

“That They All May Be One”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *John 17:1–26, 1 John 5:19, John 13:18–30, John 5:20–23, Mark 9:38–41, Rev. 18:4, 1 John 2:3–6.*

Memory Text: “‘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’” (*John 17:20, 21, NKJV*).

The Gospel of John provides us with a window into Jesus’ immediate concerns as His betrayal and death loomed on the horizon. In five crucial chapters (*John 13–17*) we receive Jesus’ last words of instruction, culminating with what has sometimes been called His “high-priestly prayer” (*John 17*).

“It is a fitting designation, for our Lord in this prayer consecrates himself for the sacrifice in which he is simultaneously both priest and victim. At the same time it is a prayer of consecration on behalf of those for whom the sacrifice is offered—the disciples who were present in the upper room and those who would subsequently come to faith through their testimony.” —F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 328.

At the core of this prayer is Jesus’ concern for unity among His disciples and those who would later believe in Him. This was a key theme in His prayer: “‘I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them’” (*John 17:9, 10, NKJV*).

No meaningful discussion of church unity, of our oneness in Christ, can be complete without careful attention given to this prayer. What did Jesus pray for, whom did He pray for, and what does His prayer mean for us today?

Jesus Prays for Himself

The high-priestly prayer is divided into three parts. First, Jesus prays for Himself (*John 17:1–5*), then for His disciples (*John 17:6–19*), and finally for those who would later believe in Him (*John 17:20–26*).

Read John 17:1–5. What is the essence of His prayer, and what does it mean for us?

Jesus intercedes first for Himself. In preceding events in the Gospel of John, Jesus had indicated that His hour had not yet come (*John 2:4, 7:30, 8:20*). But now He knows the hour of His sacrifice is here. The moment for the dramatic conclusion of His earthly life has arrived, and He is in need of strength to complete His mission. It is a time for prayer.

Jesus will glorify His Father by doing His will, even if it means He must endure the Cross. His acceptance of the Cross is not some kind of fatalism; rather, it is in fact how He exercises the authority the Father has given Him. He did not die a martyr's death, but willingly glorified His Father by fulfilling the reason for His incarnation: His sacrificial death on the cross for the sins of the world.

What is eternal life according to John 17:3? What does it mean to know God?

First and foremost, Jesus tells us eternal life consists in our personal knowledge of God. This is not salvation by works or by knowledge, but rather it is the experience of knowing the Lord because of what Jesus has done for us at the Cross. This knowledge is mediated through a personal relationship with the Father. Our human tendency is to limit knowledge to facts and details, but here Jesus aims at something deeper and more fulfilling: a personal relationship with God. Jesus' first advent also was for the purpose of guiding humanity in its search for a more meaningful and saving knowledge of God and the unity with each other that such knowledge will lead to.

What is the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God personally? What experiences have you had that have helped you come to know God?

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

Read John 17:9–19. What is Jesus praying specifically about in regard to His disciples?

Jesus prays next for His disciples, who are in grave danger of losing their faith in Him in the days ahead, when He, Jesus, will no longer be with them in the flesh. Thus, He commits them to the care of His Father.

The prayer of Jesus is for their protection in the world. As such, Jesus does not pray for the world, because He knows it intrinsically is opposed to the will of the Father (*1 John 5:19*). But because the world is the place where the disciples will do their service, Jesus prays that they may be preserved from the evil in the world. Jesus is concerned for the world; indeed, He is the Savior of it. But the spread of the gospel is tied to the witness of those who will go and preach the good news. That is why Jesus needs to intercede for them that the evil one will not defeat them (*Matt. 6:13*).

One disciple, however, has been defeated. Earlier that evening Jesus had mentioned that one of them had decided to betray Him (*John 13:18–30*). Even though Jesus refers to the fact that Scripture had predicted Judas’s betrayal (*Ps. 41:9*), Judas was not the victim of fate. During the Last Supper, Jesus appealed to him in a gesture of love and friendship (*John 13:26–30*). “At the Passover supper Jesus proved His divinity by revealing the traitor’s purpose. He tenderly included Judas in the ministry to the disciples. But the last appeal of love was unheeded.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 720.

Knowing that envy and jealousies could divide the disciples, as it had done on occasion before, Jesus prays for their unity. “‘Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are’” (*John 17:11, NKJV*). Such unity is beyond human accomplishment. It can be the result and gift of divine grace only. Their unity is grounded in the unity of the Father and Son, and this unity is an indispensable prerequisite for effective service in the future.

