

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens: Leave us not without consolation, but send us the Spirit of truth, whom You promised from the Father, that we may all be one, even as You and the Father are one; for You live and reign with the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

THE GOSPEL LESSON John 17:20-26

(Jesus prays that His followers may be one as He and the Father are one.)

20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one as we are one:**

23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 "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 loved me before the creation of the world.

25 "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.

26 I have made you known to them, and 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." (NIV)

INTRO - In 1993 Bob and Gretchen Mau and I traveled to Baltimore to attend Stephen Ministry training for 2 weeks. It was a learning and growing experience, that included attending classes, sometimes for 14 hours a day, with study after the classes. But, one of the highlights was getting to know other Christians, Christians from other denominations who, in many cases, trusted Jesus for salvation, believed in the Bible as God's Word, and wanted to share Jesus' love with others. The desire to share Jesus' love was why there were over 500 Christians at our training event. Spending time with all these Christians of other denominations, people who are separated by our differences but still joined for a time to do the Lord's work, was a real blessing that I continue to remember.

I. In today's lesson Jesus prays for the Church.

A. Jesus is praying this prayer on the night of Maundy Thursday, the night before His crucifixion.

1. He is praying for the good of the church, first for his disciples, and then for us, for those who **WILL BELIEVE IN HIM THROUGH** the disciples' teachings.

2. But, in this section, as Jesus is praying for us, the focus of His prayer is unity.

A. In verse 21 Jesus prays, **21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**

B. In verse 23 he makes this even more obvious, **May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**

3. Jesus' prayer, His desire for the church as He prays for it's good, is that there would be oneness, that there would be unity.

B. And there is a reason for this prayer, in addition to the well being of the church.

1. According to Jesus The unity of the church will show the love of God to the world, to unbelievers, by the witness of their love for one another.

2. In both verses 21 and 23 Jesus prays about the witness to the world.

A. In verse 21 the result of the unity of the church is to be **that the world may believe that you have sent me.**

B. In verse 23, the result of the unity of the church is to be **to let the world know that you sent me AND have loved them even as you have loved me.**

3. This oneness is not described in great detail, but Jesus is saying that unbelievers can be brought to faith when His people are one.

C. There is another obvious benefit of the unity for which Jesus prays.

1. Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the gospel and to make disciples.

2. When God's people work together, they are more effective in accomplishing the work he sent them to do.

II. Every Christmas we hear about the song of the angels. They sang, 'Glory to God in the highest, Peace on earth.' Yet, is there peace on the earth? Because of the fighting and wars, many believe this is an empty promise. They aren't correct in their thinking, but they think it, and seemingly with reason.

A. So how about unity? How much division is there?

1. I looked up a couple of denominational statistics on the internet.

A. Do you know that there are 38 Lutheran denominations listed **IN THE UNITED STATES**, with about 70 million Lutherans in the world?

B. Do you know the internet listed 69 Baptist denominations in the United States, with over 40 million Baptists in the world?

C. Different scholars claim there are between 20,000 and 23,000 different denominations in the world today.

2. And you know that there is not just division world wide, but often people in congregations cannot agree about God's Word, and cannot work together.
3. Rather than the righteousness of unity, we have the sin of disunity.

B. And imagine the witness that is given.

1. If Christians can't get along, or love one another, how can we call others to love?
2. If Jesus loves us, and His love changes lives, why are we divided? Is Jesus' love real?
3. What if the witness of disunity is the reason someone does not believe in Jesus, and ends up in hell, rather than heaven?

C. And yet, we have to acknowledge competing calls from God. In addition to the call to unity, God also calls us to stand for the truth of His word.

1. Paul says in Galatians 1, **If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!** That is because we are saved by faith in Jesus, and faith in something else cannot save us.
2. Surely, there are times that we know what God's word says, and in standing for that truth we may end up disagreeing with another believer in Jesus.
3. So, Not only do we fail at being one and giving a witness of love in Jesus, we are in a situation that makes doing all that Jesus calls us to do seemingly impossible.
4. The results of sin in our lives is devastating. Sin is devastating beyond what we even usually imagine.

III. Back now, to the discussion about the reality of peace. I was recently at the bed of a man dying from cancer. This man had much pain, but had peace with God that came through Jesus's dying to forgive us and through Jesus' rising to win victory over sin and death, and that peace came in spite of the turmoil in his life.

A. In a similar way, yes it seems there is a lack of unity in the way that Christians live, but do you know that we have unity with God?

1. Look again at verses 21 to 23, but especially at verse 21. Jesus prays first for us to be one with Him and the Father.
2. He prays **21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. MAY THEY ALSO BE IN US SO (see) that the world may believe that you have sent me.**
3. We have a unity with God, that transcends our division in this world.

B. Let me tell you where this unity comes from.

1. We were separated from God, disunited with him, through our sin!
2. But God came looking for us, by sending Jesus.
3. God broke down the barriers separating us, by Jesus death, when he did away with our sin.
4. God has given us victory over the sin that separates us from Him and others, and a home with Him in heaven, through Jesus' rising again.
5. We have a oneness with the Father, that will be complete when we get to heaven.

C. This unity with God affects the way we live.

1. If we are all saved children of God, we have a oneness, a brother hood, in the midst of our disagreements.
2. So, Through Jesus' resurrection we have not only broken down barriers between ourselves and God, but also between ourselves and our Christian brothers and sisters.
3. This breaking down the barriers made Paul talk in Ephesians 2 about Jesus breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians.
4. There are still divisions between Christians on earth, and they will never be totally gone in this world.
5. But, Knowing that we will be one in heaven, with God and with one another, can at least affect the way we treat one another in this world. It can help congregations, it can help all Christians.

CONCLUSION - The Stephen Ministry training we attended is not a one time thing, it happens about 4 or 5 times a year, where Christians of different denominations gather as Children of God to work together to share Jesus' love. I can tell you that as long as we live in a sinful world there will be disunity. I can also tell you, that

because Jesus rose from the dead, and we have eternal life in heaven, that unity with God and each other will be complete in heaven, and is something we can work toward and express in this world. Amen.