

Series: Receiving life by believing in God's Son (a Gospel of John study)

Sermon Text: John 17:20-26

Key Word: Unity

(*The accounts in chapters 14-17 are only found in John)

We've been studying this beautiful 26 verse prayer in John 17 all month, and if you've missed a lesson or want to relisten, the audio and notes are on our website. So far, we've discovered how Jesus prayed for Himself and for His first disciples. He prayed for their protection, joy, and unity because, as we've been learning, the church on earth isn't like the church in heaven. We may want churches to be safe, problem-free utopias, but Christ's first church had a culture where everyone, even a "*Judas type*", was offered plenty of time to "*come and see*" without being pressured into full agreement. Of course, this adds tension and risk to church life, but where else can people in this polarized world find such an amazing opportunity? To embrace our challenging mission, we must explore today's...

BIG IDEA: Jesus prayed the unity of His future church.

Question #1: Is church unity realistic? Verses 20-21 begin with Jesus saying, "*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.*" Some think the church Jesus founded has been so diluted and divided that it's no longer relevant, but I can easily name 60+ local pastors/churches of various denominations, who routinely pray for one another and work together (examples). We don't agree on every detail or "*do church*" the same, but we share **2 key non-negotiables**: 1) The only path to salvation is grace through faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son; and 2) Our faith is relevant, not because churches are perfect, but because Christianity is *true*. In *verses 9-19* Jesus referred to God's Word as *truth* which *sanctifies* (purifies) us. This makes *truth* essential for transformation and unity--it's like a map back to God in a world of ungodly ideas. Some say *truth* is no longer knowable, but in a recent [4 part series on justice and race](#) cultural guru **Tim Keller** suggested that, "*We are all united by the truth of Scripture, but our doctrine of sin teaches that we come to Scripture with self-justifying hearts and many other emotional and cultural blinders, and so we often miss things the Bible is saying to us. Experience can change this.*" John 17 shows us *truthful* words were the basis of an ongoing conversation that kept human Jesus aligned with God's ways when life went sideways. When people are born again by the Word of God, we're invited into this holy conversation and family dynamic where love compels a willingness to re-think, deny selfish desires, and let *truth* reform our character and direction, making *church unity realistic*! Let's go to...

Question #2: Why is church unity so important to Jesus? The answer is in *verses 21-24*, "... *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 the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you've given me I've 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 the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*" Twice, He referred to church unity as "evangelistic" (i.e., it helps people believe in God). Why did He say this? Because in a polarized world of ideas, it's stunning to see people agree on and unite around anything! Now, I don't mean we all memorize the same answers, rather we have divine tools (like mercy, grace, and forgiveness) that enable lively, interesting, and challenging conversations among diverse people. We believe in absolute, uncompromising **truth** AND unending **love** that is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude, doesn't insist on its own way, and keeps showing up no matter what (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1-8)? We embrace the mission of **Ephesians 4:1-3** to "*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" Churches that pursue **truth** at the expense of **love** and unity, have lost sight of the pattern Jesus established. Finally, this leads to...

Question #3: How does unity in Christ help fix what's wrong? In the final verses of this prayer, Jesus gives voice to a tension Christians constantly feel--the desire to be with Jesus in heaven's **glory**, and the need to **make God's name and love** famous on earth. *Verses 24 and 26* express this tension, "*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you've given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world...I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you've loved me may be in them, and I in them.*" I'll express this tension another way...how do we find the will to **make God's name and love** famous in a world of ongoing injustice? That comes from seeing what Jesus saw in *verse 25*, "*O righteous Father, even though the world doesn't know you, I know you, and these know you've sent me.*" Jesus was encouraged that the wheels of justice had been set in motion, not because **the world** suddenly turned to God but because a few people were starting to **know His Father** and **believe He had been sent by God** to bring about justice in the most unexpected and unjust thing to have ever happened--God's sinless Son willingly bore our guilt and shame on the cross.

