

The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Praying Savior – John 17

The Lessons from Jesus’ Prayer – John 17:1-26

Seven Characteristics of the Church: Unity (John 17:20-23)

20 I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

This morning I wish to continue to speak to you concerning this fifth marker of the church which we find Jesus praying for; that in addition to the church being characterized by joy, by holiness, my truth and by mission, the disciples of Christ are also to be known as a people of unity; that “they” prays Jesus, that is those who believe in Him because of the preached word of the apostles, would be one, even as the Father and the Son are one; and that they might be perfected, completed, found in unity. The theme of these four verses is clearly unity; the unity of the church; the unity of those who believe in Christ.

And so, last week we considered a definition of unity. Let me remind you of that definition. True biblical unity is this: *it is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.* At first glance this definition may seem strangely individualistic. But the truth of the matter is this, if we as the people of God are to experience the unity Jesus prays for, it all begins with our personal commitments to knowing and living out the will of God to the glory of God. As the old adage states, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In like manner, *our practical experience of unity among one another, and our visible manifestation of unity to our community and to our world is only as strong, is only as convincing and will only have the level of impact as each one of us is committed to living our lives more and more according to the faith.*

Let me say this again with a bit more commentary. *Our practical experience of unity among one another (that is our growing in our knowledge of who God is, of who Jesus is as Lord and Savior, and even of who we are both apart from Jesus as lost sinners as well as in Jesus as loved saints), and our visible manifestation of unity (that is what the world sees, what we as a congregation reveal to the unbelieving world) to our community and to our world is only as strong, is only as convincing and will only have the level of impact as each one of us (individually) is committed to living our lives more and more according to the faith (a faith that calls us to live together).*

Let me make some clarifications. I am not speaking here of one’s own personal ability or responsibility to live as a light in their homes, jobs and spheres of influence. No doubt there are bright examples of those individual Christians that stand out to both the believing and unbelieving community as shining examples of loving and living for the Lord. But the question before us is not answered by the description, “Look at how that individual loves and lives for the Lord” – as important as that is. Rather, the description we find Jesus desiring and praying for His church is this, “Look at how that church, those believers all love and live for the Lord together.” Jesus is praying in effect that as His people grow in their faith, they would grow in their oneness, their unity; both with God and with one another to the glory of God and as a testimony to the world of God.

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I. We must know the basis of unity (17:20)

And so, last week we looked at the first of three key points from these verses. That point being this, we must know what is the basis or the foundation of unity. From verse 20 we noted that unity begins (and ends) in and with God. Jesus prays to the God of unity for the unity of His people. We also noted that to know or experience unity, we must see unity as something to be prayed for. Jesus here is praying for the unity of His people and we know that even now, Jesus sits at the right hand of God and it would seem that one of the things Jesus continues to pray for is the unity of His people, that believers would grow in their knowledge of the work of God and therefore grow in their ability to live according to that knowledge; to live by faith. In fact, we noted that faith, or the faith, this knowledge of God, of Jesus, of ourselves in sin and our need of salvation; or what we sometimes call doctrine, also is the basis or foundation of unity.

There is no unity apart from the faith, apart from the teachings of God from His word. As someone put it at our midweek home Bible study, God made the rules, He stated the truth and we have to now play by those rules. If we want to know and pursue unity, we must know it comes from God, it is to be prayed for and it comes to those who have and know the faith that is found in Jesus Christ, to those who are committed to knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.

Before I move on, let me make one more clarification. In this definition of unity we have the word “perfectly”. True, full unity is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God together; that is to be our goal. This is what we are aiming at. We all realize that ultimately, on this side of glory, we will not obtain to this goal, but to this goal we are to be nonetheless committed. I am not suggesting some kind of arrival at sinless perfection by using this word “perfectly.” However, with that said, let me put this thought into you minds. There is a sense in which we can, even now, know and live out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God. How is that you might ask? Included in God’s plan for us is His knowledge of not only our past sins, but also our stumbling and falling into sins yet future for us. Right? God knows we will sin. He also knows our limited abilities to know all there is to know about Him, about His word and even about ourselves. And so, we truths like 1 John 1:9 that tell us, **“If we confess our sins (knowing that we will sin), He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** Beloved, that is the will of God. And so it means that when I sin, if I know and willingly confess my sin to Him and receive the promise of forgiveness, then I am perfectly knowing living out the will of God at that time. I also have a limited knowledge of God and yet I am commanded in 2 Peter 3:18 to **“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** So, while my knowledge will be limited and incomplete, if my heart’s desire is to increasingly grow and know Him, I am at the moment perfectly knowing and living out the will of God to the glory of God. Of course, I ebb and flow in this desire to know Him and so I long for the day when sin, that imposing dam that seeks to hold back the flowing blessings of God in my life, will be finally removed and I will ultimately know and live out with will of God to the glory of God for eternity.

