

A Prayer for Unity

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[0:00] Our Old Testament reading comes from 1 Chronicles 17, verses 20-27.

! This is a section from David's prayer, so verses 20-27. There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears.

And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself and to make a name for yourself and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people whom you redeemed from Egypt. You made your people Israel, your very own, forever, and you, Lord, have become their God. And now, Lord, let the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house be established forever. Do as you promised so that it will be established and that your name will be great forever. Then people will say, the Lord Almighty, the God over Israel, is Israel's God, and the house of your servant David will be established before you.

You, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him, so your servant has found courage to pray to you. You, Lord, are God. You have promised these good things to your servant. Now you have been pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight. For you, Lord, have blessed it, and it will be blessed forever. Amen.

Well, good evening, everyone. It's good to be with you. I've been preaching away the last four weeks in a row, and while it's a pleasure to be with other congregations to encourage them and be encouraged by them, it's really good to be back with my own church family. So, a pleasure to be with you this evening.

[1:58] We continue our series in the Gospel of John today. We took a break last week. We were back looking at finishing up this high priestly prayer taken from John 17, and this evening we reached this final section in verses 20 through 26. So, if you have a Bible, you can turn there with me. Obviously, many of us here are familiar with the Bible, and you may be familiar with different passages which speaks of Jesus going off in private to pray. There's times where he may, in the morning, go off to a solitary place, or when he's in a crowded area, he retreats from the crowds in order to pray, and very rarely do we actually get a look inside what Jesus is actually praying. I wonder if you ever thought, what is this conversation that Jesus may be having with the Father?

Father. And that's what makes this passage this evening so unique and so important, because we're actually given the opportunity to see and to hear what's on Jesus' heart. And here in this passage, it really serves as kind of like a last will and testimony, because this is the last prayer that we have recorded before Jesus is going to the cross. So, we hear what is on his heart. We hear what he is burdened with. And the focus in this final passage of his prayer is his burden for the church.

And it may be surprising at first, if you don't know this passage, about what he would actually be praying for. He's praying for the unity of the church. And you may be thinking, well, if Jesus were to be praying for the church, you may think, okay, he might pray that they have deeper faith, or that they read their Bibles more, or they have more boldness in sharing the gospel.

But Jesus is talking about unity. And so, this is what I want us to unpack this evening. Why Jesus would make this prayer? What does it mean for us? And ultimately, how does it bring glory to God? So, this is our passage, John 17, starting in verse 20. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

[4:21] Father, I want those you have given to me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make them known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. This is the word of God. Let's begin with prayer. Lord, we do thank you for this privilege to come together again to the preaching of your word. And so we ask, Lord, that while we may come with distractions or various burdens or heavy hearts, we ask, Lord, that you give us clarity of mind, that we may listen to your word and may receive it, that it may sink down deep into our hearts, that we may be encouraged and corrected by it, that you may receive the glory from our time together. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, as I mentioned, we've been going through this high priestly prayer, and I think it's, we can kind of think about it in three parts, almost as if it's concentric circles. Because we started by looking at verses one through five, and it's this innermost circle where Jesus is praying for himself. He's asking God for his own glorification.

And then we kind of move out to that second ring, verses six through 19. This is Jesus praying for his own disciples, that the Father would protect them, that he'd fill them with this full measure of joy. And we get to this outermost ring this evening, where Jesus is praying for those who will believe in me through the message of the disciples. And so we need to recognize who those are in this passage.

[6:08] It's not simply the contemporaries of the disciples. It's not simply the New Testament church that is soon to come about. It's Jesus looking far into the future to include all the believers down through the ages.

And so if you are a follower of Jesus, Jesus is praying for you in this passage. And so of course we recognize that prayer is our means of communication with God, but I think the beautiful thing that we see in this passage is that Jesus is also praying for us.

And this isn't simply just a one-time prayer that he prayed in the upper room before he went to the cross. Jesus is an ongoing pattern of prayer for his people. We have to only turn to 1 John 2, where it explains this, that he continues to speak to the Father in our defense.

