

LIVING IN UNITY

John 17:6-23

Today, we've jumped ahead to chapter 17 of John's gospel, which forms part of Jesus' final teachings to the disciples after the Last Supper. These teachings are contained in chapters 14 to 17 of John's Gospel, often called 'The Farewell Discourse' or the 'Upper Room Discourse'. Chapter 17 contains the longest of Jesus' recorded prayers. Milligan and Moulton say "No attempt to describe the prayer can give a just idea of its sublimity, its pathos, its touching yet exalted character, its tone at once of tenderness and triumphant expectation". There are three sections to this prayer, although our reading today only covers two of them. Jesus has just prayed that he might be glorified as he finishes the work he has been given to do in verses 1 to 5 and then in our reading Jesus prays for his disciples in verses 6 to 19 and our reading of verses 20 to 23 also covers a part of his prayer for all believers in verses 20 to 26. So let's study it together, and, as we do so, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles.

Many people see this prayer as rather gloomy, but it isn't. It is spoken by One who has just affirmed that he has overcome the world (16:33), and it starts from this conviction. Jesus is looking forward to the cross, but in a mood of hope and joy, not one of despondency. The prayer marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, but it looks forward to the ongoing work that would now be the responsibility first of the immediate disciples and then of all those who would later believe through them. Jesus prays for all these future believers including us.

Let's begin with the prayer for Jesus' disciples. In verse 9 Jesus makes it quite clear that he is praying just for the disciples and not for the whole world. This section can really be divided into two parts. In the first Jesus redefines the disciples who are the *subjects* of his prayer in verses 6-10; and, secondly, he intercedes on their behalf, expressing *the concerns* of his prayer in verses 11-19. So let's start by looking at verses 6-10:

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.” (John 17:6-10)

Jesus says that he has revealed the Father to the disciples (verse 6). The ‘you’ is literally ‘the name’ in the Greek which means the whole person of God, his essential nature. Later (verse 11) Jesus says God will protect the disciples in the name, so ‘the name’ is clearly an important concept in this prayer.

Verses 6 and 9 tell us that the disciples had belonged to the Father, who has now given them to Jesus – see the “those whom you gave me” and the “you gave them to me” of verse 6 and the “those you have given me, for they are yours” of verse 9. Yet verse 10 tells us that the ownership is reciprocal between the Father and the Son, “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine”. This seems like a paradox, but it’s part of the glorious mystery of the Trinity.

Verses 7 and 8 describe the knowledge of the disciples. See verse 7; “they know that everything you have given me comes from you.” – the disciples have grasped the fundamental truth that Jesus can only be explained in terms of the Father. In verse 8; “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.” – the disciples have trusted Jesus and his words which have authenticated him to them. The disciples were far from perfect, but they had been drawn apart from the rest of the world and had stayed faithfully with Christ. As we’ve seen these believers, the disciples, belong to God and Christ and they are utterly secure in their hands – God will never let them go or abandon them.

Verse 10 also speaks of the achievement of the disciples; “glory has come to me through them.” What an amazing thing that is, that these disciples who were certainly far from perfect could nevertheless bring glory to Christ. There is no suggestion here that their glorifying was confined to their trust or faith in Christ. What an encouragement that is for we believers today and what an incentive to live Godly lives, so that Christ who needs absolutely nothing whatsoever from us may still be glorified through our obedience and service.

Let’s move on the look at Jesus’ intercessions for the disciples in verses 11-19:

“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” (John 17:11-19)

Jesus knows that his crucifixion and his departure from the world will be a stunning blow for the disciples. They had depended very heavily on the visible presence of their Master, a presence that was about to be taken from them. Though Jesus has already promised them that the Holy Spirit will come, and has even assured them that this will be better for them than his continuing bodily presence, yet he knows that the coming hours will be a great shock to them. Despite everything they are not ready for the stunning impact of Calvary. Tenderly now he commits them to the care of the heavenly Father. Jesus addresses his intercessions to the Holy Father – a title only used here in John’s

gospel – a title which combines the awesomeness of God with intimacy and which is especially appropriate for the requests that the disciples be sanctified in verses 17 and 19.

There are five main thrusts to Jesus intercessions. Firstly, Jesus prays that the disciples may be *protected* in verses 11, 12 and 15. This is necessary because the disciples will face powerful opposition both from the world and the devil and Jesus will no longer be around to protect them. Although Christ has overcome the devil, Satan is still a powerful force. As D A Carson says in his book on Jesus' Farewell Discourse: "The spiritual dimensions of this prayer of Jesus are consistent and overwhelming. By contrast we spend much more time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family, and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one." Note how the disciples are to be protected "*by the power of God's name*" verse 11 – this is basically God's revelation to them both through OT scripture and through Christ's revelation. "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." (Proverbs 18:10).