II. We must know the nature of unity (17:21a)

that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us...

As we move on in our text, we find that we are presented with more than just the basis of unity in our text. Next we presented with the very nature of unity. What is unity like? What does unity look like? How can we know if we are in true biblical unity – this knowing and living out

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perfectly the will of God to the glory of God? There are at least two aspects of the nature of unity that we would do well to know and apply.

1. **Unity is to be the common experience of all believers**

First of all, I would have you see that unity is to be the experience of not just some; not just a select few; not for a handful of so-called “super saints” who have found a way to truly surrender all and follow Christ without distraction, but rather to every one who believes in Him. Read with me verse 21. Look what we see, **“that they all may be one...”** That **“they”** – those who believe; those who are looking to Christ’s life, death and resurrection as their only hope of being made right with God; that each and every one of them may be in found in this unity; in knowing and living out perfectly the will of God for the glory of God. If you are a believer – this prayer is for you and this prayer is for us. God will not leave one of His own behind. Those who believe, those of faith are to experience unity.

The apostle Paul seizes upon this very theme in Ephesians 4 linking unity and faith as being the common and increasing experience of believers. Listen to Ephesians 4:11-13 which says,

*11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we **all** attain to the **unity** of the **faith**, and of the **knowledge** of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.*

And so, the only question for us is this, are we experiencing this “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” Notice it is a process, none of us has arrived, but it is to be our experience and our pursuit. Are you striving to attain to this unity? Jesus prays that you would? Oh that we might be found pleasing the Lord, experiencing personally and then corporately the growing knowledge and this living out the will of God to the glory of God.

2. **Unity is being in the likeness of God**

So unity is to be our experience, but what is unity like? We see secondly as we strive to know the nature of unity, that unity is being in the likeness of God. Consider the words of Jesus again in verse 21 when He said, **“that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us...”** He even says it again at the end of verse 22, **“that they may be one, just as We are one...”** Jesus prays for unity and then defines unity for all of His people in terms of His own unity or relationship with the Father. Here we see that true unity is divine. God is Himself unity. We call Him a tri-unity or Trinity. One God, in three perfectly harmonized, perfectly unified, perfectly satisfied oneness. There is no dissension in the Godhead. There is no hint of jealousy, or envy, or suspicion or even of malice that exists between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Jesus never questioned the motives of the Father, because He knew the Father’s motives were holy and pure. The Father was and is never threatened by the Son’s exaltation.

In short, the unity that exists between the Father and the Son is actually an attribute, a characteristic of God. God is unity. God knows and lives out perfectly His will to His glory. And Jesus Christ Himself, God incarnate, knew and lived out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.

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What makes this remarkable is the fact that Jesus prays that this divine attribute of unity that exists between the Father and the Son would be the same kind of unity that believers experience between one another for notice in verse 21 Jesus says, **“that they all may be one...”** but also that we all would experience such a divine unity in our relationship to Himself and the Father. At the end of verse 22 we find Jesus reiterating this unity among the believers to one another and then in verse 23 we see it expressed in our relationship to Jesus and to the Father. Jesus says, **“...that they may be one, just as we are One (in our likeness); 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity...”** What a glorious calling! What a high calling. We are called to know and live out the will of God in a manner consistent with the way God Himself knows and manifests His will to His own glory.

Beloved, we are the sons of God and to live as a son of God is to strive to experience in our relationships to one another the same unity, the same affection, the same purpose as is revealed in the relationship between the Father and the Son. And so, when Peter wrote as he did in 1 Peter 2:1, **“Therefore, putting aside (laying off) all malice and all deceit and all hypocrisy and envy and all slander...”** it is nothing short than a call to be godly. We are to be holy, even as our God is holy. We are to manifest to one another and to the world this divine attribute of unity. Are you striving for this kind of unity? To put this in one succinct and challenging phrase, *our union with one another is to mirror the union that exists between the Father and the Son.* Overwhelming? Yes! Impossible? No! Not as we commit ourselves to knowing and living out the will of God to the glory of God. When we commit ourselves to that, then we begin to have a greater and greater impact upon one another, helping others know the Lord and motivating others to live out the will of God to the glory of God.