And so sometimes when you get deep into passage, you may think, okay, how do I actually apply this passage to those who are hearing? This is a really easy passage to apply, because Jesus is speaking directly to us in this context.

And he's praying that we may have unity. And he says so three times in the first three verses. And so this is what I want us to consider tonight, this unity that Jesus prays for.

[7:18] And I really want us to consider in three points. I want us to first consider the nature of our unity, the means of unity, and the goal of the unity. The nature, the means, and the goal of this unity.

So let's consider this first, the nature of this unity, and think about what is Jesus referring to here? What does this look like in the church? And it actually may be better to ask this question in the negative at first.

What is he not referring to here? Because he's not, when he's speaking about unity, he's not simply talking about union, or some form of uniformity. I think oftentimes this passage can be mistaken, and you think about this big picture of the ecumenical church.

We just need one big church. We need to do away with denominations altogether. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. He's not talking about organizational union. He's talking about relational unity.

And so we don't have to go very far after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection when we get this really beautiful picture of the oneness of the church that he's praying for. If you think about the religious landscape before Christianity, there were certainly a number of religions across the world, but they were largely defined by ethnic groups and cultures.

[8:33] And so in this case, we see something very different come about when we have this New Testament church spring up, because it's not defined by ethnicity any longer. Christianity is truly the first multi-ethnic religion.

And so it begins, this message is proclaimed by this New Testament church that ethnicity is no longer a barrier. It no longer determines covenant access to God. There is neither Jew nor Greek,

Paul says.

There's neither Jew nor Gentile. We are all equals under the gospel of Jesus. And so this is what we see played out very early in the book of Acts, that this New Testament church, they're eating together, they're worshiping together, they share their possessions, they are inviting others into this faith community.

We see it even expands, it goes, it spans across class. If you think of the book of Philemon, Paul is writing to this leader in the church, Philemon, and encouraging him to forgive and to receive back his former slave, Onesimus, not simply as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ.

And so we see in the church, the rich and the poor, the slave and the free, all being welcomed into this fellowship that's rooted in Christ. And it's not just the joy of fellowship that's shared in this New Testament church, but also the sorrow and the hardship, the growth of the church, it comes about through great persecution, great suffering, imprisonment, executions.

[10:03] Yet we see the church endure by bearing each other's burden. And so I think we can look at this New Testament church and think, wow, this is such a beautiful picture of the unity that Jesus prayed for.

But I think actually when we look in this passage, Jesus is taking this idea of unity even a step further here. Because if you look in verse 21 again, it says, I pray that all of them may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us. And so Jesus is praying that the believers may be united to the same degree as the Father and the Son are united.

And so I think it's important. Sometimes we throw around these theological terms. We talk about Father, Son, and Spirit. We talk about the Trinity. That term Trinity is not used in the Bible. What we see played out in the Bible here is the Bible very clearly describes three persons of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons are one God, the same in substance, equal in power, and glory. And so when we talk about the members of the Trinity, we see they have one essence.

[11:12] This is what Jesus is praying for, that we may have the same degree of unity as the Father and the Son. But in actuality here, we see the believers, we can't literally attain, you and I attain the same essence with one another that Jesus is praying for here.

But what he's saying is he wants this perfect unity of the Godhead to serve as a model for the intimate loving bond that you and I should share together. And he actually goes a little bit further because not only should it be a model, but it should actually serve as the foundation for our Christian unity.

Because look at how verse 21, well, verse 22 begins, may they be one in us. And so he's highlighting unity between the Godhead.

He's also highlighting unity with the Godhead. And so we see this beautiful picture of oneness in this passage. That the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, and the Son is in us.

We are in the Son. Is there not a better picture of relational harmony that we can see? If we go to 1 Peter 1, verse 4, it says this, it says that we participate in the divine nature.

[12:26] Now, that doesn't mean when we become Christians, we become divine in any way, but it's speaking about how our life becomes hidden with Christ in God. And so this is why Paul always uses this phrase, the same phrase to describe Christians.