Let's pray: Father, it excites me to hear Jesus praying for us to be with Him in Heaven, how you set the plan of salvation in motion before the foundation of the world, and how we can experience a taste of ETERNAL life in this PRESENT life through glimpses of remarkable love and unity. Obviously, Jesus wasn't sent to establish a perfect church or government or else He'd have healed everyone and everything. Instead, you sent your Son to model how we can compassionately embody your Words (*truth*) in ways that highlight your patient plan to establish eternal righteousness through His life, death, and resurrection. As we rightly seek to end injustice, help us remember the justice we long for appeared to us in merciful love and to follow in the footsteps of the one you sent to do the job. Amen.

Let's sing: "Mercy"

So, what's your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **An invitation into conversation:** "Prayer is not something you do. It's something you enter. God is inviting us into a space for greater intimacy with Himself. The Son 'always lives to make intercession' for us in the presence of the Father. Before we utter a word in prayer, the Spirit is groaning for us from our deepest places, and the Son stands before the Father on our behalf and prays for us. Our own words are caught up in theirs. Our own praying is carried along by their prayers. When we pray, we are entering the intercession of the Son and the Spirit on our behalf, as our prayers rise up to the Father." Source Unknown
- **Prayer and unity undermine our enemy:** "The second foe has also been hinted at previously, the devil (15). Jesus states his conquest of the devil at several points in these chapters, but he is never in danger of dismissing this opposition as merely nominal. The world and the devil are daunting enemies, and Jesus' concern about them in his prayer is a summons to vigilance and prayer for protection. By contrast we spend much more time today praying about our health, our projects, our decisions, our finances, our family, and even our games than we do praying about the danger of the evil one. Their unity will itself be a victory over the devil since part of his strategy will be to attack it." Pastor Bruce Milne
- **Being made holy or set apart:** "The word for 'setting apart' is basically the same as the word for 'holy'; but our word 'holy', when applied to people, can give a sense of over-pious religiosity which is foreign to the New Testament. What is 'holiness' in Jesus' world? In first-century Judaism, 'holiness' called to mind the Temple in particular. It was the holy place, the place where the holy God had promised to live... The high priest had to go through special ceremonies of 'consecration', to be 'set apart' so that he could enter into the presence of the holy God, and pray there for his people. In exactly the same way, Jesus is declaring that he has been, all along, 'set apart', 'consecrated' for God's exclusive service. Now, like the high priest, he is asking the father to preserve his people from evil, from the tricks and traps of 'the world'. He wants them to be his holy people in the best and fullest sense." Professor NT Wright
- **Not a stale relationship:** "Jesus talks at length to his Father, and we sense from his words that this is a conversation that has been going on for some time. One could expect from this divine Son a serene and silent tranquillity, a composure formed from his intimacy with God, not

needing any social intercourse or expression. But this is precisely what we do not find. Jesus lives in a conversation with the Father. “Words” are the medium of their shared life together (17:8). This means that as we are invited into life with the Father, as the Father and the Son indwell us through Holy Spirit, spirituality is not a static experience. It is not a creedal position or a status any more than a marriage can be described as a “vocation” or a status. Marriage is not defined as sharing the same address. Marriage is about transparency and intimate union and life as one. Marriage is a conversation. It is the same here. The Christian life is a conversation, a dynamic relationship in which, as a result of our new birth, the talking begins. God’s “word” now becomes the medium of our relationship too and with it, our talking develops an intimacy with profound social dimensions.” Professor Gary Burge

