

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

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Introduction.

- A. Just off the top of your head, of all the prayers of Jesus that are recorded in Scripture, which is the most spiritually significant? There are several possible answers to this question. Probably the answer that will pop into most people's heads is what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer, which is recorded for us in Matthew 6. Everybody knows this one. Another candidate might be Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, in Matthew 26, where He asks God to remove this cup from Him. Lots of hymnwriters, at least, seem to think this prayer is important. It shows up in a number of the songs we sing before the Lord's Supper.
- B. There are some other candidates too, but of the recorded prayers of Jesus, the one that is probably most important is the prayer He prays in John 17, throughout the entire chapter. This prayer actually occurs on the same night as the prayer in the Garden, perhaps two or three hours before. Indeed, from the text, it appears that as Jesus is traveling to the Mount of Olives, He pauses in mid-journey to utter this prayer. The subject of Jesus' petition to the Father here is not Himself, but His disciples. For this reason, sometimes it is called the High Priestly Prayer or the Intercessory Prayer, but both of those names are a bit too clunky to be useful. Let's turn, then, to this prayer this morning, what we can instead call Jesus' prayer for unity.

I. The Sharers of Unity

- A. As we consider this prayer, we first have to ask just who it is that Jesus is talking about, who the sharers in this unity will be. After the introductory portion of the prayer, Jesus spends some time defining exactly this, who His people are. The first part of this definition appears in John 17:6-8. In this three-verse chunk, Jesus defines His disciples by describing their behavior in three important areas: They believe that God sent Jesus, they have received the word of God, and they have kept the word of God. Let's look at each of these in detail:
 - 1. Starting from the bottom first, this tells that Jesus' disciples believe that Jesus came from God. Nothing difficult here. Anyone who does not believe this is not likely to want to be a disciple of Jesus, either.
 - 2. Second, disciples of Jesus must receive the word of God, which, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, means believing that it is the word of God, not the word of men. Now, this also sounds like a "Duh!" point, but in the religious world around us, it's becoming increasingly fashionable to believe that the Bible is not the inspired word of God, and that its descriptions of historical events are not literally true. Sadly, this trend is most evident among the religious leadership. This past Easter Sunday, just a month ago, there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men and women who got up in pulpits all around this country and preached glowing sermons about "the spirit of resurrection," all the while believing in their hearts that Jesus was just a man who died on the cross and who stayed dead. If the past is any guide, in a few years or decades, this attitude will start creeping into our midst too.
 - 3. Friends, we cannot accept either this viewpoint or the people who hold it. If we do, if we begin to tolerate those who do not receive the word of God as from God, there are two important consequences that attach. In the first place, by our toleration, we become joined to them. Second of all, that same toleration of evil will also inevitably separate us from Jesus and exclude us from His church. Sure, we can have unity if we believe that the word of God is not from God. It will just be with the evil, not the good.
 - 4. Finally, disciples of Jesus must keep the word. From time to time, in our Christian existence, we run into folks who say, "You people in the Church of Christ believe that you're the only true Christians, and you believe that anyone who isn't in the Church of Christ is going to hell." That makes it sound like we believe that salvation is guaranteed by the sign in front of the church building, and it completely misses the point. In the Lord's church, we're not concerned with names and signs. We're concerned with keeping the word of God. Anyone who keeps the word of God is a disciple of Jesus, and anyone who does not is not. As a corollary, we must recognize those who keep the word as brethren, and we must reject those who do not.
 - 5. When we put this into practice, when we question someone's religious practices, it's not because we're hateful people; it's because we see a disconnect between what they do and what the Bible teaches. It might seem impolite to bring up those differences; it might even be offensive to some, but it is absolutely necessary. If people don't hear the truth from us, they aren't going to hear it from anybody, and they're going to be lost. Let's be true disciples. Let's keep the word ourselves, and let's encourage others to keep it too. Only then can they and we together be a part of the discipleship for which Jesus is praying.
- B. This idea, of separating the world into those who keep the word and those who do not, is not some offensive little idea that we have invented ourselves. Instead, this is a division that Jesus Himself makes. Consider what Jesus says in John 17:9-10. Jesus prays for those whom God has given Him, for those who keep the word. By contrast, He explicitly says that He does not pray for the world. Implicit in this distinction is the idea that anyone who does not keep the word is not in Christ, but in the world. Those who are united in Jesus, then,

are only those who devote themselves to His obedience. Those who do not, are not.

