“THAT ALL OF THEM MAY BE ONE”

John 17:1–26

Key Verse: 17:21

“…that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Whether we realize it or not, this world is a spiritual battleground. In our world there are so many forces under Satan’s power, and those who belong to God constantly have to struggle against them. Satan and his forces are motivated by bitter hatred for Jesus and his followers. In this chapter Jesus prays for his disciples, and for all those who would follow him in the future, including us today. He prays God would keep us safe from Satan’s power. He prays for us to be set apart from the world. He prays for us to be pure and holy. He prays especially that we all would be united through his truth. But how can we be one? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words today.

Before praying for others, Jesus prayed for himself. What did he say? Look at verses 1–5. We notice he’s speaking mostly about glory. We human beings, if we’re honest, all seek glory. Some seek their own glory, and Jesus said earlier they can’t be trusted; others seek God’s glory, and Jesus said they are people of truth (7:18). Yet here, Jesus *does* pray for his own glory, which at first may sound strange to our ears. And the context is also a bit odd. He’s about to go through betrayal, arrest, an unjust trial, and crucifixion. He could have asked God for courage, or strength, or peace. But of all the things he could be praying for, he’s praying for glory. He’s not praying for the kind of glory we would ordinarily think of. What’s this “glory” he prayed for? We learn several things here.

**First**, his glory was the cross. Read verse 1b. John in this Gospel makes it a point to refer to Jesus’ death on a cross as his “glory” (12:23; 13:31,32). Death on a cross was so shameful and painful, not anything a normal person would pray to happen, to themselves or anyone else. But Jesus actually asked the Father to “glorify” him in this way. It’s ironic, mysterious, and unnatural, all at once. But it teaches us to see what glory really is. Glory is the privilege to do God’s will, especially when it involves humiliation, self-sacrifice and suffering. But do we really see our God-given sufferings as our “glory”?

**Second**, his glory was God’s glory. Read verse 1b again. Jesus prayed that through his suffering and death he could glorify God. Through his “glory” on the cross he would glorify God. It’s what Jesus really wanted, above all else—God’s glory. He didn’t feel trapped or forced; he was willing, because he knew it was his Father’s will. He knew that through his obedience to it, he could glorify his Father God. But honestly, how much do we want to glorify our Father God?

**Third**, his glory was giving people eternal life. Read verse 2. Jesus received the glory of giving eternal life to people. According to verse 3 eternal life starts right now, as we get to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Giving people eternal life—what greater glory could there be? We can’t give people eternal life, but we can help others believe in Jesus, and thereby receive eternal life in him. So in a sense, every person we help to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life becomes our glory. Sometimes the impact of what we try to do in ministry can’t be seen with the naked eye, not even by ourselves. We may not be able to count them like sheep, or catalogue how many disciples we’ve raised, or how big a chapter we’ve built. We may never know in this lifetime those we helped believe in Jesus. But someday everything will be brought to light (1Co3:11–13; 4:5). God will reveal what remains in eternity.

**Fourth**, his glory was completing the work the Father gave him to do. Read verse 4. What was the work God gave Jesus to do? In light of all of John’s Gospel, it was the work of planting faith (6:29). It was the work of raising disciples. Ultimately, it was the work of giving his life as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). He emphasizes here that he “finished” (cf. 19:30). Starting often seems glorious. But finishing is really glorious. Finishing God’s assigned work for our lives is our glory, too. Are we aware of the work God gave us to do? Are we planning to finish?

**Fifth**, his glory is eternal and heavenly. Read verse 5. Though Jesus’ glory looked toward the past, toward what he had done with his life, and at the present, how he was about to suffer and die on a cross, it also looked to the future. It was the glory he would enjoy in the Father’s presence after his suffering and death. He was sure of this future glory. The ugliness of the cross would in no way diminish this glory. Jesus as God’s Son shared a unique glory with his Father before the world began. But his words here are also our hope. By his amazing grace, even we someday get to share in his glory. So in summary, we should pray for ourselves to suffer for him. We should pray to glorify him. We should pray to lead others to believe and have eternal life. We should pray to complete the work he gives us. And we should pray for the hope of his eternal glory.

In the next part Jesus prays for his disciples. In verses 6–10 he goes into some detail describing them. He emphasizes that the Father in his sovereign will gave them to him. He says they obeyed God’s word. He contrasts them with the world and says they actually belong to God. Jesus’ words about his disciples here should shape how we view ministry. People who come to us are not ours, but God’s. Those who come to Bible study and accept God’s word may seem insignificant, but to God they are so precious.

What’s intriguing is how Jesus prays for them. First we notice his tone. He’s so proud of them. He says, “Glory has come to me through them.” We’re so familiar with people seeking personal glory through ministry. But that’s not at all what Jesus means here. It’s a shocking statement that Jesus saw his disciples as his glory. They were weak, slow to believe, burdensome, and fallible in so many ways. But Jesus still says that glory came to him through them. It means more than that Jesus proved himself to be a spiritual superstar by putting up with them. It was a very special glory, the glory of changing water to wine, of changing sinful, worldly, narrow-minded people into wonderful children of God, the glory of the power of the love of God to redeem and transform. As Paul said of those who believed in Jesus through him, they were like letters of recommendation written on the heart (2Co3). Jesus’ tone in prayer for his disciples was filled not only with deep appreciation, but also deep concern. He was worried about leaving them alone in the world. He was like a mother worried about having to leave her children alone. His concern was so personal, so genuine.

