

Jesus' High Priestly Prayer—Unity (John 17:20-26)

Jesus prayed for us, for you and for me! In His High Priestly Prayer, recorded in John 17:20-26, Jesus prayed first for Himself, then for His disciples, and finally for those who would later come to faith through His disciples' teachings—you and me. John 17:20-26 contains this portion of His prayer. In it Jesus prays for unity among His followers. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus prayed for us. In fact, He continues to intercede for us in heaven (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). In the same way the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf (Romans 8:27). The Son and the Spirit are constantly praying to the Father for us. As in His High Priestly Prayer, unity among Christians must be a constant theme of Jesus' intercession for us. Because Jesus made unity a priority in His prayer, we should make unity a priority in our lives. Let's learn to get along with one another!

Jesus wants His followers to be one (17:20-23).

In John 17:20-23 Jesus uses the word "one" four times (five times according to some Greek manuscripts) and the word "in" five times in reference to unity within the godhead and among God's people. Jesus wants His followers to be one.

Christian unity reflects the unity within the triune godhead (17:20-21a).

Jesus expanded His prayer to include all who would believe through the message of His disciples. He obviously knew that many, many people would put their faith in Him. We would come to faith because the disciples would faithfully proclaim the good news about Jesus. We, too, have the privilege of passing along that good news to others.

Jesus' prayer for future believers focused on unity. He prayed that "all of them might be one." He describes the kind of unity He has in mind in terms of the unity between Himself and the Father. We are to be one "just as" the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. Within the triune godhead there is an essential unity—God is one God. However, individual human beings cannot be one in essence as God is one in essence. Therefore, Jesus has in mind here a spiritual unity. All believers are joined spiritually through new birth into a single family, into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). However, this spiritual unity must reveal itself in practical unity. Some Christians might defend their divisiveness by claiming spiritual unity apart from practical unity. But true spiritual unity demands practical unity. We have no excuse for not getting along with other believers. Practical unity is a unity of relationship, of fellowship. The Son and the Father enjoy unity of fellowship "in" each other. We, too, can experience unity of fellowship within the church. Unity doesn't demand uniformity, of course. There is diversity within the body of Christ. But this diversity is no excuse for division. We are one spiritually and we must learn to be one practically. This is Jesus' prayer for us.

Christian unity reveals to the world the redemptive mission of Jesus (17:21b).

Unity among believers is deeply related to our position “in” God. Jesus prayed that we might be “in” the Father and the Son. Many Greek manuscripts record Jesus as praying that we might be “one” in the Father and the Son, an emphasis on His prayer for unity that fits nicely within the context. Our spiritual and practical unity sends a powerful message to the unbelieving world. When people see Christians of diverse backgrounds working together in love for one another they will move closer to faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed that our unity would prompt the world to believe that the Father sent the Son. Jesus’ identity and redemptive mission are revealed through the loving oneness of His people (John 13:35).

Christian unity rests on the glory of Jesus which He shares with His followers (17:22).

Our unity as believers doesn’t stem from our own willpower. It’s based on the work of Jesus Christ in our lives. Jesus describes this work as His “glory.” Earlier in this prayer Jesus referred to His shared glory with the Father in heaven (John 17:5) and the glory that emanates from His redemptive work on earth (John 17:4). Hebrews 2:10 connects Jesus’ work of bringing people into His glory with His suffering on the cross. So, when Jesus states that He has given us the glory He received from the Father, He must have in mind the redemptive work completed in us. We are glorified in our redemption because we now are relieved of our sins and restored to fellowship with God. This redemptive work within us makes it possible to be one, unified spiritually and practically just as Jesus and the Father are one spiritually and relationally. We will get along with other believers only when we recognize and rely on the deeply transforming work of Jesus within us.

Christian unity reveals to the world the love of God for His people (17:23).

