

## ***Jesus Prays for His Church***

Today's New Testament reading is John 17:20-26, the end of the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in the Bible, the High Priestly Prayer, which is part of his Upper Room Discourse. This prayer is in three sections. In verses 1-5 Jesus prays for himself. In verses 6-19 Jesus prays for the original disciples. Because we are part of the true Apostolic Succession, this prayer is also for us today as his disciples. But I want us to look together at the final section, verses 20-26, which is specifically for those of us who have come to Christ since Jesus' time on earth.

Follow as I read **John 17:20-26**

*<sup>20</sup> "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup> Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

*<sup>25</sup> "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

The amazing truth is that Jesus prayed for us. And not only so, but he continues to pray for us, as we read in Hebrews 7:25: "...he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. The Apostle Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." (Rom. 8:26-27).

In this High Priestly Prayer, and in Jesus' ongoing prayers, he asks the Father that we might have, first of all, union with him. Jesus had just prayed that his disciples would be made holy by the truth (17). This spiritual oneness for which Jesus prays is a union of all who'll believe in him. The union Jesus is speaking about becomes reality the moment we become a Christ follower, when the Holy Spirit comes into us and begins to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus prays for our union in Christ, with himself and the Father that is described as "breathtaking" (21-22, Carson). Jesus speaks of a relationship with him that is of the same nature as his relationship with the Father. In the first five verses of this High Priestly Prayer Jesus speaks of his eternal relationship as God the Son

in the glory of the triune Godhead. God is without beginning, and he has always existed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the Son came to earth on his redemption mission he emptied himself of heavenly glory and took upon himself the likeness of our sinful flesh (Philippians 2:6-8; Romans 8:3). Now, after his death and resurrection, Jesus has ascended back into glory, but now he has a glorified body.

Christ's glory now is the glory of the God-Human. The eternal Son has, since his conception in the womb of Mary, a human body of immortal flesh. And the Son continues to have perfect and glorious union with the Father. And Jesus prays for our union with him and the Father, which is what Paul the Apostle means by being "in Christ." By God's saving grace we who were lost sinners have been placed in an eternal relationship with Christ. Holy God now looks on us as perfectly righteous through our faith in Jesus Christ. Paul said, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17) Christ in us is our hope of glory (Col. 1:27). As God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in union, Jesus prays we will be joined to this holy union: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...." (v21).

Jesus prays that his disciples would be sanctified/made holy by the truth of the word. He prays not that his disciples be taken out of the world but rather that they be protected from the evil one (15-19). Union with Christ means we are given the Holy Spirit, who enables us to live according to the word of God a life that's different from the world around us. Jesus prays that the union of his church with him would make the world realize his *and our* divine origin (21). The holiness of God's people is what gives us an authentic and authoritative voice to our witness to the world. Jesus also prays we will continue to know him in a deeper way (24-25).

Jesus prays he'll continue to make himself known to us, his people, and that we'll know the same love the Father has for his Son (26). Amazingly, Jesus prays a union that gives us the same love relationship with the Father as he himself enjoys. Jesus prays that we have union with him that leads to a growing knowledge of him and of the Father's love. Breathtaking words!

And Jesus prays also that we have unity with one another, a unity that doesn't depend on denominational agreements and compromises. The unity for which Jesus prayed is not a camaraderie or social unity. It's a divine gift. Jesus prays for his church a unity that he alone can give to his people who share a common life—the same Holy Spirit who lives in each one of us. His presence in us gives the fruit of the Spirit, which enables us to relate to one another with love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, humility and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). These are the attributes that allow us to be unified as a body and a family. Contrast this gift of unity with what Paul describes as the acts of the sinful nature

that divide people, including “hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy” (Galatians 5:19-21).

All believers have the gift that unifies. If there’s division and discord in the church it’s evidence there are unbelievers in the congregation or there are those living and acting and speaking and thinking like unbelievers. It isn’t because Jesus doesn’t give us the Spirit of love and unity. And it isn’t because he isn’t praying for our unity! There’s a sense in which all believers experience this gift of unity, and we can be and ought to be unified with people with differences in some of the non-essentials of the faith, such as what we believe about the Second Coming of Christ or gender issues. Real unity doesn’t mean “cookie cutter” uniformity.

I recall when during my son’s college days I visited College Church in Wheaton, IL reading their church motto on their worship guide: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, charity.”

