

## The Lord's Prayer-4: Christ Prays for the Church (John 17:20–26)

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### Introduction

1. As the high priest bore the names of the tribes of Israel on His breast, Jesus now takes the names of all the saints of the church age upon Himself as High Priest (Hebrews 4:14–5:12).
2. Jesus expresses His will to the Father (*thelō*, literally, “I will”); yet, His will is that of the Father (4:34; 5:30; 6:38).
3. In the section before us, Jesus asks nothing new. The main theme is *unity*. As He asked for glory for Himself, He asks for unity for His own. The *unity* that He asks is much more than simple organizational oneness. There is no ecumenical appeal here, but the appeal for *unity* is breathtakingly extravagant. This unity has two goals: (1) that the world would know the Father sent Jesus, and (2) that the Father loved those in His trust as He loved Jesus. Every true believer is included in that love.
4. As Jesus prayed for the disciples before Him, He then prayed for those who would believe in Him through the apostles—all the elect of the gospel age. We begin by reviewing and expanding on the subtle but very real comparison of God's speaking to old-covenant Israel on Mount Sinai and Christ's speaking to new-covenant Israel on Mount Zion.

### I. The Origin of the Unity

1. In this high-priestly prayer, Jesus declared to the Father that He had manifested the divine Name to the people entrusted to Him by the Father (v. 6). His receiving them was for the purpose of giving them eternal life (v. 2). This required Jesus' redeeming them out the bondage of sin. This statement contrasts the scene on Mount Sinai when God Himself addressed (Exodus 20:1) the assembly in an awful scene of fire, smoke, and shaking of the earth. The scene was designed to illustrate God's terrible holiness so as to provoke and warn His people to *fear* Him and listen obediently to His instruction.

God is dangerous (Exodus 19:24). God's perfect *holiness* is the danger due to human unholiness. He is a *consuming fire* (Deuteronomy 4:24 and 9:3, repeated in the NT, Hebrews 12:29; Isaiah 33:14). No one can play with fire, but God can make His own fire-proof. In what way? Note Isaiah 33:15.

2. One needs but examine the language of this prayer to see the similarity in the inauguration of both covenants—the former on Sinai and the latter on Zion. God *spoke* personally to the assembly of Israel on Sinai, and Jesus *spoke* in person to the Israel of God assembly on Zion. The words (*logos*, truth) spoken in both instances was intended to instruct (*rhema/torah*) the hearers as to what was both promised to them and expected of them as to their covenant responsibilities. God manifested His *name* to Israel in order to show His “*steadfast love*” (20:6), which revealed the great need for a gracious enablement for His own to be able to love Him and keep His commandments. Jesus fixed the problem. Sadly, old-covenant Israel refused the voice of God and would not hear His instruction (Jeremiah 17:23). On the other hand, Jesus declared that those to whom He gave instruction “*kept His word*” (John 17:6). But Hebrews also warns those in the new-covenant era: “*See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking*” (Hebrews 12:25, 28, 29).

### II. The Nature of the Unity

1. The *unity* that Jesus prayed for was like the unity He enjoyed with the Father. The Father was in the Son to the extent that it was He who did the work (14:10). At the same time, the Son, in dependence on and obedience to the Father, was His agent for creation and redemption. Nevertheless, the persons of the Godhead remain distinguishable.

2. The believers were also to be *one* in covenantal union with each other as to purpose, love, and action. They were also to be in the Father and the Son, as seen in the vine metaphor (15:1–6). As the branch (believer) abides in the vine, he is identified with, draws life from, and is fruitful only by that union to display a compelling and unworldly love as a vital witness to Jesus. How? It is shown (1) in the self-sacrificing service of His people, (2) by the undaunting perseverance to the mission charged to them, and (3) by their conscious dependence on God for life and fruitfulness.

### III. The Glory of the Unity

1. The *glory* (v. 22) spoken of is not that for which Jesus prays in verses 1 and 5 because that was for Himself alone. What He desired for all believers was that they would be one even as He and the Father were one. This secondary glory is best taken as *a mediated revelatory glory*—the self-revelation of the Father through the Son, which is essential to eternal life (v. 3).
2. This glory is further unpacked in verse 23: “*I in them*”—the union of salvation—and “*you in me*”—the power of the Father’s love. The aim is a “perfect” union, not realized but anticipated—“*that they may become perfectly one.*” This anticipated “oneness” must be evidenced to the world if the world is to know (1) that the Father sent Jesus, (2) that He loved the believers as He loved the Son. Believers are to be caught up into the love of the Father for the Son—secure, content, and fulfilled. This is what Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:17–19.

### IV. The Future of the Unity

1. Jesus expressed His desire for all the elect, that they be where He was in heaven (Revelation 7:15–17). There they would *see* the glory He had with the Father before the foundation of the world (v. 5). On earth, they did see His glory (1:14) in His transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–7), in His signs (John 2:11) and, still more fully, in the cross and resurrection (2 Corinthians 3:18). One day all new-covenant saints will see Him as He is (1 John 3:2) and in the glory He enjoyed before His humiliation (Philippians 2).
2. The prayer also reveals the ultimate hope they have turns on the love of the Father for the Son. Those who delight in being loved by the Father will also share in the glory of the Son in His triumph.
3. Finally, verses 25 and 26 serve as the ground for the future prospect of His followers, emphasizing the continuing manifestation of the Father to His own. Jesus appealed to the “*Righteous Father*” (whom the world does not know), pressing the ancient hope lost from Eden—God’s dwelling with His people. The One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity declares, “*I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite*” (Isaiah 57:15). Jesus enables His own to qualify. Praise the Lord.

### Lessons

1. The principle that Jesus lays out in His prayer is this: Christ desires that the love He and the Father enjoy should be the experience of His creatures. Love motivated that mission (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4).
2. The practical intention of Christ’s high-priestly prayer was that salvation should change believers by experientially *knowing* (v. 3) the Father and the Son (Ephesians 3:14ff). How? “*Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*” (Ephesians 5:2, 25; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Timothy 1:14). May the grace of God overflow for us with faith and love as we are in Christ that we may learn to love as Jesus loved because that is what it means to be a Christian.