

John 17:20-23 “Unity”

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[0:00] I really love this prayer of Jesus that we've been looking at here in John 17.

I hope that you love it at least half as much as I do because we're going to be listening in to Jesus here for two more weeks. I know it's been a few already, but we've already noticed that even as Jesus is heading to the cross, we are on His heart.

He's praying for us, as Derek reminded us earlier. Isn't that an amazing comfort? I think I say that every week.

But today we're getting to the verse that clarifies that reality most explicitly. Where Jesus says, I pray for those who will believe in me through the word of my disciples.

You, me, Southwood Church, our family on His heart. Our names on His hands.

[1:17] Our needs on His lips. Talking to His Father about us. Every week we've been marveling at a different aspect of Jesus praying for us.

Today I want to remind you that He not only prayed for you then, 2,000 years ago, but He still prays for you today.

He always lives to intercede for us, Hebrews 7.25. Has someone ever said to you, or maybe you've said to someone else, thank you so much for praying for me.

When I hear you praying for me, it's such a great encouragement and comfort to me that you're praying for me. When your grace group gathers around you as you hurt and someone is praying for you, what do you feel?

Don't you feel cared for and valued? Doesn't that lift your spirits? Imagine the comfort, the joy of hearing Jesus pray for you.

[2:24] He is. You can even hear some of what's on His heart here in John 17. So we talk a lot about being the hands and the feet of Jesus to show His love to our neighbors.

And to use that same analogy, you can be the lips of Jesus when you pray for someone. Because He loves them like that too. He prays for them.

When your grace group gathers to pray, you are being the lips, even the heart of Jesus to one another. You're helping each other remember that He still prays for us.

Even as you use His words to actually hear Him praying. Prayers we know His Father hears. Prayers we know His Father answers.

And as Jesus, the most righteous man ever, His prayers avail much. What a great Savior we have to be praying for us. What a privilege it is to be His, right?

[3:23] And then to be His hands and feet and lips to one another and to this world. I hope you'll hear Jesus praying for you today and that you'll help others to hear Him as you pray with them.

Let's pray together and then we'll listen in to Jesus praying again. Jesus, we are so grateful that you pray for us.

Jesus, I am very grateful right now. I need you. I need to hear your word. I need to know your voice. I need to embrace its hope and life and love. We need that. We need you every hour.

We need you. And right now especially, thank you for your word. Lord, that we will hear your voice. Would you speak it to our hearts by your Spirit? We ask in your name.

[4:26] Amen. John 17 at verse 20. Jesus continues talking to His Father.

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.

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. 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.

Thus far, God's holy word for which we give Him thanks. Last week, we heard Jesus praying to the Father to keep us safe, set apart for Himself, and then to send us into the world.

Now, you may have noticed in those verses, Jesus is praying for our unity. Unity. Some see unity as the theme of this entire prayer.

[5:47] And while I don't necessarily agree with that, Jesus does pray for it three times. Unity is a buzzword these days, isn't it?

Perhaps because people are so divided these days that unity seems unattainable and enviable. We want it in families, in communities, in churches, in nations.

But where does unity come from? As Jesus prays for it, He's going to point us to its source. Does unity just happen when we quit caring? We don't care about anything else but unity.

We just try to get along with everybody. We lower the bar where there's no truth, no real passion for anything except for unity itself. Is that the source of unity?

You'll hear that in some churches. But Jesus says it's actually the opposite. And this is true on a team or in a company, but it's especially true among the people of God.

[6:54] See, the source of Christian unity is a shared relationship, a shared passion for God, for His truth, for His mission. Notice this back in verse 11.

It's the first time in this prayer Jesus prays for our unity, for us to be one. It's unity that results from being kept in relationship with the one true God.

Protect them, keep them faithful, connected to You, Father, that they may be one, even as we are one.

The image of this that has always helped me is the image of an orchestra. Imagine that we had this morning on stage a 100-piece orchestra, right? And they all showed up and wanted to get their instruments in tune to get started.

If each of them was personally passionate about unity and turned to the person next to them and said, hey, let's start playing our instruments and get in tune, you would have a cacophony of French horns and violins and tubas and whatever else was up here.

[8:03] They would all be very loud and probably for quite some time very out of tune with one another across the stage. Instead, how do you get a unified pitch in a group like that?

You musicians know how you do it. One clarion note is played and each instrument tunes to that note. Soon, as each does that, what do you have?

You don't have a hundred different notes. You now have all of them unified on one pitch together in beautiful harmony because they were attuned to the one note.

That's what Jesus is talking about here as the source of our unity. It's this special relationship that He shares with His Father that, remember, He's inviting us into it.

Verse 21, they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you that they also may be in us.

[9:12] In other words, we're different in so many ways, but the essence of life for us is knowing Jesus. Our shared passion is relationship with Jesus.

