

That They May Be One

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[0 : 0 0] Our sermon text this morning is the Gospel of John, chapter 17, verses 20 through 26. Let me invite you to turn there with me. For the past few months, we've been walking through chapters 13 through 17 of John's Gospel. We've been taking it section by section, word by word, to hear what God is saying to us today through what we've come to call in these chapters Jesus' upper room or his farewell discourse. And chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer at the end of this discourse, sometimes called his high priestly prayer. And today we come to the conclusion of that prayer.

So we're going to read together how Jesus concludes this farewell discourse as a whole and his high priestly prayer in particular. But before we do that, let me pray for us as we come to God's Word. God, we ask for your Holy Spirit to come and give light to our hearts, to our minds, as we come to your Word. Lord, help us not just to be hearers of your Word, but to be doers as well. For Jesus' sake, amen.

All right, John 17, verses 20 through 26. Jesus prays, 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 love me.

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 love me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I may know 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.

[2 : 1 6] Well, when you hear that someone you care about, or when you hear that someone you admire is thinking of you, that can be pretty powerful, can't it? I remember when I was in, when I was a ministry intern many years ago, I remember getting a handwritten note from the senior pastor at the time, and it was a simple note. It said nothing more than just, I'm praying for you, I'm encouraged by you and by your ministry and what God's doing through you. It wasn't anything fancy, but for me, it was significant. It was encouraging. It was empowering, even. Maybe you've had a similar experience. Maybe an older colleague at work that you look up to drops you an email and says, hey, I hope you're doing well. Keep up the good work. Or maybe your spouse texts you in the middle of the day just to say that they're praying for you because they know that you've had a hectic day.

Or perhaps it's a friend from church who tells you at small group that they had you in mind a lot this week and prayed for you and for that request you shared the last time you met, and they've been wondering how you've been going, how you've been doing. These things can be powerful.

I know one pastor who early in his ministry got a personal letter from John Stott, the great English pastor and author, encouraging him, spurring him on, and that letter, as you can imagine, became something of a cherished thing to this pastor. Now, as we turn to John 17, we see that something even more powerful is going on. In verse 20, it's not just a colleague or a spouse or a friend who's thinking and praying specifically for you. It's the Lord Jesus himself.

As he says, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. Now, Jesus began this prayer in chapter 17, praying for himself in verses 1 through 5, and then praying for his apostles in verses 6 through 19. That's who he's referring to in the first part of verse 20 when he says, I'm not just praying for these only. That's the apostles sitting there right in front of him. But you see that Jesus isn't just praying for those apostles sitting right there in front of him. Jesus looks ahead. He looks ahead to all those who will believe in him through that apostolic word.

He looks ahead to the church that will be formed by that life-giving proclamation of the cross, not just in the first generation, but on and on, down through the generations. As the apostolic gospel reverberates through history, calling men and women from every tribe and tongue and nation, this message of reconciliation between God and humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Jesus looks ahead and he sees that church and he prays for them.

And that means that this prayer of Jesus is for us too, for our church. And it's for you. If you've come to place your trust in Christ. Consider that. The Lord of heaven, the world's true king, the center of all real spirituality and human flourishing, he thought of you and prayed for you before you even came into being. What a wonderful and what a humbling thought that on the night before he was betrayed, Jesus thought of Trinity Baptist Church and all the churches and you. In his divine knowledge, he held us all in his heart, seeing us together and individually and prayed for us.

[5 : 51] Over the past year as a family, we've been reading a series of books called The Wingfeather Saga. It's a fantasy series by Andrew Peterson. And at one point in the story, the central characters, who are these three young children, they discover personal letters from their father who had died many years ago. And as they read these letters that were directed to sort of each one of them, it was life-changing to know that their father had thought of them and had written sort of to their future selves, calling forth in them, calling out the good in them, and inviting them to live into their calling.

