



SERMON TITLE: "Unity by Truth"

SCRIPTURE: John 17:11-23

DATE: February 7, 2021

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## SERIES SUMMARY

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

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For followers of Jesus, it's crucial to think in terms of "covenant." It's a Bible-word that means partnership. Two of the most important places where Christians are called to think covenantally are in marriage life and church life. After all, the church is supposed to be a big family, and the family is supposed to be a little church. Additionally, both are supposed to have unity at their core. Both are divinely ordained institutions that are supposed to show off God's faithfulness. Both marriage life and church life are ways to depict God's own covenantal love to his people. And both of these contexts require huge levels of commitment and sacrifice to do them well.

Surprisingly, on the night that Jesus was betrayed before he went to the cross, he prayed for all of his followers that we understand and share in special covenant unity. Also, in his prayer, Jesus says that the unity of his people is for the sake of those who are not his people. And that means that inward unity is outwardly missional. But how should we pursue this missional unity? We're too often distracted by the idols of comfort and control. So, what will it take for Jesus' prayer and vision for us to happen? What's the catalyst that will bring about unity? In Jesus' mind and prayer, how will covenant unity blossom?

A good place to start is making understanding what Jesus *isn't* praying about. In John 17, when Jesus is praying for our unity, he's *not* talking about the following:

1. Biblical unity isn't uniformity. There's no nuance in uniformity. If unity means uniformity, then we'd all be Christian robots, and that's not God's design. God paints with the widest possible palette. He created, craves, and delights in diversity. In 17:11, Jesus prays, "That they may be one *even as* we are one." Jesus shares a unity with his Holy Father. They are both divine. But the point of this section of John is that both Father and Son are going about their unity differently. Jesus is going to the cross, and the Father isn't. They are the same in essence, but distinct in action. Unity in goal, purpose, and essence. But not uniformity in function and action. So, Jesus isn't praying that we would all mindlessly be the exact same.
2. Biblical unity isn't political unity. This is not talking about the sanctity of life in all things. If you're a Christian, and you debase or take a life because it's easier for you, that's not a political issue, it's a biblical issue. When we say that biblical unity is political, we mean that the foundation of Christian oneness and harmony is not built on how the state and the market relate to each other. Covenantal unity isn't constructed on power or wealth, but on Jesus. Yes, we should wisely and humbly do earthly politics, but earthly politics will not give us the unity we need both now and for eternity. Only Jesus can.
3. Biblical unity isn't total theological agreement. Yes, our unity is built on certain, central theological truths about Jesus and the gospel (we'll get to that). But that doesn't mean we have to wait until we agree on every detail of every doctrine before we can have unity. A good litmus test is this: How closely related is a doctrine or idea to the message and story of Jesus? The closer it is, the more serious you should take it. There is room for dialogue here, but the point is that we don't need agreement on every peripheral theological idea before unity can happen. That's exhausting.

These reminders of “what unity isn’t” are to whet our appetite, and help us grasp more fully “what unity is,” and how it works. So, what’s going to make this covenant unity happen? Jesus prayed, “Father, sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (17:17). The word “them” is plural, not singular. Personal holiness and sanctification absolutely matters, but it’s an extension of this prayer. Here Jesus is specially praying for corporate holiness. Holiness is an idea about what we’re set apart from and what we’re set apart for. But unity is the idea for how the set apart people function together. Simply put,

Unity is corporate holiness.

If you want to grow in personal holiness, you should pursue unity with other brothers and sisters in Christ. If you want your faith to soar, you should fight for unity. Jesus doesn’t want you to be holy in a vacuum. That’s not holiness, that’s isolation. What Jesus wants for us is shared holiness. He wants us unified. But there’s more. In verse 11 and 22, Jesus prays, “Father, may they be one even as we are one. And in between these, Jesus says, “I set myself apart so that they will be set apart in truth” (17:19). And this means that the mechanism that leads to corporate set-apartness is truth. It’s the agent of unity.

God’s catalyst to bring about unity is truth.

