

184. The Gospel of John—17:20-21

“With Jesus Behind the Veil” Part 18

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We have been studying Jesus’ prayer to His Father on the night before His crucifixion—a prayer He prayed with His disciples standing there listening.

Why did He pray this very intimate prayer to His Father in their presence—so that they would know and understand what was most important to Him with regard to their welfare and the Kingdom of God going forward.

I think the big reason He prayed this prayer in their presence was because—these were things that He wanted to be the focus of their prayers for one another after He returned to the Father, and they continued the work of the Kingdom in His absence.

This prayer is divided up into 3 main parts:

1. Jesus Prays for Himself—v.1-5

2. Jesus Prays for His Disciples—v.6-19

And today we want to begin looking at the third part of Jesus’ prayer where—

3. Jesus Prays for All Believers—v.20-26

John 17:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

Here the Lord Jesus turns His attention towards the future and begins to pray for all those who would be saved down thru the history of the Church—including those of us who are His disciples today. And the first thing on His heart was unity—

John 17:20–21a (NKJV)

²⁰ “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all may be one...

As we studied earlier, Jesus has already prayed for the unity of those disciples who had walked with Him for the last 3 ½ years—especially those who were apostles with Him that night:

John 17:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.

So here, Jesus is praying that the Father would keep His disciples in *unity*.

Why was the unity of His disciples (then and now) so on His heart and mind that night? —because He first of all knew that unity leads to *joy* (v.13), but more importantly unity leads to *victory* (there is strength in numbers)—whereas division leads to *strife* and *defeat*.

It is the devil’s goal to create disunity and strife because he knows they create division—and division will destroy families, churches and even nations:

Matthew 12:25 (NKJV)

²⁵ ..."Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house [family] divided against itself will not stand.

Mark 3:24-25 (NLT)

²⁴ "A kingdom divided by civil war will collapse. ²⁵ Similarly, a family splintered by feuding will fall apart.

As we said a few weeks ago—unity is of the Holy Spirit—whereas division is of the devil whose main strategy is *‘divide and conquer’*—To be clear, he can’t conquer until he first divides.

As we said at that time—unity is impossible without *humility* (being dead to self)—which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23).

The devil could never sow discord and division into a family or a church without *pride*—pride being the opposite of *humility*.

James warns us—

James 3:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist [i.e., *‘where pride is present’*] confusion and every evil thing *are* there.

Again, unity leads to victory whereas division leads to defeat—which is why God has such strong condemnations for those especially who sow discord and disunity in the Church. For example, one of the 7-sins God singles out in Proverbs 6:19 as sins He especially hates is—*“One who sows discord among brethren.”*

Because unity is essential for victory (over the devil—i.e., *‘spiritual warfare’*)—God commands us to do all that we can to *promote* unity in the Body of Christ:

Ephesians 4:3 (NKJV)

³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In the Greek, Ephesians 4:3 literally reads—*“Being eager to maintain, or guard, the unity of the Spirit.”*

The verb used here is a present participle which means—*“we must constantly be endeavoring to maintain this unity”*—Why? Because it will constantly be under attack from the devil.

That is why Jesus prayed to His Father for us on the night before His crucifixion that we, as His people, would always walk in unity with each other—**“That they all [all believers down thru the history of the Church] may be one...” (verse 21a)**

Some argue that the Father hasn’t answered the Son’s prayer for unity because of all the different Protestant denominations in the world which are all divided in what they believe.

Catholic apologists point to this as proof that the Protestant Church isn’t the true church and why the “unity” in the Catholic Church is proof that it (and it alone) is the one true church—Why? Because they claim that their unity is the result of the Father answering the Son’s prayer proving that they are the true church.

First of all, don’t confuse forced uniformity with spiritual unity.

Every cult in the world has forced uniformity masquerading as spiritual unity (the cult demands absolute unwavering monolithic uniformity to the doctrines and rules of the group)—but it isn’t true spiritual unity coming from the Holy Spirit.

Second, don’t think that diversity of thought and belief automatically equals division. Unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive of one another.

