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John 17:20-26

Christ's High Priestly prayer, Pt.2: The Cosmic Importance of Church Unity

A few weeks ago, we looked at the first half of this chapter together, in my sermon on John 17:1-19. That sermon was titled "Christ's High Priestly Prayer, Pt.1," and this sermon is "Part 2," precisely because this whole chapter is one unified prayer of Jesus Christ, and we need to understand that all these verses flow together, into one cohesive prayer. I opened that last sermon by saying that it's like when you accidentally walk in and overhear two people talking about you, or you just so happen to overhear one of your parents praying out loud for you, just between them and God; such a moment gives us a rare, intimate glimpse into that person's heart towards us, doesn't it? It shows us what they truly think of us, what they most care about and desire for us, giving us the raw heart. And that's kind of like what we're given here, in John 17. We're invited into the quiet, intimate conversation of Jesus Christ, God the Son, speaking with God the Father *about us* - about His people. In these verses, Jesus is praying for you and me.

V.20 makes this explicitly clear: He was praying specifically for you and me, for every Christian that would ever live. V.20 says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for *those who will believe in me through their word...*" In other words, all who believe and all who *will believe* the gospel of Jesus Christ, including us today. Last time, we saw in vv.1-19, that Jesus was praying for His people as our High Priest and representative in the shadow of the cross. There was a lot there that we unpacked in those verses, but Jesus hinted at the idea of *unity*. Now, in this final section, vv.20-26, Jesus picks back up on this theme of unity that he hinted at earlier, now diving into the topic fully, showing just how much he cares about the unity of His people, for whom He prays and makes atonement by laying down His own life. So as we overhear this prayer of Jesus for us Jesus, as we hear his heart, we see he desires our *unity* with Himself *and with one another*.

Unity is not something that we tend to prioritize in our modern, contemporary culture. We prioritize individualism and freedom. Unity often requires compromise, trust, and relying on others - it gets messy, very quickly. Unity is hard. And as we look around, we're reminded just how hard it is. Our country is currently incredibly fractured and polarized; people are divided by massively different worldviews and we all just keep moving *farther apart* from each other. We've also seen the rise of cancel culture, where everyone quickly writes someone off completely the second they hear something they disagree with or don't like; and cancel culture

has affected Christianity, too. On top of that, there are the realities that have *always* made unity a challenge. There are *real, genuine theological divisions* among Christians and between different churches. And at the local church level, if you spend enough time at any church, you'll soon discover that there are no perfect churches, no perfect Christians, that we're all sinners, and unity is always messy, hard work. So why go to all the trouble to fight for unity? What's the big deal?

The big deal is that this is Jesus's prayer, desire, command, and plan for us. So this is not optional. Our passage shows us that Jesus desires and prays for our unity with one another and with God in order to better display His love and glory. First, we see that He prays for the unity of all Christians, all those who do and will believe in Him; second, we see that our unity with one another is based on and flows out of the very unity and love that the Son shares with the Father, the very love and unity of the Triune God; third, we see that our unity is meant to evangelistically display the glory and love of Christ to the world; and finally, we see that Jesus prays for and secures the day when we shall be with Him in eternal life to see His glory and love fully and be perfected by it; the day when our salvation and unity will be brought to completion. This is a glorious prayer of Christ for us that reminds us of Christ's love for us, His glorious purposes for us, and His desires for how we should live as His people. So let's begin with point number one...

I. Jesus prays that we will be unified with one another even as God is One (vv.20-23)

The standard that Christ gives us for unity as believers is nothing less than the unity of God – the unity Christ experiences with his Father as the Son of God. This is the model for the unity of the church. Believers are to be unified, are to “be one” just as God the Son and God the Father are unified, just as they are “one” with each other, as it says in v.21: “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you....” Here, we see Christ praying for the unity of believers, and the standard for unity he gives is none other than the unity he enjoys with the Father. He makes the comparison again in v. 22, saying “that they may be one even as we are one,” going on in the next verse to pray that we would be “*perfectly* one.” So Christ compares the ideal of church unity to the unity he shares with God the Father. In order to understand what this means, then, we must understand the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The Bible teaches what we call the doctrine of the Trinity: that there is one God, but three distinct and inseparable Persons of God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult concept, a mystery. But this simply means God is a community of three

Persons living in a complete, loving, harmonious, unbroken, and perfectly unified relationship with one another. The scriptures tell us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). God is *loving*, but he also *is love* – in fact, God is a community of three persons perfectly loving one another. God the Father and God the Son, Jesus, along with the Holy Spirit, share a unity of love, purpose, will, action and mission. The Triune God is completely and perfectly *One*.

