

John 17:20-26

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Date: 17 August 2025

Preacher: Sinclair Ferguson

[0:00] I'm reading from John's Gospel, chapter 17. If you've got a church Bible, it's on page 1085. John chapter 17 and from verse 20 onwards.

! 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, so that they may be brought to complete unity.

Then the world will 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 love me before the creation of the world.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know ye, I know ye and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and I 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.

[1:30] Amen. I'm going to invite Sinclair up now. Well, do keep your Bible open at the end of John 17 there.

And if I may take a few minutes not counted towards sermon time, which undoubtedly they will be, I want to say a couple of things. The first is what a joy it is to be here, not only with you, but with my long-time friend and nemesis, Terry McCutcheon.

We have known each other over 20 years now. And some of you may remember the only other time I was here was because Terry injured himself, I think playing in goals probably in a football match for Celtic juniors.

And I heard it was his ankle. And I've been perplexed for a whole year why having injured your ankle would stop anyone preaching. Because you don't usually preach through your ankle.

And the Lord Jesus preached sitting down. And so I was very tempted this morning to fall out of bed and twist my ankle when I heard that Terry was going to be here.

[2:53] Because I think you will sense, as many of us sense, that the Lord's hand has really come in an unusual way on Terry for this ministry.

And in fact, it will actually help me publicly to remember to do something, Terry, I've been meaning to do. My keys, my house keys, are on the Hope for Glasgow key ring, which I've had so long.

Because I love Terry, I've had to keep it in place. And now that I pull it out, I realize it's actually time to send him some more money in the hope that I might get one of the spare key rings.

So thank God for Terry and his ministry. And I also want to say to you, though not sing to you, you'll be glad, a very happy 10th birthday.

And especially those of you who may have been here 10 years and therefore may have paid a pretty considerable price in having the courage to begin a new church family in Stirling.

[4:01] That is by no means an easy thing. And especially Callum and Moira Ann have borne the burden of that and the heat of the day.

And perhaps as an outsider, I can say to you what he will never say to you, and probably the elders would find it difficult to say to you. One of the best ways you can celebrate these 10 years is to express encouragement to them.

And I say that because I've been able to escape most of my ministry into teaching in the theological seminary. And years ago, one of my colleagues, a very brilliant New Testament scholar said, Sinclair, I'm wondering if I should go into pastoral ministry for the last couple of years of my active ministry.

And I said to him, I always carry two white pills with me. And I'm happy for you to have them. You take them with a full glass of water, lie down in a darkened room, and half an hour later you'll be feeling a lot better.

And he said to me, what's the difference between teaching in a theological seminary and being the pastor of a church? And I said, well, you've seen the magicians on television who put the bodies in the box and then put the swords through them.

[5:23] When you're the pastor of a church, the chief piece of equipment is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. When you're teaching in a seminary, you're forming people to teach, to understand, teach, and preach the Word of God.

The equipment looks the same, and there are people. But when you're in the ministry, you're not the magician with the sword. You're actually the body in the box. And all the swords go through you. And my observation is most people in most congregations don't actually know that. But if you speak to any of the multitude of ministers who are in this congregation, I suspect they'll all tell you the same story.

And to me as an observer from the safe tower of a theological seminary, I think the thing I've noticed most of all, sadly, is how many Christians who regard themselves as mature Christians who, as far as I can see, have never once said to their minister, I cannot tell you how grateful I am for what you mean to me and what your ministry has meant to me.

And I understand that for many people, we are very shy Scots. We're not all Terry McCutcheons. And we often feel he doesn't need my encouragement. But this is a great way to celebrate a 10th anniversary.

[6:48] Please don't all do it next week. It will give the impression you're just doing it because this geezer came along and said, as Christians, we should do it.

But it is one of the best ways, actually, to obey Scripture, which teaches us that if we receive good things from those who minister to us, we should give good things.

And it doesn't mean that. It means the expression of our hearts. So, you know, when you're my age, you can say things like this because you're leaving town in a couple of hours.

And, you know, Calum will have to put up with the damage. Why did you ask that, man? But this is actually a birthday plea from my heart to you because it will make all the difference in the world to the relationship that you have with your ministers.