Their sanctification, or consecration, in the truth also is indispensable for service. The work of God’s grace on the disciples’ hearts will transform them. But if they are to witness to God’s truth, they themselves must be transformed by that truth.

What does it mean to be “not of the world”? What is it about us, our lives, and how we live that make us “not of this world”?

“For Those Who Will Believe in Me”

After Jesus prayed for His disciples, He broadened His prayer to include “those who will believe in Me through their word” (*John 17:20, NKJV*).

Read John 17:20–26. What was Jesus’ greatest wish for those who would later believe in the gospel message? Why is it so important that this prayer be fulfilled?

As the Father and Son are one, Jesus prayed that future believers also would be one. In a few places in the Gospel of John, Jesus referred to the unity of the Father and Son. They never act independently of each other, but are always united in everything They do (*John 5:20–23*). They share a common love for fallen humanity to the extent that the Father was willing to give His Son for the world, and the Son was willing to give His life for it too (*John 3:16, 10:15*).

The unity Jesus refers to in this prayer is a unity of love and purpose as it is between Father and Son. “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Manifesting this unity in love will give public confirmation, both of their relationship with Jesus and with the Father. “The display of their genuine unity ought to provide a compelling witness to the truth of the gospel.”—Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 498. This is how the world will know that Jesus is the Savior. In other words, this unity Jesus prayed for cannot be invisible. How can the world be convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel if it cannot see love and unity among God’s people?

“God is leading out a people to stand in perfect unity upon the platform of eternal truth. . . . God designs that His people should all come into the unity of the faith. The prayer of Christ just prior to His crucifixion was that His disciples might be one, even as He was one with the Father, that the world might believe that the Father had sent Him. This most touching and wonderful prayer reaches down the ages, even to our day; for His words were: ‘Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word.’

“How earnestly should the professed followers of Christ seek to answer this prayer in their lives.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 17.

What are we doing in our lives and churches to help reach the kind of unity presented here? Why is a certain amount of death to self crucial for each of us if we want our church to be united as it should be?

Unity Among Christians

Read Mark 9:38–41 and John 10:16. What does Jesus' response to the apostle John teach us about exclusivism and quick judgments about who is a true follower of Jesus?

Seventh-day Adventists have tended to understand Jesus' prayer in John 17 as directly applying to the unity of their church denomination. We must be united as a church to fulfill our mission to share the three angels' messages to the world. On this point, there is little contention.

But what about unity with other Christians? How are we to relate to them in light of what Jesus prayed?

No question, we believe that God has faithful people in other churches besides our own. Besides, the Bible makes it clear that God has His faithful ones, even in Babylon: “ ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues’ ” (*Rev. 18:4, NKJV*).

At the same time we know that according to the book of Revelation, there is great apostasy among those who profess the name of Christ, and that in the last days many false Christians will unite with each other and with the state in order to bring about the persecution graphically depicted in Revelation 13:1–17. Hence, Adventists always have been very careful about getting involved in calls for unity with other churches, such as seen in the ecumenical movement.

How, then, should we relate to other denominations? Ellen G. White wrote the following in regard to the Seventh-day Adventist Church working together with other Christians, at least on this specific issue: “As the human agent submits his will to the will of God, the Holy Spirit will make the impression upon the hearts of those to whom he ministers. I have been shown that we are not to shun the W.C.T.U. [Woman's Christian Temperance Union] workers. By uniting with them in behalf of total abstinence we do not change our position regarding the observance of the seventh day, and we can show our appreciation of their position regarding the subject of temperance. By opening the door and inviting them to unite with us on the temperance question we secure their help along temperance lines; and they, by uniting with us, will hear new truths which the Holy Spirit is waiting to impress upon hearts.”—*Welfare Ministry*, p. 163.

Though she was dealing with a specific issue at a specific time, she does give principles that we can follow regarding how we relate to other Christians, especially on the question of uniting around a cause.

First, we can work with them on common social interests. Second, if we do unite with them, we must do so in a way that will not compromise our beliefs or practices. Third, we can and should use this “unity” to share with others the precious truths with which we have been blessed.

One Faith Shared in Love

In John 17:3, Jesus said that eternal life is to know God. Read 1 John 2:3–6. What does it mean to know God? How do we demonstrate our knowledge of God in our daily lives?