We evangelicals can differ on non-essential doctrines and still be in unity with each other when it comes to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. In other words, Christians can disagree over things like the timing of the Rapture; are the gifts of the Holy Spirit still around; is the Millennial Kingdom literal or allegorical—and still be in unity with each other.

One author uses George Whitefield and John Wesley as an example of this—

“Such a powerful evangelist was George Whitefield that thirty thousand people would regularly attend his open-air meetings. So anointed and eloquent was he that history records many orators and actors would come just to watch him. John Wesley, a contemporary of Whitefield’s, was also preaching to multitudes. Yet so diverse were the views of these two men on certain doctrines, they took out advertisements in the newspapers explaining why they believed what they did—and why the other was amiss. People thought these men hated each other—until one reporter asked Whitefield, *“Tell me, Mr. Whitefield, do you expect to see John Wesley in heaven?”* *“No,”* answered Whitefield. *“He’s going to be so close to the throne, and I’m going to be so far back, I’ll never see him.”*

The author concludes by saying—*“I like that! Here these guys had very different views doctrinally, and very different flavors in ministry—but they had unity through love in their diversity.”*

Another pastor and author put it this way—

“Despite their outward denominational differences, all true Christians are spiritually and positionally united in the Body of Christ by regeneration in their belief that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone. Their commitment to the absolute authority of Scripture provides them with practical unity with one another here on earth and in the local church. All those who savingly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ “are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Romans 12:5).”

That folks, is one of the greatest truths that has ever been revealed about the Christian church—that we are a body—the Body of Jesus Christ on the earth.

So many people think of the Church as an organization—but that is fundamentally incorrect. The Scriptures teach that the Church isn't an organization—it's an *organism*!

The greatest difference between an organism and an organization is that—one has life and the other does not.

One author put it this way—

“A corpse is organized—it has all of the limbs in the right place, the bone structure is intact, all the organs are in the right spot and connected to the right things—everything is there but it's not alive.

At this point it's an organization but it has ceased being an organism.

The dictionary defines an organization as a “structured system”—but it defines an organism as a “living system.”

So again, the Scriptures teach that the Church isn't a dead organization—it's a living organism!

We are the Body of Christ and what makes us alive is that Jesus (the Lord of Life—John 1:4), has given us His life at the moment of salvation by imparting to each believer the Holy Spirit—

John 6:63 (NKJV)

⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life.

But also, think of the Holy Spirit as the central nervous system of the Body empowering and directing each of the individual members in service and obedience to the Head of the Body—the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the One who gives us the power to do the work Jesus has called each of us to do. *Without the life of the Spirit in the Church we would become a corpse—a dead organization and not a living Body.*

Unfortunately, this is the sad testimony of all too many so-called Christian churches today—they are dead, the life of the Spirit is no longer in them (if He ever was)—they are apostate churches.

So, the prayer that Jesus prayed for His Church was that it would walk in unity with God and with one another—

John 17:20–26 (NKJV)

²⁰ “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

Let me say it again—spiritual unity can only come through the indwelling Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit won't indwell a person until they are first 'born of the Spirit' (“born again”—John 3)

A person is only born again, or born of the Spirit thru the Word of God being presented to them—

Romans 10:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Through the centuries all who have preached the true gospel have preached the apostles' word—even as Jesus said: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word [the gospel].” (verse 20)

1 Peter 1:23, 25 (NKJV)

²³ having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever...²⁵ Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.

When Peter said that we were born, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible—he has in mind to two births Jesus talked about in John 3:

John 3:1-6 (NLT)

¹ There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. ² After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” ³ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” ⁴ “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” ⁵ Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.

For a person to go to heaven they must undergo 2 births—the first *physical* (“born of water”) and the second *spiritual* (“born of the Spirit”). In physical conception, the man’s seed is corruptible (perishable)—and even if it fertilizes the egg and a child is born—that child’s life is also subject corruption and death (“*In Adam all die*”—1 Corinthians 15:22a).