This is the model, the standard, we have as believers for what our unity with one another should look like. Our unity as the church should be modeled after, should reflect, the unity of the Trinity. We as believers are to be a community of people in perfect unity with one another; we are to have a unity of love, purpose, mission and will. As we think through what this unity looks like, and begin to think how to apply this truth to our lives, we must ask *who* exactly is to be unified. As we have already noted Christ is praying for *all believers that are to come*. So what does that look like? What does that mean for us today? We can think of our unity with other believers in two ways: *Universal Church Unity* and *Local church Unity*.

First, Jesus’s prayer shows us that we have a *real, genuine unity*, a *oneness*, with all true believers, all those who believe in the gospel of Christ and hold fast to his Word, throughout all time and the whole world. As we think about unity with all believers in the world today, perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is all the different denominations that exist. There are all kinds of different churches; must we all belong to the same denomination in order to have unity? I don’t think so. This isn’t calling for a worldwide, global *institutional* unity but rather a *spiritual* unity, being one in Spirit, faith, love, purpose, and goal. But a necessary part of unity is having *spiritual and theological unity*. Unfortunately, there are significant differences between believers and different kinds of churches today, and in order for us to be faithful to what we truly believe the word of God teaches, sometimes that means we must belong to different types of churches. Now, a lot of people push back on this, and claim that the only way to be unified is to strip away denominationalism and just have one globally recognized, institutional Church. Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox believe this, but a lot of non-denominational evangelicals believe this as well. The problem, though, is that pursuing this requires you to do one of two things: either you demand *absolute conformity*, demanding that everyone thinks the exact same thing, stripping away people’s rights to conscience or to disagree on different issues; or, you water everything down so that there’s very little content that you demand that everyone agree on at all. This is the route not of conformity, but of *compromise*. But if everything is allowed, then there isn’t any

actual *real* unity. It sounds nice to say that we'll all just get along despite our differences, but let's just think about it: some Christians say we should baptize babies, some not; some Christians say women can be pastors, some not; some say everyone should be speaking in tongues during a worship service, some not. We can't just ignore or compromise on questions like that, can we? If we don't address them, there's no real unity. If we just sweep things under the rug and boil everything down to the least common theological denominator, you're left with a very weak, shallow, doctrinally hollow husk of a church. But real, vibrant unity requires theological unity. After all, look back just a few verses, at Jesus's prayer in v.17: "Sanctify them in *all truth*." So the local church is where we are able to express real, tangible unity, and pursue even *greater* unity in love with each other by having a robust common foundation of strong theological unity.

That may sound abstract and impractical, so let me explain how this works with something called "theological triage." It breaks down the urgency of different theological and biblical beliefs into three categories: 1. *primary* issues are the things we have to agree on in order to be Christians, things like the gospel, the trinity, the humanity and deity of Jesus, the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ for sinners, the necessity to repent from sin and renounce ungodly living, things like that. All who agree on these first tier issues are Christians, and we have real, genuine, spiritual unity with one another - with *all true Christians* - throughout the world, as brothers and sisters in Christ! So we pray for all Christians, even those we don't know. We have friendships and fellowships and partnerships with other Christians, even from other church backgrounds and other places, so long as we all agree on these first level issues. It's why you can meet a fellow Christian on the plane or on vacation and feel an immediate bond. There's a real unity there that binds us.

But, there are still lots of differences. And so that's where the *second level* of theological triage comes in: 2. Secondary issues are those that we have to agree on to do church together, to be part of a local church family. This includes questions about baptism, about who can be a pastor, church polity, things like that. This is where having a statement of faith is incredibly helpful: it outlines not only the first tier issues all Christians believe, but also all the secondary things that we as a local church family believe. They're settled issues, erecting boundaries that create a safe place for us to do church life together. It guards against disunity and promotes greater unity because it already settles a host of questions for us, giving us a firm foundation of theological and spiritual unity with one another.