He made truth to serve the oneness he wants for his people. And Jesus is praying that our experience would be one where truth binds us together in harmony. Sadly, for most of our culture, if you believe in one truth claim, that means you attach a burden of other things to it, and then you beat people up with it. Many times, in our experience, truth doesn’t unify; it divides. But the opposite is true in Jesus’ mind. How so? Or maybe we should ask, what does John mean by “truth”? In the gospel of John, truth is always about who Jesus is and what he has come to do. In chapter 1, Jesus is full of grace and truth. In chapter 8, Jesus says to abide in his word, know the truth, and the truth will set you free. In chapter 14, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Basically, the truth that is supposed to unify us is Jesus himself. Detached ideas can’t unify us because they are up for grabs and open to interpretation. Only a committed relationship can bring the unity we want and need, and that relationship has entered into our broken world in Jesus. Meaning,

Truth is a person to relate to (Jesus), and not primarily an abstract principle to believe in.

Jesus alone is the truth that is the change-agent for our unity. And this unity is not first and foremost for our comfort! This is so that other people will know Jesus and trust Jesus and follow Jesus and obey Jesus. Truth is not a club to beat people up with. Truth is a person who represents an invitation into grace, love, community, and relationship with God. And all of this is most clearly seen at the cross. That’s what Jesus is thinking about in 17:19. There, Jesus says he’s about to set himself apart for our corporate holiness. He will be cut off for our unity. This means that the gospel message of Jesus crucified is the ultimate thing that brings unity. The self-giving love of the cross is how we are unified, and that unity is how the world sees God.

The world will not know the self-giving love of the gospel when Christians fight about politics more than they enjoy and forgive one another. The world will not know the self-giving love of the gospel when Christians are more known for building walls than building bridges. The world will not know the self-giving love of the gospel when Christians split hairs over peripheral theological points instead of standing in awe of the fact that we are undeserving and he still loves us, and he loves us all the way to death!

Practically, this looks like sacrifice. Sacrifice is how we’re supposed to live in covenantal harmony with each other, ultimately, through Jesus’ sacrifice. We should behold Jesus’ laying down his life for us, and then we have to seek to do the exact same for others. We should ask things like, “Am I willing to sacrifice being right and feeling right for the sake of unity? Do I have to win every argument in my marriage? Do I have to make my spouse or friends feel like the buck stops with me? Do I have to make people see it my way in small group, or in political conversations with other believers, or in a theological conversation? Am I willing to sacrifice for the sake of unity?” Think about it:

Jesus actually had the authority, more than any human ever, to shut everybody up, and tell them what was right. We don’t have that authority. And what did he do? He gave himself up for his enemies. We are sinful, and we consume ourselves by trying to make people like us, and we are rarely willing to sacrifice anything to make it happen. But Jesus was sinless, and the whole goal of our existence is that we would be like him, and he sacrificed everything to make it happen. So, for truth to unify us, and for the world to see God’s love in our unity, sacrifice must happen. And it did, at the cross. And all of our attention should be there.

The truth of Jesus as God-in-the-flesh who has come to earth, lived a perfect life, died on a sinner's cross, drained death of its power by his resurrection, and is returning as Unimpeachable King – this is the truth that makes the fire of unity burn brightly. And with all of our nuanced opinions and wide-ranging experiences, we should circle around this fire together as one. Unity, not uniformity. Covenant relationship, not covenant robots. And we should gather around this gospel fire to warm ourselves with its heat, to eat and laugh and share and cry together, and to see things more clearly because of its light.

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**Discussion Starters** — This week we continue our mini-series on the Lord's Prayer found in John 17.

1. Personally, what stood out the most to you about this passage or message?
2. What are things that can't give believers the unity Jesus wants for us?
3. In what ways are you most tempted to find unity with others outside of the gospel?
4. Who is someone you know who embodies these ideas of Christy unity by means of gospel truth?
5. What is something that is okay for Christians to disagree about, and why?
6. What is part of the purpose of unity in Jesus' prayer?
7. When have you felt the greatest sense of unity, community, and belonging with God's people?
8. How should you sacrificially pursue unity in your relationships because Jesus first sacrificially pursued unity with us?