

One in Christ

by J.C. Ryle

Jesus prays for the sanctification of his people, the unity and oneness of his people, and that his people may at last be with him and behold his glory.

Scripture: John 17:17

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "Sanctification"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound significance of Jesus' prayer in John 17, focusing on three key petitions: the sanctification of believers, their unity, and the promise of eternal fellowship with Christ. He highlights that sanctification is essential for holiness and spiritual growth, which reflects the reality of Christianity. Ryle warns against divisions among Christians, stressing that unity is crucial for the credibility of the Gospel. Finally, he reassures believers of the hope of being with Christ in glory, which serves as a source of comfort and motivation for holy living. Ryle encourages Christians to prioritize holiness, unity, and the anticipation of eternal life with Christ.

Transcript

"Sanctify them by your truth . . . for their sakes, I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me . . . Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world . . . I have declared to them your name, and will declare it, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:17-26)

These wonderful verses form a fitting conclusion of the most wonderful prayer that was ever prayed on earth--the last Lord's prayer after the first Lord's Supper. They contain three most important petitions which our Lord offered up in behalf of his disciples. On these three petitions let us fix our attention. Passing by all other things in the passage, let us look steadily at these three points.

We should mark, first, how Jesus prays that his people may be sanctified. "Sanctify them," he says, "through Thy truth: Thy word is truth." We need not doubt that, in this place at any rate, the word "sanctify" means "make holy." It is a prayer that the Father would make his people more holy, more spiritual, more pure, more saintly in thought and word and deed, in life and character. Grace had done something for the disciples already--called, converted, renewed, and changed them. The great Head of the Church prays

that the work of grace may be carried higher and further, and that his people may be more thoroughly sanctified and made holy in body, soul, and spirit--in fact more like himself.

Surely we need not say much to show the matchless wisdom of this prayer. More holiness is the very thing to be desired for all servants of Christ. Holy living is the great proof of the reality of Christianity. Men may refuse to see the truth of our arguments, but they cannot evade the evidence of a godly life. Such a life adorns religion and makes it beautiful, and sometimes wins those who are not "won by the Word," (I Pet. 3:1). Holy living trains Christians for heaven. The nearer we live to God while we live, the more ready shall we be to dwell forever in his presence when we die. Our entrance into heaven will be entirely by grace, and not of works; but heaven itself would be no heaven to us if we entered it with an unsanctified character. Our hearts must be in tune for heaven if we are to enjoy it. There must be a moral "meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light," as well as a title. Christ's blood alone can give us a title to enter the inheritance. Sanctification must give us a capacity to enjoy it.

Thomas Manton has aptly said, "If an earthly King lie but one night in a house, what care there is taken that nothing be offensive to him, and that all be neat, and sweet, and clean! How much more careful ought we to be to keep our hearts clean, to perform service acceptable to him, to be in the exercise of faith, love, and other graces, that we may entertain, as we ought, our heavenly King who comes to take up his continual abode in our hearts."

Who, in the face of such facts as these, need wonder that increased sanctification should be the first thing that Jesus asks for his people? Who that is really taught of God can fail to know that holiness is happiness, and that those who walk with God most closely, are always those who walk with him most comfortably? Let no man deceive us with vain words in this matter. He who despises holiness and neglects good works, under the vain pretense of giving honor to justification by faith, shows plainly that he has not the mind of Christ.

We should mark, secondly, in these verses, how Jesus prays for the unity and oneness of his people. "That they all may be one--that they may be one in us--that they may be one even as we are one--and "that so the world may believe and know that Thou hast sent me"--these are leading petitions in our Lord's prayer to his Father.

We can ask no stronger proof of the value of unity among Christians, and the sinfulness of divisions, than the great prominence which our Master assigns to the subject in this passage. How painfully true it is that in every age divisions have been the scandal of religion and the weakness of the Church of Christ! How often Christians have wasted their strength in contending against their brethren instead of contending against sin and the devil! How repeatedly they have given occasion to the world to say, "When you have settled your own internal differences, we will believe!" All this, we need not doubt, the Lord Jesus foresaw with prophetic eye. It was the foresight of it which made him pray so earnestly that believers might be "one."

The unity which our Lord prays about here is that true, substantial, spiritual, internal, heart unity which undoubtedly exists among all true members of Christ of every church and denomination. It is the unity which results from one Holy Ghost having made the members of Christ what they are. It is this unity which makes them feel more of one mind with one another than with mere professors of their own party. It is this unity which shakes the world, and obliges it to confess the truth of Christianity. For the continued maintenance of this unity, and an increase of it, our Lord seems to me in this prayer specially to pray. And

we need not wonder. The divisions of mere worldly professors are of little moment. The divisions of real true believers are the greatest possible injury to the cause of the Gospel. They waste precious time and strength, and supply the world with reasons for unbelief. If all believers at this moment were of one mind, and would work together, they might soon turn the world upside down. No wonder the Lord prayed for unity.

Let the recollection of this part of Christ's prayer abide in our minds, and exercise a constant influence on our behavior as Christians. Let no man think lightly, as some men seem to do, of schism, or count it a small thing to multiply sects, parties, and denominations. These very things, we may depend, only help the devil and damage the cause of Christ. "If it be possible, as much as lies in us, let us live peaceably with all men." Let us bear much, concede much, and put up with much, before we plunge into secessions and separations. They are movements in which there is often much false fire. Let rabid zealots who delight in sect-making and party-forming rail at us and denounce us if they please. We need not mind them. So long as we have Christ and a good conscience, let us patiently hold on our way, follow the things that make for peace, and strive to promote unity. It was not for nothing that our Lord prayed so fervently that his people might be "one."

We should mark, finally, in these verses, how Jesus prays that his people may at last be with him and behold his glory. "I will," he says, "that those whom Thou hast given me be with me where I am: that they may behold my glory."

This is a singularly beautiful and touching conclusion to our Lord's remarkable prayer. We may well believe that it was meant to cheer and comfort those who heard it, and to strengthen them for the parting scene which was fast drawing near. But for all who read it even now, this part of his prayer is full of sweet and unspeakable comfort.

We do not see Christ now. We read of him, hear of him, believe in him, and rest our souls in his finished work. But even the best of us, at our best, walk by faith and not by sight, and our poor halting faith often makes us walk very feebly in the way to heaven. There shall be an end of all this state of things one day. We shall at length see Christ as he is, and know as we have been known. We shall behold him face to face, and not through a glass darkly. We shall actually be in his presence and company, and go out no more. If faith has been pleasant, much more will sight be; and if hope has been sweet, much more will certainty be. No wonder that when St. Paul has written, "We shall ever be with the Lord," he adds, "Comfort one another with these words."

We know little of heaven now. Our thoughts are all confounded when we try to form an idea of a future state in which pardoned sinners shall be perfectly happy. "It does not yet appear what we shall be." But we may rest ourselves on the blessed thought, that after death we shall be "with Christ." Whether before the resurrection in paradise, or after the resurrection in final glory, the prospect is still the same. True Christians shall be "with Christ." We need no more information. Where that blessed Person is who was born for us, died for us, and rose again, there can be no lack of anything. David might well say, "In Thy presence is fullness of joy, and at Thy right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Let us leave this wonderful prayer with a solemn recollection of the three great petitions which it contains. Let holiness and unity by the way, and Christ's company in the end, be subjects never long out of our thoughts or distant from our minds. Happy is that Christian who cares for nothing so much as to be holy and loving like his Master, while he lives, and a companion of his Master when he dies.

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