And this also sets us up to have greater unity with each other *even when we disagree on things!* And this is where the third level of theological triage comes in: 3. *Tertiary issues* are things that we can agree to disagree on even as fellow church members. For example, we can disagree on our interpretations of Revelation 20 and when we think the Millennial reign of Christ happens and still do church together as unified brothers and sisters in Christ! The same goes for some disagreements on spiritual gifts, the finer points of soteriology, and a host of other different doctrines. This allows us to be unified on the most important things but to also recognize that there are things we can disagree on, and that there's even Christian liberty for making different decisions in life, even as we strive for unity with one another in love, as a unified church family.

This is why the local church is the place where Jesus's prayer here is meant to be pursued and lived out visibly, practically, and tangibly. The local church is where we pursue unity by being family members and loving each other *despite our differences and disagreements!* It's where we show, with our presence and lives and actions and words and money, that we are *one* with each other because of Christ. So let me ask you, friend: are you pursuing unity with your fellow Christians? Do you care about being one with God's people as much as Jesus does? I've often found it to be true that those who complain loudest about how disunified the Church is today and mock denominations are often the same people who are *least* connected to local churches. Don't let an ideal keep you from pursuing *real unity* with a real life Christian community. Hear Christ's desire for you and all his people: be one with one another even as the Father and Son are One! No church is perfectly unified; but *pursuing* unity with an imperfect church is infinitely better than *dividing* and belonging to no church. So don't stay on the sidelines; don't go it alone; if you're not a member of a healthy, Bible-believing, gospel preaching church, then you're not actually pursuing unity and you are out of step with God's will and Christ's prayer for your life. Pursue unity by joining a local church.

But maybe you hear that, and you think, "sure, that's a great ideal, but how can we possibly have unity together when we're all sinners and it's so hard?" We see why here in Jesus's prayer: our unity is possible because of the unity we have with God and His love for us.

II. Jesus prays that we will be unified because of the love and unity of God (vv.20-23)

We can have unity with one another because each of us, as believers, have been united to Christ. In this passage, Christ's prayer that all believers would be one is connected to the prayer "that they also may be in us" (17:21b). Our unity with one another is not only to be *like* the unity

of God, but it flows *out of* our common unity *with God*! In v.22, Christ prays that “the glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one.” This “glory” most likely refers to the revelation of who God is in Jesus Christ; Christ reveals the character, person and glory of God to us. And this glory has been revealed to all believers *so that* we “may be one even as” Christ and the Father “are one,” as he says in v.22. He goes on, explaining how this works, in v.23: “*I in them and you in me*, that they may become perfectly one.” In other words, We are to be perfectly one, to have perfect unity, *precisely because* Christ is in us, and the Father is in Christ. When we repent of our sins and put our faith in Jesus Christ, *then we are united to him* in such a way that our sins are placed on him and his righteousness is placed on us. We are *in Christ* and He is *in us*, so that what is true of us - that we are sinners deserved judgment - goes to Christ, and what’s true of Him - perfect righteousness and glory - gets credited to our account! What’s true of Christ becomes true of us. We become God’s beloved children, His family, inseparably united to Him as Christ’s own body and bride, even as Christ is distinct yet inseparable from the Father. We are intimately united with Jesus and therefore, with God. In fact, this even means God the Father loves us *just as much as He loves Jesus*! That’s a bold statement isn’t it. Maybe you don’t believe me. Look down at the end of v.23: Jesus prays, “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*”! Don’t miss that: God wants us to know that the Father loves His children, Christ’s people, all believers, as much as He loves Jesus. Christian, God is inviting you into the eternal embrace of His unending love that He perfectly enjoys.

