

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Whenever we face challenging times in our life, we receive comfort if we know that fellow believers are praying for us, don't we? In fact, we often ask people to pray for us. It also happens that even if we're not asked, we pray for other people... and it may be a prayer they are NOT praying for themselves. For example, it's prom night, and mom and dad are praying fervently that their daughter will have strength to resist any temptation she might face that evening. The daughter's not praying the same thing! She's just looking forward to having some fun. She's not even thinking about the possible dangers to her soul that she might face that evening. But mom and dad know better. Or, here's another example. Your next door neighbor is not even a believer. He's not praying because he thinks God-belief is a crutch and is something people made up. But you're praying for him. You're praying that he might hear the truth about Jesus and that his hard heart may be softened by the Holy Spirit. And you're praying that God might make *you* his channel through which the good news can be broadcast to your neighbor. You pray for opportunities to share your faith.

Suppose you found out that someone was praying for you... but you hadn't asked them to pray for you and didn't tell them what you'd like them to pray for. Wouldn't you be curious? Wouldn't you want to know what that fellow believer was asking God for on your behalf? Now... what if I told you Jesus himself is praying for you? That's right... God's one and only Son, ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father is speaking to the Father bringing requests to him on your behalf. Wouldn't you want to be a fly on the wall in God's throne room and hear what Jesus is praying for you?

In the Gospel lesson today, we have that privilege. We actually get to listen in on a prayer Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father on behalf of all believers... that includes you and me. If I brought a chalk board up here, I bet we could come up with a pretty long list of things Jesus COULD pray for us. But what DID Jesus pray for us? What we'll look at today is the end of a prayer Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father on the evening Jesus was betrayed. Jesus soon be dead. Three days later he would rise. 40 days later he would ascend into heaven. Everything was changing. This was the end of his earthly pilgrimage. The salvation of mankind would be finished within 24 hours.

And at this critical time, Jesus says a prayer out loud so his disciples could listen and later record what he said. This prayer has been called Jesus' High Priestly prayer. One of the important jobs of the High Priest was to pray on behalf of God's people. And that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. At home you might want to read through all of chapter 17... it's a fairly long prayer. He first says a brief prayer acknowledging that the Father's salvation plan to bring eternal life to the lost was soon going to be completed. Jesus and the Father would be glorified. Jesus then prays for his disciples, knowing the hard days ahead for them. And then in the last part of the chapter, the part we're looking at, Jesus prayer for believers of all time... he prays for you and me. What does he pray? Listen:

**John 17:20-26 “My prayer is not for [my disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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. 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. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”**

As I studied this prayer I found three main things Jesus asks the Father for on our behalf. When we know what Jesus prayed for, it opens our eyes to see what is most important for our faith and life. If Jesus asked the Father for these things, shouldn't we be praying for the same? And shouldn't we be doing everything possible so that these requests might be accomplished in our lives?

Okay, the first request: Jesus asks the Father for unity among believers. He says, **“I pray... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”** Of all the things Jesus asked for, he asks that we believers might be one. He asks for unity! Unity must be really important! But what kind of unity does he want us to have, and for what purpose?

There is an effort by some to unite Christians of different denominations. This is commonly called the “Ecumenical Movement.” And there definitely have been some notable mergers and agreements over the last couple decades. Together with this there has been an incredible growth in “non-denominational” churches (sometimes called “non-denoms” for short.) These churches pride themselves in not being associated with any one church body. Instead they strive to stand solely on the Word of God.

This much we can agree with: it's not membership in a particular denomination that saves a person. It's faith in Jesus Christ alone that saves a person. But here's the thing... where does that faith in Christ come from? It comes from hearing the Word of God. It comes from Christ's promises connected with Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These things the Holy Spirit uses to create and strengthen believers everywhere in the one true faith. Word and sacrament are key. Every visible church on earth stands for something. They understand the teachings of Jesus in a particular way. In other words, they proclaim God's Word... God's truth... in a particular way. *And it is agreement and unity and a single-mindedness regarding this teaching of Jesus that unites Christians.*

In this same prayer shortly before this, Jesus had prayed: **“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”** It is only the Father's truth that can set apart a person from this world as a follower of Christ. So we see the truth is vital for unity. And earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus said to believers, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”** John 8:31. Yes, we should strive toward unity and peace, but *never at the expense of God's truth.* Never can we compromise on the teachings of Jesus in order to produce an external unity. If one church body says, “Jesus' teaching is this.” And another says, “No! Jesus' teaching is *that.*” We cannot say, “Well, for the sake of unity, let's just

agree to disagree and let's just work together!" No! That's NOT what Jesus said. Unity is based on agreement and singlemindedness regarding the teaching of Jesus Christ. He himself said so.