And that’s why we’re able to connect in unity with folks outside our local church and participate with other denominations in evangelistic, social and ethical causes. But the unity of believers Jesus prays for seems to be worked out best and uniquely in the local church. That’s the venue where we’re made accountable for being either a unifier or for being divisive. So, the church is a gift from God that enables us to experience unity in the local body.

Unity with one another is both a gift and a demand. Jesus prays that his church will be brought to complete unity (23). And the Apostle Paul urged the church to be of the same mind, have the same love, being united in spirit and purpose. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” He then gives the supreme example of Christ Jesus, who humbled himself to be our Savior (Phil. 2:1-11). Paul writes to the Ephesians, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (4:1-4).

One of my great teachers in seminary, the late George R Beasley-Murray, told our class that Jesus is here praying that we make our external relationships conform to that inner relationship we’ve been given with Jesus. Just as he’s in us and we’re in him, so we’re to receive others and to guard and cherish our relationships with them as follow believers in whom Jesus also lives. As we’re united in fellowship with Jesus so we’re to be united and in fellowship with one another.

The demand for the unity for which Jesus prayed is a demand for reconciliation with those who are offended by or are offensive to us. Jesus prayed for our unity

as the hour of the cross approached. Jesus was about to suffer the agony of the cross to give us peace with God but also peace with one another. So we're to restore and maintain relationships with one another at the foot of the cross.

A good diagram for the unity of the church is an inverted cone. At the base of the cone we are farthest apart and are separated from one another. Picture Jesus at the top of this inverted cone. As we walk up the side of the cone toward Jesus at the top, we necessarily are closer to one another. Let's picture the cross of Jesus also at the top and realize we are never more unified than when we are gathered with Jesus at the foot of the cross.

James writes about the sins that cause division, and then calls on God's people to submit to God and draw near to him. Such nearness to God causes Satan to flee and enables us to be gracious to and unified with others (Jas. 4:1-10).

This church building has several pianos. Suppose a tuner tried to tune them with each other and they were all out of tune. None would sound the right pitch. And think of the effort of rolling all those pianos from one to the next, trying to tune them to each other. But a tuner has a better way to tune pianos. He has a pitchfork with perfect pitch. He goes to every piano and tunes them all to the same pitch. If we ever needed to bring the pianos together for a big piano concert, they would all sound in tune with each other.

We all have different ideas and opinions about different matters. And Jesus isn't praying that we be uniform in every way. It's OK to be unique and to have your opinions, ideas and interpretations as long as you're in tune with Jesus. If your life's in Christ and you're living by the word and walking in step with the Spirit then you love one another and act in all humility and kindness. You're in tune with Jesus. And if we all are, then we're in tune with each other.

With the credibility that comes with being united in love we're ready to be united in mission to do his work. To be a unified people means we're united in prayer and purpose. Being united in Jesus means we're all able to hear his marching orders and join him in his work of serving and redeeming a lost world. That means working together at Dale Heights and partnering with other churches and organizations in our city.

HA Ironside, the great preaching pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in bygone years, told about a missionary friend serving in a difficult place. This missionary had formed a partnership with several other missionaries from different Christian denominations and evangelical para-church mission agencies. This missionary, who was from a denomination not known for its cooperation with other groups, told Dr. Ironside that "down here where I serve every Christian looks good!" He didn't have the luxury of being exclusive or isolated. We too need other believers, churches and ministries.

In *Once upon a Town*, author Bob Greene relates how a group of volunteers in North Platte, Nebraska made a huge contribution to the war effort during the Second World War, beginning on Christmas Day 1941 till the end of the war. On every day of the year during this entire time, volunteers from within and around North Platte, a town of 12,000, operated a hospitality center called the Canteen, which was in the town train depot. The Canteen was open from 5:00 AM till after the last troop train pulled away from the train station after midnight. Throughout the day and night trains carrying young soldiers on their way to or from deployment stations on both sides of the continent would make a brief stop at the Canteen. There volunteers, mostly women, would feed the soldiers baskets of home baked food and give them gifts to assure them of their appreciation for the war effort. Lifetime friendships were established and lives were changed by the impact this hospitality had on these lonesome and frightened soldier boys. By the time the war ended more than six million soldiers were fed and encouraged.

When we join with God in his great work, heaven only knows the impact our small church can have on countless lives. Our gift at Dale Heights is hospitality, that Jesus-like outreach to friends and neighbors, including internationals. As we reach out, God will give them a spiritual home and welcoming place with us. And, as we share our Christ- life with others, we'll be answering Jesus' prayer, that we and these new friends will share his glory in the New Heaven and Earth, that place of absolute unity and joy (24)!