II. The Basis of Unity

- A. Now that Jesus has defined those who share in His unity, He also describes the basis on which that unity can exist. This portion of the prayer begins in John 17:11-13. The main thrust of what Jesus is saying here is that He wants the Father to keep the disciples of Jesus in His name. The result of this, He says, will be that those disciples will be one just as Jesus and the Father are one. Only those who are kept in the name of the Father can be a part of the unity of Jesus. This is extremely important; we'll come back to it later. So what does this mean? What is the significance of being kept in the name of God? To grasp Jesus' thought here, we need to realize that when the New Testament says "in the name of," what it usually means is "by the authority of," just like we say, "Open, in the name of the law." Jesus is asking God to keep His disciples under His authority.
- B. Imagine that! Here Jesus is, less than 24 hours before His death, praying perhaps the last prayer He will ever pray for His disciples. In the midst of this touching appeal for unity in His people, He starts praying about authority. Now, there are a lot of folks out there, both in the church and outside of it, who wouldn't expect that at all. They want to divide the church into two groups. On the one hand, they say, are the dry, lifeless Pharisees in the church who only care about authority and the details of God's law. On the other hand, they like to group themselves with the warm, loving, alive Christians who don't sweat the small stuff and just want to love each other and be united. Friends, that division just doesn't make sense. In the plain terms of what Jesus is saying here, the only possible way we can be united with God and other Christians is by being kept under the authority of God. A proper understanding of Bible authority is not a divider. Instead, it is precisely that understanding that brings us together with each other. Authority is not dry. It is essential.
- C. This authority for our actions is something that must be passed down to us by God. Jesus here tells His disciples that while He was with them, He directly was the instrument of God's authority. He was the One who was responsible for keeping them in the name of the Father. Now, however, that time is coming to an end. As He says in John 17:13, He is coming to the Father, and will no longer be able to fulfill that function directly. This poses the question: how can we keep under God's authority and thus share in His unity now?
- D. Jesus answers this question with His prayer in John 17:14-19. Remember all the earlier discussion about receiving the word and keeping the word? Jesus didn't just drop the thread of that idea. Here, He tells us that after His departure, the word of God is to be the agent of God's authority. He wants His disciples to be kept from the evil one, and therefore necessarily united with Him. This occurs when we are sanctified, made holy, set apart for God's purposes, by the truth of the word. The word is our primary tool for unity.
- E. This points us to another topic that too many Christians find dry and boring—study of God's word on the subject of Scriptural authority. They say that we ought to read the Bible like a love letter, not like a blueprint. Now, that sounds like a nice sweet thing to do, but in practice, here's what it means. It means that we are supposed to go through the Bible, pick out all of the nice warm fuzzy passages about love and grace, and let those passages about love and grace make warm fuzzy feelings in our hearts while we do whatever we want and worship with a church that does whatever it wants.
- F. Brethren, it's not the voice of Jesus I hear urging us to behave in this way. It's the voice of the devil. Jesus wants us to be loving people, yes! Jesus wants us to live in awe of the grace of God, yes! But the fact of the matter is, brethren, that both of those concepts inevitably take us back to a close study of Bible authority in the word. It's impossible for us to understand what grace is unless we understand God's law first, and unless we strive to keep God's law, grace does not apply to us. Similarly, we cannot possibly know what love is unless we turn to the Scripture to learn how God wants us to express it. Love does not exist apart from God's law. Love is defined by God's law. Love, grace, and authority are like strands in a rope. You can't take one out without destroying the whole thing. We can't love each other properly and be united with each other unless we first have learned how God wants us to do it. Unity exists under the authority of the word.

