

One as We are One, that the World may Believe and Know that You sent Me

John 17

In John 17 we find this prayer of Jesus in front of the disciples. In other places we get a few short prayers of Jesus, but this is the only long prayer of Jesus that we have. Jesus often prayed alone, but we're not told what he prayed. What we want to know is: "Why does God want us to know what Jesus prayed?"

After we've read this prayer we can answer that. More than anything, this prayer is about us, it tells us how Jesus prays for us. Already in 17:2 Jesus brings us in, those that the Father gave him, and in the last verse of the prayer, 17:26, he's still talking about us. We, the people God gave him, are at the center of his prayer. God wants us to know that Jesus prays for us, and what he prays for us.

That produces another question: "Should we not pray for ourselves what Jesus prays for us?" I can't see a way around saying "yes" to that. God wants us to know how to pray, and a lot of this we could pray for ourselves. Believers generally don't need to be taught to pray; some kind of prayer usually comes naturally. But we all need to be taught what to pray, and John 17 helps us with that.

Here's the setting: at the end of John 14, Jesus and the disciples left the upper room and headed toward Gethsemane. Jesus deliberately did not get to Gethsemane until after he had taught the disciples on the way, and after he had prayed this prayer in front of them. Jesus did not want Judas and the hostile crowd to find him until after this teaching and this prayer. Once those were done, Jesus led the disciples to the place where Judas would know to find them (18:1-2).

As We Are One – John 17:1-5

Jesus asks the Father that we, the believers, would be one in the same way that the Father and the Son are one. He speaks of our oneness four times (vv11, 21, 22, 23). So let's first talk about how the Father and Son are one.

They are a father and a son, a parent and a child. The family image comes to the front here right away. We also are brothers and sisters who share the one Father. And the Father and the Son glorify one other. "Father, glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. I brought you glory ... Now, Father, glorify me in your presence" (vv4-5) We also honour the other ahead of ourselves; easy to say and hard to do.

Jesus told the Father, “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine.” The ideal church at the end of Acts 2 lived just like that, sharing food and possessions with each other. And lastly, read three times that the Father loves the Son. The Son’s love for the Father comes through every line in this prayer, though it is not mentioned. Earlier Jesus said that the world needs to see that he loves and obeys the Father (14:31).

The Father and Son are family, they both honour the other, they share all they have with each other, and they love each other. The New Testament encourages all of these between believers. Jesus prays that we’d be one like that.

I Pray for Those you Gave Me – 17:6–11

We should catch what Jesus calls us: we are the ones the Father gave him out of the world. We were the Father’s, and the Father gave us to the Son. When Jesus speaks to us, he says, “You did not choose me, I chose you” (15:16). But when he talks to the Father in this prayer, believers are those that the Father gave him so that he could give us eternal life. Five times in this prayer, we are the ones that God gave to Jesus (17:2, 6 [2x], 9, 24). I can hardly get my head around that, but it’s an established fact between Father and Son. This back story is comforting, is it not? We’re in good hands.

Then Jesus says (v9) “I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.” This startles us: Jesus did not pray for the world, and he didn’t just not pray for the world, he told the Father in front of the disciples that he was not praying for the world.

John 3:16 tells us how much God loves the world. Does Jesus not share that? He certainly does. We read in Matthew that Jesus had compassion on the lost, they were like sheep without a shepherd. But even then he asked only that we’d pray for more workers.

The Most Urgent Request in this Prayer – 17:11

His most urgent request is this: “Holy Father, keep them by the power of your name, which you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

Jesus asks several things in John 17, but this trumps the rest. First, Jesus has a long lead-in to this request. He begins verse 9, “I ask for them,” but he does not actually make the request until the end of verse 11. Also, Jesus calls God “Father” repeatedly in this prayer, but only here does he use the more solemn “Holy Father.”

In this request Jesus reminds God of his name. The name of God is Yahweh, and the Father gave that name to the Son. These things together tell us that for Jesus this request had particular weight. Four times in this prayer he describes all his people being “one.”

Jesus asks the special protection of the Holy Father so that we would be all be one. Would you have thought that for all believers to be unified we mostly needed protection? I would have guessed something else, and I'd have been wrong. To be one as Father and Son are one, above all we need God's incredible divine keeping, his divine protection.

Would you have guessed that above all the things the Lord could have urgently prayed for us, he would ask for our unity? When you think about the believers you know, or all the believers in the world, would you have thought what we need most of all was to be one, to be unified?

I don't think that would be my urgent request. We are sadly fixated on our private conscience and our individual holiness. Perhaps we need to consider more carefully what we are about, because Jesus wanted our unity more than he wanted anything else.

Jesus has already commanded us three times to love one another as he loved us; obeying that command will be our part in this unity. To the Father, he solemnly asks for our protection: "keep them so they'll be one." That's the Father's part in this.

A little later Jesus will ask, "keep them from the evil one." When we are not one with each other, when we are divided, we are watching the evil one's work. We think we're wrestling against flesh and blood, against that difficult person or that unpleasant church, but we are not. It will take a lot of obeying the new command on our part, and a lot of protection from the Holy Father on his part, for us to be one as the Father and the Son are one. That's spiritual warfare.

Why do we think Jesus prays all this in front of his followers? At least part of the reason must be that he's teaching them and us how to pray. It takes confidence in our instructions to pray like this.

That the World May Believe – 17:20–21

Jesus expanded his prayer to those who would later believe; that directly includes us. "My prayer is not for them alone, but 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 in you."

Jesus wants us all to be in the family relationship he has with the Father. There is a real sense here that we all are brought into the oneness and fellowship of the Trinity. We stay human of course, we don't become God, but we share that mutual glorifying of one another, loving one another, and sharing with one another that happens between Father and Son. But it does not work if we are not getting along with each other.