Please understand, Jesus was dogmatic. To be dogmatic about something most people would say is bad. You need to be flexible! "Don't be so dogmatic," is a common rebuke today. But Jesus was dogmatic. He taught the Father's Word, and he was uncompromising. The experts in religion of Jesus' day did not see things like Jesus did. Jesus did not compromise with them. He did not strike an agreement to be externally one with them. Instead he called them a brood of vipers and warned his followers to watch out for their teaching. Jesus was dogmatic because God's truth is dogmatic. It is set. It is unchanging. Jesus calls his church to be dogmatic. Jesus calls you and I to be dogmatic. Know what Jesus says. Understand it. Teach it and share it with others. Let's start our own ecumenical movement as we strive to unite all people in the unwavering truth of Jesus Christ!

All people around the world who hold to this truth of Jesus are one. They are at peace with God and with one another. It's a blessing! A great blessing Jesus desperately wants us to have! And when there is unity in the church on basis of Christ's teaching, Jesus' glory is poured out. **"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."** Jesus was glorified, and the Father through Jesus when Jesus did not compromise in his obedience to the Father, or in his teaching of the Father's word, will or ways. Through faith in Christ Jesus we are in Christ Jesus. His obedience and holiness God counts as ours. We are one with him. He is one with the Father. We are one with each other... glory be to God! And his glory is poured out on us and in us!

What happens when such unity prevails? Christ's church makes an impact in this world. **"May they [all believers] also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."** Where there is a unity based on Christ's truth, there are people filled with Christ's love. And when a person, when a church is filled with Christ's love, it expresses that love to others. There is visible, external evidence in the life of believers who are united in Christ and to each other. The love we show to others as individual believers and as a church is a powerful testimony to the world that Christ really is the true Son of God. It tells people, "Jesus wasn't a fake. He was real, and he has changed lives."

Do you see why Jesus prays for unity among believers? A unity based on his truth is a powerful witness about Christ. It brings glory to God and glory to Jesus Christ, his Son.

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Now, what else does Jesus pray for in this prayer? This world is not our eternal home, so it's natural that Jesus would pray that we be brought safely to our eternal home. He says, **"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."** Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker. "Whoever dies with the most toys wins." Sitting in traffic, we recognize how wrong that thinking is. Truth is, whoever dies with the most toys is dead. Just as dead as the one with no toys. And then there is eternity... an eternity spent either in heaven in God's glorious good presence forever...

or an eternity spent “outside,” excluded from God and his presence and all good things... forever. And here’s the thing... what happens now, in your life today, and this week and this year and in the 8 decades or so you’re alive... these things have a direct bearing on where you spend eternity. Get your mind off the toys, and start thinking about eternal life! Jesus is! And that’s why he prays that his will is that we may be where he is... in eternal glory.

Now, here’s the good news. In Christ Jesus, your eternal destiny is secure. In fact, your life is already stored up with Jesus in heaven. By faith, you are in Christ Jesus. If you are in him, and he is with the Father, then you are already with the Father. You’ve already begun eternally living. And yet the glory is now hidden, and you’re currently waiting it out in this foreign country called earth until we join our brother and Father in eternity. Jesus can’t wait to have us with him in glory. May that be our prayer and focus as well.

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And finally, the third thing Jesus prays for is this: **“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”** What is Jesus praying for here? Let’s boil it down to this: He prays that you be “in the know.” Have you heard that phrase before? We use it to refer to those who are in the loop... those who are privy to important information. Not everyone has it, but those who are in the know... they have it. And Jesus says here: He knows the Father and his will and his plan of salvation. In fact he accomplished it. And he taught the Father’s will and plan of salvation to his disciples. And they would teach it to others. Through a long chain of people “in the know” about God’s plan of salvation, you have come to know it too... and that’s why you’re here today! And this knowledge is something we need to be continuously refreshing and expanding.

Don’t take this knowledge for granted. Use every opportunity to know Jesus and the Father better. You know the many opportunities. Worship, Bible class, personal Bible reading and prayer, family devotions. Grow in your knowledge and faith, and the love which the Father has for his Son will also be in you.

What a blessing today to have listened in on a 2000 year old prayer which God the Son prayed to God the Father. And yet it’s a current prayer as well. We got a glimpse of what Jesus knew to be important, and that helps us reorder and refocus our lives as well. Unity, knowledge and eternal glory... these were foremost in Jesus’ mind as he prayed for you and me. Pray these same things, and then work hard that you might be a part of the answer to those prayers! May God strengthen us to be living answers to Jesus’ prayer. Amen.