

John 17:20-26

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[0:00] Living Christ, I pray that you will, by the Holy Spirit, let your voice be heard. May we encounter afresh the wonder of the triune God. I pray in His name. Amen.

Such a delight to be with you this evening and to share something from this remarkable passage in John chapter 17. I encourage you to keep your Bibles open to that text, John 17, 20 to 26. I've entitled it this, Eavesdropping on a Father-Son Conversation. Trinitarian Dynamics of mission, oneness, glory, and love. Our first response in general to being allowed to eavesdrop and listen in to a conversation between two persons of the Trinity must surely be wonder and awe. That we can, and that He invites us into this conversation. The dynamics that arise within this Trinitarian conversation between Father and Son are the foundation for everything that is prayed in it. There are four amazing dynamics that flow to us in this great passage.

Mission, oneness, glory, and love. But they all flow from the Trinitarian life of God. Therefore, I want to begin with just a few words about the Trinity. Someone has said that those who deny the Trinity will lose their souls. Those who seek to understand it will lose their minds.

Don Lewis was a friend and regular, attended this service for many years, and I really appreciated him. He once told me that he thought that I understood the Trinity. The Father and the Son are actually mentioned, and of course, no one understands the fullness of the Trinity.

It's mystery. And yet, things are revealed to us. And I don't think they're ever as clearly revealed as in this passage before us. It's quite a remarkable passage. The Father and the Son, of course, are mentioned explicitly here. And although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, the words of Jesus in John 14 to 16 that you looked at a few weeks ago, and again later on in John chapter 20, make it abundantly clear that the Spirit of God is also fully God and fully a person, and that the Spirit is vital in implementing all that Jesus expresses here as His desires for His people.

[2:41] From a technical theological perspective, it is popular in certain theological circles these days to speak of the so-called classical understanding of the Trinity, one that emphasizes the oneness of the Trinity, and I fear sometimes at the expense of the threeness of the persons.

They're very much afraid that persons might be understood as three individuals in the Trinity. We know that there are not three individuals in the Trinity. There are three persons who are persons in relation. Each is in the other in a remarkable way.

And the threeness of the persons is an equal emphasis to the oneness of the essence. For example, in great church fathers like Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers.

The classical school speaks of three relations and one essence, rather than three persons in one essence in one communion. I do acknowledge that there is mystery in the Holy Trinity, but I want to insist also that some things have been clearly revealed.

Persons talk to each other in prayer, not relations. If what has been revealed is not the basis for our understanding of the eternal or imminent Trinity, then we're back on our quest looking for God.

[3:58] God's revelation to us in Christ and by the Spirit, these are the means by which He teaches us what God is really like in eternity and in heaven. And so, I want to begin by affirming, and this is, I think, clear from Scripture, God is one in essence, one in communion, one in love, but that He is also three in person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This passage puts this into very clear profile. Now let me return to the four great requests that are made by Jesus in this wonderful conversation He has with His Father.

We're going to see that each one of these requests is grounded in some Trinitarian reality. Actually, every phrase in this passage is filled with meaning, profound meaning.

So we're going to look at what it is the Son asks of the Father as He's about to go to the cross. If there is great mystery in the triune being of God, there's also great mystery in this passage, because sometimes you feel like I've mentioned four things that are in this passage, mission, oneness, glory, love, but they all seem to merge into one another.

That's what makes this... But should we be surprised that it's a very mysterious prayer when we're talking about the mystery of the triune Godhead speaking to each other? My hope is as we look at this text, we will gain a fresh understanding that the Trinity, God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not just a creedal confession to be made, which we all make when we just said the creed.

[5:42] My hope for us is that we will gain a fresh understanding and understand that the Trinity is especially not just a creedal confession to be made, but that everything about the gospel is actually grounded in the triune nature of God.

One can easily see why theologian Cornelius Plantinga once said what he did when he suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity is attached with conceptual gears and pulleys to other areas of Christian interest.

And theologian of worship, John Whitfleet, affirms similarly that the Trinity is like a foundation to our faith. It's a grammar. It's a backbone.

