

## I. Introduction:

A. What do you think Jesus wants for you? What do you think God wants most for you? I am assuming you know what you want for you? What does Jesus want for you? What does Jesus pray for you? What does he ask the Father to give you?

B. As you may know, this is a trick question. The answer is in the book. It's in today's passage. In our series on the second half of John we've come to the High Priestly Prayer. Jesus is our High Priest. He intercedes for us. In today's text we get to listen to what he prays.

C. He has less than a day to live. He has spent it with his disciples. He has washed their feet, talked about love, told them – again – that he is leaving and told them that they are going to be OK. They've finished the Passover Meal. Judas is betraying him at this moment. He has now retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray.

D. And in the Holy Spirit fueled mystery of inspiration, we get to listen to the prayer Jesus prays.

1. We have lots of reports of Jesus praying. It happens in all kinds of settings. But we almost never hear what he prays.<sup>1</sup>

2. As an aside, this prayer – which is very rich (Martin Llyod Jones wrote 4 books on it)<sup>2</sup> – this prayer covers a bit of ground.

E. I want to focus on verses 20-23. **My prayer is not for them alone.** (The them would be his disciples, who he starts the prayer praying for). **I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,** (that would be us – and everyone else who has put their faith in Christ).

F. V21: **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.**

1. **He is praying for our closeness with them and with each other.**

G. <sup>22</sup>**I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**

II. Jesus prays for our unity. He prays for the unity of his followers (**his church**). **He prays that we have an ability to get along with each other.**

A. He does not pray for their safety – and indeed, every one of the men in that room will suffer, and 10 of the 11 will be martyred for their faith. He does not pray for an easy life. He does not pray that they will get ahead. (I'm not saying you cannot or should not pray for those things. But that is not what Jesus prays for).

B. His prayer is for our unity. **Emphasis on OUR.** It's not that everyone everywhere gets along. That would be nice, but that is not what He prays for. What Jesus prays for is that his followers get along with each other.

C. He holds up the relationship between himself and the Father as the model. (The perfect relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.) He prays **“...that all of them may be one, Father, just as we are one.”**

D. And finally, He notes that He is praying for this unity so that those on the outside looking in will see in the church something they feel called towards - will see in the unity of the church a validation of Christ's claims to be God.

III. So, what does this mean for us? Well, for starters, it means that we – you and I, Christ's followers – need to find our primary identity in Jesus. In the person and work and mission of Jesus. It means that our ethnic identity and our political ideology and our national allegiances and our socio-economic status and our college basketball bracket-fueled fan spirit all need to take a back seat to the wishes of Jesus.

IV. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus had said to them – a new command I give to you. Pay attention to this. You are to “love one another as I have loved you.”

A. Some people think that the way to do this is to find people who agree with them on everything – on politics, on music preferences on cultural events and other things. And then they tack the faith on the end of that.

B. It can be easy to place other things ahead of Jesus. Indeed, it's hard not to. The history of the Jews and of the church, would suggest other things end up cutting in line all the time. Many people are more disciples of a political than they are disciples of Jesus. So, they find their primary identity as:

C. We cannot forget, Jesus did not find a bunch of people who thought alike and planted his church there. He pulled together the tax collector and the zealot and said: what will unite you is going to be so defining that you can manage these other differences.

D. I have had to think about this a lot because I have been told – by people I respect - that what we are doing (or at least trying to do) is not going to be possible for much longer. I have been told that there will not be any purple churches. There will be red churches and there will be blue churches.

1. And I have looked at this because we are a purple church in three ways: 1) most people are purple by conviction; and 2) we have people who are both red and people who are blue; and 3) we think that is the goal.

2. This is a complicated topic, but as a rule, I think this is what we should be fighting to create. I do not want to be part of a church where everyone thinks the same about everything as everyone else. I want to be part of a church where everyone thinks like me! (That is only partially a joke. It is sort of what we expect. What people expect is that their preferences – on things big and small).

3. Note that what we are to pray for is that our identity in Christ is so strong that it overrides everything else. Have you been praying for this?

