

Series: Upper Room Discourse

Text: John 17:20-23

Message #15 (April 23, 2006)

WHEN MANY ARE ONE

Introduction

1. The fact that we can actually hear Jesus pray to His Father in heaven is an amazing and wonderful opportunity for us. The idea that within this very prayer, Jesus was actually praying for us, is over the top! But that is exactly what is before us today.
2. It is true that the portion of the prayer that we have already considered was specifically directed to the eleven (as well as perhaps the other followers of Jesus who remained with Him). Application specifically to us up to now, though both possible and appropriate, is secondary at best. Those first century disciples were front and center in Jesus' mind as He prayed what we have recorded in the first 19 verses.
3. But now we turn to verse 20. "I do not ask for these only, **but also for those who will believe in me through their word...**" That request must refer to us! Are you not at least a little curious as to what Jesus would think so important that He should pray to the Father about these future believers, which include us? Remember, in only a few hours He would be crucified – and He knew that. But here He prays for us.
4. I first want to consider the simple **fact** that Jesus prays for us. Then we will look at the content of His prayer for us in regard to oneness, and also in regard to the world. Let's unpack this brief text and see what treasures we can discover.

I. JESUS PRAYS FOR US

A. As He prayed, Jesus saw a future effective ministry

1. Throughout the Gospel accounts, there were clear suggestions of Jesus' mission. He declared, "I will build my church." He proclaimed in the Olivet Discourse, "And the Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Jesus clearly was not expecting this fledgling movement to die, but rather to flourish!
2. However a quick glance at these men around Him, and one might wonder how anything like what Jesus was suggesting could possibly happen. And yet Jesus

declares that He is leaving the work of this worldwide spread of the Gospel in their hands.

3. And so he prays for those who will believe through their word. That means that these disciples would be given the responsibility to record the truth of the Gospel (“their word”) so that future generations would be able to hear the Word and believe in Jesus. That is exactly what happened to us if we have trusted Christ! It was through the word recorded by these disciples, which was given to them by God, guarded and preserved, and then used to bring us to life by the Holy Spirit of God! This happened and is happening because Jesus asked that it would be so! He prays for us as He sees this future effective ministry.

B. As He prayed, Jesus saw a future triumphant church

1. Rather than seeing the end of it all in the crucifixion, Jesus sees the triumphant growth and development of His church.
2. We need to understand that not everyone who claims to belong to Christ does. Just because we were baptized in the name of Christ or because we do not claim some other world religion or we have a Judeo-Christian heritage, or even if we responded to some evangelistic directive, these do not make us Christian. However, those who have repented of sin and believed in Jesus, as He is presented to us in the pages of Scripture, belong to Jesus. As Christ prayed, He saw a swelling number of people who would embrace Him. They would come from every corner of the globe, from every conceivable people group, from every imaginable language and dialect, but they would come. And still they come!
3. That night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed and that prayer included us. That’s amazing! What was the concern of His prayer?

II. JESUS CARES ABOUT ONENESS IN US (This is really the heart of His prayer)

A. He cared about an increasing oneness

1. We have seen this theme of **unity** earlier in this prayer (v. 11). What we have here is developed in two ways. First, this oneness involves those who will believe through the message of the current disciples. Second, this oneness has something to do with glory that Jesus has given to us. Let’s see if we can unpack this a little more.

2. In terms of unity, the first disciples had no advantage over us. We belong to this unity of the body as much as they did. There is no advantage for the first century disciples of Jesus. We all enjoy this unity in Christ. This oneness is therefore an expanding one, for it continues to grow and yet remains as one entity. This is mind-boggling, but within our ability to understand. The second aspect of this unity is more complex.
3. Jesus declares, “The glory that you have given to me I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one.” What was the glory that the Father had given to the Son? Hang on! We might be in for a rough ride. The glory the Father gave the Son was the glory of the humiliation of the incarnation, which would culminate in the glorification of Christ at the crucifixion and in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. There was glory in the act of redemption and in the subsequent glorification of Christ and we have seen something of that (“I will glory in my Redeemer.”) So Christ has given us His glory in that we can see and understand all of this, a little at least. In that way we have been the recipients of His glory, but maybe there is more.
4. Whether we like it or not, Jesus is saying in His prayer to the Father that our true glory (that which He shares with us) is found in the way of the cross! The idea of bearing the reproach of Jesus before a cruel and unbelieving world is not our shame. There is no shame in it. It is our glory! Have you noticed that the harder a task, the more honor is given when the task is completed? The way of the believer is hard but, in Paul’s words, “it cannot begin to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us!” It is in this sense that we share in the glory of Christ. As Paul told the Philippians, we share in “his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” The oneness shared between the Father and the Son is shared with us as well in our observation of it and in our participation in it, that is, in His sufferings.
5. On the one hand, we already share in this unity with Christ and one another. We already are one. Yet in another way, this unity needs to grow. Jesus prays “that they may become **perfectly** one”, suggesting that there is room for improvement. In the words of D.A. Carson,

