

Jesus Prays for His Church

In the name of him who has ascended on high and now intercedes for us before the throne of his Father in heaven, dear friends in Christ: During his earthly ministry our Lord Jesus showed himself to be a man of frequent and fervent prayer. Time and time again we read that he would go off to be by himself – away from the many distractions constantly competing for his attention – in order to spend several hours at a time pouring out his heart and his mind to his Father in prayer. That’s really quite remarkable. Speaking for myself, most of the time I find it difficult to stay focused for even fifteen minutes in prayer in any one sitting – and I suspect I’m not alone in that. But Jesus prayed an awful lot. Did you ever wonder what he was praying about?

If so, we get a pretty good indication in our Gospel reading for today. There we have the concluding portion of what is sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus – a prayer that Jesus spoke aloud for the benefit of his disciples shortly before departing the upper room where they’d celebrated the Passover to go to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus would be arrested later the same night. This prayer, which takes up the entire seventeenth chapter of St. John’s Gospel, gives us a window into the very soul of Jesus as he prepares himself to complete the mission that he came to this earth to accomplish. The prayer has three distinct parts. First Jesus prays for himself, that through the upcoming ordeal of his passion and death he would bring glory to his Father and also to himself. Then Jesus prays for the disciples who are with him, that they would be kept from the power of the evil one in this dark hour. He knew that what he was about to face would be a severe trial for them as well. They would be scattered and confused, not understanding what was happening or why – and so he prays that none be lost. He also prays that they would be kept separate from the false philosophies and deceptions of the world by the truth of the words he taught them. And then finally, in the section we heard today, Jesus prays for his whole Church – all those who down through the generations would come to faith in him by hearing the truth of his teaching first given to his disciples.

It’s this last section I’d like to focus on this morning – for two reasons. One, because it’s today’s Gospel reading (that’s a no-brainer); but two, because it remains the prayer of Jesus for his Church even today. I mentioned before that Jesus is interceding for us right now before his Father’s throne; that is to say he’s presently speaking to his Father asking that his requests on our behalf be answered. He will be doing this until the time comes for him to take his whole Church home to be in glory with him. But since this was his prayer for the Church back then, and because Jesus doesn’t change, it’s more than safe to assume that what he asked for then is what he’s asking for now.

So what is Jesus praying for his Church? We see that he makes four specific petitions. The first is that “they may all be one” just as he and the Father are one. Jesus prays for the total unity of the Church – and it’s a wonderful thing to ask for – but if we look around at the state of the Church today, it seems that this is a prayer that has not at all been answered. Today there are more church bodies and denominations than ever before—thousands of them, all claiming to be Christian – and all claiming to have the one correct interpretation of the Scriptures and the truths that Jesus taught. Instead of unity in the Church we see nothing but division; and because of these divisions all kinds of arguing and conflict and infighting. It seems to be a total mess.

On the surface anyway ...but something to remember is that the one holy Christian and apostolic Church is an article of faith. It’s something we believe in without being able to see – just like we believe that Christ gives us his body and blood in Holy Communion. We don’t see it; but it’s there. So it is with the Church. Jesus knows who are his. He knows those who trust in him and his atoning death for their salvation – and they are indeed one with him. And on account of it, they are one with everyone else who is united to Jesus through faith – even though this unity cannot be seen. You know, there was a time in Israel’s history when the prophet Elijah thought he was the only faithful person left. It seemed to him that everyone else had gone over to the various pagan cults of the Canaanites. The religious scene in Israel was total chaos. But the Lord told Elijah, “No, I’ve got seven thousand others who remain faithful to me.” Elijah couldn’t see them. He didn’t know who they were – but they were there nevertheless, and God knew who they were. The same is true today. And the remarkable thing is that even in the midst of what appears to be nearly total chaos in the visible

Christian Church the Lord Jesus is still calling people to sacred union with him by the power of his Gospel and his Holy Spirit. So in this sense, the prayer of Jesus for unity in his Church *is* being answered.