Our common mission is the glory of Jesus. And the more that that becomes true of each one of us individually, the more perfectly we become one.

The more on pitch we are together, the more we rejoice in the glorious Savior than anything else in the world. See, what Jesus is praying for is more than just friendship, where we share lots in common.

That happens, that's a good thing, but this is the unity of the Trinity. He longs for us to share that spiritual unity because the most important thing about me is the relationship with God that I have because His Spirit dwells in me.

This, by the way, has always been how God's people find unity. It comes not from our efforts at unity, looking around at one another.

[10:16] Not there first, but from our relationship with God, looking up to Him. Psalm 133 is a hymn in praise of unity about how good unity is, how pleasant it is when we live like that, connected, united to one another.

It has two images in this short psalm. The first is the oil flowing down the head to set the priest apart, and then it's down to his beard, and then down to his robes.

See, unity in relationship with God that then flows down to unite us with one another as those set apart as His people. The second image has a very similar point.

The dew on Mount Hermon, that's the highest point in all of Israel, flows down to Mount Zion below to all God's people.

As we are more deeply and passionately united to God Himself, see, then unity flows down to where we share it with one another. So that when we are distracted from God and His glory, when we're not looking up together, we feel very much that we are divided.

[11:32] When that's not what's so important to us, we're easily divided from one another. But that's so that when we do see God clearly, we begin to notice one another, to welcome one another, to honor one another in very practical ways.

It looks like something in our relationships. Ephesians 4 talks about the unity of God's people this way. Verse 3, if we're eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, that's what He calls us to.

And here's why. There's one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Do you see there the personal nature of our unity? It doesn't say one language, one nation, one social class, one personality type.

All of you get it together. That's not what it says. It says one Father. Unity comes from being defined by His adopting love. It says one Lord.

[12:46] Unity comes from being united to Jesus in baptism, knowing Him as life's greatest treasure. It says one Spirit. Unity comes from being united as part of the body of Christ, gifted for your special place in it.

That same heart's in 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul talks about us being many members with lots of unique and different gifts, but we're one body. Verse 13, for in one Spirit we became one body. No longer separated by ethnic or religious background. No longer separated by social class. No, we're one. This is what the gospel of Jesus, the salvation God brings to us, the faith that we have in Him does to us.

It achieves unity from otherwise very different people because even if there's nothing else that we share, we share the thing at the top. Number one, the most important reality in life is the same for us.

When have you experienced that kind of unity? As you've delighted in Jesus, as you've seen Him most clearly, as your great treasure. I felt it in India with people that I struggle to communicate with in words, but when we start doing things like singing praises to Jesus, like praying for someone together, like sharing the good news of Jesus from a passage in the Bible that I know what we must be talking about, my heart soars.

[14:22] This is Pastor Venu. Venu and I have gotten to be good friends. I met him seven years ago, the first time I went to India.

He's traveled with me each time I've gone. We've shared Jesus in homes and cars and schools and churches. We've prayed with people who were hurting.

We shared with each other about the challenges of life with Jesus and marriage and ministry and parenting and whatever else. And after just a few days of that, our hearts were so united that we still, from across the globe, share and pray for one another several years later now.

At the end of our trip, he introduced me at one Bible school as, this is my brother, Pastor Will.

And one of the students there who knew Venu well and loved him said, your brother? And we looked at each other like, are you kidding me? Have you seen us?

[15:32] Do we look like brothers? Brothers? And we talked later that outwardly we may not look like brothers, but we shared so much inwardly.

The same spirit. The same Savior. The same Father. Truly, he was right. Brothers from across the globe. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great British preacher of the last century, preached actually 80-some sermons on this passage, John 17.

So you do the math. I am less than 10% the preacher that he is. I'm stopping at five. Sermons are so helpful. One of the things he shares in them is his own experience of Christian unity across class boundaries.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones was raised in the upper crust of English aristocratic society. Think estates and drawing rooms. And for those of you who this means something to, Downton Abbey, that's where you are, okay?

And it was just understood that many of the working classes were beneath you. He never related with them. It wasn't part of his life. He was a very successful medical doctor when later in life he met Jesus.

[16:51] Several years after that he became a pastor and was called to a small rural church in Wales where many of his parishioners were illiterate.

And he found, much to his surprise, he acknowledges, an immediate affection for them. And even more surprisingly than that, that he learned from them.

He was told that would never happen. That he would never have that kind of experience with people like this. But something had changed. Now because of his connection with Jesus, he had a connection with people that he never would have cared about before.

Who is that for you? Maybe you felt this in a grace group. With people that you now treasure, that you look and think, I never would have ever met or hung out with this person.

