

John 17:20-26

“One”

The Word of the Lord from John 17: Jesus prayed to His Father, “The glory that you have given me I have 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 that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:22-23).

This is the Word of the Lord.

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

Separation and Restoration Jesus prays that we might be one in Him.

Go back with me to the Garden of Eden, before the fall into sin. The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve were perfect, sinless and holy; furthermore, they were created in the image of God. Because God is righteous, they were righteous too. They reflected His glory. Furthermore, they could be in His presence. They could walk with God in the garden. They could look upon His face. There was no shame, no guilt that would make them run away and hide. They were with God and God was with them. Now, they weren't carbon copies: Adam and Eve were distinct from each other, comparable helpers to each other. Even though the two would become one, they were still individuals. And, without sin, they were one with God—they were not separated from Him.

Sin changed all that. As soon as Adam and Eve fell into sin and heard God walking in the Garden, they ran and hid from Him. When He asked what they had done, they blamed Him and each other. They were no longer one with God. They would no longer be as one with each other, because they would always have selfish, ulterior motives in dealing with one another. Because of their sin, God cast them out of the Garden, away from the tree of life—but not before He promised that the Savior would come and deliver them from death and devil. The Savior would come and reverse the curse of sin. He would bring people back to God by removing their unrighteous sin and making them holy once again.

The Savior is Jesus, praying in the Gospel lesson. Note the sequence of events from here: this is the end of chapter 17. Three verses from now, He'll be confronted by the angry mob that comes to arrest Him. He'll be hauled out of the garden of Gethsemane. He'll be put on trial and sentenced to death for being guiltless. Then He'll be taken from the city to the Place of the Skull, and He'll be crucified.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were driven from the Garden of Eden because of their sin. When the Passion of Our Lord begins, He's removed from a garden, too—because of His holiness. Where Adam was sentenced to death by God because of his guilt, Jesus is sentenced to death by man because of His innocence. Where God grieved at the sin and separation brought about by Adam, man rejoices to be separated from the Son of God when He dies on Calvary (finally got rid of Him!) But despite the glee, is this man's revenge on God? Hardly. It's Jesus undoing what Adam did. He's taking Adam's place to undergo Adam's punishment: not just physical death, but far worse. He's fully forsaken by God on the cross. That's what it means when He cries out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

The Son of God—one with the Father from eternity—suffers the ultimate separation from oneness with the Father. In other words, He suffers hell on the cross before He is restored to His Father again.

All of this lies less than a day away as Jesus prays this prayer, and listen again to what He prays about you: He prays “that they may be one, just as we are one.” Jesus prays that you would be one with God again, like Adam and Eve before the Fall into sin. There’s only one way for that prayer to be answered, and that is for Him to suffer the ultimate separation from God in your place. That’s what the cross is about. For Christ, separation and condemnation. For you, redemption. Restoration. Reconciliation. One with God again.

Jesus’ Gifts to Keep Us One When the Lord speaks of His Church, He uses a lot of “together” words. He speaks of His Church as family, for He is our Father and we are His children. He speaks of us as His flock: the Lord is our Shepherd, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. He says we are called into the fellowship of His Son. He calls us the body of Christ—the branches joined to Him, the Vine. The people of God are not strangers, lone wolves, rogues, severed limbs or dried up twigs for the fire: they are those who have been called and gathered—gathered in, gathered back.

In Christ, they are those who are one in Him.

If Jesus is all about restoring oneness, then the devil is going to be all about fostering division. That is what sin does: it divides. It shatters. It fragments and isolates. Plenty of sins divide and separate. Pride will have you alone on your pedestal, considering others below you and not worth your time. Greed will have you gather possessions to yourself, not friends or family. Lust will have you view others as objects to be used, not as fellow people for whom Christ has died. Many sins entice you to hide in a room with your sin, all alone. They work to destroy friendships, teams, marriages, families and congregations by division and subtraction. Next time you’re in line at the grocery store, survey the magazine covers at the checkout stand and see how many “happy” celebrities and athletes “with everything going for them” are living lonely lives because of sin. That’s not to pick on them: it’s true for all sorts of people, most of whom will never be famous enough to make it on the cover of a tabloid.

All of that separation is awful enough, but it distracts us from what is worse: sin separates you, divides you from God. It keeps you unholy, and an unholy you cannot be one with your holy Savior. If you cannot be one with Him, all that is left is the ultimate, eternal separation of death and hell.

Jesus prays that we might all be one, together, in Him. Your sinful flesh will therefore tempt you to be your own individual person at the expense of God’s Word and grace. You see this in pop theology all the time: the buzzwords change from month to month, but the idea is that you should shun organized religion in search of your own personal spirituality—instead of being a sheep in the flock, you’re supposed to be on your own in your pursuit of God. Confirmation is seen by many not as confirming the true faith and your place in the body of Christ, but only conforming to what “the establishment” says is right—and thus sacrificing individual expression and a personal relationship with God. But if the flock is tended by the Good Shepherd and the “institution” of the Church is faithful to the Word, that’s where you

want to be. When “individual expression” means rejecting what the Word says to be and do what you want, then it is defiance of Jesus’ prayer that we be one.