Still, it is a scandal that outwardly the Christian Church is so divided and fragmented. Why is it this way? The short answer is that Satan is very good at what he does – and what he does is deceive people. He injects his lies and falsehoods into the churches in an effort to steer people away from the saving Word of God's truth. You see, he understands that we are saved through faith – and that faith is founded upon belief in certain God-given truths – like, for example, "Eat the fruit of this tree and you will die." You know how that one came out. Satan flatly contradicted the statement and our first parents fell for it. But the thing to see is that even when he can't get away with tricking people through outright contradiction of what God has said, he can still bend things a bit. "What exactly did God mean by, 'Don't eat from this tree'? Are you sure he meant *this* one? Might it not have been *that* one? How can you be so sure? And is it just this one; or is it every tree of the same species? What about related species? And it's supposed to be the one in the *middle* of the garden, isn't it? Suppose we expanded the garden to the west a bit – then it wouldn't be in the middle anymore; some other tree would be. Would we then have to switch forbidden trees? And what does, 'Don't eat' mean, anyway? Could you at least taste it to see what it's like and then spit it out? If you don't actually swallow it, how could you be accused of eating it? Or maybe he meant something mysteriously spiritual when he referred to eating. It's not that you can't eat it; it's that you're not supposed to eat it. *Wo-oo ...get it?* It's a transcendental thing."

This is the reason we have so much division in the visible Church and so many different Christian denominations. To greater or lesser degrees people have fallen for Satan's deceptions. For every truth that God asserts in his holy Word Satan has dozens of ways to twist, turn, or bend it so that in the end it's not exactly what God said or meant. You add up a few of those twists and turns and, by golly, you've got yourself a whole new denomination which, I hasten to add may very well still have the basic truths of the Gospel intact – but with just a bit more clutter and confusion that makes the saving Gospel a little harder to find and adhere to.

That's why it is absolutely critical that we continue to seek God's truth straight from the Scriptures and keep it whole and intact. In our day a lot of people think it's our job to bring unity to the Church on earth by negotiating, compromising, and "agreeing to disagree" on just what exactly God's truth is. This is perhaps Satan's greatest deception. "If the question of what is truth comes between us, let's just throw out the truth, join hands, and sing happy praise songs that really don't say anything because if they did they might offend somebody." It's absurd – and yet the notion is so appealing because people believe that by doing so, they are answering the prayer of Jesus. I've said this before, but it isn't our job to answer prayer. That's what God does. Our job is to be faithful to him and the Word of truth he gave us. God's truth is *his*. It's not ours to negotiate with. It's our job to find it, keep it, confess it, and never to compromise it.

But someone will ask, "With so many different claims to what is the truth out there, how can we be so smugly sure that we have it right?" That *can* be a good question—provided it's not being used a smoke screen to say that truth is relative, or to deny that truth exists, or to say that even if it does exist it cannot be known. Those ideas are more of Satan's attempts designed to obscure the truth or get us to avoid seeking it. But if the question is serious, then the answer is that we shouldn't be smugly sure of anything. Rather we should be constantly challenging our assertions and beliefs in light of God's Word. We should be continuously asking ourselves, "What did God say?" and "Do I believe it?" The point is that we should be seeking the truth in God's Word. And this is important because Jesus is the truth. So, if anyone says it's better to get along and pretend to be one big happy family apart from agreement in the truth, it's a false unity. It's a unity without Christ and therefore an unchristian unity. If anyone says the truth cannot be known, they are saying that Christ cannot be known. And so, I guess he wasted his time completely coming to earth and teaching all the things he did. If anyone says all we need are the bare essentials and let's not bother with the details, they are saying that there are parts of Christ that we don't need. These sorts of comments sound so pious and peaceful; but they are the lies of Satan straight from the pit of hell. Do not fall for them. Instead recognize that the prayer of Jesus for unity in the Church is being answered – and that we become more and more a part of the answer by being united with Christ through increasing our faith in his Word.