Secondly Jesus prays that the disciples will be *united*, they are to be united as closely as the Father and Christ are united – verse 11. Their unity will be an expression of the power of God's name which protects them.

Thirdly, Jesus prays that the disciples will be *delighted* – verse 13. Despite the opposition which awaits them, the disciples can still experience the joy of Christ and Jesus prays that they will. How amazing it is that Jesus can refer to his own joy and indeed the "full measure of his joy" – verse 13 – when he is about to undergo the most appalling suffering of the cross.

Fourthly, Jesus prays that the disciples may be *dedicated to mission* – verse 18. Although the world is a threatening place for the disciples, Jesus does not want them removed from it (verse 15). Moses and Elijah and Jonah all prayed that they be taken out of the world (Numbers 11:15; 1 Kings 19:4; Jonah 4:3, 8), but in no case was the

request granted. The place for the people of God is in the world, though, of course, not of the world. The church is not to be a kind of holy club for Christians. A major reason why the disciples are to remain in the world is because Jesus has a purpose for them there (verse 18). As Newbigin says, “[The disciples] are not to inhabit a ghetto, they are to go forth on a mission.” *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world* (verse 18). The mission of the church is the continuation of the mission of Christ. Our mission as believers is to proclaim the gospel to the world.

Finally, Jesus prays that the disciples may be *sanctified* – verses 17 and 19. The word ‘Sanctify’, like ‘holy’, comes from a Hebrew root meaning ‘separate’. Earlier, Jesus had prayed to him who is the ‘holy Father’. It is the Father’s holiness which is the basis of the Son’s mission. That holiness, in its separation from sin and its dedication to the way of righteousness, Jesus now desires in the disciples. The mission is one of light confronting darkness. From now on its instruments must be the sons of light who do not walk in darkness (John 8:12). As Paul says of himself at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, they are to be ‘set apart for the gospel of God’ (Romans 1:1). The means of the disciples’ sanctification, like the means of their protection, is to be the word of God – verse 17 – and Jesus has conveyed that word to them. Later they will receive the Holy Spirit to enable the further expression of that word in them.

Jesus now widens the terms of his prayer to include all believers, look at verses 20 to 23:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (verses 20-23)

So Jesus is praying for all those who will ultimately come to believe through the gospel message sent into the world through the disciples. This final section of Jesus' prayer is a deeply moving one because it brings Jesus into direct relationship with us. There are hints elsewhere of Jesus' recognition that future generations of believers would arise and express allegiance to him (John 10:16; Matthew 24:1; Luke 13:29) – now he's praying for them. Jesus is praying for all those who have ever believed in him or who will ever believe in him – he's praying for us.

Jesus prays that all believers, the whole church, may be united – “that all of them may be one” (verse 21) and that we might be brought to complete unity (verse 23). This unity is greater than it seems. It's a supernatural unity defined by and included in the unity of the Father and the Son (verses 21 and 23). It's not the same as the unity between the Father and the Son, but it is analogous to it. As Newbigin says “It is a unity which not merely reflects but actually participates in the unity of God – the unity of love and obedience which binds the Son to the Father.” So, it is a unity which is brought about, not by the efforts of human ingenuity, but by Jesus giving us the glory that the Father had given to him (verse 22).

This unity is also to be tangible one which will cause the world to believe (verse 21) – to believe that Jesus was sent by the Father and that the Father loves the church.

This unity is also evangelical; it will produce faith and cause people to believe (verses 21 and 23). This is not simply a “unity of love”. It is a unity based on adherence to the revelation the Father brought to the first disciples through his Son, the revelation they accepted (verses 6 and 8) and then passed on.

This is a challenge for us today. We are the face of the church that people encounter. Our relationships are to be such that the watching world will come to recognize not only that Jesus is the true revelation of God, but also that *you ... have loved them even as you have loved me*. Our church needs to be a 'love centre' where relationships

between we members are a faithful and persuasive reflection of the mutually supportive, utterly loyal and eternally accepting love of the Father and the Son. This is true whether the relationships are of men with women, young with mature, laity with clergy, new members with long-standing members, rich with poor, cultured with unsophisticated, socially upper class with socially lower class, leadership with membership, new converts with established Christians, and whatever other differences our church embraces.

Yet we don't have to create anything. Our challenge is to be a part of and give true expression to that which God has already worked in our midst. The churches are already one in God, our church is already one in God. We need to actively seek to allow that supernatural unity to find expression both in us within this church and between believers in other churches.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I pray that your word and your Spirit might sanctify us through and through, that we might be delighted and dedicated to the mission of proclaiming the gospel, that you will protect us in the power of your name and finally that we might be united as a body in order to witness Christ and his love amongst us and between us and to everyone with whom we have contact this day and forevermore. Amen