He always calls them as being in Christ. The Father and the Son are united in the Godhead.

Believers, we are united with the Godhead. Therefore, we can be united with one another.

And so this is the nature of the unity that Jesus is praying for here. And so in one sense, I hope this gives us great comfort that the all-powerful creator of the universe wants to be in intimate relationship with you and me.

that in an age of isolationism and loneliness, we are encouraged to have unity and fellowship as a family of Christ in the church.

But while it gives us comfort, it may also bring us fear because we say this is a really high bar. If he's talking about the same unity as the essence of the Godhead, how in the world are we supposed to attain this?

[13:32] How is this supposed to be brought about? Well, that brings us to our second point because we're going to be thinking about what is the means of this unity? How is this intimate bond brought about and how is it maintained?

I've got four kids at home. And as is common, when you have lots of kids, lots of things break very often. Often toys or things that they're playing with. And so oftentimes the fix is they come to me and say, well, can you fix this?

And sometimes I can. You get out your super glue, you get your tape and you can fix something. But that doesn't mean that everything can be fixed every time. And so as a child, it's sometimes hard to determine, well, when can something be fixed and when can something not be fixed?

And sometimes there's disappointment when they come and say, fix this toy and there's nothing I can do. There's no amount of super glue that's going to fix this little piece on the transformer.

There's no amount of tape that's going to fix this badminton racket.

It's going to break again in five minutes. I think this is often the case when we think about the church because we want to think about, what is the glue? What's the man-made glue that's going to unite the church?

[14:35] That's going to prevent division in the church? Ultimately, there's not a man-made solution. We think about many things. We may think about structure. Presbyterians love structure.

Right? We've no, have, we have elders and deacons with very clearly defined roles. We have different church courts with different jurisdictions. We have committees and we have boards and we have special processes for doing things.

We think, well, that's going to bring us together. All we have to do is think about the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland to see the history of divisions. You look at those charts and it just looks like this massive flow chart of all the different churches, all Presbyterianism that are broken away. The Church of Scotland, the Free Church and the Free Church Continuing, the Free Presbyterians, the United Presbyterians, the Reformed Presbyterians. All the same structure, but there's a lack of unity. Sometimes we may look to something like shared interests.

We want, we think shared interests are going to bring unity in the church. That if it's just, I want to go to church that people that are the same age and stage as me, that have the same interests and the same hobbies, that are, and there may be a similar profession of the same socioeconomic status.

[15:44] That's going to bring unity within the church. And while we may be naturally gravitate to those who are similar to us or share common interests, it's really superficial, superficial in nature.

It's not going to be, give us the grounding or the foundation that we need for true unity within church. Uniformity, commonality, those things aren't going to be the lasting glue that bring oneness.

I think oftentimes we think about doctrine, doctrine, doctrine is going to be the glue that we need.

And so we can spend all our time trying to nail down what the Bible says and fine tune our theology and hone in on the intricacies and details of what God is all about.

But if we think about it, if we go to the book of James, James is speaking to the church. He says, you believe in one God. Well, that's good. But even the demons believe in God and they shudder.

Think about it. Demons have good theology. In the book of Mark, when Jesus is casting out demons, he prevents them from speaking because he knows that they know who he is.

[16:51] They recognize his divine identity and authority. So even demons have good doctrine. And it may scare them to death, but it doesn't change them.

And so in the same way, that can be true of us. But honestly, if you look over church history, some of the most theologically minded people in the church have also sometimes been some of the most divisive because their head knowledge doesn't actually transform the heart.

And so therefore, it doesn't lead to unity. And so the reality is that there's nothing that we can do to manufacture this unity. There's no human means of gluing us all together.

What Jesus is talking about here, true means of unity comes through the transforming work of the gospel. And so look at verse 20 again. He says, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.

He's saying, I'm praying for those who will come to faith in the gospel through the message of the disciples that's going to be transmitted down through the generations. And so you think about how a telegram works.