Like sanctification, this oneness is simultaneously something already achieved and something that needs perfecting. On the one hand believers, if they are true

believers, are already one: the triune God has already taken up residence within them and they live by faith in Jesus Christ. This is common for all of them. There is a common experience of grace, a common object of faith, a common eternal destination, a common regeneracy, a common rejection of the “world”, a common perception of the Lord’s glory. These ties make them one. The things that unite true Christians are so deep and eternal that they transcend the things that divide them. Christians are truly one. On the other hand, Christians need to grow in their unity; for Jesus prays, “May they be brought to complete unity...” The implication is that their unity, while real, is not perfect. Sad to tell, too often Christians do not cherish deeply the things that unite them with other true believers: they cherish instead the divisive things. Even where there is some point of conscience at stake, there is a danger that in defending what we hold to be a point of truth we may endanger the integrity of this witness of loving unity. At the level of praxis, at the level of attitude, at the level of love, at the level of a growing grasp of true doctrine – at all of these levels the Christian church needs to be perfected in unity. For this Jesus himself prays; and one day he will see this prayer answered without qualification. The expanding unity will become the perfect unity.

B. He cared about an increasing witness

1. This oneness is designed to foster this ever-expanding unity. The first disciples made known the message through proclamation but also through demonstration. As they did so, others came to faith. And as this ever-increasing circle continues to witness to the world and love one another, more continue to come to faith.
2. As one writer has said, “The world itself is the constant target, and as men and women in the world confront the witness of the church, some at least come to recognize that God sent his Son and loves his people in the same measure that he loves his Son.”
3. A proclamation of truth without a visibly changed life is hollow and unconvincing. A fervent life without the truth of the Gospel might be attractive but there is no power to actually redeem those who are dead in sin and desperately need a Savior. Jesus expected His disciples to make Him known in word and deed! That in part was what He prayed for in regard to us!

C. He cared about an increasing manifestation of His glory

1. As this unity is expanding and this witness is increasing, Jesus is being revealed to a lost world. He is the content of the message. He is the glory being revealed. It is His glory that is given to His disciples.

2. The unity of believers is important because as they exhibit this unity the world has no explanation for it except for Christ. In the words of one of the commentators, “The disciples’ unity in love is so unearthly that only the truth of Christ is adequate to explain it.” At one level at least, Christ’s glory is seen in the unity of His people.

III. JESUS HAS DESIRES FOR THE WORLD IN REGARD TO US

A. God’s desire for the world is manifested in His love for His Son

1. The Father sent the Son. Setting aside for a minute any discussion of election or predestination, the idea that God would send His Son to redeem anyone out of the world is mind-boggling. Usually when we try to understand God’s response toward the world, we couch it in terms of fairness and deep compassion. When someone suggests that God’s love might be limited in some way, many cry foul. “It is not fair! All must be given the opportunity!” Really? Why? That God would send His Son for anyone should surprise and amaze us!
2. The Father loved the Son. We think we know this, but let’s think a little harder. It was the Father’s love for the Son that led Him to send His Son. Remember what the Son is doing! It was for love, for the glory to be received by the Son that the Father sent the Son. We often think of God’s loving the world and so He sent His Son. We do not often put together the idea that it was the Father’s love for the Son that caused Him to send the Son. God wants the world to see His love for the Son pictured in the fact that He sent the Son.

B. God’s desire for the world is manifested in His people’s love for one another

1. If we have been loved by Christ and saved by Christ, made new creations in Christ, it follows that we will walk together. When we don’t, we declare to the world that what happened to us in Christ was not that big of a deal. It failed to make a difference in the way we treat one another.
2. How that must grieve the heart of God! Does that mean that we must always agree on everything? No. It does say something about how we are to treat one another. Listen again to D. A. Carson.

(T)he things which tie together true believers are far more significant than the things which divide them. The divisive things are not necessarily unimportant:

sometimes they are points of faith or practice which have long-range effects on the church for good or ill, reflecting perhaps some major inconsistency or misapprehension concerning the truth. Nevertheless the things which tie us together are of even more fundamental importance. Regardless of denominational affiliation, there ought to be among Christ's people a sincere kinship, a mutual love, a common commitment, a deep desire to learn from one another and to come, if at all possible, to a shared understanding of the truth on any point. Such unity ought to be so transparent and compelling that others are attracted to it. To such Biblical ecumenism there is no proper objection. Indeed, it is mandated by the Final Prayer of the Lord Jesus himself.

Conclusion

1. So as Jesus prays for us, what was He saying? He cares how we respond to Him and He cares how we respond to one another. Both have an impact on how the world perceives the church, but also how the world perceives God.
2. How does the unbelieving world around you perceive you in your relationship with others who profess like faith? How does the unbelieving world around you perceive God as you have made Him known?
3. The Lord Jesus prayed for us about those things and I assume He prays still.