And that leads nicely into the next thing that Jesus prays for: namely that having been made one with him through faith we would also be made perfect in love. This is where we get into the strange math of the kingdom of God. In our worldly way of thinking, one minus one equals zero, right? Every time; no exceptions. But that's not how it works in the economics of God's kingdom. What do I mean? Well, we're talking about love here, God's love. And as I make my confirmation students memorize, love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling of affection; rather it is complete, voluntary, self-sacrificial devotion. Love gives. Love serves. Love sacrifices one hundred percent. And God is love. God's very being is love. What that means is that the Father gives himself fully and totally for the Son. He does this eternally. He surrenders the entirety of his own divine essence so that the Son is – and yet in doing so, he doesn't lose himself; instead, he gains the Son. One minus one equals two. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says, "you, Father, are in me and I am in you". Two persons sharing the same divine being. But now Jesus prays that the same kind of relationship be extended to his Church. "I in them and you in me so that they may be perfectly one". Jesus, the Son, the product of the Father's sacrificial love now goes to the cross surrendering himself completely for us, his Church. Two minus one equals millions – everyone who is being saved through the death of Christ for sin.

Get it? I hope so because it gets better; because the idea of our being perfected in love – the thing for which Jesus prays – means that he wants us to love one another in the same self-sacrificial way. Can you imagine what that would be like, if everyone here was truly loving toward each other as Christ is loving toward us? It's hard to think of because we all hold back. We think (in our worldly, sinful way) if I surrender myself for the others, it's one minus one and that's zero. I lose. So, we all look out for ourselves and our own best interests. We only put out for the others what we think we can afford to without disturbing ourselves too much – and we measure our output with respect to others to see if we're doing our fair share. That's not love; it's selfishness. But turn it around. What if everyone was giving one hundred percent of themselves for the others? Then instead of each one looking out for himself, it would be all the others looking out for you. By giving yourself, you gain. One minus one equals dozens, or hundreds, or thousands—and with the same equation being multiplied for as many of us as there are ... then love grows infinitely. And you'd better get used to the idea because that's what we are going to be doing for all eternity.

The prayer of Jesus is that we continue to move toward realizing this kind of perfect love now by confessing our sins, being cleansed of our guilt and selfishness, and opening our hearts and minds to receive more of his Spirit and truth. Then Christ dwelling in us will move us to be more loving to each other and we will begin to experience even now a foretaste of things to come. More than that – and getting to the third petition of Jesus – is that our love for one another would then serve as a witness to the rest of the world that Jesus did indeed come from the Father bringing us his love. Folks outside of the Church should be able to look at us and see that there is something supernatural going on in terms of the love we display for one another. They ought to be able to see that we are not like the rest of the world. And so Jesus prays that our love be such that it does indeed bear witness to him and to the truth of his claims.

And that's for better or for worse. Certainly, some people will be drawn to the light of Christ when they see our love. They'll think, "There's obviously something powerful going on among them, and I want to be part of it." This may open them to hearing the Gospel. But it doesn't always work that way. In fact, most often it does not. Bearing witness to Christ either by action or by word makes you the enemy of the world. Remember the world saw the love of Jesus and it rejected him. It killed him. But seeing him die even a pagan Roman centurion had to confess, "Surely this was a righteous man and the Son of God." I have no idea whether he came to saving faith in Jesus; and it really doesn't matter. The point is that seeing the sacrificial love of Jesus led him to know the truth. Seeing our sacrificial love should lead people to the same truth whether they join with us or whether they choose to reject and persecute us. Most will do the latter – but even then our patience, our endurance, and our love and forgiveness for our enemies will continue to serve as a witness to the Lord Jesus.

And that brings me to the last petition that Jesus makes for his Church, that we be taken to be where he is and given to see him in the fullness of his glory – the glory he had with his Father from before the foundation of the world. This is his ultimate goal: that through whatever crosses and suffering we may be appointed, we may pass with him to his Father's home. At that point these prayers of Jesus for his Church will end; but until then we can be sure that he stands as our own high priest, pleading these requests before his Father who has promised to give us all things for the sake of his Son who loved us and gave himself for

us. We can be sure the God will answer these prayers. So may our prayers of thanks and praise ever rise to him who prays for us. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!