

3. Jesus Prays for All Christians

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let's turn in our Bibles to John's Gospel, chapter 17. And if you have one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find this on page 903. And we've been studying this chapter, John 17, during this month, and this is the third and last talk which I'll be giving on it.

We've been reading the first 19 verses so far, but today I just want to read the final paragraph, which is verses 20 to 26. So we're picking this up partway through Jesus' long prayer.

So verse 20, Jesus prays, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just 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 have sent me.

The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

[1 : 30] O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name and I will continue to make it known that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.

And may the Lord God add his blessing to these great words. Well, as I say, today we come to the third and last of this little series of sermons on John 17.

Just a brief introduction first and by way of reminder. This 17th chapter of John is unique. There is nothing like it in any of the other Gospels.

And in this chapter, John the Evangelist records a long prayer that Jesus prayed to God the Father on the night before he was crucified. Just a few hours before he was crucified.

And the timing is very significant. He is about to leave the world. He is about to end his public ministry in the world. So he is praying about the future. And he is expressing to God the Father the things that he most earnestly and deeply wants and desires for the future.

[2 : 43] So in this prayer, we have the yearnings and longings of Jesus' heart brought to God the Father as he prepares to leave his disciples and return to heaven. So we noticed a few weeks ago in verses 1 to 5 that he prays for himself.

Then in verses 6 to 19, he prays for his disciples and particularly his prayer there is for the 11 disciples. Judas has left them by this stage, but he is praying for those 11.

And now in verses 20 to 26, he is praying for all the future generations of Christians. Those who, in the words of verse 20, will believe in Christ through the word of the first century Christians.

So this final section of the prayer takes a long view across the centuries. In fact, it looks even further to the final consummation of all things beyond the end of time.

Now, if I were to ask you, and I'm not going to do this, but if I were to ask you what is Jesus praying for, specifically in verses 20 to 26, my guess is that you would run your eye down over these verses again and then you would say, I know the answer.

[3 : 52] He is praying for the unity of Christians. And you'd be quite right. He certainly is praying for the unity of Christians. Look, for example, at verse 21.

That they may all be one. Verse 22. That they may be one even as we are one. Verse 23. That they may become perfectly one.

So he is certainly praying for the oneness, the unity, the unitedness of Christians. But if you were now to put on your very best pair of reading glasses and scrutinize the page even more carefully, you would notice that his prayer, that Christians should be one, has a further goal.

Look at verse 21 again. That they may all be one, just 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 have sent me.

So Jesus is praying that Christians should be one. But this oneness, important though it is in itself, and it's very important, is not the end or goal of his prayer.

[5 : 01] It is the means to a further end. Namely, that the world should come to believe that God has sent Jesus. That Jesus has the authentication of the true God behind him.

And then we notice that Jesus repeats the same thought in verse 23. The wording is slightly different, but the meaning is the same. Look with me at verse 23. That they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

So to Jesus, the unity of Christians is not simply an end in itself. It's the means to a further end, which is that the world should come to believe that Jesus is, well, not some imposter, not some irrelevance, but rather is the true Son of God who has been sent by God, the only Saviour.

So I think we could sum up the message of this paragraph like this. Jesus prays that Christians should be united so that the world should be persuaded.

Now Jesus, you'll notice, is not praying directly for the world. In fact, he has said clearly back in verse 9, I'm not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, which are the Christians.

[6 : 17] But even if he's not praying directly for the world, his words in verse 21 and verse 23 show that he is still very much concerned for the world. And in particular, he is concerned that the world should come to believe that he is truly sent by God.

Now friends, don't you find this rather intriguing? If you're a Christian, I know many of you here are Christians, let me ask, what is your attitude to what Jesus calls the world?

Well, you might say, I've thought long about this, and I can tell you that I have to be very wary of the world. The world is, after all, a member of that evil trio, that wicked trinity, the world, the flesh and the devil, that axis of evil.

I also know that John the Apostle, in his first letter, chapter 2, verse 15 says, Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride in possessions, is not from the Father, but is from the world. I know my scriptures, so I'm very wary of the world.

[7 : 27] I try, therefore, to avoid being worldly. I prayerfully seek to steer clear of worldly influences, because I know that the world is in the grip of the love of money, the love of possessions, the love of consumerism and entertainment.

It has sold its soul to shopping and fashion and alcohol and drugs and the misuse of sex. It has no love for the Lord, no love for the gospel. So I am best off buckling on all my moral and spiritual armour so as to be unharmed by the influence of the world.

And I warn my loved ones, my children, my grandchildren, to stay clear of the corrupting influences of the world. I have also read James, chapter 1, verse 27.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Now, if we're Christians, and we think along those lines, we have learned something very important from the Bible. Because that phrase, the world, as the Bible defines it, means human life as organised without reference to God and in rebellion against God.

[8 : 40] It is anti-God and anti-the gospel. In fact, in this very passage, in John 17, verse 14, Jesus acknowledges that the world hates his people, hates his disciples.

Back in chapter 15, verse 18, if you look back over the page, you'll see that he says, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. But, despite all this, Jesus, in this most heartfelt prayer, tells his father what he longs for, and that is that the world should come to believe and know the truth about him, that he has been sent from God.