- **More than social camaraderie:** “This unity will be patterned after the unity of the Father and Son (11). It is therefore a vastly richer reality than social camaraderie, as we shall note more fully below...those who will believe in me through their message (20). It is first a supernatural unity, defined by and included in the unity of the Father and the Son: cf. as we are one (21–22). It is a unity which not merely reflects but actually participates in the unity of God... Ephesians 4:3: ‘keep the unity of the Spirit ...’. Our part is not to create this. Patently we cannot. Our responsibility lies in maintaining and expressing it. Our churches are to be ‘love centres’ where relationships between members are a persuasive reflection of the mutually supportive, utterly loyal and eternally accepting love of the Father and the Son...Unity at the expense of truth is not supported by this passage...Where the Holy Spirit has created the common life of the body of Christ among us, and agreement on the fundamentals of the revelation given through Jesus is present, it is unthinkable to pursue the mission of Jesus in isolation from, and even in competition with, those who are as truly the beloved objects of Jesus’ prayer as we are.” Pastor Bruce Milne
- **Jesus alone is God’s path to love and justice:** “They suppose, naturally enough, that it will sound arrogant, or as though they are giving themselves a special status by claiming this about Jesus. But this is to misunderstand the whole message of the gospel. When Jesus is exalted, the reason is nothing other than love. This is not the sort of sovereignty that enables people to think themselves better than others. It is the sort of sovereignty that commits them, as it committed Jesus, to loving service. That’s what the whole prayer comes down to in the end (verse 26). It is about the love of the father surrounding Jesus, and this same love, as a bond and badge, surrounding all Jesus’ people, making him present to them and through them to the world. And, whereas in verse 11 Jesus addressed the father as ‘holy’, now he addresses him as ‘righteous’ (verse 25). The father is the judge of all the earth; though the world rages against Jesus’ followers, he will see that right will prevail. But, as always in the New Testament, the justice for which we pray, the righteous judgment through which the father expresses himself in his world, appears before us as love. That is because, supremely, it appears before us in the person of Jesus. It is this Jesus, this man who prayed for you and me, this high priest who set himself apart for the father’s glad service, whom we shall now watch as he goes forward to complete the work of love.” Professor NT Wright
- **Evangelistic love and unity:** “A group of Christians who are so knit together in the love of God that others can say of them, ‘Look how they love each other,’ is a church where the gospel will be ‘the power of God for ... salvation’ (Rom. 1:16). Evangelism is a community act. It is the proclamation of the church’s relationships as well as its convictions. The preacher is only

the spokesperson of the community. The gospel proclaimed from the pulpit is either confirmed, and hence immeasurably enhanced, or it is contradicted, and hence immeasurably weakened, by the quality of the relationships in the pews. The biggest barriers to effective evangelism according to the prayer of Jesus are not so much outdated methods, or inadequate presentations of the gospel, as realities like gossip, insensitivity, negative criticism, jealousy, backbiting, an unforgiving spirit, a ‘root of bitterness’, failure to appreciate others, self-preoccupation, greed, selfishness and every other form of lovelessness.” Pastor Bruce Milne

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Full life:** John said he wrote this letter to help us find “*fullness of life through believing Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” Chapters 1-12 contain 3 years of real-life stories where people met Jesus during His public ministry. Chapters 13-21 slow way down as Jesus began to reveal His (God’s) heart to His disciples in the week leading up to the cross and resurrection.
- **The bigger picture:** *Chapters 13-17* form a unit, which is often called His “*Farewell Address.*” **13:1** begins, “*Jesus knew his hour had come to depart out of this world*”, and **17:1** begins, “*Father, the hour has come*”. The middle 3 chapters (**14-16**) are about another Comforter. The bullseye of this unit is the parable of the true vine, making it the central theme of the entire unit (**13-17**) “*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me*” (John 15:4). Why such a huge section on comfort and abiding in Christ? Well, because the disciples were becoming uneasy as Jesus ramped up the cryptic talk about His departure and death. Anxiety is evident in their questions (**13:36, 14:5, 8, 22**), and Jesus affirms His purpose for this address in **chapter 16:1**, “*I’ve said all these things to keep you from falling away*”; **16:6**, “*Because I’ve said these things, sorrow has filled your heart*”; **16:25**, “*I’ve said these things in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father*”; and **16:33**, “*I’ve said these things, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*” This unit of Scripture gives the church her marching orders (i.e., *to glorify God by loving one another like Jesus loves us*) and is filled with comfort for when the world wears us down and we lose sight of the goal.
- **Farewell Addresses:** “Academic studies have compared Jesus’ Farewell Discourse with those of dying teachers and leaders in antiquity. Jacob’s last words in Genesis 49 are typical of this form, as is Moses’ farewell in Deuteronomy 31–34. Not only does Moses identify his successor, but he gives teachings that must be recorded and a final blessing. Apocryphal Jewish literature from Jesus’ day offers more tantalizing parallels. In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs each of the twelve sons of Jacob give farewell instructions, blessings, and prayers. In the Testament of Moses, we overhear Moses’ final words to Israel and Joshua. We even possess ‘testaments’ of Solomon, Job, Isaac, and Adam³⁰—fictionalized farewells imagined by Jewish authors between 100 B.C. and A.D. 200. Jewish testaments imagine the dying (or departing) person surrounded by his most intimate friends and family. Standard literary elements generally appear. For instance, they always show a concern for the comfort and encouragement of those left behind. Often there is an exhortation to obey the law, and a deposit of writings is left behind.³¹ In some cases, the departing person passes his ‘spirit’ to his followers or successor. Moses and Elijah do this respectively for Joshua and Elisha (Num.

