“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.”

John 17 is a unique passage. It’s like a curtain is being pulled back and we get to witness a most intimate conversation Jesus is having with his Father God. We all have a lot of common sense knowledge, assumptions and ideas. But if we really want to know Christ’s mind and heart and truly follow and imitate him, we need to carefully study what he’s saying here. There are so many things Jesus could have prayed for at this time. But surprisingly, what he prays for repeatedly is for his followers to be one. We want to think about why this unity was so important to him. We want to learn what kind of unity he was talking about. And as we think deeply about all the aspects of his prayer in this chapter, we want to learn how we can be one. May God speak to us personally through this study.

Before praying for others, Jesus first prays for himself. What does he say? Read verses 1–5. He’s speaking mostly here about glory. We human beings, if we’re being honest, all seek glory. Some seek their own glory, and Jesus says earlier in John’s Gospel that such people can’t be trusted; others seek God’s glory, and Jesus says that they are people of truth (7:18; cf. 5:44). Yet here Jesus *does* pray for his own glory. At first it can sound strange. The context is also a bit odd. He’s facing betrayal, arrest, an unjust trial, and crucifixion. At such a difficult time he could have asked the Father for courage, or strength, or peace. But of all the things he could’ve been praying for, he’s praying for glory. It’s not the kind of glory we’d ordinarily think of (5:41; 8:50,54). What’s this “glory” he’s praying for? And how is it related to being one? We learn several things here.

**First**, his glory is the cross. Read verse 1b. In John’s Gospel death on a cross is repeatedly referred to as “glory” (12:23; 13:31,32; 21:19). Death on a cross was so shameful and painful, not anything a normal person would pray to happen, not to themselves or to anyone else. But Jesus is actually asking the Father to “glorify” him in this way. It’s ironic, mysterious, and not natural, all at once. But it shows us what spiritual glory really is. Spiritual glory is the privilege to do God’s will, especially when it involves humiliation, self-sacrifice and suffering. Really? Do we really see glory like that? Actually the Bible tells us that every true follower of Jesus is called to this kind of glory (1Pe2:21). Like our Lord Jesus, we need to see our cross as our glory and pray to really embrace it (Gal6:14). We can’t be one with those who are seeking their own glory or avoiding the cross. But we can be one with those who pray to embrace the cross of Jesus.

**Second**, his desire for God’s glory. Read verse 1b again. Jesus prayed that through his suffering and death he could glorify God (12:27,28). It’s what he wanted more than anything else: God’s glory. He didn’t feel trapped or forced; he was eager for it, because he loved his Father God so much. He was aware that through humble obedience to death on a cross, he could glorify God. In other words, glorifying God was his greatest glory. Do we have such a desire to glorify God? We can be one with those who have such a desire to glorify God.

**Third**, his glory is giving people eternal life. Read verse 2. Our Lord Jesus has authority over all people, but he doesn’t use it to dominate people; he uses it to give people eternal life. Giving people eternal life is his unique glory. 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? Of course we can’t give anybody eternal life, but we can help others believe in Jesus, and thereby receive eternal life in him. If we pray only to make people our church members, it’s too small a prayer topic. We need to pray for people to believe in Jesus truly and receive eternal life. We can be one with those who pray to lead others to truly believe in Christ and receive eternal life.

**Fourth**, his glory is completing the Father’s work. Read verse 4. What was the work God gave Jesus to do? Looking at his whole ministry, it was the work of planting faith (6:29). It was the work of raising disciples. Ultimately, it would be the work of laying down his life as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). He emphasizes here that he “finished” this work. Starting something may seem glorious, but finishing is really glorious. Especially, finishing God’s assigned work for our lives is our glory. We can be one with those who strive to the end to finish the work the Father gives them.

**Fifth**, his glory is eternal and heavenly. Read verse 5. Though Jesus’ glory looked toward the past, at what he’d done with his life, and at the present, that 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. Jesus was sure of it. The ugliness of the cross would in no way diminish it. Jesus as God’s Son shared a unique glory with his Father before the world began. But his words here are also our hope. The Bible says that by his grace, we too will someday share in his eternal glory (Ro8:17; 2Th2:14; 1Pe5:1). We can be one with those who have this hope of eternal glory.

In the next part Jesus prays for his disciples. In verses 6–10 he describes 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 belong to God. What’s intriguing here is how Jesus prays for his disciples. First we notice his tone. He’s so proud of them. He says, “Glory has come to me through them.” Wow! We’re familiar with people seeking personal glory through ministry, but that’s not at all what Jesus means here. Actually it’s shocking that Jesus saw his disciples as his glory. They were so weak, so slow to believe. But Jesus still says that glory came to him through them. It means more than just that Jesus proved to be a spiritual superstar by putting up with them. No, his glory of making disciples was a far greater glory, the glory of changing water to wine, of changing sinful, worldly, narrow-minded people into wonderful children of God. It’s the glory of the power of the love of God to redeem and transform. The tone of his prayer was full not only of deep appreciation, but also of deep concern. He was worried about leaving them alone in the world. He was like a mother worried about leaving her children. It was so personal, so genuine.

But besides his tone, what he prays for his disciples is also surprising. Read verse 11. He prays first for their protection so that they may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one. In the world they would be under attack, especially their unity with God and unity with one another. The devil is still working to sow doubt of God’s love and goodness in our hearts, and mistrust and grudges toward others. So Jesus prays for his disciples to be one with the Father and one with one another. Unity with the Father would make their unity with one another possible. It’s the best spiritual defense. We can try to do many things to build unity—find common goals, humbly serve one another, etc. But according to Jesus, unity among us happens when we’re as close to the Father as he is. Those who know, love and trust God are the ones we should want to be one with. So, before trying to get closer to people or fix our broken relationships, we first should be praying for ourselves, and then for others, to be one with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. As we draw closer to God through Jesus, we become closer to one another.

Jesus’ next prayer topic for his disciples is also surprising. Read verse 13. He asks “that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.” They would face hatred and the evil one, but he prays they may be full of his joy. Jesus’ joy is way more than human joy. Human joy come from our circumstances or people, so it’s always up and down. But Jesus’ joy comes from being one with the Father and from the hope of his kingdom, so it’s unshakeable and can’t be taken away (16:22). 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 our Lord Jesus, though we face many struggles, we should be praying for ourselves and for one another to have the full measure of this joy.

Read verse 15. Here Jesus prays for his disciples not to be taken out of the world, even 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 forever. Read verse 18. Jesus was sending them into the 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, 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 this dark, sick, evil, dirty 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 (Heb5:8,9). Even all kinds of Bible study cannot sanctify us if we don’t come to Jesus on the cross and accept his shed blood and forgiving grace.

In the last part, verses 20–23, Jesus prays for all future believers. 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 for all future believers to 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-life 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. Paul said 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…” Being personally close to Christ makes us one.

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. Jesus has one more prayer topic for his followers. Read verse 24. At the end of his prayer he brings it back to glory. Jesus wants us to be with him and with the Father and to see his eternal glory. It’s amazing that he prayed this. He concludes his prayer 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. How can we be one spiritually? We first have to pray for ourselves the way our Lord Jesus did. We have to learn his heart for his disciples and to pray for others the way he did. Most of all, to be one with each other, we first have to be 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.