That's a bit of what Jesus is doing here. He's looking at us and he's praying for us. So we know that we're not alone and we're not forgotten. Our king has been praying for us. Our king has been praying for you before we even came to be. So why don't we see what Jesus prays for us? And let's find out what his desire is for us so that we can live into it and be encouraged that he's with us in it. Now there are two big requests here at the end of chapter 17. And we're going to look at both of those requests and we're going to spend a little more time on the first one and then we're going to kind of wrap up and conclude on the second one. So as we consider Jesus' prayer, we see first that he prays for our unity. He prays for our unity as a church. Let's read again verses 20 through 21.

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. Now Jesus knew that one of the great challenges the church would face is division. Now how did Jesus know that? Well think about it. The plan from the beginning was to redeem a people from every tribe and tongue and nation and bring them together into a multinational, multi-ethnic, globe-spanning people of God. After all, remember what God told Abraham at the very beginning of the plan of redemption? Through your offspring, all the nations would be blessed. In the church, Jew and Gentile, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, they would all come into the family of God on equal footing by grace. The church is the one place in the world where natural enemies come together in a bond of peace and are called to live as brothers and sisters, children of God. And Jesus knew that that wasn't going to be easy. So our good shepherd prays for us. Now there's been a lot of discussion about what sort of unity Jesus is talking about here. Is it an institutional unity? Is it doctrinal? Is it missiological? Well, let's look at what Jesus has to say. Again, verse 21, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us. In other words, Jesus is saying that our unity is going to be modeled after the Trinitarian relationship of God the Father and God the Son. Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, they may also be in us. And right off the bat, that means that it's going to be a unity that displays a whole lot of diversity. After all, the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Though they are one God, they are different persons. So that means that not every Christian and not every local assembly and not every association of local churches or denomination needs to be exactly the same. There will be diversity in the church, and that's okay. But in that diversity, there will be unity. So what does that unity consist in? Well, the Father and the Son, though different persons, are one in essence, and that's true of the church. Every genuine believer is a member of the one body of Christ. And no matter how fractured and discordant the visible church becomes, we are still one, brothers and sisters indwelt by the one Holy Spirit. But how is the unity meant to be expressed, meant to be lived out? How is the unity between the Father and the Son expressed and lived out? Well, looking through John's gospel is a great way to see that. And as we look through John's gospel, consider what we've seen. Consider that first, we've seen that there's a unity of mission. The Father, remember, sends the Son, and the Son comes to do the

will of the Father. All that the Father does, the Son does likewise. In the triune God, there's a unity of mission. And Jesus prays that the church would have that same kind of unity together on mission to glorify God, to share the gospel to the ends of the earth, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be animated by that same goal, the same desire to see the nations worshiping the one true God, to see the world, even our enemies, come to know the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ and be born anew. Within all our diversity as Christians, as churches,

Jesus wants us to have a unity of mission. Think of an ancient ship. You know, not everyone on an ancient ship or an ancient boat had the same task, right? Some of them sat up in the lookout, some of them turned the wheel, some of them hoisted the sails, but the mission was the same.

[11 : 43] Cross the ocean, reach the harbor, make it home. And as a church, we want to keep reminding ourselves of our common Christ-given mission, to reach the lost and make disciples of all nations, to love our neighbors, and to glorify our King with all that we say and do. That's how the ship keeps sailing.

But in the Trinity, there's not just a unity of mission, right? There's also a unity of love. You can't read John's gospel for long until you hear again and again about the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father. Their mutual indwelling, the Father and the Son, the Son and the Father, is an indwelling of love. So Jesus' prayer is that we too would have this unity of love amongst ourselves as a church. Consider 1 Corinthians 13. Believe it or not, that passage was not written for a wedding. It was written to a local church that was actually splintering apart. And when Paul writes the letters of 1 Corinthians, he says, your failure of unity is at root a failure of love. But then he says, listen, love is patient and kind.

