

EXEGETICAL GUIDE

JOHN

17:20-26

JESUS' PRAYER FOR UNITY



BE UNITED
IN CHRIST

BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

John 17:20–26: Jesus' Prayer for Unity
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Be United in Christ

Exegetical Guide

John 17:20–26

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

Jesus' final prayer for His disciples was that they be united—united with one another and one day united with God. While on earth, Christ united His followers by revealing God's glory to them. Since His ascension, Christ draws people to Himself through the witness of His disciples' unity. One day those who are in Christ will dwell together in the very presence of God, eternally enjoying the loving unity for which the Lord so passionately prayed.

The church's unity is an essential element of the church's witness. The loving union Christians enjoy with God should produce a loving union between believers that attracts people to the Savior. United in Christ, Christians must enjoy and reflect on earth the loving unity that will one day be perfected in Heaven. United by Christ, believers must Be United in Christ.

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HOW TO USE A BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

An exegetical guide models how to study a passage of Scripture. The Introduction provides the context, while **Connection to Be United in Christ** highlights the text's importance for Christian unity. The Passage presents the Biblical text being studied.

We begin by **Studying the Passage** because God's messengers must convey God's words accurately. The Passage Comparison presents the text in its original Greek or Hebrew alongside seven English translations. Comparing translations allows for a better understanding of the passage and provides insight into the intent of the original Biblical manuscripts. The Structural Layout divides the passage into its component parts, because to understand what God said we must understand how He said it. It is an essential step in Bible study, but do not be discouraged if this section seems unfamiliar or daunting. The Narrative Flow explains the Biblical author's flow of thought through the passage. The Passage Overview then presents a simple outline that will form the foundation of subsequent outlines and the sermon manuscript itself. The Passage Focus distills the text into a statement that will be the main idea of the sermon. We then identify several Resources to further your study.

Having studied the passage, we are ready to begin **Preparing the Sermon**. Good preaching feeds God's people on God's Word, so our messages must be both healthful and appetizing. This is why this section begins by laying out several Sermon Ingredients that will be used to prepare a nutritious and

appealing message. We must present God's Word accurately and clearly so that God's people will understand it with their minds, embrace it in their hearts, and apply it to their lives. The Passage Outline presents the structure and flow, while the Passage Details provide the grammatical, historical, and theological information needed to understand and teach the passage. The message is then fortified with Applications and seasoned with Illustrations. These ingredients are combined to prepare a spiritual meal to feed God's children. The Sermon Outline rephrases the Passage Outline to make it more understandable to an audience. The Sermon Manuscript for Your Use then offers an example of how the passage might be preached. Then we identify several Sermon Examples that model good preaching on the text.

We continue by **Exploring the Classics**. In this section we provide examples of classic commentaries, sermons, and other resources so that the insight and eloquence of the past can bear fruit in the church today.

We conclude the exegetical guide with **The Gem in its Setting**. In this section, we explore the surrounding context of the book of John, finding Jesus in the upper room with His disciples, and seeing how those events set the stage for His prayer in John 17.

Thus, an exegetical guide presents both a comprehensive analysis of one particular Bible passage and a model for studying and preaching Scripture. We pray that God will use this guide to promote love for Him, fidelity to His Word, and unity in His church.



Note: some pages are omitted from this book preview.

Connection to Be United in Christ

John 17:20–26 reveals the passion of Jesus Christ for His disciples' unity. Since His words so clearly express the passion and prayer of Jesus for His disciples to be one as God is one, the Be United in Christ Outreach Ministry has adopted them as motivation and direction for our vision and efforts.

The loving unity enjoyed by the Father, Son, and Spirit is the most delightful and enduring of all realities. God made man in His image to enter into this harmonious fellowship. For a short while we enjoyed it, but then we sinned and separated ourselves from God. Our fellowship with God fractured, as did our fellowship with one another. Yet God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son to reconcile us to our Maker and restore our relationship with our heavenly Father (John 17:21, 24, 26). This gracious offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is free for anyone who will receive it, turning from their sin in repentance and turning to God in faith.

When a sinner responds in genuine faith to the gospel, the Spirit unites the new believer with Christ so that he can enjoy the intimate, loving relationship that the Son has with His Father. This union with God results in and is reflected by the unity that Christ's disciples have with one another.

It is this unity that shows the fallen world that the Son truly was sent by the Father. This is the connection between John 17:20–26 and the Be United in Christ Outreach Ministry. This passage is foundational to the way we think about Christian unity, which is essential to fulfilling the Father's purpose in sending His Son. The credibility of the gospel is at stake. To please our Savior, we must Be United in Christ.