It's a substructure. It's a linchpin. It's a capstone. It's a cornerstone of Christian theology. Now to the four things that Jesus asks and their Trinitarian underpinnings.

Number one, the first theme in Jesus' prayer to the Father is concerning the church's mission. This is implied from the very first verse in verse 20 where Jesus announces He doesn't just want to pray for His own imminent journey to the cross, which was verses 1 to 5 of this passage, and He doesn't just want to pray for His disciples.

[6:58] That's the second passage in this great prayer, verse 6 to 19. But in fact, He wants to pray for those who will believe in Him through the witness of His disciples.

So, missions on His mind. The missions theme is also explicit in verse 21 where Jesus expresses a purpose statement for His request.

So that the world may believe that You sent Me. And then this is followed up in verse 23 by these words. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them as You have loved Me.

So, there can be no doubt that in this prayer, world mission is on Jesus' mind and therefore on the mind of the Father. This mission is in keeping with two great passages that we know so well in the New Testament.

The Great Commission, I was once in a Greek class at a university Greek class, all people training for the ministry, and they'd never heard of the Great Commission. I was the only person in the class who heard of the Great Commission.

[8:00] Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Lo, I am with you to the very end of the age. And then Acts chapter 1, verse 8, you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the outermost parts of the earth.

So, God the Father and God the Son are engaging together about mission, the mission of the church to the very end of the age and to the very ends of the earth.

That's what's on God's mind as Father and Son talk about it. But the key question here is, what is the Trinitarian reality that grounds and fuels this mission?

This is so important. Just before this passage in verse 18, Jesus has indicated that the missional nature of His people lies in their relationship to Himself.

As one who was sent from the Father. Jesus says these powerful words, Father, as You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

[9:04] So, our mission is grounded in God's mission expressed through Jesus, the sent one. God the Father sent His Son. The word for that in Latin is *missio*.

And God the Father and God the Son sent the Spirit. And the word for that again is *missio*. And somewhere in the middle of round about the time of the Reformation, a Catholic Jesuit came up with the concept of, how about we call our mission as the church to the world also *missio*. *Missio Dei*. God sent His Son. And guess what? You and I are in the Son. We are in Christ. That's the greatest prepositional phrase of the Christian gospel.

We are in Christ. And Christ is in us. And the Spirit is in us. And the Spirit is a missional spirit. And so here we get this idea that our mission as the church is not what we do for God.

It's what we do with God. Every church is called to be missional, on mission with God, continuing the mission of Jesus to the world.

[10:10] How do we do it? Our agency, which is real, we are meant to be on mission, is in God's agency. As I said, we don't do mission for God. We do it with God.

And notice especially, it's an outflow of life in the triune God. This makes the missional church both deep and wide. The call to be a missional church is first to be deep into the love of God, into the life of the Trinity, through word and sacrament and community.

And flowing from that depth, there flows the width of mission to the world. Secondly, so God, the Father, and the Son, they talk about mission.

It's on their minds. As He's about to go to the cross. Secondly, the end goal of mission to the world is expressed in verse 21. That they all may be one.

So the second theme in Jesus' prayer is oneness. Jesus prays that those who are His people now and those who come to faith through their witness will actually be one.

[11:11] Why is Jesus so concerned about that? Well, it took the Christians in the book of Acts a long time to embrace the Gentiles. And He wants His church to be one, made up of Gentiles and Jews together.

The ardent desire of Jesus for the oneness of His church is expressed in both verse 21 and 22. That all of them may be one, Father. That they may be one as we are one.

That is remarkable. That the unity of the church is grounded in the oneness of the triune God. We need to know that Christ's greatest dynamic for world mission, folks, is not a fancy evangelistic program.

Though there are some very good ones around, don't get me wrong. But God's greatest key, greatest dynamic for world mission is not a program at all.

It is the remarkable oneness of His people. Ethnic groups together in a way that would stun the world then and now. But what is that oneness grounded in and empowered by?

[12:22] In verse 21, Jesus says, That all of them may be one, Father, just as you and I. You are in me. And I am in you. That is mind-blowing.

