

JESUS' PRAYER ON BEHALF OF FUTURE BELIEVERS

17:20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word;"

Technically, Jesus has been praying for the eleven disciples. Now His prayer expands beyond them to the whole company of believers throughout history who have come to faith in Christ through the disciples' message. In other words, Jesus is looking with prophetic eyes through the whole of Christian history to our very own day. Therefore, His prayer is for us, for we have believed the apostolic message. The content of the prayer starts in verse 21.

17:21 "that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me.

17:22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one;

17:23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

The main concern of Jesus for us is clear. He desires that believers be unified as He is with the Father. The nature of this unity is described in verses 21-23.

First, the unity is a unity with the apostles. There are three categories of people mentioned in verses 20 and 21: (1) the apostles ("these" – v.20), (2) future believers ("those" – v.20), and (3) "all" (v. 21 - both the apostles and the future believers). In other words, Jesus prays that all who have followed Him and all who will follow Him be one. How can Christians alive today be one with those who have died and gone to be with the Lord? The answer is through the apostolic message. What unites all Christians of all ages together is a common commitment to and belief in the apostolic gospel that places Christ squarely at the center of all of life. In other words, Jesus' prayer is that there might be a historical continuity between the apostolic message and the church in every age.

This is seen from the very start of the church. In Acts 2:42 it says of the first believers after Pentecost that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." 1 John 1:1-3 says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, **so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.**" Ephesians 2:19-20 tells us that we are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built *on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone."

Unity is always fragmented where there isn't common belief and commitment to the gospel.

Secondly, the nature of the unity between believers is likened to the unity between the Father and the Son. Sometimes when Jesus refers to His oneness with the Father, He is speaking of their unity of essence; at other times He is talking about their unity of purpose and mission. It is hard to imagine how Jesus could be praying that believers become one in essence, so we are left with the second meaning as the primary thought. Believers are to be one in purpose, have the same mission, and be of the same mind. "The Father is in the Son and does His works (14:10). The Son is in the Father. The two are one (Jn. 10:30) and yet distinct. So in measure is it with believers. Without losing their identity, they are to be in the Father and the Son. Apart from the Son they can do nothing (15:5)" (Morris, 734). Carson says it like this: "Although the Son is in the Father, coeternal with Him in the unity of the godhead, yet He is dependent upon Him and obedient to Him in the self-emptying of His mission. . . In a similar way, the Father and the Son, by means of the promised Counselor, live in the disciples (14:23), so that the disciples, like Jesus, become the sphere of divine activity (14:12). As they remain in the vine, they bear fruit (15:1 ff.). This comes about as they stand in dependence upon (15:4) and obedient toward (15:10 f.) the one who lives within them" (Farewell Discourse, 198).

Ephesians 4:1-3 and 11-16 are helpful in further understanding how our unity plays itself out.

Ephesians 4:1-3 says,

- 1 "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,
- 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,
- 3 *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace."

Based upon the magnificent salvation that the believer has received in Christ, he is admonished to live in accordance with his high destiny and calling. The way to lead a life worthy of our calling is to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Ephesians 4:2 tells us that we do this "with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love."

Ephesians 4:3 calls Christian unity the unity *of the Spirit*, for it is a unity that God's Spirit creates as a result of the work of Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). Jesus had promised the disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to help them (Jn. 14:16. 26 etc.), but it is also through the Spirit that believers have equal access to God (Eph.2:18).

In the Book of Ephesians Paul shows that the human race, which is alienated from God, is also broken and scattered within itself. Its restoration, therefore, involves being united. In Ephesians 1, God's plan to unify humanity involves bringing all creation under subjection to Christ (1:9, 10). Since the Church is the example to the universe of God's masterpiece of unification (Eph.2:7), believers are expected to live in unity, consistently with God's purpose. Paul declares that unity is perfected through the interaction of individuals in the work of God. Christ gives apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors to the church. Their responsibility is to edify and restore the body of Christ

until it attains the unity of faith. He, therefore, exhorts believers to grow into Christ, who is the Head, from whom the whole body is joined together and built up in love (Eph. 4:3, 11-16).