Ever. Ever. We wouldn't have given each other the time of day. And now we meet and pray for one another and we encourage one another in Christ because we share nothing else. We never get distracted on any other topic.

[17:57] There's nothing else that we would both want to talk about. I love connecting with people with shared interests. I love connecting other people who have shared interests. But some of my most spiritually encouraging relationships come with those that I share little else with but Jesus.

Young people, you can experience this too. You also live in a world where everyone is desperate to belong.

How do I fit in? He wants to find his group. She wants to find her people. The ones you know that we're just like. But I got to tell you, it's beautiful when the kids from the drama club and the guy from the football team and the band kid and the academic team member and the cheerleader and the special ed student, when they all welcome one another into real friendship.

And that's hard, y'all. I'm not pretending that's easy. But when you all love Jesus, you can actually love beyond those differences. You can love in those differences.

You can even become a safe group for other people who don't seem to fit. They belong with you. That's where they belong. I hope you've tasted that Christian unity before, all of you, no matter how old you are.

[19:22] It's not to be taken for granted. Jesus prays for it multiple times, I think partly because we struggle to live in this.

Even though Jesus has made it a reality by adopting us into his family, it is true that we are united, young people and adults and kids and senior citizens.

But church people have been good at parties for a long time, all the way since back in Corinth. And I don't mean the kind of parties with cake and streamers. Those are good parties.

I'll come to those. I mean, I follow Paul and I follow Apollos. I follow Luther and I follow Calvin.

I follow hymns and I follow praise songs. For some of you, this may have been what turned you off to the church before. Many of you have told me this.

[20:21] That you felt like it was a place where you were unwelcome, like you didn't fit or belong in that group, like you would actually have to agree with them on everything and like all of the same things that they

did and feel the same way about everything to belong.

And y'all, that is awful because it excludes people. And that hurts people. But it is even worse because it is preaching that something else is more important than Jesus.

Do you see that? When we say you don't belong here until you like everything I like, until you do things the way we do them, until you look and dress and act the same way we do, it says that's more important than Jesus.

I can't be united to you until you are like me. And Jesus says you are united to them because of me, not because of what you look like or what they do. What's the solution?

What's the solution in Corinth and for us when we get divided in non-gospel party spirit like that? It's the one clear note of Jesus.

[21:33] I follow Christ, right? It's why the great creeds that are shared by Christians throughout the centuries focus on the person of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit over and over again.

I'm not saying the other conversations don't have their place. They do. They're fun to talk about after we're clear that we're united in Christ, that it's a family conversation. That's why we cheer for other churches in town.

We're not competing against them. That's why we speak the truth in love, why we forgive one another, why we serve one another. See, the more we find life in relationship with Jesus, not in any of the secondary things that we define ourselves by, then the more passionately we move forward together in unity.

Let me make one more application of this just briefly about our Christian unity on Tuesday. By the way, I'm glad that my talking about this makes many of you nervous.

That way I'm not alone. I hope it is not lost on you that same Father, same Savior, same Spirit does not say same political party.

[22:49] It's not in there. The unity of God's people is not organizational. Jesus wasn't Democrat or Republican or third party.

In fact, among his 12 disciples were political opponents. Matthew, the tax collector who had so cozied up to the idea of Rome being there that he worked for them.

Simon the zealot on the other end of the spectrum who wanted Rome out of there as fast and as strong as possible. Right there among Jesus' disciples. So we must guard against speaking as though a Christian must vote a particular way in order to be following Jesus.

See, when we speak that way, it leads people to those faulty conclusions I was just talking about. Faulty conclusions about the person of Jesus, the mission of his church, the nature of his kingdom. Now, certainly, God's Word and his Spirit guide us in engaging in all of life, including politics. And those are good conversations. We can talk about those.

[23:56] But we are united by something way more important than politics. By someone way more powerful than any human leader. God's people are united not even by a constitution, but by a crucifixion, right?

That's what we're about together. Don't forget that. That's what unites us to one another today and Wednesday and next Sunday and well beyond that. I hope you have brothers and sisters with whom you disagree politically.

Not just so you can change one another's minds before Tuesday. That's pretty unlikely. But so you can keep one another focused on the main thing. Where our life, our eternal life is found.

Our hope and confidence this week, like every other week, maybe especially this week, is found in the King of Kings. In the joy of being united to a God who loves us and prays for us.

That is something to be excited about. It's something to be passionate about. You can know you can wake up excited on Wednesday because that will be true and you'll be on His mission for His glory no matter whatever other circumstances are going on.

[25:07] Back to John 17. Aren't you glad? I am. If being passionately connected to Jesus is the source of Christian unity, if that's how we get connected, being passionately involved in His mission is the result.

Perhaps better said, Jesus accomplishing His mission of connecting others to Him is the result of our unity in Him.