Love does not envy or boast. It's not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. A church without love is kind of like a fireplace without a fire. It's just a bunch of logs stacked on top of each other. No one wants to be a part of that, right? You know, the ship might be sailing toward the harbor, but if all of the crew are just biting and devouring one another, what's the point?

Paul will say as much at the end of Galatians, if you remember. So Jesus prays that we wouldn't just have a unity of mission, but have a unity of love, just like the Father and the Son love one another.

[13 : 59] But next, there's also what we might call a unity of truth. A unity of truth. Jesus often says, you know, you'll remember this from John's Gospel. Jesus often says, I only speak what the Father has given me to speak. And the opening chapter of John shows us that all that the Father has to say is expressed in the Son, the Logos, the Word of God. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of the truth and wisdom and message of God. In the Trinity, then, there's perfect unity, not just of mission and love, but a perfect unity of truth. And Jesus' prayer is that we, the church, might be unified in our understanding of the truth, in our understanding of God's Word. So that means we have to come back again and again to the Scriptures. And we have to humble ourselves. And we have to read. And we have to listen to one another. And we have to listen to what the church has said about the Word of God that's come before us. And we have to be willing for the Bible to challenge us and to challenge our hearts and to challenge our traditions. And where Scripture is clear, we must be clear.

And where Scripture is less clear, we have greater room for diversity in the family of God. So where Scripture is clear, we're clear. And where there's less clarity, there's more room for diversity. Not every matter is a deal-breaker. You know, historically, think of the Protestant Reformation. For the Reformers, the Scriptures were very clear. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Our works contribute nothing to our justification, to our right standing before God. That is the clear teaching of Scripture.

But that wasn't something that the medieval Catholic Church was willing to concede. So they drove the Reformed churches out, and the unity was broken. Now, I think there are two perspectives that we have to keep on such broken unity.

On the one hand, we have to admit it was a bit of a triumph of courage to stand on the Word of God on a matter so central to the gospel and so clearly revealed, even at great cost, to undergo that pain of division. It was a triumph of courage. And yet, at the same time, was it not heartbreaking that the whole church could not come to see and to believe that truth together?

That's why, despite all their fiery rhetoric at times, the Reformers' hearts were broken by the brokenness of the Bride of Christ. And with broken hearts, they underwent division because God's Word was so clear.

[17 : 00] But we have to admit, of course, that there are many things in Scripture that are not as clear or as central to the gospel as justification by faith alone. Consider again 1 Corinthians, right?

Some Christians, reading their Bibles, wanting to be faithful to Jesus, considered that eating meat sacrificed to idols ought to be forbidden. After all, as Christians, we reject idol worship, so we're not going to eat that meat. But other Christians, reading their Bibles, wanting to be faithful to Jesus, considered that eating meat sacrificed to idols wasn't a big deal. After all, as Christians, we know that idols are literally nothing but wood and stone. What's to be afraid of?

Who cares if we eat that meat? Now, if you're interested in how Paul parses this out in detail, you can go home and you can read 1 Corinthians 8 through 10. That would be a really fun read this afternoon. But you'll notice right off the bat that Paul doesn't come to this issue and simply say, one side's right, one side's wrong, here's the winner, here's the loser, we're done here.

No. What does Paul do on this issue that's not so clear? He urges them to love one another. You think you have the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols? Okay. But out of love, are you willing to lay down that right to worship with your brothers and sisters and not offend them in the same way that Christ laid down his rights for you?

At the same time, you think eating sacrifice to idols is a sin. Okay. But in love, are you willing not to judge or think the worst of your brothers and sisters who think differently than you?

[18 : 56] Are you willing to love them? Are you willing to love them and think the best of them? So Paul admonishes mutual respect and love in the midst of difference.

There's an old saying that goes, in what is essential, unity. In what is non-essential, liberty. In all things, charity. In what is essential, unity. In what is essential, unity.