What surprises us here at the end of the prayer is the reason Jesus gives the Father for asking for our unity: “so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” When Jesus prays that all his followers would be one, he is also praying for the world. The best thing Jesus can do for the world is to ask the Father for all his followers to be one, because that way the world will believe that the Father sent the Son. Do any of us actually believe that?

Jesus deliberately prays all this in front of the eleven, those he sends into the world, the original gospel preachers. He says that the rest of us will believe because of the message of those first followers. But in this prayer, he’s not concerned about their preaching. He mentions their preaching and then drops it, because although it’s necessary, it’s not the deciding factor. How will we all act toward one another? That’s how we will persuade the world that he’s for real.

The eleven needed to hear this. Remember that there was a dispute among the apostles even after the Last Supper about which of them was the greatest. They needed to hear this, and the world needed them to hear this. In Matthew (and Mark and Luke), when Jesus spoke to the apostles about their greatness in the kingdom, he led them to the same place: serving relationships to one another (Matt 20:25-26; Mark 10:42-44; Luke 22:26-27).

In this prayer, believing that God sent Jesus is saving faith. So if all of us are one, then the world will be invited to saving faith. The world will find our oneness a persuasive argument that Jesus really did come from God, and the world will be pulled toward saving faith.

This is pretty much what Jesus told us when he first gave the new command: “by this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:35). This also means that when we do not love one another as Jesus loved us, when we are not one, then the world has good reason to doubt that God sent Jesus.

That the World May Know – 17:22–23

We are now near the end of the prayer: “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—so that they may be completely one” (AA). What exactly is our glory? The Father gave the Son glory, and the Son has passed this on to us, so that we could be one as Father and Son are one, so that we could be completely one.

Our unity is bound up with our glory. For the Father and the Son, their oneness and their love for each other is their glory. That’s what makes them glorious. Jesus the Son has passed on that glory to us, so that we could be one, so that our unity would be perfect, and that would be our glory. That’s what makes us the salt of the earth, a city on a hill, and the light of the world.

In verses 22–23 Jesus does not ask for anything. Jesus has already asked the Father twice to make us one, and here he’s telling the Father that he’s done his part – he gave us the glory the Father gave him, so that we could be one and perfectly united.

“Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Again, Jesus has an eye on the world in all this. IF we will love one another, and live in unity, the world will know two things. The first Jesus already mentioned: the world will know that God sent Jesus into the world.

The other is that the world will know that God loves us the same way God loved Jesus. Jesus prays this with assurance, he has no doubts, and he wants his followers to listen carefully and get this down, which they obviously did, so that they and we can pray like this.

How will the world know that God loves us just as much as he loves his Son? If we are one, the world will know this. This also baffles me. If I were to ask God to do something for all believers to show the world how much he loved us all, it would take me a long time to get around to Christian unity. But our Lord put that at the top. He’s showing us how to think and how to pray.

What Does the World Need?

According to Jesus in this prayer, the world needs to know two things: that God sent Jesus, and that God loves the people of Jesus as much as he loves Jesus. Not what I expected. The same evidence will persuade the world of both: if we are one as the Father and Son are one, that is, if we are brought to complete oneness. The best way Jesus can think of to pray for the lost world is to ask the Father to protect us so we can be brought to complete unity. So, what our mission?

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus tells us to pray that he will send harvest workers into his fields, and we will let that stand. In John we read the Lord’s own prayer, and he prays that the world will see our unity. The rest will flow from that. Amazing.

Asking and Receiving in Prayer

Several times in chapters 14-16 Jesus taught that whatever we ask from God, he will give it. But in John 17, Jesus prays that we would be one as he and the Father are one. It is a good prayer. This prayer, however, has not been answered. All of his followers are still not one. There is still plenty of division within the people that the Father gave the Son.

I don’t know how to explain this. Why God has not answered Jesus more completely? But this much is clear: the Son knows what it’s like to pray the right prayer for a long time and not have it answered. Hang on to that, because sometimes we need to remember that. There’s nothing wrong with how Jesus prays: he has faith and the Spirit’s leading. Sometimes the right prayer is not answered, or at least it takes a long, long time.

On the other hand, we should assume that the unity we do experience, whenever that happens, happens because God heard this prayer and is still guarding us so that we will be one.

The Surprises of this Prayer

The Lord's most passionate appeal to the Father was that we would be one as Father and Son are one. For us all to be one requires great divine keeping and protection. If we are one, the world will believe and know that God sent Jesus. If we are one, the world will know that God loves us.

For me every one of these are surprises. So, for what should we pray? We do not have this prayer just to know what Jesus prayed. We have this prayer so we will pray like this ourselves. How will we show our concern for the world around us? What is the church's mission of the world? Where do our instructions lead us?

We need to tell ourselves that we have trouble understanding is how important this oneness is. I have heard many more sermons about the evils of "unity at any cost" than I heard about the importance of unity. I grew up hearing about how bad it was when believers had to compromise to get along better. I never heard a preacher say oneness and unity are as important as what Jesus says in this prayer. What if Jesus meant all this just the way he says it?

The good news is how much of this actually happens. It happens among us here, and it happens between believers all over the world. When there is oneness, we need to think about Jesus praying. When we are unified, it's because Jesus is praying for us and the Father is protecting us. Let's pray for it ourselves. If we want the world to know and believe, this is the prayer. Amen.

PRAYER: Holy Father, we get some of this right, but it sure could be better. Forgive us. Protect us by the power of your name, the name you gave Jesus, so that we all would be one, as you and your Son are one. May we be one as you are in the Son, and the Son is in you. May we all be in you, so that the world would believe that you sent Jesus. May we be completely one, so the world would know that you sent Jesus, and the world would know that you love us the same way you love Jesus. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.