Look at verse 21. You may have noticed this when we read it the first time. That they all may be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Verse 23. That they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

What's the result of otherwise different people being united in Christ? It's that people looking on realize that something otherworldly is going on.

[26:27] We live in a divided world, don't we? Watch how most of the United States feel on Tuesday and how united they seem. We hate the division, don't we?

We hate feeling that we don't like it inside of ourselves, we don't like it around us, and a divided church cannot heal the wounds of a divided world. We'll just make it worse.

We'll just bring some more division along with us. That's not what God has called us to. He's called us to something distinct that's going to impact the world. When otherwise divided people become unified, we want to know how.

How did that happen? How did that Auburn guy marry that Bama girl? What? How did that Jew and Gentile share in life and worship all the time?

How did they figure out? How did they figure out where to go? How did they figure out what day? How did they walk around loving each other like that? They used to hate each other. How did that retired finance exec Kamala fan grandmother and that unemployed 20-something high school dropout MAGA single mom love one another so much?

[27:47] Why do they hang out all the time? How come they seem to really enjoy it? That's the power of Jesus' cross. We don't know how to explain that in human terms.

We have to say there's something else beyond us that brought us together because it's nothing about us. I've read and wrestled this week over what Jesus is praying will happen.

This idea that the world is impacted. How exactly does that happen? How does our unity produce an impact on the world? Maybe you've thought that before. We're like, cool, so we could all be unified and I'm not sure anybody would notice you may think.

What's he saying? Jesus says it twice that this is what he's praying for and it's not as I figured that if all of us Christians just get in one global denomination I don't even know what to call it but if we just did that the world will all of a sudden convert to Christianity.

That's not what Jesus is saying. Remember, it's not an organizational unity. The source is that personal spiritual relationship with the Trinity. Jesus is also not saying that if all Christians just worked together better we would evangelize the world.

[29:05] No. It certainly helps when we labor together for the kingdom rather than against one another but best I can tell what Jesus is saying in his prayer is that when all Christians are united in dependence on Jesus for their relationship with the Father for the relationship they were made for for their life reflecting the image of God the way he created them to the world sees the message of Jesus clearly and the love of the Father truly.

They see the gospel the good news that Jesus claims that he alone connects us to our maker and we're all wondering is God there and how do I know him and if he's real what would it look like for me to have a relationship and Jesus says I am the way and the truth and the life and for that relationship you were made for.

Secondly that God loves us not because of how we perform but because of how Jesus has performed.

In fact Jesus claims here did you notice at the end that God loves us as he loves him.

Good stuff for next week okay we're coming back. love that God would love us like that. See whether the world embraces Jesus or not Christian unity sounds that clear note the one clear note that clear gospel message of hope and joy and life that is sounded so clearly in the pages of scripture it is in scripture alone that we find out that hope and that life is found by grace alone through faith alone through faith alone in Christ alone and that message sounded so clearly when we're all desperately needing him when we unite around our need for him and his meeting our need and Jesus longs to see that happen he prays for our unity and that our unity will spread his glory and grace to the whole world so that the world will know not how great our organizational skills are and that we all got together on the same page not how great the entertainment we produce is and this is the best show in town on Sunday morning no how great our savior is that's what they see

when we're united in this way around that savior and that relationship the beauty of Christian unity is that it can actually be a joy for you to experience and to live in not a burden that you have to go achieve that's one of the beautiful things about this passage

[32:04] Jesus still unifies us not only is he still praying for our unity but listen to verse 22 Jesus isn't saying go out there and be more unified you can do it what does verse 22 say Jesus is sharing divine glory with us he's giving it to us in order that we may be one to bring us to perfect unity that we may be one bride purified by him for him it's the glory of that Trinitarian relationship that he is inviting us into he's inviting you this morning to see that relationship and that savior as the most wonderful the most important part of your whole life what most delights you what most unites you to anyone else makes you most eager to be in relationship with them and Christian unity flows down as a byproduct of that gracious gift that we're united to him and so we get that gift and we get to keep opening it together and enjoying it together as we feed the hungry as we pray for one another in our grace groups as we share the good news and take it to the world and around the world till his glory is known everywhere by everyone that's his heart for us let's pray and ask for his help

Jesus would you indeed make us one we believe God is answering that prayer and continues to even in a culture of division that he's exalting you and we're seeing you as more needful and we're seeing you as more beautiful and we're seeing you as our life more and more and we pray that that would impact the world in ways beyond what we could plan for don't take our strategies work beyond us do exceeding abundantly beyond all we would ask or imagine because of your power that is at work within us because your spirit is uniting us and is convincing the world that you sent Jesus because you love them as much as you love him we thank you for your love and we pray that we would find joy in life in it even today in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org on keep going on court and we see you in life there we can't that was at us we'd like to say you we

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