In the study questions for last week’s message was a question that is so appropriate to answer and apply here. The question is this: Have you seen how your faith (what you believe about God; and what God has called you to – to be in unity even as Jesus and the Father are in unity) has affected the unity of believers here in this church? How you answer that question is an indication of your commitment to the unity that Jesus prays for here. The more you desire to be like Jesus; the more you desire to be holy; the more you desire to know Him and the power of His resurrection, the more positive impact you will realize. And, as more and more of God’s people strive after this kind of living, the more it begins to manifest both inside and outside the church the reality of God and of the reality of sin and salvation from sin through His Son Jesus Christ.

III. We must know the goal of unity (John 17:21b-23)

so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

So then, we have seen the basis of unity; its foundations have their start and origin in God Himself; it is to be prayed for because Jesus prayed for it; it is founded in faith and confirmed by the teaching of God’s word. We have also considered that unity is divine...it is godlike and we are called to experience and manifest the unity that exists between the Father and the Son in each of our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And now, considering our third and final key point, I submit to you that if we are to be a people of unity, we must also know the goal of unity. This is the proverbial “so what” question. So what? Why are we to strive after this holiness? What is so important about unity? As is so

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often the case, we tend to do better when we know why we are asked to do something. And Jesus graciously obliges us. He tells in these verses the goal of unity. I find in our text two such goals.

1. A testimony to the world of the reality of God (17:21b; 23)

You will notice that two times in this passage Jesus gives a reason and a goal for this unity for which He prays. He said at the end of verse 21, **“so that the world may believe that You sent Me.”** And again at the end of verse 23 He said, **“so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”** Two times Jesus makes this emphasis. But what does this mean? To put this another way, the practical unity experience by us and made known to unbelievers is to be of such a kind that causes the world to believe and to know that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior, and that the Father loves the followers of Christ with the same intensity as He loves His Son. How can the world, unbelievers, “believe” that God sent Jesus and know that God loved the followers of Jesus?

It would be wonderful if all we had to do for the unbeliever is hand them a Bible and say, “Read, and you will see that God sent His Son to be Savior and loves His people.” Most unbelievers are not so motivated and even if they were motivated to read, without a change in the heart, they will not understand the Word of God. So what is Jesus speaking about here?

Remember that we are looking at the characteristics of the church that Jesus is praying for. These are to be the markers by which the church, the people of God is known for among one another as well as by those in the world. And while most unbelievers will never pick up a bible and read it, unbelievers have an uncanny way of reading the lives of believers. And when Jesus says that by unity the world will believe and know that God sent His Son, we are to see that it is by our lives, by how we live individually and among one another that is to arrest the attention of an unbelieving world, causing him to think about the message of the gospel that believers “say” changes their lives. They need to see the changes and they need to see the interaction. Beloved, this means we need to see changes and we need to be interacting with one another in venues that show the world the grace and love of God in our lives.

How are unbelievers to come to know that Jesus is God who became man in order to save sinners from the penalty of sin? Beloved, they must see it evidence in our lives? Our lives, our actions, our lips must be drenched in the message of the gospel. The gospel message saves from sin; it transforms lives, it changes our attitudes and our conversations. Our individual lives need to be conveying this truth to such a degree that unbelievers will be inclined to want to see more and being invited to church or to a Bible study or a prayer meeting, they are startled by a people who exalt God and praise Him for His grace and mercy and salvation. They need to see a people who are God-centered and Bible-centered rather than man-centered. They need to see in us the heart of the truth that this life is not about me, but about the glory of God. If all we do when we come together is talk about the weather; or TV shows, or sports or politics or music, how does that display the life-transforming power of the gospel? Our lives are to display the realities of our redemption from sin. When an unbeliever is in our midst, does he see our trembling at the holiness of God, our hatred of sin, our rejoicing in salvation, and our fascination with Christ? Our worship is not about the style of music, or the giftedness of the preacher or the friendliness of the church – our worship should be just that, the worship; our declaring boldly in song, in prayer, in devotion to the Word of God just how worthy we consider God. If someone leaves this place thinking we value anything more than knowing God through knowing Jesus by means of the Word, we have failed to be a testimony that God sent His Son. Because unity, this knowing and

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living out the will of God to the glory of God, delivers a message that Jesus has come from the Father to save sinners.