However, when it comes to the new birth—the ‘seed’ is God’s Word (the gospel) and when it is received into a heart it gives birth to spiritual life which will never be corrupted and subject to death (“*In Christ all shall be made alive*”—1 Corinthians 15:22b; also John 11:26 “*whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.*”)

John 17:20–26 (NKJV)

²⁰ “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

The love of God working thru His people (walking in unity)—is the greatest testimony to the world that we belong to Jesus and He is God Almighty capable of transforming lives from hatred to love (mention Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot both on Jesus ‘team’).

However, when we talk about someone who underwent a radical transformation the more time he spent with Jesus—I think the Apostle John would definitely fit that description—for his was an incredible transformation.

John is known as the ‘*apostle of love*’ who more than anyone else in the New Testament (except for Jesus Himself) spoke of love and exemplified love.

In 1 John we get a feel for this man called the apostle of love—

1 John 2:8-10 (NKJV)

⁸ Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. ⁹ He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

John is saying to those in the church back then—

"If you say you're in the light (a true Christian) but you have hatred in your heart for another Christian—you're deceiving yourself and you're still in darkness (lost). If you are truly saved the Holy Spirit lives inside of you, and if the Holy Spirit is inside of you—you can't hate the family of God."

This then becomes the 'litmus test' that John (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) holds up as the determining factor as to whether or not a person is really a Christian.

1 John 3:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death.

Look, John isn't saying that a true Christian will never have conflict with another Christian—sometimes families will fight with each other.

John is talking to those who say they're saved—and yet hate other Christians (Jews hating Gentiles and vice versa; or years ago in the deep South, whites who went to church and yet hated black Christians or vice versa).

1 John 3:23 (NKJV)

²³ And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

1 John 4:20-21 (NKJV)

²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

The way our love for God is manifested is in how we treat each other. Anyone who says they love God and yet hates other Christians, regardless of what church they go to or denomination they belong to—is a liar and deluding themselves. This is strong language coming from the 'apostle of love'—but sometimes professing Christians need a '*kick in the pants*' instead of constant '*pats on the back*'.

John's message, although hard for many to hear, became the strong medicine needed to heal the division in the early church—a simple message for the people of God to love one another.

1 John 4:8 says that 'God is love'.

As Christians, God the Spirit lives inside of us—the Spirit is love.

That is what Spirit we are of—the Spirit of life not death;

the Spirit of love not hate.

As we study John's life in the gospels, we can see that this man who was called the 'apostle of love' didn't start out that way. He was not a lover of men initially—he was a son of thunder who wanted to call fire down from heaven upon his enemies)! But as he spent time beholding Jesus, walking with Jesus, studying how Jesus interacted with people—he began to change—he became a man of love.

It wasn't his natural inclination or his human character—it was a total work of the Holy Spirit from within (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Remember that next time your prone to think, *"I can't be a person who loves—it's just not in my nature."* Or *"I just can't forgive that person for what they did to me—I don't have the strength."*

Listen, the same Spirit of God Who lived in John and changed him from a hot-headed *'son of thunder'* into someone who went around telling people *"Little children, love one another"*—is the Spirit who works in you and me.

If He did it for John—He can and will do it for us—if we're willing.

It won't happen overnight—but little by little you will be transformed into the image of Jesus.

That was one of the reasons we gave for studying the gospel of John in the first place—so we can gaze at Jesus and learn from the love He showed others.

The goal is that the more we behold Jesus, the more we will be transformed into His likeness—so that we too might become a disciple of love.

Someone has said—

*"As great as it is to be a people who move in missions.
As wonderful as it is to be a people who study the Word of God.
As powerful and great as it is to be a people who are flowing in the things of the Spirit.
And as dynamic as it is to be doing the works of ministry.
The most important thing we can do, above all, is to demonstrate God's love to the people of this world—and it starts with the family of God.
In John 13:35 Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples..."—by what?
By your doctrine?—NO
By your understanding of church government?—NO
By your knowledge of the Word?—NO
By your boldness in witnessing?—NO
John 13:35 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, **if you have love [fervent] for one another.'**"*

God's love is the basis for our unity.

Our unity will reveal to the world that we belong to Jesus who has given us His life and transformed us from the inside out thru the power of the Holy Spirit. This was His final request for His disciples.

Are we going to deny Him that request through our pride and selfishness? If we're going to pursue unity—it must start in our marriages.

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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