[17:58] Maybe some of you actually were around and actually sent a telegram or telegraph back in the day. But you'd actually go to a telegraph office to send your message and that would be relayed via Morse code to another office and that office would receive it and store it and then retransmit it until it gets to its final destination.

And originally, the original telegraphs, they only had a range of about five or six miles. And so you think about this message, if it had to be sent far, it had to be retransmitted and resent over and over again.

I think the spread of the gospel, it really occurs in a similar fashion. And so I wonder if we really marvel at this. If we think about how the gospel has been transmitted and relayed to you, who told you about the gospel?

And who told them? And who told them? Generation after generation, person after person, if we were to trace this back, would it not come from the mouths of the apostles themselves?

This is what Jesus is talking about, this apostolic message. It's this unchanging good news preached by the apostles down through the generations received by you and me. And so this message, we need to remember, it's not a message of trying harder.

[19:08] It's not a message of self-improvement. It's not a message based on legend or made-up story. If it was best on those things, it would simply fizzle out over time.

But Paul tells us in Romans 1 that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Man was created in the image of God that we were supposed to live in perfect union with him, but because of the fall, sin separated us from God.

And as a result, we are justly deserving of his wrath. But it says that God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And so this message that Jesus wants proclaimed by the apostles, it's playing out in real time in front of him. Because it's only days later that he's going to be arrested and beaten and crucified and buried.

He willingly taking the punishment for our sins. But we know the good news that he doesn't stay in the grave, that he rose from the dead conquering sin and death forever.

[20:17] And so some of us have been around the church our whole lives and we've heard this message of the gospel over and over and over again. And sometimes we just become numb to it. Or sometimes we just kind of think about it in the abstract or generalities.

We've heard, yes, God loves the world. But in this prayer, Jesus is personalizing this message. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you.

He's praying that we as his people will know that God loves them the same way that God loves us the same way that he loves the Son.

And so this is really an incredible reality to get our heads around here that God the Father loves you as much as he loves his Son.

In our sin and in our filth, in the depth of our rebellion, he has chosen you and me to love us, to cleanse us, to give us the righteousness of his Son, to bring us from death to life that we may be called sons of God.

[21:24] God. We go back in time to 1572. John Knox, the Scottish reformer, he became ill with pneumonia and his condition began to deteriorate.

And as he lay in his deathbed, he turned to his wife and he said, Go. Go where I cast my first anchor. And she immediately knew what he was talking about and she went and got his Bible and she opened it up to John 17 to this passage, the high priestly prayer and she read it over him.

And after she was finished, he commented, Oh, what a comfort this chapter is. See, the truth of God's love for him is what was his anchor in his life and ministry.

In the same way, should God's love not be our anchor? that the love of God may move us to relationship with others, move us into deeper relationship with him.

The gospel, it's not merely good news for us to know, it's good news for us to experience. And so, when God's love so permeates our hearts, it's going to transform the way that we live, it's going to transform the way that we relate to other people.

[22:43] So, think about how Paul talks about this again in Philippians 2. He says, we have this encouragement in the fact that we are united to Christ. We have this comfort in his love. We get to share in his spirit.

We get to experience the tenderness and compassion of the Father. Therefore, we need to be like-minded. We are called to have the same love and be of one spirit and one mind.

This is the means of unity. It's rooted in Christ. So, that then brings us to our final point. What is, what's the purpose of this unity? Think about that telegraph illustration again.

I think it's really good. It's a comfort for us to think about how the gospel has been transmitted generation over generation from person to person and how it reached us. The illustration, it breaks down if we think that we're the final destination, that we're the terminus of that message.

The gospel message was never meant to end with you and me. It's our duty. It's our command. It should be our pleasure to relay it. And so, look at what it says in verse 21 again.

[23 : 50] Why does Jesus pray for unity? So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Verse 23, what happens when believers are brought into unity? Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The purpose of our unity is for others to come to the saving faith in the person and work of Jesus. If we think back of this past weekend, I think we see a beautiful example of that.

And we have our friends from South Carolina with us from a church that has supported Rachel and I for more than six years. A church that has given to the renovation of this church building.

