things as true based on the plain and obvious fact that Jesus is asking His Father to make all believers one:

1. This unity is something God does in us, it is not something we can achieve in a human way through human means. If we could achieve this, Jesus would be teaching His disciples how to accomplish this unity instead of praying to His Father to make it a reality in them.
2. This unity is something God does in fact give, since we must believe that God the Father has indeed answered the prayer of His Son. Every other aspect of this prayer has clearly been answered and is being answered by the Father, so we must believe that about this request, too.

Based on those two truths, we can know that Jesus is not talking about organizational unity nor is He speaking of cultural cooperation for the achievement of political gains. Rather, Jesus is praying for a spiritual unity, something accomplished in us by the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit was poured out on the disciples at Pentecost, and they began to speak in other languages, so that everyone who came heard the Gospel in his or her own native language, this was the outward supernatural demonstration of the inward reality wrought by the Holy Spirit, a true and spiritual unity.

### **B. Basis of Unity**

What is the basis for this unity? Based on what Jesus prays, we can see a two-fold basis: one is external and temporal while the other is internal and eternal. The first basis is receiving the word of God. Because this is a unity of all those who have come to believe in Jesus through the testimony of the Apostles, this is a unity based on coming to receive the word of God. Jesus said about His Apostles:

*I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. <sup>8</sup> For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.*

Now, the same is true of those who come to believe in Him through their testimony: We are given to Jesus from out of the world, because we belong to God. The evidence of this is seen in the fact that we keep the word of Jesus – that is, not that we perfectly obey everything He commanded, but we have come to believe that He is the One and Only Son of God, sent from the Father for us. And so the first basis of this unity is that we have all received the word of God.

But the second basis is actually the more important – more eternal, internal, and foundational. The basis for our unity is nothing less than the unity among the persons of the Godhead themselves, and our inclusion in that unity by our union with Christ. Jesus prays, “*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us*” How are the Father and Son united? They are deeply, eternally, unchangeably united in the essence of who they are. They do have distinct personalities, but their bond of unity is so absolute that they actually share in the same essence.

So, for us, when we receive the word of God, we are united to Christ by faith. We are in Him and He is in us. And since Jesus is united to God the Father, we are brought into the full communion of the unity of the Godhead. This is why it is so absolutely impossible to talk about someone who is united to Christ then losing their salvation. This union is a union “just as” the Father has with the Son. In fact, it is a union that brings us into

their union, “that they also may be in us.” This cannot be broken without tearing apart the very essence of God Himself!!

If you prize this unbreakable bond that you have with Christ and God the Father, then realize that this is the same bond you have with every other true believer, everyone who has come to believe in Christ through the word of God. They are your brothers and sisters. You are members of the same body. You cannot break those family bonds any more than you could break your bond with God or break the bond of God. If that’s true – and it must be, because Jesus prayed it – then why do we tear at these bonds and act as if we can break them or that we would if we could?

### **C. Purpose of Unity**

And what is the purpose of this unity? Of course, we could say “the glory of God” and be right because everything God does is for the purpose of His own glory! But then we need to ask, “How?” How is God glorified by our unbreakable spiritual union with God and with one another in Christ? Well, we get that from the purpose clause in Jesus’ prayer: “*so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*”

Earlier, in John 13:35, Jesus taught His disciples: “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” Clearly, the effectiveness of the witness of the people of God is tied to our outwardly manifesting in our lives the truth of the inward unity Christ has secured for us. We have been joined to one another in an unbreakable bond in Christ. If we want the world to pay attention to our witness, and we want Christ to be known by the nations, we need to be committed to taking what Jesus has already accomplished in us and living it out in our lives.

How? Some people have had misguided notions of what this looks like. Several years ago, Evangelicals and Catholics Together and the Christian Coalition both tried to advance a unity that overlooked real and vital theological differences for the sake of a cultural and political agenda. That’s pretty much the opposite of what this unity should look like. Remember, our unity is by faith in Christ as He is revealed in His word.

Much better and more fruitful have been recent movements like Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition, which have focused on Christ and the Gospel to bring people together, despite our secondary theological differences or our cultural and political differences. At their best, movements like these focus our hearts and minds on Christ, on worshiping and serving Him together and advancing His Gospel and His kingdom in the world. In other words, we dare not set aside vital Gospel theology for the sake of earthly power and political agendas, but we must be willing to set aside earthly power and political agendas for Gospel kingdom priorities!