That the oneness of the Trinity can become ours as we enter into it. It is already ours. Once we come to be in Christ and the Spirit is in us, we are drawn into the very life of God.

That we can be one just as the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

If the dynamic of mission is grounded in the triune God, so is the oneness of the church that promotes it. These words are utterly remarkable. There is an in-ness.

I know that's not a proper word. In-ness. It came to me from theologian Julie Canlis who used the word about the in-ness. The in-ness. The Father and the Son are in each other.

[13:18] They're in-ness. You follow me? Great. And there's an in-ness about the Father and the Son. That is, they are mutually internal to one another in a very mysterious way that doesn't compromise their own personhood.

John's Gospel informs us of this in a number of places. We as human persons are an analogy of that in our interdependence upon one another. But we are never mutually internal to one another. This text clearly informs us, however, that we can be in the life of God, in relationship with God, participating in the relationship between Father and Son in an utterly remarkable way.

This is the heart of our faith. There is a distinction to be observed here, of course. The Father and the Son are one in terms of their nature. We become one with them by grace.

grace. And in this union that we have with the Father and the Son, I want to be very clear. We don't become God. We become like God in character.

[14:24] But we actually become more fully human by being in Christ. And the main point here is that there is no unity in the church without our real union with Christ.

Verse 22 explains how we can possibly be in union with Christ and therefore in union with the Father. It says, I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one as we are one. And that brings us to the third theme that we overhear in this conversation between the Father and the Son. Mission, oneness, and thirdly, as we eavesdrop and hear about mission, as we participate in the mission of the Trinity, and as we hear about a community of oneness which is grounded in our union with the oneness of the triune God, we may well ask the question, what hope do we have of being in union with God like that?

A God who is more majestic and transcendent and glorious than we could ever imagine? I'm glad you asked. Verse 22 to 24 anticipate this question.

The third theme in Jesus' prayer is glory. He knows full well that we're not capable on our own to be one with God. We're not capable on our own to participate in His mission.

[15:36] We need His grace. And so Jesus says, I have given them the glory. This is the most astounding sentence I think of the whole passage. 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. Notice that God speaks that Jesus speaks about the union that He has with the Father and our being in Him in the same phrase.

So that we 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. How can we possibly take our place in union with Christ? We need grace.

But in addition to that, we need glory. Astonishing. God gives us glory in order to be able to participate in His life.

What is glory? And how have we received it? Glory is the outshining of inward excellence and virtue.

[16:35] Another way of saying it is that glory is the iridescence flowing from the life of God. We participate in it as reflectors of His iridescent natural glory.

Earlier in John 17, Jesus speaks about the glory that He had as the preexistent Son of the Father before the world began. That glory was veiled when He was here on earth in its regal sense, but His moral glory was visible for all to see.

And then His regal glory is restored as He ascends to the Father. And as He ascends to the Father, what is He going to do?

He's not just going to sit on a throne. The book of Hebrews tells us that His work in heaven is bringing many sons and daughters to glory, imparting the glory that He has to us.

That is, by His life and death and resurrection, He not only forgives our sins, we tend to be very focused on the forgiveness of sins as part of our salvation. That's wonderful, but there's much more to that, our salvation.

[17:42] We are made sons and daughters of the living God, and we are brought into glory. We participate in His glory.

That begins to happen when we are converted and come to Christ, but it continues throughout our lives, and it becomes part of our formation because Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18, we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory that comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The Spirit of Christ is transforming us with ever-increasing glory. I look at my life sometimes and I don't see the glory, but I take it by faith that God is working His glory in me and He's working His glory in you, transforming you, making you worthy because we are in and of ourselves not worthy, but God gives us glory in His Son by the Spirit that we might share in His glory.

That glory is a process now in this life, but there's coming a day when the climax will happen, when we see Christ, when Christ returns, or when we die and see Him face to face.

Verse 24 says, Father, I want those You have given 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.