They want to send a group to be able to see what Christ is doing in us and through us and they want to be able to participate in that. We see how this played out this week.

The point of this relationship is not simply so we can just make some friends across the ocean. We can eat pork together. Think about this partnership. It's so that we may see people come to know Jesus.

[24 : 55] And those of us who were here just yesterday for this community hall gross, I hope you saw this. I hope you saw the unity play out amongst us. That people just coming off the streets who were just curious about what was going on with these people gathered in front of the church.

People who didn't maybe un-church, maybe never even stepped foot in a church, that were experiencing the love of Christ maybe the first time in their lives. And so what a joy it is to see this church gather together different ages, different backgrounds, different nationalities, all for the sake of the gospel.

And I think we need to recognize it. It's wonderful to do events like this, but something like a hog roast is not the beginning and the end of what ministry looks like in the church. I think it's good to have a big picture of the need, but oftentimes our mind just stays here.

We recognize, yes, there's darkness in our society around us. We see this need for the gospel. We long for revival, but we often fail to personalize this message. Think about, we just had the Scottish parliament elections just a few weeks ago.

We heard no shortage of politicians talking about the change that they want to bring about. They speak in big platitudes about needing to improve education or eliminate, we need to eliminate poverty or we need to end racism.

[26 : 09] And again, they're speaking on a very high level here. They're saying, this is what the government needs to do. This is the government's responsibility. But I wonder if we were to ask them individually, you want to improve education, when was the last time that you tutored a student?

You want to end poverty, when was the last time you fed the homeless? You want to end racism, when was the last time you had someone from a different race inside your home for dinner? I think oftentimes, this is what we see.

We see, they see the need in society, but they call on government to fix it, shirking any sense of personal responsibility. This is what often plays out when we think about the gospel, right?

We claim that we want to see the gospel spread, but really, I'd rather someone else go through the hassle of having to spread it. We talk about the role of the church and the responsibility of the church but we don't always think about what our role in the church is.

The clue is, this is not meant to be a place where we just kind of collect warm bodies on a Sunday.

We need men and we need women, we need children, we need married and single, we need students and graduates, young and old, to be committed to the spread of the gospel.

[27 : 23] And Jesus says that the spread of the gospel is going to come when the world sees our unity. It's really hard for the world to see our unity when we only sit next to each other for two hours on a Sunday. The world is going to see our unity when we are committed to the gospel, when we are willing to sacrificially give of our time and our energy and our resources to see the love of God be spread in this community so that the gospel becomes so undeniable and irresistible to those around us.

Because this is what the ultimate vision of what Jesus is praying for here when we turn to verse 24. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory.

This desire, it's not a mere wish that Jesus has, but it's an expression of will founded upon acknowledged right. Man was created to live in perfect harmony with God and behold his glory. Sin prevented that from happening. But Jesus has now come. He has, through his completed work, he now allows for this unity to be found and possessed once again.

And so while we can get a glimpse of this glory of God in our lives now, our longing should be for when we, that day, when that veil has been lifted and we can see the full glory of the Father, when we may behold the glory of Jesus and we do so in perfect unity.

[28:56] This is what we get when we read in Revelation 7. It speaks of this great multitude that there's no one can count from every nation and tribe and people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

And they cry out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. This is a picture of the church in perfect unity beholding the perfect glory of the Son.

This is ultimately what we should be striving for as a church. That as we draw nearer to Jesus, we're drawing nearer to one another that we may behold the glory of God.

That we may see it and share in it. May it be so. Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you for the encouragement from this word that we know that the Son is praying for us.

That he continues to intercede on our behalf. We thank you, Lord, that in all your glory and your might you desire to be an intimate relationship with us.

[30:15] and so may that be the foundation for our unity. Lord, we desire to be united to one another and may it not be just based on goodwill or much effort but may it be rooted in the gospel.

That the unity that we display may be seen by an outside world. That the gospel may go forth with power. Lord, may it be our deepest and most earnest desire that you may be glorified.

And we thank you for the opportunity to share in that glory as you are a united people. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.