When I was in high school, our youth group used to attend a conference every winter near Gatlinburg. I remember a speaker there one time trying to communicate God’s love for us and his desire for us to love him, using this illustration: “Before creation, God was just sitting around for all eternity, and one day said, ‘Oh myself, I am so bored!’ So he created us to have a loving relationship with him.” Of course, many people there laughed and felt good. But what kind of picture does this paint of God? If this picture of God is true, it implies that God *lacked* something, namely, the satisfaction and joy of loving relationships and community. In this picture, God is lonely, and needs something outside of himself. This would mean that God created us because he needed us to love and worship him, that he was lonely, bored, and lacking something without us. This picture is *completely* foreign to the Bible! God does not need us; He did not create us because he needed our love, praise, or companionship. God already has all the

joy of love and community there is in himself. God created us out of the *overflow* of his love; he created us to participate in, experience, enjoy and respond to *his love*, the loving community of the Trinity. God is love; God is a community of three persons in perfect unity with one another. God eternally enjoys and delights in Himself because He *is* a community of perfect love, and He invites us to come and join Him in delighting in the trinity and experiencing the delight of His perfect, harmonious, unbroken love, the very love He has set upon His Son.

Maybe you're feeling discouraged lately. Maybe you're feeling unloved, or unloveable. Maybe you feel far from God or spiritually cold. Maybe you feel like a failure, like a hypocrite, burdened by guilt and shame. Maybe you have a hard time getting up in the morning, or sitting down to read the Bible or pray feels like a chore, or you have to drag your feet to go to work or school or church, cause your tank just feels empty. Brother and sister, here's the greatest pick-me-up and pep talk I could ever give you: *God the Father loves you with the very love He has for His Son! God loves you just as much as He loves Jesus! And He has promised to lavish His love, the very love that Christ deserves, on you! NOT based on your performance, but based on His mercy and grace, based on the very prayer and desire and work of Christ on your behalf!* So you can receive and rest in and be affirmed and validated and encouraged by the love of God this morning, and know that despite your shame or guilt or failures and spiritual dryness or lack of motivation, God loves you just as much as He loves Jesus. And that means you can wake up or go to work or sit down to pray and read or come to church or face the challenges in your life or even say you're sorry with a big smile on your face and a sense of profound peace and joy in your heart, because it's alright; everything is ok; you're in Christ, and Christ is in you, and the Father is in Christ, and that means you are in the Father, wrapped up into the embrace and unity and love of the Triune God, filled and drawn into the embrace of the God who *is* Love! And He pours out His love onto you and promises He'll never turn off the flow and never let you go, but only invites you to come in and experience even more, for all eternity. So be encouraged, Brothers and Sisters.

This is also incredible, practical encouragement for us in our relationships with each other, especially at those moments when we find unity messy, when we find it hard to love each other. So when those days come, and you find yourself disagreeing with a fellow Christian or church member; when you feel hurt, disappointed, or betrayed; when you're sinned against; when you lose your cool and sin in frustration, and need to repent; when you find yourself

annoyed and tired and wonder why you have to go through this with that same person *again* - here's why, Brothers and Sisters: because God is patient and loves you just as much as He loves Jesus, and He also loves *them*, that fellow Christian that you're in conflict with, just as much as He loves Jesus; and God wants us to set aside our differences and love each other and be unified even as the Father and Son are unified in perfect love, distinct persons yet inseparable in love.

And if you're not a Christian yet, this incredible confidence and assurance can be yours, too! Repent of your sins and put your faith in Christ Jesus, and you, too, can be wrapped up in the eternal, unfading love of God; no matter who you are or what you've done, if you trust that Christ died for your sins and cry out to Him in faith, God will forgive you and love you just as much as He loves Jesus Christ, the perfectly Righteous Son of God. In fact, that's part of why God calls us to church unity: it's meant to be an attractive, evangelistic display of his glory and love in the gospel of Christ. Which brings us to point 3...

III. Jesus prays that we will be unified with one another so that the world will see Christ's love in us and believe in His glory (vv.20-23)

Church unity displays the glorious love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Church unity has an *evangelistic purpose*. We see this clearly in our passage: the reason for oneness given in v. 21 is "so that *the world* may believe that you have sent me." The *world* here refers specifically to non-believers. Again in v. 23, the same reason is given, saying "so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them even as you loved me." In the last part of the verse, "them" refers to believers, just as it has throughout the passage and chapter 17. In other words, church unity witnesses to the world the truth of the gospel declaring that Jesus Christ truly is the sent one from God, *and* declares the love of God for his people, the church. As the church loves one another and pursues unity in this world, it is a living, breathing, visible picture of the love, unity, and glory of God. Church unity is attractive and evangelistic, like a lighthouse in the storm, a beacon of hope to all who are lost in the misery of sin and brokenness. When people see the love, joy, hope, and peace found in a healthy, unified church family, it's attractive, it's powerful. People *want* to be in on it; they want we have and get to experience here. It shows the power and beauty of the gospel of Christ. This is a powerful motivation for us to pursue church unity with one another, even when it's difficult. It's for the sake of evangelism!