Our unity as believers is dependent on our faith relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus describes that relationship as His life within us: “I in them.” Later, Paul describes this concept as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). Often Paul refers to believers as being “in Christ” (Ephesians 2:6, 13), but he also says that Christ is in us. These descriptions point to an intimate unity between the believer and the Savior. “I in them,” Jesus said, and then, referring to the Father, “you in me.” The Father is “in” the Son, and the Son is “in” believers. Therefore, we as followers of Jesus Christ have a “perfected” unity that should become more and more evident in the way we live in community with one another. Jesus repeats the idea that unity among believers will prove to the world that the Father sent Him. In addition, the world will recognize that the Father loves Jesus’ followers. Our unity reveals to the world the love of God for His people. In fact, Jesus states the amazing truth that the Father loves us “just as” He loves the Son! The infinite love of God the Father for God the Son is matched in the Father’s love for us. Whenever we feel unloved or believe that God has abandoned us we can rest on this revealed truth of the Father’s infinite love for His children.

**Jesus wants His
followers to be near (17:24).**

It’s impossible to imagine unity apart from proximity. Because we are one with Jesus, Jesus wants us to be near Him—eventually to be with Him throughout all eternity.

Jesus expressed His desire for His followers to be with Him (17:24a).

Again, Jesus addressed His prayer to the “Father,” this time stating His desire for believers to be with Him. We as Jesus’ followers have been “given” to Jesus by the Father, a truth that Jesus had expressed earlier in this prayer (John 17:6-10). Our identity as believers is found in our relationship with God. Because the Father gave the disciples and all future believers to Jesus, Jesus wants His followers to be “with” Him. He wants us to be where He is. Jesus told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them so that they could be with Him (John 14:1-3). Jesus wants us to be with Him in heaven for all eternity.

Jesus expressed His desire for His followers to perceive His glory (17:24b).

In addition to being with Him, Jesus wants His followers to see His glory. The word translated “see” carries the idea of thoughtful perception or observation. Although no one can fully view the glory of God (Exodus 33:20), Jesus will allow us to see His glory in heaven. This glory is that which the Father will give to Jesus, a restoration of His heavenly glory that Jesus willingly veiled in His incarnation. The Father eagerly restored Jesus’ glory because of His love for His Son. This love is an eternal love, a love of God the Father for God the Son from before the foundation of the world. The Father loves the Son and He loves us with the same love. Jesus loves us so much that He wants us to be with Him in heaven throughout eternity. Because of this deep love and this deep longing to be with us forever, we should be motivated to live in unity with one another here and now.

**Jesus wants His followers
to be permeated by love (17:25-26).**

Divine love within the godhead has been planted within Jesus’ followers. Unity among believers reveals this love.

Jesus acknowledged that His followers knew that the Father had sent Him (17:25).

Once again Jesus addresses His prayer to the Father, this time calling Him the “righteous Father.” God is upright morally and He is perfectly just in all He does. Righteousness is an attribute of God. Jesus said that the world didn’t know God. Jesus, however, knows the Father. In His incarnation Jesus revealed the Father (John 14:9). Furthermore, those who know Jesus know that He was sent by the Father. We cannot dissociate the Father from the Son. To know God is to know Jesus Christ, His Son.

Jesus made the Father’s reputation known to His followers so that they might be characterized by love (17:26).

Jesus always did that which was according to the will of the Father (John 4:34). In so doing, Jesus made the Father known to His followers. In fact, Jesus states that He made the Father’s “name” known to us (compare John 17:6). The name encompasses the character and

reputation of God. Jesus revealed the Father as a loving God who seeks the redemption of His fallen people. Jesus made the Father's name known during His earthly ministry and He continues to reveal the Father to all believers. We cannot know God apart from Jesus Christ and His revealing work. Jesus reveals the Father's love so that the love of the Father for the Son "might be in them." Jesus wants the love of God to permeate our lives. The love of the Father resides in us because Jesus Himself lives in us. The Father is in the Son, the Son is in us by faith, and therefore the Father's love resides within us as Jesus' followers. Because the love of God permeates our lives we can and must live in unity with one another. Only then will the world recognize the love of God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus made unity a priority in His prayer, we should make unity a priority in our lives.