Generally, while people in society today wish to call themselves law-abiding citizens, these same people often will downplay the biblical obligation to keep the commandments of God. Some even argue that God's grace does away with God's commandments. But that is not the biblical teaching: "Keeping the commandments is not a condition for knowing God but a sign that we know God/Jesus and love Him. Therefore, knowledge of God is not just theoretical knowledge but leads to action." —Ekkehardt Mueller, *The Letters of John* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2009), p. 39. Jesus Himself emphasized: " 'If you love Me, keep My commandments.' " " 'He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me' " (*John 14:15, 21, NKJV*). "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (*1 John 5:2, 3, NKJV*).

Read John 13:34, 35. What new commandment did Jesus give His disciples, and how does this relate to the idea of unity among Jesus' followers?

The command to love one's neighbor was not new in itself; it can be found in the instructions God gave Moses (*Lev. 19:18*). What is new is Jesus' command for His disciples to love one another *as He has loved them*. Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love is the new ethic for the Christian community.

What a wonderful standard has been set before us! Jesus' life had been a practical demonstration of love in action. The whole work of grace is one continual service of love, of self-denying, self-sacrificing effort. We can imagine that Christ's life was an unceasing manifestation of love and self-sacrifice for the good of others. The principle that actuated Christ should actuate His people in all their dealing with one another. What a powerful witness such love would be to the world. And what a powerful force for unity among us such love would provide, as well.

How can we learn to reveal the kind of self-sacrificing love for others that Jesus revealed?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “God’s Law Immutable,” pp. 443–446, in *The Great Controversy*. Read the articles “Denominations, Relations to Other,” pp. 763, 764, and “Roman Catholic Church,” p. 1110, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“Although the Seventh-day Adventist church is a worldwide church with many local churches, Adventists do not claim to be Christ’s universal church. The universal church is broader than any denomination. It is visible and invisible insofar as it consists of those who believe in Jesus and follow him. This particular theological issue is heightened if we take into consideration apostasy among Christians, addressed poignantly in the Book of Revelation. The pure church of Revelation 12 is contrasted with the ‘harlot’ of Revelation 17, Babylon the great city, which in turn is contrasted with the bride of the Lamb, the holy city or the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22. In the first century, the universal church may have been quite visible[;] it is much more difficult and complex to see it, for instance, during the Medieval Ages.

“Therefore, Adventists do not limit the concept of God’s true church to their own denomination, nor do they automatically extend it to other Christian churches. God’s true church consists of those individuals who truly believe in [H]im. God knows them. Adventists, on the other hand, claim that they are God’s special visible end-time remnant of Revelation 12:17 and chapters 12–14. This remnant has a local as well as a universal character (*Rev. 2:24 and 12:17*).”—Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church* (Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2013), p. 37.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Has your local church worked with other Christians on certain issues? How can we work with them, when appropriate, without compromising truth?
- ❷ What are the implications of the statement below found in *The Great Controversy*? How can we make this real among us? “If God’s professed people would receive the light as it shines upon them from His word, they would reach that unity for which Christ prayed, that which the apostle describes, ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ ‘There is,’ he says, ‘one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism.’ Ephesians 4:3–5.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 379.

Summary: Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in John 17 is a reminder that Jesus still is concerned about church unity today. His prayer should be our prayer, and we should seek ways to solidify our faith in God’s Word. Love for one another also should characterize our relationships to everyone, including other Christians, whatever our theological differences may be.

God Fills a Hole

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Frank Cantrill, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor in Australia, was shocked when doctors diagnosed him with skin cancer. But an even bigger surprise came two weeks later when a gaping hole in his head healed in what stunned doctors called a miracle.

Frank was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma, a kind of skin cancer, on his head in 2014. “It was a shock to be told that if the new drugs didn’t work, I would not have too many chances,” said Frank, 72.

A pastor anointed him, and people began to pray for him. Frank underwent a series of operations, radiation treatments, and immunotherapies with his wife, Marlene, at his side.

Complications arose after an operation where doctors removed a large melanoma from the back of Frank’s head, leaving part of his skull exposed. Nurses dressed the wound, waiting for the skin to grow back over the skull, and later his wife took over.

The wound healed well at first, but then the skin just stopped growing.

One day, the color of the exposed skull changed from white to yellow. A plastic surgeon gave Frank the disturbing diagnosis that his skull had died. The surgeon called in a leading plastic surgeon for consultations, and the two decided to perform a major surgery with the assistance of a neurosurgeon. The complex operation would take 8 to 10 hours and require the doctors to replace Frank’s skull with an artificial one.