III. The Nature of Unity

- A. After setting forth the basis of Scriptural unity, Jesus then defines this kind of unity's nature. This is laid out in John 17:20-23. Here, Jesus begins by praying that all His disciples may do what we just finished discussing, that they may all be kept in the authority of God. Why does Jesus want this? Because then they can be one with God and also one with each other. Remember how Jesus brought this up in John 17:11? Here's the same point at much greater length. This complete, mystical unity only exists through the word.
- B. This is another topic that a lot of folks get mixed up on. They believe in what's called ecumenicism, the idea that all nominally Christian churches and denominations should just paper over their doctrinal differences and be one big happy family. This is certainly not something to which the brotherhood is immune. I have in my files a newspaper clipping from when I still lived in Southeast Texas. It's from the Beaumont Enterprise, January 15, 2005, and it is entitled "Reunited." It's about a merger between two area churches, the Parkside Christian Church and the Cornerstone Church of Christ. They have decided that the doctrinal differences that have existed between the churches of Christ and the Christian Church for the past 100 years are nothing worth dividing over. Take, for instance, the issue of using mechanical instruments of music in worship. On this

subject, one of the elders of the Church of Christ in question says, "We're kind of fond of a capella music, but I think we can do a blend." Never mind Ephesians 5:19. Never mind Colossians 3:16. Never mind the fact that Christians are never authorized to do anything but sing anywhere in Scripture. Now they're going to have "mixed" services with this Christian church that have three instrumental hymns and three a capella hymns. These are not people who care about God's word any more. They just want unity at any price.

- C. The problem is that the unity Jesus describes in John 17 is based on more than just the desire to be unified. Instead, the unity of Christ is based on shared submission to the authority of God as revealed in His word. We can be united with God when we follow His will by keeping His word. We can be united with others who follow His will by keeping His word just like we do. However, we CANNOT be united with anyone who does not keep it. We follow God's will, and they follow their own will, and having two wills in the same body is like having two drivers in the same car. It just doesn't work. Absolutely, we should seek unity with all men. God rejoices in unity. However, in our search for unity, we must never compromise the principles of the word.
- D. This sounds restrictive, but in reality, it's what Jesus wants. Indeed, Jesus observes that only this unity will make evident that Jesus is from God. If we claim that Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, it doesn't make sense for us not to obey. If we want to proclaim Jesus as King, we have to show His kingship in our lives first.

IV. The Effects of Unity

- A. Furthermore, unity created by submission to God's authority also has two ultimate effects. Jesus details these in John 17:24-26. The first is that it determines who will be with Jesus in heaven. Remember, folks, unity is not just a here-on-earth thing. Instead, unity is an eternal thing. If we remain with Jesus and with His people here on earth, we shall also be with them in heaven.
- B. As always, though, this is entirely tied up with obedience to God's word. Remember what we looked at earlier. The ones whom God has given Jesus are the ones who keep His word, and it's precisely those word-keepers whom Jesus wants with Him to behold His glory. Just as has been true throughout this text, this is a much smaller group than many in the world want to believe. We can't go along with that way of thinking, wave our hands, and say, "I'm sure he's going to go to heaven." We need to use Jesus' definition for who a disciple is, we need to use Jesus' definition for unity, and we need to use Jesus' definition for who is going to go to heaven, because that definition is the true one. It's the only proper way to understand the text.
- C. Finally, in the last verse of this chapter, we see Jesus describing something we've already touched on: the connection between authority and love. He tells us that as a result of hearing of and submitting to the authority of the Father, the love of God will be in us. Once again, this is not what the wisdom of the world says. It tells us, "Let's not worry about all those boring rules that are in the Bible. Let's just get together and love one another."
- D. Friends, that cannot be. First of all, love is not something that we get to make up on our own. Love is a commandment; indeed, both the first and second commandments of Christianity command us to love. All the other commandments tell us how to love. If we reject those commandments in favor of what we think is love, all we do is demonstrate our own unloving natures. The Bible tells us, after all, that if we love God, we will keep His commandments. Furthermore, if we truly love our neighbors, we will keep the commandments of God with respect to them. If we don't do this, if we just do whatever we want to and call it "love," no one will see anything different in us than in the rest of the world. We'll look just like our selfish, evil neighbors. The worldly will seek us, and the righteous will shun us. On the other hand, though, if we make known the authority of God in our lives, that will cause us to be united to His people and show the world that we are His.

Conclusion. If you want to submit your life to the authority of God, come to Him today.