And so that's just one of the most important things in our lives and in our families. And since our children breathe in, don't they, what we breathe out, they usually listen to what we say, but they always breathe in what we breathe out.

[8:08] And when we breathe out gratitude to one another and to those who serve us, our elders and our pastors, they pick that up. And it creates a bond, an invisible bond between our children and those who minister to them and lead them.

Now, that's not the sermon, although in some churches it's sermon length. So let's turn to John 17, these last few verses of what is often called Jesus' high priestly prayer.

And I've chosen them because there are a couple of emphasis here that just struck me as being especially significant for the celebration of a 10th anniversary in a church.

Because these verses, in a way that is, in a sense, completely unique in the whole Bible, explain to us exactly what Jesus wants for us because of the way he thinks about us.

Now, as you know, this is often called the high priestly prayer, not because it says that, but in fact, because the prayer is modeled on the way in which the high priest in Israel would pray on Yom Kippur, the great day of atonement.

[9:36] He had to go through a whole season of preparation, part of which was, first of all, consecrating himself to the Lord and praying for himself and his ministry.

And then he would gather into his prayers his colleagues, the other priests, and his family. And then eventually, he would gather into his prayer all Israel.

So there were concentric circles for himself and then for himself and his colleagues and family and then for all the people of God.

And in this prayer, the disciples were listening to, obviously, Jesus follows that pattern because he is about to fulfill everything that was symbolized in Yom Kippur, the great day of atonement.

He was going to fulfill the double sacrifice that was made that day. He was going to be killed for the sins of the people and he was going to carry the sins of the people, as happened on the day of atonement, out into the wilderness land between heaven and earth where alone he would be bearing our sins and carrying them away as both the Old Testament and the New Testament often says until that scapegoat, as it came to be known, you can read about this in Leviticus 16,

disappeared over the horizon.

[11:15] And this is the Bible's picture of what it means to experience the forgiveness of sins, to see our sins, as Terry was saying, laid on the Lord Jesus Christ and disappearing over the horizon so that we are set free from the guilt of them.

We're set free from their reign over us even although, as Terry was saying, all of us continue to struggle with the presence of them. But what strikes me is being especially unique about these last verses is that they're actually the only prayer in the whole Bible into which you and I can actually write our own names.

Now, you know, sometimes people do that kind of thing with all kinds of verses. They're going to write your own name into this. But there is actually no other prayer in the whole Bible into which you do not need to write your name if you're a Christian because your name is already there.

So, we sometimes pray the prayers of the Psalms and we make ourselves the subject of those prayers. We say, the Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. We pray in words of distress. I cried to the Lord and the Lord had my cry. But this is actually the only prayer in the Bible in which Christian believers are the object of the prayer.

[12:51] Because you'll notice what Jesus is doing here. He is now extending his prayer beyond his immediate disciples for whom he has prayed in verses 6 through 19.

For himself in verses 1 to 5. For his disciples in verses 6 through 19. And then he begins to pray for us and for the whole church that he is redeemed by his sacrifice as he, on his heart, and this is a, this is a moment of high emotion for Jesus.

As you would understand, the burden of the cross is falling on him. And so we find in these verses some of the most striking and encouraging things as we listen to the Lord Jesus making intercession for us.

And I want to limit what I draw out of these verses to two things. Although each of them will have two things. And the first is, I want you to notice how the Lord Jesus thinks of us.

those of you who are my generation will remember the old days when often evangelistic sermons would be based on the text what think ye of Christ?

[14:20] So in the good old days when people used the authorized version a long time ago before many of you were born, that was a favorite text what think ye of Christ? And it usually sounded fairly menacing.

It usually assumed you don't think very much of him and I'm going to try and get you to think a lot better of him. But what this passage tells us is not the question what do you think about Christ?

But what does Christ think about you? What does Christ think about you now? Today? And some of you you know some of you maybe just left home as new students.

It took me it took me probably 40 years for it to dawn on me that when I left home my parents would even talk about me.

Just never crossed my mind that they would miss me. Now I know there are many reasons why they wouldn't miss me. Good riddance to bad rubbish. But it made me realize I wonder if many Christians think the same way about the Lord Jesus.

[15:38] It's really important to us to be challenged with the question what do you think about Christ? But there is actually a more important question which is what does Christ think about you?