He does not say to the father, Father, what I want you to do to the world is to squash it and flatten it, nullify it. No. He longs for the world to come to believe in him.

So, it is a fascinating paradox in the Bible that 1 John, chapter 2, verse 15, says, do not love the world. But John 3, 16, says, for God so loved the world.

Is the Bible then self-contradictory on this point? Of course not. There may be an apparent contradiction just on the surface of things, but we have to look below the surface.

[10:04] What this apparent contradiction teaches is that the Christian has a dual relationship with the world. At one level, we are not to love it.

Its values, its futility of thinking and purpose, its godlessness, all this we are called upon by the Lord to avoid. But at another level, we are to love it deeply because of its lostness, because of its need of God, because of its desperate need to hear the good news of a saviour.

Just to earth this in our real lives, think of yourself leaving the building later this afternoon and going back out into Buchanan Street, which I think is the fifth busiest street in the world as far as commerce is concerned, so I've been told.

Now, think of all the folk that you will see in Buchanan Street. Aren't they interesting? Do you find them interesting as you walk up and down? I've never, until the last year or so, lived and worked in the centre of a big city like Glasgow.

I've always been a small town minister. So coming here to the centre of this big city is a real eye-opener. And I walk up and down that street, Buchanan Street, almost every day of my life these days, taking the air, having a constitutional, refreshing myself, smelling the coffee.

[11:21] I once had a cup of Starbucks. I wonder what all the fuss is about. Anyway, there you are, out in Buchanan Street. And it's the people, as you walk up and down, the people who are so interesting.

On the one hand, you can see worldliness writ large upon so many faces. The commitments people have to things are almost tangible and visible, aren't they?

The commitment to shopping and possessions and fashion and looking good despite turning 30. In some cases, commitments to alcohol or drugs or sex beyond marriage and so on.

Now, all those worldly things, of course, the Bible teaches us to avoid. But on the other hand, the Lord teaches us to love those folk deeply because God so loved the world that he was prepared to give his only son to death in order to rescue it.

Now, all this helps us to see how in John 17, Jesus also has a dual relationship with the world. So on the one hand, in verse 14, he speaks of the disjunction between the world and his people and between the world and himself.

[12:33] The world has hated them, he says, because they're not of the world just as I am not of the world. But on the other hand, in verse 21 and verse 23, he tells God how much he longs that the world should come to believe the truth about him.

So Jesus hates worldliness, but he loves the world. And we are to follow his example. All right, friends, eyes down on verse 21.

What is it that will bring the world to believe that the Father has sent Jesus? In other words, to believe that Jesus really is God's son and the only saviour.

Well, verse 21 teaches that the thing that will bring the world to believe is the oneness or unity of Christ's people. 21. That they all may be one, just 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 have sent me.

Now, notice the extraordinary way in which Jesus teaches what unity between Christians is like. In verse 21, the oneness of Christians is to be modelled, he says, on the unity between Father and Son.

[13:47] And he expresses it in a number of phrases where the key word is the little word in. So verse 21, you, Father, in me, I, in you, they, in us.

Look on to verse 23. It's the same thing. I, in them, you, in me. And at the end of verse 26, I, in them. Now, don't you think there's something very odd about those little phrases?

I say that because we never use language in this way when we're talking about human relationships. Think of your very best friends, the people you love most and the people you know best.

You would never speak of being in them, would you? You might speak of loving to be with them. You might say, I love Jack's company. An hour of fun and talk with Jack is just terrific and a delight. I love to be with him. But we never speak of a friendship so close that we think of our friends being in us or we being in them. It just wouldn't make sense of our experience of life and friendship to use a phrase like that.

[14:57] And yet, Jesus and his Father are in each other. Do you remember how back in chapter 14, Jesus is talking to Philip and he says to Philip, do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

So there is something about the relationship between the Father and the Son that is so close, they are so deeply identified with each other, they so deeply belong to each other, that this language of being in one another is the truest and best way of describing their relationship.

Now let's notice something else in verse 21 that is equally surprising. Jesus is praying here for the unity of Christians, that they may all be one. He then immediately gives a model for that unity between Christians and that model is the relationship between the Father and the Son, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you.

Now if the unity of the Father and the Son serve as the model for the unity of Christian believers, I think you would expect Jesus to say, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in one another.

That would provide an exact logical parallel. But it's not what he says. In fact, he never speaks, as far as I'm aware, of Christians being in one another.

[16:25] Loving each other, yes, but not in one another. How then do Christians find their unity according to verse 21? Not by being in one another, but by being in us, in the Father and in the Son, that they also may be in us.

Now it doesn't take a lot of hard thought to understand what is going on here. Just imagine me and my old friend Willie Phillip. Willie, are you here? You're not. Anyway, imagine me and my old friend Willie Phillip one day sitting down to a cup of coffee and a slice of chocolate cake together and having a chat.

And I say to Willie, Willie, you know, as Christians, we ought to be more truly one, you know, more truly united in heart and soul. So just look me in the eye, Willie, and let's try for a moment to develop our friendship and our unity in the Lord.