27:18; Deut. 34:9; 2 Kings 2:9–14). In the farewell of Jesus many of these elements appear. He encourages his disciples and comforts them (John 14:1). He also urges them to be obedient (13:34; 15:12), and from John’s perspective the ‘literary deposit’ Jesus leaves behind is the Fourth Gospel itself. Moreover, Jesus promises that his Spirit will indwell and empower his followers following his death (14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:3, 13). In other words, we have in John 13–17 all of the elements of a Jewish farewell.” Professor Gary Burge

- **Change of focus in Chapter 13:** “This section signals a change of focus as Jesus turns to ‘his own’ and shows them his love...In the end there is no explanation of the cross other than the love of God. There can be no other, for we certainly do not deserve it and can never earn it.” Pastor Bruce Milne
- **The heart of God:** “Here, in five chapters (13-17), in only 155 verses, and in less than four thousand words we are given what the Puritan writer Thomas Goodwin called “‘a window into Christ’s heart.’” Professor Sinclair Ferguson
- **Book Context:** The Gospel of the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, provides a clearly stated purpose. *John 20:30-31* says, “*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” Some people demand to have all their questions satisfied before bowing to Jesus, yet John claimed his limited account was enough to bring anyone to faith. As we read it, our Savior and friend emerges from the pages as a real person in the real world. Jesus shows us what we could become, if we too would rely on His infinite Father who will gladly supply whatever we need.
- **Life in his name:** Life is the Greek word, “zōē”, which means “Life, Living, Lifetime, Life-Giving” and is where we get the word, “zoology” in English. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says it’s “used in the NT of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself, Jhn 5:26, and which the Son manifested in the world, 1Jo 1:2. From this life man has become alienated in consequence of the Fall, Eph 4:18, and of this life men become partakers through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jhn 3:15, who becomes its Author to all such as trust in Him, Act 3:15, and who is therefore said to be 'the life' of the believer, Col 3:4, for the life that He gives He maintains, Jhn 6:35, 63. Eternal life is the present actual possession of the believer because of his relationship with Christ, Jhn 5:24; 1Jo 3:14, and that it will one day extend its domain to the sphere of the body is assured by the Resurrection of Christ, 2Cr 5:4; 2Ti 1:10. This life is not merely a principle of power and mobility, however, for it has moral associations which are inseparable from it, as of holiness and righteousness. Death and sin, life and holiness, are frequently contrasted in the Scriptures.”

Other Articles/Songs/Videos:

Direction for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the discussion around 30mins. Go for a single, not a home run.
3. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparation questions for John 17:20-26.

- As you read this section, what does Jesus seem to be praying for and to what end?

Application questions from John 17:20-26.

- What might lead us to sacrifice or compromise truth in our pursuit of unity? How does this keep people from being made new and from experiencing the loving communion of God and others required for true unity and ongoing transformation?
- In what way is church unity “evangelistic”, and how is the mission for which God sent His Son betrayed by refusing to pursue unity with Christ’s church? Share ways you find this concept challenging.
- What broken aspects of this world do you long to see made right? As Christians rightly pray for and pursue justice, what things must we keep in mind? Please share ways you’ve seen truth stood for in ways that promoted unity and love.

Here are some great resources for digging deeper into community group life...

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://toddengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://toddengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>