4. Our unity – not our uniformity, not that we are identical clones – but our unity around Jesus and his mission is Christ’s chief prayer. It is what he implores the father to grant him. “Hold this thing together, because I know it will easily spin apart.”

V. We are not the first to take up this topic. Discussions about unity have been going on for a couple thousand years, in part because there is so much discord.

A. The New Testament itself tells us about a number of flare ups that happened in the early church, such as:

1. the very visible disagreement between Peter and Paul over the Gospel itself – in Acts 15;

2. the somewhat unimportant spat between Paul and Barnabas shortly after.<sup>3</sup>

3. In Phil. 4 we see Paul urging everyone to help Euodia and Syntyche hold it together.

4. In Galatians 3 we are told that in Christ there is: 1) Neither Jew nor Greek; 2) neither slave nor free; 3) neither male nor female. We are told these things because all of these were divisions.

5. In I Cor. 1:10 Paul appeals to his readers in to “agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

B. One other thing to note here when you read about all of the tiffs going on. Is that we are not called to create a unity but to recognize it.

1. In Ephesians 4 Paul writes: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—<sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

2. This suggests that we are not pulling things together. They have been pulled together by Christ. We just have to not allow what He has pulled together to split apart. We need to work so that the unity that exists in Christ finds visible expression in our lives.

C. If we step back and look at all that is discussed under the topic of unity, it seems as though we need answers to three questions:

1. Who are we supposed to be unified with?

2. What are we supposed to be unified about?

3. And how we are supposed to pull this off.

VI. I have already said a bit about question one. Who are we supposed to be unified with? The call in John 17 is for Christians to get along with each other.

A. Now, some apply this to the relationships between churches. And that is understandable. After all, there are a lot of churches out there. And they do not all get along with each other.

1. As you may know – initially there was a church in an area with a bishop over that city.

- a) In the 11<sup>th</sup> century we had the first big split – the Great Schism, in which the church in the East (the Orthodox Church) went on way and the Western Church went the other. The fight was somewhat over the use of icons, but mostly over Rome's claim that her bishop was over everyone.

- b) And then 400 years later the Church in the west split when Martin Luther – a Roman Catholic monk and professor – called on the Roman Catholic Church to reform. And it ended up splitting.

- c) And then that split split again and again and again. Emerging out of the Reformation you have:

- (1) The Lutherans, The Reformed – also sometimes called Calvinists, And the Anabaptists, And then later you have the Church of England.

- (2) And then later most of the above groups will split and split and split. For instance, the Anglican Church gave birth to the Puritans, who gave birth to the separatist Puritans.

- (3) According to Todd Johnson of the World Christian Data Base, there are over 30,000 different denominations in the world.<sup>4</sup>

B. This is not quite as bad as some think.

1. Denominations were set up as a way for people to get along. The general idea is, we agree on the important stuff, but disagree on things like – whether to have a bishop or an elder board or both; whether to baptize infants and – well, 100 other things. The promise was that we would only speak well of each other.

2. I see some value in having different churches – because they reach different people. As long as they are focused on Christ and lift up the Gospel.

3. **And tonight we have 13 churches coming together for a joint service.**

4. You are not really in a spot to do much about the unity of all the different denominations out there. Your challenge is to get along with the person sitting next to you.

VII. Question Two: What are we expected to be unified about? As one church that meets in four places? **What are we supposed to agree on?**

A. Are we expected to agree on everything? No. We do not need to agree on everything. We need to agree on the basics:

1. In terms of the basics of faith: think Apostle's Creed, or Fence Posts
2. In terms of mission, we need alignment. As a church we cannot do everything. Some individuals use their gifts to serve in all manner of ways. We organize around certain things – always around Proclaiming the Good News and Engaging in Good Works. Under REACH it was on: 1) 100,000; 2) starting 10 new churches; and 3) 500 baptisms

B. Does this mean that there are some things worth fighting over? Well, if by fighting you mean, disagreeing. Yes. If by fighting you mean punching someone in the mouth. No.