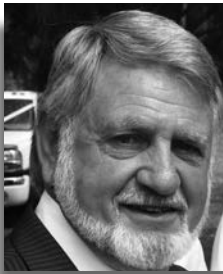
“The news was a shock to us,” Marlene said in an e-mail to friends.

A few days later, as Marlene was changing the dressing on Frank’s head, a chunk of discolored skull came off with the dressing and rested in her hand. “I nearly collapsed with shock!” Marlene said.

Underneath the chunk of skull that had come off, she could see that Frank’s flesh had been growing across the skull and had covered the gaping hole.

Over the next two days, Frank visited three medical specialists to find out what was happening. He learned that the human skull has three layers, and his flesh had been growing underneath the first layer, eventually forcing the top layer of the skull to pop off.

The medical specialists declared it a miracle. “They said, ‘Who is looking after you?’ ” Marlene said.



FRANK, pictured left, and Marlene Cantrill pointed to God as the Great Physician. The operation was canceled, and Frank was sent back home.

“God knows what is happening, and He has perfect timing,” Marlene said. “All we can say is ‘Praise the Lord!’ ”

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 17:20, 21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe Jesus' concern that His followers be unified.

Feel: Discern the importance of unity for both the church and its mission.

Do: Seek to represent accurately God's character of love and unity to the world around him or her.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A Mandate for Unity

A What does the nature and character of God have to do with Christian unity?

B The prayer for oneness comes among several other petitions for the followers of Jesus. How do the petitions relate to one another and to what the early Christians would face after the death of Jesus?

C Why was Jesus so concerned about the unity of His followers?

II. Feel: Unity Is Necessary for Mission.

A In what specific ways does disunity among the followers of Jesus impact the mission of the church?

B What does disunity in the church imply about the nature and character of God?

III. Do: Showing Love and Respect

A What image of God do your current relationships portray to the world?

B What obstacles are hindering an accurate portrayal of God's character?

C What steps do you need to take to more accurately reflect God's character?

► **Summary:** The prayer of Jesus in John 17 demonstrates Jesus' great desire that His followers accurately represent God's nature and character to the world around them. The oneness of purpose between Father and Son means that Christian unity is indispensable to this goal.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 17:20, 21*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Followers of Jesus have been called to represent the love and character of God to the world around them through their unity with one another.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that when we call ourselves Christians, people around us begin to judge Christianity and God’s character based on what they observe about our interactions, whether or not we are aware of our impact.

Opening Discussion: When I moved to the United States for postgraduate study, I found myself unwittingly an ambassador for my country of citizenship. When people listened to me talk, they assumed that my accent was representative of the accents of all New Zealanders. They assumed that my clothing style reflected the current fashion in New Zealand. In fact, all my words, actions, and even food choices were scrutinized and assumed to accurately reflect my background. In many cases, the assumptions made by those around me were correct; but in other areas, their assumptions misled them.

Every Christian is called to be an ambassador for God. How we think and act impacts the way the world understands His character. When we act selfishly, causing disharmony, the world perceives a divided and powerless God. But when we display love and unity with one another, we display the true character of God.

Discussion Questions: When have you been an unwitting ambassador? What sort of impression did your actions leave with regard to the person, country, or sport you represented? Are you more likely to make a better impression when you have chosen to be an ambassador? Give reasons for your answer.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This section provides a focused review of the relational aspects of the prayer of Jesus in John 17.

Bible Commentary

The lengthy prayer in John 17 follows what some scholars have identified as

a typical farewell address. The content of the prayer itself suggests that the prayer was intended as an encouragement for the disciples, who would soon face challenges without the physical presence of Jesus.

I. The Key Relationship *(Review John 17:2, 3, 20–23 with your class.)*

At the very heart of the prayer in John 17 is the relationship between the Father and the Son. It is a relationship of perfect love and unity that has existed from “before the creation of the world” (*John 17:24, CJB*). The Father is identified as “the only true God” (*John 17:3, NKJV*), the Holy Father (*John 17:11*), and the Righteous Father (*John 17:25*). These titles describe both His character and His righteous actions. Jesus is identified in the prayer as Christ (*John 17:2*), the Son (*John 17:1*), and the Sent One (*John 17:3*), who does what the Father asks.

The relationship between the Father and Son provides the basis and example for what Jesus requests from His followers. The relationship between the Father and Son also features in the words that Jesus utters about eternal life. Eternal life is dependent upon knowing both the Father and the Son. But notice that it is not simply knowledge of Their existence. The clarification that one must know that the Father is “the only true God” and that the Son was sent by the Father suggests that a personal and experiential knowledge is required for eternal life. The symbolism of the names used for the Father reinforces this thought by implying that those who receive eternal life have experienced the righteous and redemptive actions of God.

