

What Jesus Wants from His Disciples Today

The important things that Jesus wants from His disciples remain the same for Christians of all ages. Between Jesus final Passover with His disciples and His institution of the Lord's Supper Jesus gave His disciples many words of encouragement (John 14-16) and prayed to the Father for Himself (John 17:1-5), His disciples (John 17:6-19), and for all His followers who would come to faith in Him through the Word of His disciples (John 17:20-26). The three things that He prayed for in His disciples in John 17:6-19 apply to His followers of later times as well.

The first is that the Father should keep them. "Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name that You have given Me." From beginning to end, from God's choice of His own in eternity, to His call, to justification, to preservation, and to final salvation, the one thing that matters is God's undeserved love. It works its results in the objects of His love. For preservation in the faith the same two principles can be observed as in the rest. Those who are kept in the faith owe their preservation entirely to the loving working of God. Those who are not are lost entirely by their own fault, as in the case of Judas, to whom Jesus refers obliquely in this prayer as "the one who will be lost." Though Jesus knew that Judas would be lost, Jesus was in no way responsible for his loss.

Jesus had a special task for His disciples, to carry His message of eternal life through His death and resurrection to the whole world. They would proclaim it, and He would use them to write and speak by inspiration. For the message of what He had done, in giving His life as a ransom, to reach fallen mankind, it was necessary the Father in His grace would keep these eleven disciples in His name. As often in Scripture, God's name embraces not only the words by which He is called, but everything that is known and proclaimed about Him. It includes the kind of thing we mean when we speak about some person's good name. It is the reputation that people are familiar with about him, which includes the kind of person he is, and the good things that he has done. It is significant that five times in this prayer Jesus also refers to the Word, the message about Him and the Father. In this prayer we find that "name" and "word" come close to meaning the same thing. "I have made Your name known to the people whom You have given Me out of the world" (17:6); "keep them in Your name, the name that You have given Me" (17:11); "I have kept them in Your name, which You have given Me" (17:12); "I have made Your name known to them, and I shall make it known" (17:26).

God's name, embracing all that He is and has done, as it is proclaimed in His Word, is the means through which He keeps people in the faith to final salvation. As these passages show, the Father's name is inseparable from the name of His Son. To be preserved in the faith, this is what every person must hear and believe.

The second thing that Jesus wanted for His disciples was "that they [might] be one, as [The Father and the Son] are one." Throughout this prayer Jesus looked towards the perfection that would finally be realised in the age to come. Then the believers would also see the glory that the Son has had with the Father from before the world existed. Then the unity of all believers with Himself, and His own unity with the Father would be seen as well as believed. The modern ecumenical movement has powerfully affected the thinking of many Christians of today. It wrongly perceives this unity as a visible unity of all professing Christians, and as a unity that church-leaders in particular labour to achieve, often through efforts in formulating doctrinally ambiguous statements, and often compromising the truth of God's Word. It assumes that, if only all those who are Christian in name would drop their differences, the world could at last be converted. Rather, the unity for which Jesus prays is something that God gives. It exists already. The believers in Jesus of all times and places have always been one, and this prayer of Jesus has always been fulfilled. The corrective to the false view of the unity of the church that people need to hear repeatedly is that the Church of God is hidden. It is not visible to sight, because only God knows those who are His. Hypocrites and unbelievers are mixed with the church – or churches – as people see them. The unity of the church is part of the same nature as the church. It is hidden, but real, and the unity of all believers of all times and places will finally be visible in the glory to come. It is like the unity between the Father and the Son, which is also not visible to the eyes of human beings in this present world. The true glory and unity of Christ's one church will be apparent when the scaffolding of this present world order is removed.

Jesus did indeed relate the oneness of all His believers to the conviction that the Father had sent Jesus: "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. Let them also be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me." In the Gospel of John the word "world" usually means the unbelievers, who reject Christ and persecute His disciples. When any person in the world comes to faith, he is no longer of the world. Sadly, the world, as world, will not believe that the Father has sent the Son until it is too late for the world's salvation. Finally every tongue will be compelled to confess that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.

Quite strictly, Jesus did not pray that His disciples should become one, but that they should be one. The unity of the Father with the Son is the basis of the unity of those who believe, and reveals the nature of the unity of believers. All those who belong to Jesus Christ through His Word and name have already become one. They are united with Christ and with each other, in spite of the divisions that have arisen among Christians because of their unfaithfulness. Their true unity is not visible and not organisational.

It is important to put together the references to unity in this prayer so that the true nature of this unity is understood. "Keep them in Your name, the name that You have given Me, so that they may be one, as We are one" (17:11); "I am not praying for these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their Word, that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You." (17: 20-21); "I have given them the glory that You have given Me, so that they may be one, as We are one" (17:22)."

The third thing for which Jesus prays for His disciples is that they should keep His Word. There is only one way to seek, to keep, and to extend this spiritual unity of all Jesus' followers: through faithfulness to the words of Jesus. His Word is living and powerful, and it is the means through which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth. People become believers and remain believers through the message about Jesus that His disciples

have passed on to them through inspiration. Keeping the Father's Word is the way in which Jesus' followers would demonstrate that Jesus' work has been successful.

The centrality of the Word in this prayer of Jesus should be obvious. "They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your Word" (17:6); "I have given them the Words that You have given Me; and they have received them and learned the truth that I have come from You, and they have believed that You have sent Me" (17:8); I have given them Your Word, but the world has hated them, because they do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world" (17:14); "Make them holy by the truth; Your Word is truth" (17:17); "I am not praying for these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their Word, that they all may be one" (17:20).

This prayer of Jesus is a summary of what Jesus wants to give us. He wants believers to belong to Him and the Father. He wants them to receive His teaching. He wants them to know His heavenly origin. They not only know about the glory that He had with the Father before the world was made, but He wants them to see His glory and share in it in the perfection to come. He wants them to be confident that they will have eternal life through believing in Him. He wants them to trust that the Father will keep them in His name and His Word. He wants them to know that already they are part of the real hidden unity of all believers of all times and places with the Father and the Him. These things for which Jesus prays, the Father's preservation, their oneness, and their keeping Jesus' Word are the motivation for their great task: keeping His Word, and spreading it.