In what is non-essential, liberty. In all things, charity. Now, it's no surprise that the last 18 months have presented many challenges to church unity, have they not? Right now, we're in the midst of trying to navigate the ongoing realities of COVID as a church family. And we don't all come to the same conclusions on what we think is best.

You know, there's lots of different opinions about masks and how do we love our neighbor and what does this mean about our personal rights? And all these things are really good conversations. But the reality is, is that we don't always all agree.

But even through all of our differences, I think we can all agree that we're ready for this to be done, right? So we've got some common ground. But you know, in the midst of us trying to work this through together, in the meantime, perhaps we need to pause and remember that our Lord Jesus is praying for us.

[20 : 28] And we need to take confidence in that. Our Savior sees us. He sees the hardship. And He's advocating for us with the Father.

And we need to remember that what's at stake in our unity is our witness to the world. Look again at the end of verse 21. Jesus prays that we would be one so that the world may believe that you, Father, have sent me.

If the world can see a place where, despite our differences, and some of them are profound, there can still be a unity expressed in love, maybe, just maybe, the world might think that there's something to this Jesus thing that we can't find in the world.

And in our love for one another, maybe they'll see that there's only one real explanation. The reason why we love one another, despite differences, is because we've been given a love that transcends everything this world has to offer.

Look again at the end of verse 23. Jesus says, Our unified love for each other is a sign that points not to us and to how great we are, but it points above to God and to His love for us.

[21 : 55] Because we love one another because He first loved us. You see, in this prayer for unity, Jesus points us to a provision.

How do we do this? How do we actually stay unified through our differences? What provision has Christ provided to make it possible for us to stick together? Look at verse 23. He says, The glory that you, Father, have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one. In order that we might be one, Jesus has given us what He calls glory. The glory He received from the Father.

He's given it to us free of charge. Now, what is this glory that's meant to help us stick together through thick and thin? What is this beauty, this prize that Christ gives to all who believe? You know, I've been thinking a lot about that this week. What is this glory that Jesus has bestowed on us from the Father? And eventually, I came back to John chapter 1, the opening of John's Gospel.

[23 : 12] Remember verse 14 where it says, And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory. And what glory is that? Glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In other words, the glory is a glory of sonship. And how does this glory come to us? Well, consider again chapter 1, verse 12.

To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God. That glory of the Son of God, the only Son of the Father, now rests on you.

Because you, through Him, are now sons and daughters of God, filled with the very Holy Spirit of God. The glory is now on us.

But brothers and sisters, consider how that glory came to us. And consider what cost it took for that glory to become ours.

[24 : 24] The Word became flesh. He laid aside all of His glory and all of His rights, and He hung naked on a tree, so that sinners under the wrath of God might be forgiven.

And not just forgiven, but welcomed into the family of God as beloved daughters and sons. The Son of God died for you to be in this family.

So how could we not make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, as Paul says? You know, when we look at the cross again, when we look at Jesus, when we look at the glory that's come to us through Jesus, how could we not make every effort?

Of course we will. How could it be otherwise? If we be who we are, if we live out of that identity as the sons and daughters of God, we will be perfectly one, as Jesus says.

We might not always agree, but that need not steal our unity of mission and love and essential truth. So Jesus prays first for our unity.

[25 : 42] Now, given the time, we have to cover Jesus' second prayer in just a couple of minutes, but we're going to look at it. In verses 24 through 26, Jesus prays second. He prays for our perseverance. He prays for our perseverance.

Look with me at verse 24. Jesus prays, Now, what is Jesus praying for here?

How do we put it in other words? He's praying that you and I will run the race and in the end be with him in glory and see him face to face. In other words, he is praying that we will persevere, that we won't let the distractions and the discouragements run our ship against the rocks, but that with our eyes set on him and with the glorious future that he has in store for us, we will make it the whole way home.

Father, I'm praying, it's my desire that they're with me. Did you catch that word desire? That's a pretty strong word, isn't it?