You’ll be tempted to depart from the “one” that Christ has made us.

For confirmands, there’s the gloomy joke about the pastor who couldn’t get rid of the bats in his church’s belfry, though he tried loud noises and screening and all sorts of things; so he finally confirmed them and they were never seen again. See, in your youth, you’re tempted to be your own person at the expense of family—your biological family and your church family. If church is what your family “does” on Sunday morning, you’ll be tempted to prove you’re your own person by getting away from church. It might feel like independence, but it’s actually starving your faith.

Parents are tempted to break God’s Word into pieces when their children depart the faith. We love our kids—we want them to be successful and well. That’s why, sometimes when kids are failing a class, parents go to far and ask a teacher to fudge the grade so that the child is included in the group that passes, not be exposed as one who fails. When a child leaves the faith for sin, parents are tempted to rewrite God’s Word and believe that He fudges, too, and no longer judges impenitent children—at least not our impenitent children. If the body of Christ confesses otherwise and says truthfully that the children must repent, parents will be sorely tempted to drift away from the Church, too.

In a most perverse way, the devil will use affliction to tempt you away from God. We should know better: it was the afflicted and downtrodden whom Jesus especially sought out, who most joyously heard His Word because they knew this world only breaks you eventually. Sometimes, the hits keep on coming in the form of sickness, injury, financial loss, family troubles, grief and more. Satan will use them to make you curl up in a ball in the corner, to turn your face to the wall—to separate yourself in your sadness. That’s where the isolation happens—divided from Christ and His body, the Church. The devil works hard at this one, because he knows how comforting the Gospel will be if you hear it at such a time. Remember that the Lord is your strength, and it is in His means of grace that He delivers grace and life to sustain you—even in the worst of trials.

This is a time when Christians often fail each other: when people are afflicted, the temptation is to leave them alone—because we wouldn’t know what to say, we want to “give them space,” or because being with sad people makes us uncomfortable. The same is true for those who, because of health, can no longer make it to church. It’s a lonely existence. The inaction of others leaves the one who suffers isolated and alone—and the devil will use that to convince them that they are separated from God, too; that they are no longer part of the “one in Christ.” The Lord uses us as His hands and voice: let us not cease in visiting and caring for those who are in deep distress.

The temptations go on and on. For one reason or another, you’ll be tempted to depart from the body of Christ. Now, this is not a call for you to be a mind-numbed robot. Each of you here is very different—each of you has different talents and strengths which God has given you. Each of you is a different member of the one body, set free from sin, set free to hear God’s gracious Word, set free to serve one another. We will have different roles and responsibilities in this place, this family, just as different parts of the body do, but we are all one in Christ. To

these confirmands, for instance, I say this: we have different roles as pastor and hearers, as teacher and students, and those roles—God willing— continue: but you are also my brothers and sister in Christ, and I rejoice greatly this day that we are one together in Him.

Look around you here, and you will see a miraculous gathering of people. There really aren't that many places where such a variety of ages, backgrounds and peoples gather voluntarily; but it is more than that. It is the Lord Himself who has gathered you together, and it is He who keeps you together— who keeps you one. And He tells you how He does so in our text for this day.

In His prayer, Jesus calls you "those who believe in Me through [the apostles'] Word." He's given you His Word, and His Word makes and keeps you one. Faith comes by hearing His Word, which He gave to us through His prophets and apostles. By His Word, He has called you by the Gospel to be His child, to be one with His body and one with Him. His Word is the means to gather us together, and His Word is His means to keep us together, one in Him. That is why we gladly repent of our sins of ignoring His Word in favor of our sinful, divisive desires. That is why we gladly submit personal opinion of what should be in reservation of the unity brought by His Word; for it is in His Word that He forgives our sins and keeps us one with Him.

Jesus has given you His glory. He prays to His Father, "The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one." The glory of Jesus is foremost the cross, for that is the ultimate act of love for us. He has given His cross to you—He's joined you to it in your baptism. He's joined you to His death and resurrection. Without that, you'd have to die your own death for sin, isolated from God forever. But because He's shared the glory of His cross with you, you are now one in Him. That is why we gladly repent of our sins that would separate us from His life and lead us to death, for Christ has opened to us the way of salvation.

Furthermore, Jesus has made God's name known to you. He prays, "I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them." Jesus has made His name known to you: He has made known to you that He is the Savior of all nations, forgiving you all of your sins. He's put His name on you—marked you as His own! You are not left as individuals trying to find your way to an unknown God through any variety of religions. The Lord has made His name known to you, and with His name He has also made known His will. He tells you that He has gathered you in, forgiven your sins, made you one with Him by His sacrifice. That is why we gladly repent and confess our pursuits of other gods that cannot save, for salvation is found in Christ.

Jesus has given us His Word, His glory and His name. It is by these gifts that He has made us one. It is by these gifts that He keeps us one. This unity may not be the most dramatic or exciting, but stable families are not about drama, but service and love. I give great thanks this day, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, to be united in Him with you. This is all the Lord's doing, and so you can be sure: you are one with His body, the Church, and one with Christ: for His Word, His glory and His name are all summed up in these words to you: you are one with Christ, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen