
**“What Unity Looks Like: Deep Intimacy With God”
(John 17:20-21)
Pastor Peter Yi
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Introduction:

Last week we looked at the foundation for unity and the reason Christians are able to have unity was because of Jesus. We are able to be united as a church community because of our common experiences as Christians. We’ve been united w/ Christ, experienced his love, fellowshiped with the Holy Spirit, and felt the tenderness and compassion of God.

Today we will look at an aspect of unity that we often times overlook. I think normally, when we think of unity, we think of it on a horizontal plane. We think of relationships with the people in our church, or the unity we can share with believers around the globe or across denominations. And this is definitely an important and real aspect of unity, but the aspect of unity I want to mention to you today is that once we become Christians we have unity with God. It’s important for us to look at this because unity with God is more important than unity with one another. If we do not have unity with God as our Father, we are unable to have unity with our spiritual brothers and sisters. Unity with God is foundational. So this aspect of unity happens first and then unity with others comes second.

The passage we want to look at is found in the book of John chapter 17. This is often called the high priestly prayer of Jesus. It’s his prayer of mediation. It’s his longest prayer recorded in all the bible. It’s one of his final recorded prayers before his death and in this prayer he begins by praying for himself, especially in regards to his imminent sacrificial death. Then he prays for his twelve disciples for God to protect them as they remain in this world. Finally he prays for all believers for all time, for future believers. (Which by the way is a way we can pray. We can pray for people not yet born. Future children, nations, etc.) The prayer that he prays at this moment is for unity. I think it makes sense. For a dozen people, for a hundred people, for a thousand people, unity might be quite easy. But what about when the church globally has grown to billions?

Historically the church worldwide has had a terrible track record when it comes to unity. We’ve had faction after faction. There are hundreds of denominations. On the negative side we can see that as disunity. On the positive side we can see that as diversity.

How important is unity to Jesus? It’s important enough that the subject of unity fills up his longest and final prayer on earth. Of all the different things Jesus could choose to pray for, he prays for unity. That itself should tell us that this is an important subject.

NIV John 17:20-21

²⁰“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that 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.”

So let’s unpack these verses a little bit.

First whom is Jesus praying for? He’s praying for all future generations of Christians, which of course includes us.

And for what does he pray? That all of them may be one. He prays for unity.

What does this unity look like? It looks like the unity Jesus has with God. “just as you are in me and I am in you”

What else does he pray for? May they also be **in** us. Meaning what? That we may be united with the Triune God.

And the purpose for unity? That the world may believe in Jesus.

This purpose of unity we will talk about more fully in a couple of weeks. In this passage it’s almost as if Jesus is saying that the mission of the church is contingent / dependent upon the unity of the church. Doesn’t that seem to be what Jesus is saying? I think it’s a no-brainer. Think about it for a second. Can a church that is busy fighting with each other; can a church, whose members are orchestrating the next church split, be focused and be effective on the mission? The mission is so challenging, so demanding, so important, so enduring, that it requires nothing less than complete unity to accomplish. Enough said. We’ll talk more about this part 4 of this series.

You know there are many different ways we can describe our relationship with Jesus. The Apostle Paul uses many different metaphors. He uses the concept of **adoption**, which is a very powerful and meaningful aspect of our relationship with God.

(Eph 1:4-6 NIV)

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love

*5 he predestined us to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--*

6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Adoption implies what about our past? That we were orphans. That concept is something that our church will soon have very intimate experience with as we build the orphanage in Cambodia to love and heal orphans. And so this ministry to orphans is very important. The letter of James even says that ministry to orphans is true religion. But spiritually speaking every one of us were parentless or fatherless. We were without identity. We were without origin. We were without family. There was no one to feed, clothe or protect us. There is no one to care for us. Think about this part for a second. If you could calculate this in terms of percentages, what percent of our identity comes from our parents? You can’t place a number value on this, but it’s a lot. From our parents we receive our name, our values. Even biologically, genetically, we receive our looks, height, our build, our personality, and so much more. For the orphan, there is at best a fragmented or incomplete identity. But once we become adopted we become a part of the family of God. We become sons and daughters of God. And we receive our true identity as God’s children.

Another thing. Related to adoption we become **heirs**. Paul in the book of Galatians says that we used to be slaves, but now we are heirs. Think of what you generally know about the master-slave relationship. What rights does the slave have? What privileges? What ownership? Nothing. A slave doesn’t even get a wage. He’s worse off than an employee. At least for an employee, there is the agreement that you will render services for a wage. But the slave, he works for food and shelter. He has no freedom. He is part of the property.

From slave, we become heirs or co-heirs with Christ. Slave to what? Slaves to sin, slaves to the flesh, slave to our sinful nature, even slaves to the devil. From that bondage, that slavery, we, through Jesus have become heirs, we have become inheritors. We now have the rights of a family member, the rights of a child. Those of us who are parents all know that we want to work hard and serve and bless our children and leave behind for them, not only money and property, but even more important things like character, integrity, faith, work ethic, things money can't buy, things that could have a greater impact than money could ever have. That's our most precious inheritance. So as God's heirs, we're no longer property, we're family. What belongs to dad, now belongs to me. This isn't his house, this is our house. This isn't his car, this is our car. So all the blessings and privileges that belong to God and Jesus as the one and only son of God, now belongs to us as well. That's what it means to be united with God.

One more image. The idea of **friend**. Listen to this scripture.

(Joh 15:15 NIV)

15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

In speaking to his disciples, Jesus says, you are no longer servants, you are now friends. The implications of this are huge. What Jesus is saying in these words is that **you no longer work for me, you work with me**.

All of these ideas about my identity in Christ hit me like a ton of bricks just recently. For the past year and a half I've been meeting with a spiritual advisor or mentor. So we don't really talk business or ministry strategy and that kind of stuff, but instead we talk about my spirituality. It's like having a spiritual shrink. So I would go over to his home once a month and we'd go into his back yard garden, this beautiful oasis with beautiful flowers, a little goldfish pond and some nice chairs under the shade.

And during one of our conversations, he laid upon me the mother of all questions. And this question rocked me to the foundation of my identity. It really began to shake things up. Here's what he asked. "Peter, how would you describe your relationship with God? Would you say it is more like Lord-servant, or Father-son. Before he even finished the question, I knew the answer. Lord-servant. No question about it. I am the dutiful, faithful, diligent, obedient, subservient, servant before my Lord. Servant Peter, at your service. Very Asian of me to answer that way, isn't it?

For me stories like the parable of the talents, I resonated with that kind of stuff. God give me five and I'll make ten. But stories like the prodigal son, didn't do as much for me. Yeah, I was prodigal, I was rebellious before I became a Christian, but I had changed. I was now a faithful servant of God. I accomplish things for God. That was my identity.

Then I started to think about that question and my answer to that question a bit more and here's where I went. I've been a Christian for 21-22 years now. I'm a pastor. I've dedicated my life to Jesus and his church. I've "accomplished" a lot for God. And then I thought back to the winter of 87-88 when God got a hold of me and I surrendered my life to him. And I thought, at the moment I became a Christian, what had I done for God? What had I accomplished for God? Absolutely nothing. There was nothing on the resume. I hadn't yet begun to serve him. I hadn't led anyone

to Christ, nor led a bible study or preached a sermon or taught Sunday school or served as an usher or on some committee. I hadn't jump started any ministries. I hadn't gone on any mission trips. The moment I became a Christian I had done nothing for God...yet I was his son. He loved me. He accepted me. He forgave me. He welcomed me. He cared for me. He fed me and grew me. He spoke tenderly to me...even though I had yet to do anything for him.

Somehow, over the course of 20 plus years as a Christian, I had shifted my relationship from a father-son, a father-heir, a friendship, to a master-servant, boss-worker relationship. I was already a son. There was nothing I could do to undo that part of my new identity. And yet I was making my relationship with God into an ugly mutation of what he wanted it to be. So where am I now? I am still in the process of re-learning what it means to be God's son again.

For every single one of us, if Jesus is your Lord and Savior, if you've confessed your sins to him, believed his death and resurrection and received him into your heart, then you are a son, a daughter, an heir, and a friend of God. Of course he is our Lord and master as well, but not at the expense of our sonship. God is Father, God is Savior, God is Lord. He is all of these things to us.

How the Apostle Paul summarizes all of the different nuances of our rich identity as Christians is with two very powerful words. IN CHRIST. This is his most favorite and common way of describing the Christian's reality, his relationship, his identity, his origin, his future, his purpose, his unity. IN CHRIST.

I'm going to read a passage from Ephesians chapter 1. It's a section that beautifully describes the identity of all Christians. And in this section he repeats over and over and over again the phrase IN CHRIST, or in Him, or through Him. Now as we read it together, I'd like for us to count how many times that this phrase occurs. And if you have your bible open, and you have a pen in hand, underline those occurrences. Ready?

NIV Ephesians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

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

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love

5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--

6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,

10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,

12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.

(Eph 1:1-14 NIV)

The phrase "in Christ" is different from lets say, "of Christ". That implies you are a part of the whole. Or "from Christ" which speaks of origin. Or "to Christ" which speaks of destination. "In Christ" is different. It is so simple, but so rich in meaning. It rings of identity. Of oneness and unity. In Christ there is identity. In Christ there is security. In Christ there is relationship with God. In Christ there is purpose. All that we are is because we are "IN CHRIST".

Say that to yourself right now. Close your eyes. "I am in Christ." Isn't that rich and powerful?

Now if this is how we are united with God, then what should we do next? Let's look at John 15. Read and listen to these words meditatively, contemplatively. I'm going to lead you in a short meditative exercise. The Holy Spirit is going to impress a word or phrase upon your hearts. Listen for that phrase. And once you hear it, pause there and hear the Lord speaking that phrase to you. Rest there. Pause there.

NIV John 15:1

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Listen for that word.

Now give thanks for that word.