Do we have such a testimony? How do we get such a testimony? Beloved, we need to be prepared always to give to people a reason for the hope that we have in Christ. We must come to our worship services and bible study not merely with the expectations of, “I wonder what songs we will sing” or “Who will I see today?” Rather, we need to come prepared with a song of praise in our hearts, with a message on our lips of how much we value and long to worship God with His people. If I could be so bold and so challenging, might I suggest you think of gathering with other believers in these terms: if you were the only to say anything about God, to tell anyone about His goodness, His mercy, and our need of Him, would you be prepared? If the preacher was unable to teach on a give Sunday, would you be ready to give a testimony of what you have learned about your God and Savior that past week? If unbelievers saw such an enthusiasm, such a zeal, such an authentic passion, it would cause them to know that there is something to the gospel we proclaim.

2. The glory of God (17:22)

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one;

But there is one final goal to unity. Not only do we want to have a testimony to the world, but ultimately unity glorifies God. And the believer's desire, both individually and corporately, ought to desire that God be glorified. But just how is this expressed in our text? We see in verse 22 where Jesus said, **“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one...”** Let me walk you through this verse.

First, remember that Jesus is praying to the Father and He speaks first here of “the glory which [the Father] had [given Him].” We need to be reminded what is meant by this glory that the Father gave to the Son. We first saw this idea of glory at the beginning of John 17. From the first verse we see that Jesus had as his priority the glory of the Father. There we defined glory as holding in highest esteemed, giving all honor; recognizing as supremely splendid, possessing all greatness, authority and power resulting in all praise. And so in verse 1, Jesus prays that the Father may glorify Him so that He might glorify the Father. By this we are to understand Jesus saying in effect, “Father, the cross is pending, the very purpose for which You sent Me has arrive, and now, I beseech You, enable Me, empower Me, grant Me Your glorious strength that I might bear this work to Your glory. Do not let me fail You in this. Do not let Me depend upon my humanness for this task for I cannot do this apart from Your majesty, Your authority, Your splendor being given to Me.” Isn't that amazing? Not only does Jesus plea such a divine enablement for Himself, but He does this audibly, before His disciples, so that we might know that Jesus truly was man as well as God; so that we might know that if the Son of Man found it necessary to plead for glory in order to glorify God; that we might also then plead for the glory of God to be manifested in our lives so that we might rightly glorify God the Father.

This is the glory that the Father have given to the Son and now look at verse 22 again and note that this is the glory that the Son said He gives to His own, **“The glory which You have given Me, I have given to them, that they may be one just as We are one...”** Why have we been given glory? If we recall the reason why Jesus prayed for Himself to be glorified, we get a good answer. Jesus as Jesus prayed that He would be enabled to carry out the work of the cross to accomplish the purpose of God, we are now given the same glory, the same priority, the same divine enablement in order to carry out what, this awesome task of practically experiencing unity

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among one another as well as visibly manifesting this unity to an unbelieving world. Oh that we might pray, "Father, the call to unity is before us, the very purpose for which You have called us together is at hand, and now, we beseech You, enable us, empower us, grant us Your glorious strength that we might endeavor in this work to Your glory. Do not let us fail You in this. Do not let us depend upon our humanness for this task for we cannot do this apart from Your majesty, Your authority, and Your splendor being given to us." That beloved, is a prayer for unity, a unity that glorifies God.

Do you appreciate this prayer for our unity uttered by the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ? May we never be inclined to treat this topic as secondary or optional. We are called to unity and it is in this unity that we have the right and the power to proclaim to the world the life-transforming nature of the gospel. Where unity is lacking there is a veil over the brightness of the gospel. So then, let us praise God for the unity He grants us and calls us to. Let us each and all strive to attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man (Ephesians 4:13). For as we do, we will glorify God and declare to the world the reality of the gospel, that God sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to save sinner and all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved!

Soli Deo Gloria

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June 14, 2009