VIII. Question Three: How do we pull this off? How do we remain together? Let me suggest six things:

A. Pray. Pray like Jesus prayed. "Father, make them one."

1. Andy Stanley gave a series of messages on unity before the last presidential election. His premise was:
  - a) Your candidate will win or lose based on how many votes they receive. The church will win or lose based on how we treat those we disagree with.
2. His prayer was: "Father, make us one so we can influence many."<sup>5</sup>

B. Do not divide. Be very nervous about creating divisions or joining them.

1. It is easy to divide. It is hard not to. We all want to take our ball and walk away. That approach comes easy, which is why this is Jesus's prayer.

C. Be humble. Be very nervous about thinking you're right.

1. Be very nervous when you find yourself thinking that you are smarter, more holy, more strategic – in some ways a better Christian – than others. This is what the Pharisees did. And Jesus went after them over and over again.
2. He talks about them – he talks to those who are the most conservative religiously – as if they are cut off from God.

3. I am not saying there is not a right path. I am not endorsing relativism. There are FencePosts. There are lines we cannot cross.
  4. But wow do we have to be careful here.
- D. Be wise and avoid getting sucked in by contentious people.
1. This sounds like Proverbs 101 – keep your distance from the fool. Or Sermon on the Mount 101 – “treat others the way you would like to be treated.” I think someone said that once.
  2. I mean something a bit more specific. I have shared before that for some time I listened to both ends of the radio dial. Out of a need to know what people were hearing, and a fear that I might be misled, I was trying to divide my time between a couple different radio stations. I stopped doing that. I decided I was too old to do that anymore. I was going to have a heart attack.
  3. It was not just that I thought they were being selective in what they reported and bending the truth, they were ascribing the worst intentions to those they disagreed with. I decided that was becoming a cancer to my soul. It was insulting to other people and to my intelligence.
  4. When I was with John Stott years ago, I confessed to being discouraged about the church and the way people.
- E. Choose not to be offended. Really. It’s almost that simple.
1. In the opening chapter of his book, *Unoffendable*, Brant Hanson writes: Okay. So this may sound like the dumbest thing you’ve ever read, but here goes: *You can choose to be “unoffendable.”*
    - a) He said that when he heard this he found the offensive. So I did what any rational, fair-minded, spiritually mature person would do: I scoured the Bible for verses I could pull out to destroy his argument, logically pummel him into submission, and — you know — win.
    - b) Problem: I now think he’s right. Not only *can* we choose to be unoffendable; we *should* choose that.
    - c) We should forfeit our right to be offended. That means forfeiting our right to hold on to anger. When we do this, we’ll be making a sacrifice that’s very pleasing to God. It strikes at our very pride. It forces us not only to think about humility, but to actually be humble.
- F. Love unconditionally someone you disagree with politically.
- G. Stay focused on the essentials. Prioritize Jesus and his mission.

1. It is my experience that I am more likely to start drawing lines in the sand when I am spending too much time looking in and not enough time looking at Jesus, or not enough time following his example. The church – as much as any organization – has the ability to make big things small and small things big.

IX. As an act of unity, let's stand and recite together the Apostle's Creed.

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<sup>1</sup> The experience of overhearing conversations is mixed. Sometimes it is good. Sometimes it is not. In this case, it is very good. We see God's heart for us and for get some hint of the perfect love and unity to which we are moving. In Connor Flow's notes he references Frankenstein, and what is learned by the monster by listening to the Delaney family.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Rainsford – an Irish clergyman and friend of DL Moody, preached 41 sermons on John 17. Thomas Merton preached 45 sermons. Martin Lloyd Jones wrote four books on it.

<sup>3</sup> You also know that there is counsel to leaders that makes it clear that some issues cannot be compromised over – there are lots of warnings over false teachers and false doctrines and caution about wolves.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy George, *Is Christ Divided*, CT, July 2005, p. 31. //. BTW, some have argued that his definition is too That seems hardly better.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Andy Stanley for this prayer. It's from his series called Talking Points