This passage characterizes both the Father and Son not only by Their divinity and oneness, but also by Their generous giving. The Father gives to the Son, and the Son, in turn, passes on much of the things that the Father has given Him.

Consider This: How does the use of the titles Father and Son relate to the main messages of John 17? In what sense are the Father and Son one? What does the giving character of God mean for His church?

II. Glory and the Mission of Jesus *(Review John 17:1–5 with your class.)*

The mission of Jesus was to reveal the name and words of God to the world (*John 17:6–8*) and to bring honor and glory to Him. A name in Hebrew culture was both a distinguishing mark and a definition of character. So, when Jesus stated that He had revealed the Father’s name, we should understand that He had revealed the nature and character of God. Jesus revealed these two things by displaying the loving character of God through His actions.

Jesus begins His prayer by asking God to glorify Him. The request was

not merely a selfish request. It was grounded in the unity of the Father and Son, and it contributed to Jesus' mission to reveal the character of the Father. The nature of the oneness of the Father and Son meant that if Jesus were glorified, the Father would be automatically glorified. Jesus was thus praying that He would complete His mission so that the Father's love would be seen, and He would receive the honor and glory that are due Him.

Consider This: Review the use of the words "glory" and "glorification" elsewhere in John; then define what John means by the word "glorification." Does it refer to what happened at Christ's ascension or to something else? In what sense do Christ's followers receive glory?

III. Jesus Prays for All of His Followers. *(Review John 17:6–26 with your class.)*

As Jesus' prayer continues, the mission of the believers also is revealed as one that makes known the character of God and brings glory to Him. The prayer of Jesus for His disciples recognizes the difficult journey that lay ahead of them as they attempted to fulfill this mission.

Jesus begins by praying for His followers' protection by invoking the name and character of God. In effect, He asks the Father to guard and protect believers, because He is a loving, merciful God, who is faithful to His promises. God's protection of His followers is necessary, because the disciples remain in a world that is hostile to the values and principles they espouse. They are, therefore, targets of Satan, who seeks to prevent their witness to the world.

Jesus demonstrated that representing God in the world can be done best by demonstrating His character through our daily lives. Cognizant of the fact that His disciples had been arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus prayed specifically for the oneness of the believers. Envy, pride, and greed had the potential to divide them, and, consequently, destroy the picture of God they were to demonstrate to the world. Oneness, on the other hand, would demonstrate not only the nature and character of God, but also His transforming power. It is significant that Christ did not pray only for unity between believers. He also prayed for their unity with Himself and His Father. Jesus recognized that unity between one another is dependent upon unity with God. It is as we are united with Him that we develop a oneness in purpose with Him that, in turn, transforms our relationships.

Transformation also is in view when Jesus requests that the disciples be sanctified by the truth. As they interact with the truth as it is in Jesus, the followers of Christ will experience the transformation of their lives. This transformation is essential if the followers of Christ are to be witnesses of the truth.

Consider This: Why do you think Jesus prays that His followers be with Him

and see His glory? What does Jesus ask God to protect, and why? What transformations occur when we are connected to Jesus? How can Christians remain connected to Jesus?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The questions below can help class members to evaluate their own roles and motivations in representing God's character.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ Why is it important that we know God personally and not simply know about Him?
- ❷ What aspects of God's name and character motivate your witness to the world?
- ❸ Which of the petitions of Jesus on behalf of His disciples is most meaningful in the twenty-first century church?
- ❹ How would you evaluate your current witness to the character and nature of God? How can we improve our witness?
- ❺ What type of unity is Jesus wishing for His followers? Hint: Consider the type of unity He has with His Father. What does this unity look like in practice?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The activities provided below allow personal or group reflection on the connection between our actions and our witness.

Activities:

- ❶ Compare the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 with the prayer of Jesus in John 17 and then answer the following questions. What similarities and differences do you note? Is unity alluded to in Matthew 6? If so, where? What aspects of God's character are appealed to in each prayer?
- ❷ Write a journal entry that explores your honest response to the relationships and mission to which you have been called.
- ❸ Collect recent news articles about Seventh-day Adventists. Sort them into two groups: (1) articles that reflect a positive image of God's character and (2) articles that reflect badly on God's character. Choose one or two for reflection. What actions might have led to a different outcome? Was disunity a factor in any of the outcomes? Why, or why not?