And it's really striking the way in which Jesus describes us in these verses. He says I'm praying not only for these that is the apostles but also for those who will believe in me through their word or through their message.

Now of course unless you find the elixir of eternal life none of us in this room looks as though we ever heard the apostles.

apostles. But he's not speaking about the apostles preaching. He's speaking about the apostles weren't. And the simple fact of the matter is no matter how you or I became Christian believers it would have been impossible for us to become Christian believers were it not for the apostles weren't.

I mean I think we all know that this New Testament is actually the only real access that we have to who Jesus was to what Jesus did to what Jesus is like.

[16:58] And it's very interesting although we don't have time to go into but if you read these chapters in John's gospel Jesus teaching the apostles in the upper room you'll notice that he is actually telling them that the Holy Spirit is going to enable them to write the New Testament.

Now how do I know that? Because Jesus says when the Holy Spirit comes on you men and he is speaking to them not actually I was not there and you were not there he is speaking to them and he says to them when the Spirit comes to you he will remind you of absolutely everything I have said and when the Spirit comes that I am going to send as he came on the day of Pentecost the Spirit will show you things that are still to come and when the Spirit comes he will lead you into all the truth about me now if you put these three things together if you threw them into a hat what would come out it would be the New Testament wouldn't it?

the Gospels are an amazing recollection on the part of the apostles of everything that Jesus said the letters are the way we get into the truth about Jesus the book of Revelation and other parts of the New Testament indication of the things that are still to come so what Jesus is saying is I'm now praying and think of these eleven men left in the room who are listening to this how staggering this must have been I'm praying for everyone who in the future through their word is going to come to faith in me and if you have come to faith in Christ ultimately the access point you have had to the Lord Jesus is what's in the pages of this New Testament it may you may have encountered that because like David Soushi the actor sudden urge to read the

Bible buys a Bible in New York and it opens at the book of Romans and he comes to living faith or you you may have come to this because you saw something in a friend or because your family was a believing family but however you came to Jesus Christ the only real knowledge of the Lord Jesus you have is because this message from the New Testament wended its way until it grabbed your heart and it's interesting isn't it especially I think when you think that Jesus is praying here almost a couple of thousand years ago that maybe the oldest Christian in the room whose parents were Christians might remember that their grandparents were Christians and you could go back three generations you could trace what

Jesus is talking about here you could trace the answer to Jesus prayer in your life you could trace that back to your mum to your grandmother maybe even to your great grandmother but you know if you can do that you are kind of back in the first world war aren't you 1900 years of Jesus prayer being answered in order for it to be answered in you and on an anniversary day if you know I could stop now and because I know some people in the room I could come forward here five minutes tell us how the gospel came to you and we could spend the rest of the day doing that couldn't we how the amazing variety of stories about how what Jesus is praying here gripped our hearts and none of us probably can go back past our great grandparents and when you think about the apparently meandering ways in which the gospel has gone from mouth to mouth from preacher to hearer sometimes apparently disappeared and then been resurrected if you and

[21:32] I are believers at all like this is the most powerful prayer that's ever been prayed because Jesus has had his eye on you and the way he thinks about you is you are someone who would come to believe through the apostles word and it wouldn't be a bad idea if on future occasions as we sit beside each other a few minutes before or after the service just to say especially if you're young this is a great thing to do with the old fogies who are in the church and there are one or two I see to say so how did it get to you but you know I think there is an even more moving way that Jesus describes us as he prays for us he says I'm praying for those who will believe in me through the apostles word but you notice the other way in which he describes them and he uses it for example in verse 24 is those you have given me those you have given me and that's an expression that appears in

John's gospel earlier on in the gospel a couple of times but I think the really fascinating thing about this chapter is in the high emotion of this evening and this particular prayer Jesus keeps going back to it verse after verse after verse father I'm praying for those you've given me and you can sense any of you who think about dying I mean actually envisage yourself dying and people you love being around you if you're not comatosed you kind of hope don't you that somehow or another you would be able to find words to express the depth of your feeling for those you love and that's actually what Jesus is doing here he's praying and the way he chiefly thinks about these apostles and ourselves is if you're a believer you're somebody that the father has said to his son she's mine and