[19:11] It is not surprising that when Jesus comes again, according to the Gospels, He will come, Luke chapter 21, 27, with power and great glory, with His saints who have been glorified, and His glory which is iridescent will be reflected in them as reflected glory.

As 1 John says, when we see Him, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. But just inside the glory theme, the fourth element of what's going on in this wonderful passage, which sometimes feels like wheels within wheels.

I preached on Ezekiel this morning at another church, and so wheels, wheels within wheels is in my mind. The fourth, so, mission, oneness, glory, all grounded in who God is and what He becomes for us.

But fourthly, just inside of the glory theme lies this majestic theme of love. There's a mention of the word love, I don't know if you noticed this, three times over.

Mission, yes, is by participation in God's mission. It's one that's brought about through union with God, which is enabled by His imparted glory to us.

[20:32] But all of this is as a result of the amazing love of God. The love of God. So verse 23 says, Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them.

That is the world, as you have loved me. This is remarkable. How much do the Son and the Father love the world of people and all who will believe the way they love each other?

Our God is a benevolent God. He's for humanity. I sometimes worry that people leave church sometimes with the idea that God is against them. But God is for us.

That's the whole message of the gospel. God is for us. He's benevolent. And so, there is this infinite, immeasurable love between the Father and the Son that He pours out on humanity and has demonstrated that by the giving of His Son to die on a cross for us.

And He desires that all will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy chapter 4. Second reference to love, Jesus says, I want my people in verse 24 to see my glory, the glory you have given me eternally because you loved me before the creation of the world.

[21:49] So, our reception of glory is an outflow of His glory, a glory He has eternally received from the Father. But in the sharing of that glory in the Trinity, that has flowed over to us and has become accessible to us because He loves us, because you loved me before the creation of the world and you love your people from before the creation of the world.

And third mention is in verse 25 to 26, Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you and they know that you sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and I myself may be in them.

The gospel, my friends, is a gospel of in-ness, the in-ness of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit and are being drawn by grace to be in Christ by the Spirit so that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

Christ indwells you, every child of God. You're indwelt by Christ. You're indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore the whole Trinity. Jesus said in John chapter 14 that we will come.

He speaks of his Father and he says, we will come and make our home in you. Rejoice in that tonight, folks, that the whole Trinity lives within you. In other words, our eavesdropping leads to the very heart of the Trinity as love.

[23:26] Love experienced between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the intimacy of their being together forever in eternity. Something that was never broken.

And as with the other three themes, it is a love that we experience since we have been drawn into intimacy with God. I myself in them. This is about the intimacy between the Father and the Son being shared with his people so that they live in love and of course this is the fuel for our unity and is the power of our mission.

I've been reading lately about a gentleman who was wrongly put in prison for ten years in a prison in the country I grew up in in Zimbabwe.

His name is Rusty Labuskachny. It was the worst condition you could ever imagine for ten years. In that prison he came to know Christ and he speaks about an inner life with God that he discovered in

the midst of all of that that echoes so much of what I've been saying tonight.

He says things like this the man who has no inner life is a slave to his surroundings. If you don't build your inner world the outer world will build it for you.

[24:49] Circumstances will dictate your way of being. Opinions will dictate your identity and so on he goes.

So I want to say as I finish all of this wonderful stuff about the Trinity and about life in the Trinity it's something we need to learn to live into. This is a series about formation. Formation is about living in wonder and awe into the very love of the triune God.

It's about contemplating his glory and sharing in the glory of the triune God in our prayers in our Bible reading in our meditation especially through word and sacrament as the gathered people of God.

And it's a glory that enables us to participate in the oneness of the triune God by means of our union with Christ by the Spirit which is the great secret of mission participating in God's mission to the world.

My prayer is that we will all delight in these amazing Trinitarian realities live into them enjoy the presence of God that's what matters more than anything else in our formation.

[26:06] See our formation is not legal do this do that do the next thing it is evangelical God has loved us from eternity past God has provided our salvation before we were even born in the vicarious life and death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension for us and in light of all those things all that goodness the goodness of God leads us to repentance the goodness of God invites our transformation transformation into his mission his oneness his glory and his love Amen