Maybe you know someone in you're life who isn't a Christian. Or maybe someone who is interested in the faith, maybe used to profess faith, or maybe even still claims to believe, but

has been so hurt by the church and disappointed by other Christians that they don't want anything to do with the church anymore. Maybe your heart desperately longs for someone to be saved, or to be reconciled to God and the Church. One of the best things you can do for them, besides pray, is to *be part of a vibrant, loving, unified church family*, invest your life into your church, and then invite those people you're concerned about to come and experience the glorious love of God on display in the church community. Talk to them about how you see God's glory and love displayed through the lives of your fellow Christians, through the ways you see each other serve, repent, forgive, grow, and love, even when it's hard. Let your life be so intertwined with the lives of your fellow believers and church members so that the non-Christians in your life can't *help* but see and experience the love and unity we share in Christ! Invite believers and non-believers to hang out *together*. These verses show us there is great power in *communal* evangelism. And you can always invite them to church as well. I am so thankful that our church family, here at Bread of Life, is marked by a commitment to love and unity, and that the glory of God is displayed in our lives together. May we be committed to glorifying God in our love and unity with one another all the more!

Finally, as Jesus concludes his prayer, he ties it all together and leaves us with a profound picture of hope, as we see in point 4...

IV. Jesus prays that we would be with Him and see His glory (vv.24-26)

Jesus concludes by praying for the day when our unity with one another and God will be brought to completion as we are perfect by the love of God and brought to live with Him in glory. We see this in vv.24-26: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Christ is going back to the Father, in Heaven, where His true glory, as the pre-incarnate Son of God who created the world, will be fully revealed to all! And He's praying that *we* will get to go and be there with Him, in Heaven, in the glorious presence of God, to see His glory and beauty in majesty in full! He makes clear He is praying this not for the whole world, but for those given to Him by the Father, all who are elect to believe, and all who *will* believe. He prays

for this, and then He's about to go and *secure this reality* through His death and resurrection, guaranteeing that one day all who believe in Him *will be* raised up, seated with Him in glory, to see His glory and be perfectly filled and satisfied in His love, so that we will be *perfected and glorified ourselves* by the glory and love of God that we get to be united to in Christ Jesus.

In other words, after praying for our unity, to be one as He is one, because of our union with God and His love for us, so that the world may see the glory of God through us - after praying for what feels like an impossible task, Jesus concludes the prayer by encouraging us with this profound picture of hope that awaits us: the coming day when we will be *perfected*, when this goal will be complete, when we will be *with Him* and see His glory perfectly revealed. On that day, our sin will be no more, and we will *truly* be one with each other and the Father, for we shall see the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus and be made like Him. Oh what glory awaits us! So we strive for church unity *now* because we are looking forward to that perfect unity that is to come.

And this means that the unity and love we experience in the local church now is but a pale glimpse of the glory and love and joy that awaits us. That should encourage us immensely, brothers and sisters! And that's one of the reasons why Christ gave us the Lord's Supper: every week, when we finish hearing the word preached, we respond in faith by coming to the Lord's Table, the family dinner table, where we visibly and tangibly show our unity with Christ *and with each other* through our common faith in what it represents: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, until He returns and brings us home to glory. So if you're a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel believing church, we invite you to come to the Table with us in just a moment.

But if those three things don't describe you this morning, then examine your heart: how is your relationship with God? What about with his people? Are you united or divided? Instead of taking the supper this morning, we invite you to get right with the Lord, through repentance and faith in Christ alone for salvation, and to get right with His Church, either through baptism, membership, or restoration. That's what this meal represents, and exactly what Christ prays for here. So if you have any questions about believing in Christ, baptism, or church membership, we would love to speak with you after the service. Until then, let's have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table.