I'm giving her to you to me it's an interesting thing the things I value are not the most expensive things that I own the things I really value depend on who gave them to me it might be somebody famous just gives you something but because it belonged to them I remember as a 15 year old boy going to watch Arnold Palmer play at the Open Championship in Troon and for years I kept two of

Arnold Palmer's tees and you can buy a hundred for a pound because these were Arnold Palmer's tees and for most of us it's like that isn't it what makes something really precious to us often depends on the person who owned it and the person who gave it to us it may be a small thing an insignificant thing but it's a huge thing for us because of who gave it to us and if we think about the beauty of the relationship between the father and the son the uniqueness of that relationship and fellowship in the bond of the

Holy Spirit then what Jesus is saying is father the reason I'm bringing those who will come to believe in you through the apostles word back to you is because you gave them to me and that's the reason they're precious to me I know that's such a help to us if we think we're not precious to Jesus and most of us go through seasons when we feel we are so messed up that we cannot be precious to Jesus and we often fall back into trying to find reasons in ourselves why we might be precious to Jesus because of what we used to be but you know ultimately the reason cornerstones a church family is precious to Jesus is because his father gave us to him and said as somebody might have said to you if they handed you over as a child to somebody take care of him watch over him look after him and if need be die for him and that's what the

Lord Jesus did didn't it and so there can be few descriptions of us as individual Christians or as a church family than this description that we are those that the father so loved that he gave to his son and said to his son just watch over this one I want you to die for this one and then I want you to send your Holy Spirit so that this one will be drawn to you and through you be introduced to me as their heavenly father and this is what the new testament tells us Jesus does he stands says Hebrews 2 in the presence of God and he says to his heavenly father father here I am and the children you have given me and that's the way the Lord Jesus thinks about us and it's it's actually powerfully transformative in our own lives when we begin to see ourselves from his point of view but you know it's also transformative in our life as a church family isn't it if we begin to think of each other in these terms however difficult

[28:14] I may find you right and there's usually somebody in the church family that you find difficult you're someone the father loved so much that he gave to my savior too and we are bound together in him so this is the way Jesus thinks about us but the second thing to notice in this prayer is what Jesus wants for us it's kind of surprising how infrequently the church asks that question isn't it I mean we are we don't notice how absorbed we have been into what sociologists often call the narcissistic era which floods Scotland doesn't it don't you tell me anything about me

I alone will tell you everything about me and so I think it's really important for us to take in here what it is that Jesus wants for us and again in this prayer this comes out very powerfully and it comes out in two dimensions first of all it comes out in what he wants for us in the here and now and then what he wants for us in the there and then so what does the Lord Jesus want for us in the here and now well look at what he prays for us he says he says I want those you have given me we are one I and them and you and 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 now clearly

Jesus is not is not asking for organizational unity is he because the pattern that he uses is the relationship between the father and the son he's praying that that relationship which clearly here is a relationship of immense and intense mutual devotion he's praying that that may be mirrored in the environment of Jesus people in the life of the church family as the father loves the son and the son loves the father so there will be a manifestation of that in the life of believers and he tells us the reason for that which is I think is very very striking he prays that we may be one so that the world will believe now I want you to think about that in a couple of ways one is why is it so important that we why does he pray!

that his disciples will be one and actually if you read the Acts of the Apostles the answer is really obvious it's because the church is going to be attacked and what will be in danger will always be its unity and so if you read through the first three chapters of Acts I think you hear echoes of Jesus saying in Matthew 16 I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not be able to overcome it because in the opening chapters of Acts the gates of Hades open like flood gates and it's almost as though there are three tactics!

that are used the first is intimidation the second very interestingly is individuals with a false ambition and the third is disunity because of complaining and it's interesting that the first tactic doesn't work you know we are living in a society where the Christian faith is actually under a good deal of intimidation isn't it it's almost regarded as sinful to hold Christian values and we saw an instance of

that last week the Times rather skillfully reported a group of people who were terrified of five feet two inches Kate Farbs that said everything didn't it that you may not hold [33:11] Christian values because you terrify me absolutely astonishing we've been celebrating 80 years since VJ day and I were terrified of a five foot two Christian believer and probably the younger you are the more likely you are to experience that but when that fails as it did then and by God's grace will fail today there's a more insidious way in which Satan seeks to destroy a church family and that is by individuals who press themselves forwards for positions that the character of their Christian lives do not merit in the eyes of their fellow believers and that was Ananias and Sapphira and we can gain the reputation of Barnabas by a generous donation that looks as though we're giving everything for the church when between the two of us we're salting a good half of it at least back in our hip pockets and you know it just takes one sometimes to destroy a church family to assume position that fulfills your ambition it doesn't necessarily mean you want to become an elder and it's destructive and Jesus praying it won't happen but it almost happened in the