## **2. Love**

As we continue in Jesus’ prayer, we come to some of the most wonderful words in Scripture: “*The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*”

### **A. The Love of the Father for the Son**

How much does God the Father love God the Son? At His baptism, God the Father spoke from heaven, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*” God the Father parted the heavens to speak directly to acclaim His love for His Son and His delight in Him. He did it again on the Mount of Transfiguration, when He spoke to Peter, James and John: “*This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him!*” Remember, this was in response to Peter’s foolish expressed desire to make three tents on the mountain, one for Jesus and one each for Moses and Elijah. But Peter missed the point! Moses and Elijah had come to point the disciples to Jesus, who was greater than both of them. That’s why God the Father spoke. He spoke of the greatness of His Son and of His deep love for Him.

Again, the next day after this prayer, as Jesus died on the cross, God the Father showed His love, by turning the sky black and shaking the earth. The demonstration at the cross was clear enough that the Centurion supervising Jesus’ execution said, “*Surely this man was the son of God!*” And then, finally, in His resurrection, God the Father declared His love for His Son by raising Him from the dead with all power and authority forever!

Clearly, God the Father deeply and truly loves God the Son. He is pleased with Him. He delights in Him. He exalts Him and glorifies Him!

## **B. The Love of God for His People**

Now, try to wrap your head and heart around this: The same love that God the Father has for God the Son He also has for all those who believe in Jesus – that’s right, the very same love. This is expressed in two ways by Jesus:

1. “*The glory that you have given me I have given to them*” – What glory is that? The glory of the beloved Son of God!
2. “*so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*” Not only should our unity testify to the truth of who Jesus is, but it should also testify to the truth of how much we are loved by God the Father. Jesus Himself says that the Father has loved us even as He has loved Jesus.

Do we live as those who are so loved by God the Father? Do we rest in the security of the Father’s love? Do we walk in the motivation of the Father’s love? Do we love others in the strength of the Father’s love for us?

When we doubt God’s love for us, it may feel like humility, but it’s not. When we live anxious lives, striving to earn what has already been freely given to us, it may feel like obedience, but it’s not.

Strength, peace and joy come from knowing, receiving and living in the love God has given us in Christ. Consider Romans 5:1-5, especially to the closing “because” clause which really ties it all together –

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (ESV)*

### 3. Glory

Closely tied to sharing with Jesus in the love of God the Father is sharing with Jesus His glory as the beloved Son of God. Jesus speaks of our sharing in His glory in two ways: He says He has given us His glory now, and He says that we will one day see His glory and abide with Him in His glory:

*“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. <sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”*

#### A. Sharing in His Glory

First of all, we share in Christ’s glory now because we are adopted in Christ as sons of God, given the full rights and privileges of sons of God, dearly loved and belonging to God forever. We have no time to explore this in detail now, so I’ll just encourage you to read Romans 8 and maybe listen again to the sermons I preached on Romans 8 just over three years ago during the first ten weeks of our church’s worship in the summer of 2015.

#### B. Seeing His Glory

As wonderful and amazing as it is to be given the privilege of sharing in Jesus’ glory now as adopted sons of God, I’m even more stunned and excited by what Jesus prays in verse 24. For the glory we share in now remains veiled, and our experience of it remains tainted by sin and the realities of life in a fallen world. But in verse 24, Jesus prays, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me.”

Jesus had promised this to His disciples earlier, in John 14:1-3 –

*“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (ESV)*

Now He prays to the Father that this is His desire, His delight, to bring us to Himself where we can see, unveiled, the splendor of His glory, and we may be with Him where He is, beyond the veil of sin and death, in the glory of the splendor of the majesty of God.

### Conclusion

Having prayed such wonderful, powerful things for us, Jesus concludes His prayer with a promise:

*<sup>25</sup> O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (ESV)*

Jesus is not going to give up on us, He is going to continue to make His name known to us, through His word and His Spirit, that we may continue to abide in His love, and to walk in the light of His love until we are home with Him! This promise, sealed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, should fill us with confident joy on our worst days. Jesus didn't shrink back from the cross, and He won't turn back from continuing to reveal His love to us, that we may know Him more and more, until He sees His desire fulfilled and we are home with Him forever!