Have you ever asked yourself, what's my desire at the end of the day? What do I really long for? What ignites my passion? Well, what desires ignite the heart of Christ?

[27 : 06] What desire flows forth from his fully human soul in prayer to the Father? Jesus says his desire is that we would be with him forever.

Friends, don't you see how ardently the Son of God loves his people, loves us? That's his desire, that we would be with him for eternity and bask in his glory.

And in verses 25 through 26, we're told that Jesus hasn't just made God known at some point in the past so that we can be with him, but no, he'll continue to make God known on and on and on.

Jesus will continue to reveal God to us and he will finish the work that he started. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until that day when we see him face to face.

Jesus says, I'll continue to do the work of revealing the Father's name to you so that you can know the love and so that you can go all the way with me. So Jesus prays, prays for our unity and he prays for our perseverance.

[28 : 21] His desire is that we would be one and that we would be with him forever. So friends, as we conclude, first, I think we ought to be encouraged. We might feel divided as a church.

We might feel that there's a lot of distraction and encouragement as we run the race, but the Lord Jesus is and has and will be praying for us. He is still our great physician, our good shepherd, and

our merciful and faithful high priest and nothing's going to change that no matter what comes. We can be deeply encouraged. And second, having heard the desires of Christ in this passage, having heard about Christ's own heart expressed in prayer for our unity and our perseverance, I think we have to ask ourselves, do I share those desires with our Lord?

And do I make them my prayer? Do I long for unity and do I pray for it? Do I long for my brothers and sisters to see Christ face to face and do I pray for that?

I think we're being invited here to make the desires of Christ our own desires. Ask the Father to give you through the Holy Spirit the heart of Christ.

[29 : 33] You know, if Jesus was fully human and without sin, and that is true, then that means his desires were the fullest and truest and most flourishing of human desires.

May we share those desires too and know what it means to be fully human. Third, amidst all the ups and downs of being the church and of following Christ, do you see the goal that Christ has in store for us?

Just think of how much time and money and effort we spend as humans to catch a glimpse of something breathtakingly beautiful. How much time and money and effort do we spend to just catch a glimpse of something that's glorious, right?

You know, we'll wake up in the middle of the night, what seems like, before the sun comes up. We'll drive to the top of a mountain just to see the sunrise. I hate getting up before the sunrise, but sometimes we do it to see something beautiful.

We'll fly halfway around the world, go through all the rigmarole of getting a passport, going through customs, planning it out. We'll fly halfway around the world to see a beautiful cathedral or a giant wall that someone built through the countryside.

[30 : 52] We'll drive across the continent to behold the peaks of a mountain range. But friends, none of that, none of that is going to hold a candle to what Christ has in store for those who believe.

Seeing the most riveting things of earth will be just like tiny echoes compared to seeing His glory, a glory that is born of a love more ancient than time itself.

And beholding His glory, awash in the wonder and awe, will see that it was all worth it.

You know, have you ever had that experience when you wake up early in the middle of the night and you drive to the top of the mountain to see the sunrise and you see the sunrise and then a little bit later in the day you're thinking, is that really worth it? Sometimes it is.

Sometimes it's not. But when we are with Christ in eternity, there is no doubt that every act of sacrificial love and every effort to encourage and promote unity and every time that we came alongside a faltering brother or sister to help them take one more step toward heaven, even though it was costly and time-consuming, it's all going to be worth it.

[32 : 23] It's all going to be worth it. in the light of His glory and His grace. So keep going, brothers and sisters. Pray for unity.

Pray for perseverance. Let's pray. Our Father, thank You that in giving Your Son to us, You have given us the most compassionate, strong, and abiding Lord and Savior we could ever dream of. And thank You, Father and Son, that You've sent Your Spirit into our hearts, made us children of God, so that we continue, can continue to be Your people in the midst of this world that needs to see You and needs to know You so desperately.

Preserve us, God, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.