In addition to this, we see in Ephesians 4 that unity is both a present possession and a goal to be attained. In verse 3 we are told to *preserve* unity. In other words, it is assumed that unity is already in existence and needs to be maintained. But in Ephesians 4:13, Paul tells us that the building of the body is to continue until we “attain to the unity of the faith”. The verb “attain” means to arrive at a particular state and focuses on the end. In other words, unlike Ephesians 4:3, Paul sees unity as a goal to reach for. Thus, unity is something that has been already achieved and something that needs perfecting. It needs to be worked on by all, but will only reach perfection when Christ comes and brings people to complete maturity. It is something believers have that needs to be lived out in the church. “Significantly, Christian growth or progress does not occur in isolation, for Paul’s language here envisages God’s people collectively (we all) as en route to this vital destination” (O’Brien, 305).

The way that we “preserve the unity of the Spirit” is found in 4:2; unity is maintained in community life through humility, gentleness, patience, and by showing forbearance in love to one another. These are not characteristics that occur naturally; they are Spirit generated (Eph. 4:2). This explains how we maintain and attain greater unity. Piper says, “Christian lowliness is a disposition to think lowly of ourselves and highly of Christ. Christian meekness is the demeanor of a person with this disposition.” The person who is lowly is humbled because he sees himself in relationship to God. He sees no comparison between his knowledge or wisdom and that of an omniscient God. He recognizes he has no righteousness apart from what was given him in Christ. He is not puffed up by any ability he may excel in over other humans. Christian lowliness makes a person feel awkward in receiving praise. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see ourselves as we are.

Piper also adds, “Lowliness is the prerequisite of patience. Haughty people are not patient. The more highly you think of yourself the more quickly you will think you should be served. ‘Who do they think they are to keep me waiting like this!’ But if you have a disposition of lowliness, it won’t feel so inappropriate when you are not treated like a dignitary and when the fruits of your labors are slow in coming. If you have seen the majesty of God’s holiness, you know your own minuteness and sinfulness, and you don’t presume to deserve special treatment. And if you have seen the magnificence of God’s grace, you know he will give you the strength to wait and will turn all your delays into strategic maneuvers of victory” (John Piper, Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-6).

Furthermore, Paul stresses that believers need to be “diligent” in preserving the unity they have. “Diligence” communicates a vigilance, or attentiveness to be sure that unity doesn’t slip away. It may even add a sense of urgency, or perhaps, even crisis to the matter.

It becomes immediately obvious that to keep this unity we must maintain it visibly. “If the unity of the Spirit is real, it must be transparently evident, and believers have a responsibility before God to make sure that this is so” (O’Brien, 280).

We should desire unity because unity provides the needed testimony for the world to know that the Father has sent Christ (17:21, 23). Jesus prays for unity *so that* the world may believe that God the Father sent Him. It is the irrefutable evidence that Jesus was sent by the Father. Someone once said that disunity in the church breeds atheism in the world.

Lastly, in John 17:22 Jesus says that He has given His disciples the glory that the Father gave Him *that we may be one*. In reading this, the first question we should ask is what is that nature of the glory that the Father gave the Son? In verses 1-5 we saw that the glory of Jesus was the glory of the humility of the incarnation that culminated in the crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation. This is akin to the glory we have received. "Just as His [Jesus'] true glory was to follow the path of lowly service culminating at the cross, so for them the true glory lay in the path of lowly service wherever it might lead them. The little band and its Master were both insignificant as the world counts importance. But the apostles are right with God and therefore are supremely significant. They have true glory" (Morris, 735; see notes on glory and the cross under 17:5). Therefore, it is by sharing in a common suffering and lowliness that we also become one with Christ and with each other.

17:24 "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

Jesus' final petition is that those whom God has given Him be with Him. Jesus had said He is not in this world and that He is going to the Father (Jn. 17:11; 14:28). He made it clear that the disciples cannot follow Him now (13:33, 36). But this separation will not be forever. He wants all who believe to be with Him, that they might see His glory, that is, that they might see the majesty and splendor which He had before the world was created (17:5). Theologians refer to this magnificent experience of bliss as the *visio Dei*: the vision of God. Jesus is at the center of the believer's final blessing.

17:25 "O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me;

17:26 and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Verses 25 and 26 are not petitions, but statements about what Jesus has done and why He did it. He has made the Father's name known (see notes on 17:6), and He will make it known again at the cross. He will do this so that the love of the Father for the Son might be in the disciples.

Our ultimate hope is in the love of the Father for the Son. Jesus has not just made the Father known, He will continue to make Him known to all who believe in Him. Jesus' goal is to sweep up all who believe into the richness of the love that exists between the Father and Himself.