Jerusalem church and then when that failed it was like you know grumbling about the mercy ministry they're getting more than we're getting and the language of grumbling is language that of course is drawn out of the story of the exodus when that whole generation did not enter the promised land essentially for one reason grumbling and this is why Jesus is praying for the unity of the fellowship in the bond of love so that no speck of dust will get into the mechanism of the church family that will cause the whole workings of the church family to grind to a halt or to disintegrate and so he's praying for that now Father I want

I want their lives as church families to reflect our life so that the world will believe and that's interesting isn't it I think it's especially relevant in the 21st century when we live in a world of dysfunctional families that the beauty of the loving unity of a Christian family I mean a church family is for Jesus a chief evangelistic instrument to reach the world and we've not always grasped that but I see that now when people as people quite often do they kind of stumble into churches and if you are able to speak to them privately and quietly they will say I had no idea it was like this I've never seen anything like this before I don't know any environment where it's actually safe for the children to be talking to older people where people give place to one another where there is this affection where there is a sense of cleanness where families where

Christian parents begin to be asked by their neighbors how do you do this how do you do this and that's that's what he's he's praying for in the here and now because the church is our lord's great evangelistic instrument in the world but he's not content with the here and now and he prays for the there and then father he says in verse 24 it's recorded I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world and this is clearly his ultimate desire for you yes the here and now but ultimately the there and the end those he has received from his father he wants us to be there like we want to be there because at last we'll be safe and the battles will be over but he wants us to be there to be with him he is the only one who is allowed his own selfish desire in glory isn't that the case and it's not selfish because he wants us to be there in glory why does he want that he wants that because if you've been a Christian for any length of time you have seen

Jesus humiliated you have seen Jesus humiliated and he wants you to see him glorified and he wants you there because he wants you to see who he really is I don't know how you feel about us as Christian believers but I have a suspicion that if you took most of us and put us in a darkened room and said talk to yourself for 15 minutes about the Lord Jesus I think a lot of us might struggle because we we may have been Christian but we don't actually know him very well but he wants us to know him perfectly that's what he's saying I want you to see who I really am and also I want you to see how much my father loves me and I want you to be there so that you'll know how much my father loves you and I also want you to be there just for this reason

[39:52] I want you to be there it's like if your wife asks you why do you love me you're a bit of a dunderhead if you say really love your cooking or any other of those things that attracted you to her in the first place and you say I love you for you and this in a sense is the sheer wonder of Jesus prayer and just imagine what that would be like ultimately if those of us who are in this room saw the answer to the Lord Jesus prayer in us being kept and then entering into his presence and in some way that is beyond our imagination beginning to see all the links in the chain of his gracious purposes that eventually held on to us and brought us there then we would see that he wants us to be there just because he loves us and he wants us to be there and when we live in that sense that

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Lord Jesus has prayed for us and in some ways this is surely a transcript of how he thinks about us and the way he makes intercession for us then by God's grace that he has kept cornerstone ten years the next ten years would be filled with extraordinary blessing for us and a wonderful impact on those who are not yet Christ and certainly for this we pray so let's pray together our heavenly father we thank you for being able to listen to the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ thank you that he gave his spirit to the apostle John and that the apostle John has passed it on to us and for the sense we have that this Jesus of John 17 as we read elsewhere in scripture is the same today as he was in that yesterday we pray that you would enlarge our trust in him increase our love and devotion to him and enable us to live in accordance with his intercession for us and give us the help that we need as individuals and as a church family to see what he prayed for realized in our fellowship together and not least in the way that through this fellowship others who do not yet trust in

Christ will discover that they are those the father has given to his son for whom his son has died and will trust also in him and join us in this great bond of grace and love and glory and we ask this in our saviour's name amen