And he would look at me and say, don't be a daft old turnip, Edward. That's not the way it happens. The way our unity grows is not so much by looking at each other, but by the two of us together looking at the Lord.

Isn't that what verse 21 is saying? Christians become one, not by being in each other, but by together being in the Lord, in the Father, and in the Son.

[17:46] Now many of you, I'm sure, are active servants of the Gospel in your own churches. And you know, don't you, that real, solid, joyful unity with other Christians develops as you serve the Lord together.

It doesn't happen as you sit down and look deeply into one another's eyes and try to commune with each other's souls. That's sentimental claptrap, isn't it, that kind of talk? It's rather as we roll up our sleeves and serve the Lord together with our eyes on Him.

Then He blesses us with real and growing unity. And this unity has very little to do with Christian denominations. When you're an active servant of the Gospel, you find that your unity with other Christians who are also active Gospel servants hardly even notices denominational distinctives.

I think of our Cornhill training course that I run up the road here and our students who are here with us this lunchtime. Now in our Cornhill training course we have 12 students this year and they come from six different denominations.

Baptists, Brethren, Church of Scotland, Church of Christ in Nigeria, Presbyterian Church of Ireland and United Free Church. And I'm an Anglican. How much time do you think we...

[19:02] We spend a lot of time together each week. How much time do you think we spend discussing denominational differences? The answer is no time at all. It is simply irrelevant to what we're doing.

Our unity is in the Lord and the Bible and the Gospel and our desire to preach it and teach it more effectively. Real Christian unity exists across the denominations and people who are focused on the Lord and his words and the great task of Gospel work find their unity with others of like mind and purpose.

So if you're a Bible-believing Christian of whatever denomination, you find unity with other Bible-believing Christians across the denominations. In fact, in a way that you can't find with people in your own denomination who do not accept the Bible as the Word of God.

So the unity of Christians deepens and develops as we together become more deeply united to the Lord. And the consequence will be that more and more folk from the world will be persuaded that Christ is truly the one and only Saviour sent from God.

Look again at verse 23. I in them and you in me that they may become perfectly ones so that the world may know that you sent me.

[20 : 25] Now isn't this exactly what happened to you and me when we were being drawn to Christ? We looked at other Christians and we were able to observe something almost tangible about their unity and the quality of their fellowship together.

I remember hearing the gospel for the first time as a teenager at a scripture union camp down in England and one of the reasons why I was drawn to Christ was the quality of the relationships between the leaders at the camp.

Those leaders were not simply pals or friends on a superficial level as you might find in the pub or at the bowling club. No. They were united as gospel workers who were serving together in the great cause of spreading the good news.

So their friendship was a purposeful focused gospel shaped fellowship and that fact helped to persuade me that Christ really had been sent by God.

But verse 23 shows us another thing. The unity of Christians will not only persuade the world that Christ has been sent by the Father it will also persuade the world that God the Father loves Christians exactly as much as he loves Jesus.

[21 : 37] Look at the end of verse 23. So that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. So the world will look at the joyous unity that exists between Christians and the world will not only say Christ truly has come from God the world will also say how very much God loves these Christians and he does.

His love overwhelming totally undeserved is given by the Father to all who belong to Christ. So let me ask if you're not yet a Christian I imagine there are some here we're delighted to have you here if you're not yet a Christian will you come to Christ and will you start being a Christian today? If you're not a Christian you still belong to what Jesus calls the world and the world is under God's condemnation but you can leave the world everyone who comes to Jesus leaves the world and then finds himself or herself part of that great company who are in the Father and in the Son but to become a Christian you need to come to Christ there's a movement involved you actually have to forsake the world walk away from the world and then you come and kneel not necessarily physically but certainly in your heart you kneel before the Lord Jesus and tell him that you want to be one of his people from this day forward he describes Christians in verse 20 new Christians as those who believe in me and if you ask what does it mean exactly to believe in Jesus let me tell you first what it doesn't mean it doesn't simply mean believing that he exists lots of people believe that Jesus exists and that God exists without being Christians at all I believe that Jupiter and Saturn and Mercury exist but that fact doesn't make any difference to my actual life at all believing in Jesus as he puts it in verse 20 is literally believing into Jesus yes movement is involved it's not just a matter of believing in your mind that he exists you need also to come to him and to say to him I'm a sinful person Lord I only deserve to be condemned but I know that you went to the cross to deal with my sin the sin that separates me from God and to take that sin away so I come to you now so as to be one of that great company of people who believe that you are sent by God and who are loved by God as much loved as you are loved by God yourself so friend if you're not yet a believer will you do that will you move to Jesus and come to him in the end everybody belongs either to the world or to the

Lord let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our Father how we thank you again for the love with which you have loved the world and do love the world and we think of you sending the Lord Jesus your deeply beloved son to have to go through this horrible torture of execution crucifixion on that dreadful gallows so that he could bear the punishment that we deserved for our sins and rebellion against you have mercy upon us and our prayer particularly is for those who have not yet come to you and put their trust in the Lord Jesus we ask that you will help them to do it and to be saved we ask it all in Jesus name Amen