

John 17:20-26
(Psalm 133; Ephesians 2:11-22)
“That They May All Be One”

Introduction

We come to the end of this great prayer that marks the end of Jesus’ ministry and the beginning of his final hours – his arrest, trial, crucifixion and victory over death. We have listened in the first five verses to Jesus pray for himself, and in verses six through nineteen he has prayed for those with him in the upper room. Now he prays for all of us down through the ages that have believed in him through the testimony of those first disciples. It is quite remarkable that we were in his thoughts as he prepared to face the cross. Jesus asks two things of the Father for us: one a prayer for the present, and the other a prayer for the future.

Body

1. Jesus prays for our lives here and now in this present age (17:21-23): Union leading to mission.

He prays that we may all be one, just as he and the Father are one.

This is the heart of the gospel, the essence of salvation, the single thing that Christ gives us that encompasses all of his other gifts. He does not ask that our union with him and with one another might be a metaphor or analogy of his union with his Father. His words are, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us” (17:21). The words “just as” mean that what he gives us is full union with God through the gift of his Spirit, who brings us all the benefits of Christ’s victory over sin and death, who joins us to one another as members of the body of Christ, and who gifts and empowers us to carry on Jesus’ mission of making disciples of all nations.

He prays that we may be one in such a way that the world will believe that the gospel is true.

And his aim clearly is missional, because he finishes that sentence by saying, “so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” And lest we think that he didn’t mean this literally, but only in a mystical or analogical sense, he repeats and strengthens the thought in what follows: “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 loved me” (17:23).

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and there are many things for which we should be grateful: grateful that they

translated and taught the Bible in the language of the people, grateful for the clarity with which they preached the gospel of grace and the priesthood of all believers. However, they never intended for the church to be shattered into competing denominations. Their desire was for the church to be reformed according to the Word of God. But the enemy sowed division and discord, and the body of Christ, which Jesus prayed would be so united in one heart and mind that its unity would serve as proof that he had come into the world to reconcile us to one another and to God, was shattered to pieces.

This should grieve every child of God, just as certainly as divorce breaks our hearts and displays brokenness rather than wholeness. Every attempt to reunite the church organizationally has failed by seeking a lowest theological common denominator that makes the effort sub-Christian, and a denial of the truth of Christ. Don Carson has said it well: The unity Jesus prays for is not institutional, but must certainly be observable. Denominations can be small expressions of our unity, especially if we do not define ourselves over against each other, but rather offer our unique emphases to one another as gifts rather than as debate points. We should honor each other's worship and fellowship, ministries and missions, accepting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and demonstrating to the surrounding world our love for one another.

To that end, Jesus has given to us the glory the Father gave to him.

In this prayer, Jesus summarizes the way that he has reconciled his people to his Father and to one another, in these words: "The glory you have given to me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one" (17:22). In other words, all that the Father gave the Son, the Son has given to us. We are in him, and by his Spirit he is in us. The glory that is his, he has given to us. The Bible depicts the life of God's people as having weight, gravitas, and substantial reality. The wicked that refuse God's grace are like a vapor, or "like chaff that the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4). If we are the Lord's, he has given us all that we need in order to declare and to display his glory so that those with eyes to see and ears to hear will realize that the gospel is true.

2. Jesus also prays for our lives beyond this present life in the age to come (17:24-26): Mission leading to reunion.

He prays that we may be with him.

Beginning in verse twenty-four, Jesus changes the focus of his prayer from our present to our future, asking first that we may be with him forever. This is the quest, the longing of religion, to know the true God and to be at peace with God, in the fellowship of those with whom he is pleased. Religion could never accomplish this great aim, but Jesus fully accomplished it. He prays that the goal of creation and redemption might be fulfilled, not just in part as

it is in this present age as we continue to grow to maturity through the grace given us, and as we strive in Christ to become what he has declared us to be. But the day is coming, and for this Jesus prays, when the battle will be over, and we are finally at rest in the presence of Christ, our bodies glorified, the cosmos restored, at home at last in the city of God.

He prays that we may see his glory.

And in that day, we will see him as he is and be able to bear the sight and to delight in his glory, rather than being terrified by it, because we will at last share fully in that glory. When Jesus was transfigured, his disciples were terrified and fell on their faces. When John received the Revelation of the glorified Christ on the Isle of Patmos, he fell terrified on his face. But when at last we see him in all his glory, we will delight in worshiping and serving him, even as we rule and reign with him throughout eternity.

To that end, he will continue to make the Father known to us in the union of divine love.

To prepare us for that day, Jesus ends his majestic prayer by pledging to continue to make God known to us in the depths of his love for us. The heart of it all, as in all God's dealing with us, is love: You have "loved them," says Jesus, "even as you have loved me" (17:23). "What wondrous love is this, O my soul?"

Conclusion

We tend to think of our lives, our choices, our salvation, in individualistic terms. But we are deeply connected. Our choices, our decisions, our words and deeds affect all those whose lives intersect with ours. Our salvation is in union with Christ and therefore in union with one another. When we display that union now, the world has reason to believe the gospel. When we fight and divide and betray that union, the world has reason to believe that the gospel is not true.

The destiny prepared for us in Christ is one of union with him, and so also with the Father and with one another through the Spirit: a vision even now of being with him where he is and of beholding his glory. All of the beauty, the excellence, the majesty that we see dimly foreshadowed here in this passing world is preparing us for the glory that is coming when at last we see the source of all that has delighted us, the One whom we have been seeking all our lives, for whom, in whom, and through whom we have our being, and whose love is our life.