But besides the tone of his prayer, Jesus’ prayer topics are also quite surprising. Read verse 11. He prays first for their protection so that they may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one. It suggests that in the world they would be under attack, especially their unity with God and with one another. The devil is always working to try to sow doubt of God’s love and goodness in our hearts, and mistrust and grudges toward others. So Jesus prayed fervently that his disciples be one with the Father and with one another. Unity with the Father would make their unity with one another possible. It’s the best spiritual protection or defense. We can try to do many things to build unity—find common goals, humbly serve one another, etc. But according to Jesus’ words, real unity starts only when we are as close to the Father as he was. Those who know, love and trust God are the ones we should really want to be one with. Before trying to get closer to people or fix broken relationships, we first should be praying for ourselves to be one with God the way our Lord Jesus is, then praying for others also to be one with God like him. As we draw closer to God through Jesus, we can draw closer to one another. The bottom line is, I should be praying for others as well as for myself to have spiritual unity in Jesus.

Jesus’ next prayer topic is also surprising. Read verse 13. He says, “that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.” His disciples would face hatred and the evil one, but Jesus prayed they would be full of his joy. The joy of Jesus is way more than human joy. Human joy comes from circumstances or people, so it’s always up and down. But Jesus’ joy comes from being with the Father and from the hope of his kingdom, so it’s unshakeable and it can’t be taken away. Jesus’ joy also comes from seeing God’s will done on earth, from seeing people drawn to saving faith and full life in Jesus. It’s a joy that transcends human evil and suffering. Like unity, it’s also so spiritually attractive. We should be praying for people to taste this joy in Jesus.

Read verse 15. Here Jesus prayed for his disciples not to be taken out of the world with all its hostility and evil, but simply to be protected from the evil one. One of our struggles in ministry is to help Bible students get out of the influence of the godless world. So we pray for them to join our believing community where they can learn God’s words, learn to pray, and find good influence that can build them up spiritually. But Jesus wasn’t just trying to build a spiritual ghetto where his disciples could hide from the world.

Read verse 18. Like a general sending his soldiers into bloody battle, Jesus was sending his disciples into the sinful world to carry on his work. So he prayed something else. Read verse 17. Without a time of being sanctified by the word they would not be useful in the world as Jesus’ servants. They would just think as the world thinks and choose as the world chooses and behave the way the world behaves. We learn here that deep Bible study is not for the purpose of making us feel self-righteous or superior to others; it’s to prepare us to go out into the dark, very sick, evil, filthy world as ambassadors of Christ.

Read verse 19. Jesus finally prayed for his disciples to be truly sanctified through his own self-sanctification, meaning through his obedience to death on a cross. Even all kinds of Bible study cannot sanctify us if we don’t come to Jesus on the cross and really accept his shed blood and forgiving grace.

In the last part, verses 20–23, Jesus prays for all future believers. They say we should have at least a ten-year plan. But Jesus seems to have had a plan for the millennia. He knew human nature so well, that we’re so prone to conflicts and divisions. So he repeats the same prayer that he had for his original disciples. Read verses 20,21. Jesus prays that all future believers would have this same spiritual unity—unity with the Father and with one another. He says it so that the world may come to believe. It has an important lesson for us. When people see unity among believers who are so different, it intrigues them to want to know this Jesus who can unite such people. The best method of evangelism is not words but real spiritual unity among believers.

So how can we have this unity? First of all, we have to make it our top prayer topic, like our Lord Jesus did. As we said earlier, unity among believers is possible only when we’re close to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Apostle Paul explained about the practical implications of this in Philippians 2:1–5: “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus…” When we’re one with the Father through our Lord Jesus, we’re so encouraged, so comforted by his love, so filled by his Spirit, so full of his tenderness and compassion, that it makes us like minded with others who are also united with him. We have the same love. We’re one in spirit and mind. We too become humble and interested in others. Basically, we come to have the mindset of Christ. As we pray to be one with other believers, there are specific things we need to avoid: selfish ambition, vain conceit, focusing only on myself, and basically, pride. Even in the church, while doing ministry, we can have such things in our inner person.

Read verses 22,23. Here Jesus says that unity is possible when we have this special glory of Jesus in us. What is it? It’s the glory of being one with the Father. Jesus says this spiritual unity with the Father gives us “complete” unity with one another. When others see it, it not only helps them believe in Jesus, but also to realize how much the Father loves those who follow him. We tend to see others critically. But Jesus wants us to see others as the most loved persons.

Jesus has one more prayer topic for his followers. Read verse 24. He began with praying for glory, and now he brings it back to glory. Jesus wants us to be with him with the Father and to see his eternal glory. It’s amazing that he prayed this.

Finally, Jesus concludes by stating his commitment to what he would continue to do. Read verses 25,26. Jesus is the only one who knows the Father, so he’s the only one who can help us know him, too. As we get to know the Father, God’s great love for his Son, and Jesus’ own presence, remain within us.

Today we thought mainly about Jesus’ prayer for us to be one. It’s possible only as we become one with the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. May God help us be one with him through Jesus so that we can have real spiritual unity with his people. And may God help us learn to pray for ourselves and for others the way Jesus did.