PASSAGE: JOHN 17:20–26

²⁰ “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; ²⁶ and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”¹

¹ While there are many fine Bible translations, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) is used in the Studying the Passage and Preparing the Sermon sections for its consistent word-for-word translation.

STUDYING THE PASSAGE

John 17:20–26

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

PASSAGE COMPARISON

John 17:20–26

GREEK	NASB	ESV	KJV
<p>²⁰ Οὐ περὶ τούτων δὲ ἐρωτῶ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν εἰς ἐμέ,</p>	<p>²⁰ “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word;</p>	<p>²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,</p>	<p>²⁰ Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;</p>
<p>²¹ ἵνα πάντες ἕν ᾧσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ γὰρ ἐν σοί, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ᾧσιν, ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεῦῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας.</p>	<p>²¹ that they may all be one; even as You, Father, <i>are</i> in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.</p>	<p>²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.</p>	<p>²¹ That they all may be one; as thou, Father, <i>art</i> in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.</p>
<p>²² καὶ γὰρ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς, ἵνα ᾧσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν·</p>	<p>²² The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one;</p>	<p>²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,</p>	<p>²² And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one:</p>
<p>²³ ἐγὼ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ ἐν ἐμοί, ἵνα ᾧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν, ἵνα γινώσκῃ ὁ κόσμος ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας καὶ ἠγάπησας αὐτούς καθὼς ἐμὲ ἠγάπησας.</p>	<p>²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.</p>	<p>²³ I in them and you in 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.</p>	<p>²³ I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.</p>



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STRUCTURAL LAYOUT

The Structural Layout shows how the passage fits together. The left column contains the Biblical text divided into its structural elements. Main clauses are aligned left, related elements are highlighted in color, and words added for clarification are placed in brackets. The right column explains how the various elements function in context.

20 “I do not ask on behalf of these alone,	In this independent clause, Jesus extends His prayer beyond His current disciples.
but [I ask] for those also who believe in Me through their word;	Here Jesus identifies the broader audience for whom He prays: His future disciples.
21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You,	This content clause states Jesus’ first request: that His disciples be united as He and the Father are united.
that they also may be in Us,	This content clause states Jesus’ second request: that His disciples be united with Him and the Father.
so that the world may believe that You sent Me.	This purpose clause states the goal of Jesus’ requests: that His disciples’ unity may help the world believe that the Father sent Him.



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PREPARING THE SERMON

John 17:20–26

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

SERMON INGREDIENTS

PASSAGE OUTLINE

I. JESUS DESIRES HIS DISCIPLES TO BE UNITED LIKE HIM (17:20–23)

A. Jesus prays for His disciples' unity (17:20–21)

1. The focus of Jesus' prayer: His present and future disciples (17:20–21a)
2. The content of Jesus' prayer: unity like God and with God (17:21b–c)
3. The purpose of Jesus' prayer: an effective witness (17:21d)

B. Jesus acts for His disciples' unity (17:22–23)

1. The nature of Jesus' action: revealing God's glory (17:22–23a)
2. The immediate purpose of Jesus' action: perfect unity (17:23b)
3. The ultimate purpose of Jesus' action: an effective witness (17:23c)

II. JESUS DESIRES HIS DISCIPLES TO BE UNITED WITH HIM (17:24–26)

- A. Jesus prays for His disciples to be united with Him (17:24)
 - 1. The content of Jesus' prayer: presence (17:24a)
 - 2. The purpose of Jesus' prayer: glory (17:24b)
 - 3. The basis of Jesus' prayer: love (17:24c)

- B. Jesus acts for His disciples to be united with Him (17:25–26)
 - 1. Jesus unites His disciples by revealing God's name (17:25–26a)
 - 2. Jesus unites His disciples so that they will fully enjoy divine love and unity (17:26b)

PASSAGE DETAILS

John 17:20

I do not ask on behalf of these alone

Verse 20 extends Jesus' prayer beyond the disciples for whom He has been praying (John 17:6–19) to those future Christians who will come to faith through the disciples' ministry.

“These” refers to “the men whom You gave Me out of the world” (John 17:6).

“Alone” indicates that Jesus' prayer in verses 20–26 includes His existing disciples. One implication of this is that all genuine followers of Christ are united with Christ's original followers. Christian unity is a unity with the apostles through faith in the Savior they proclaimed.

but for those also who believe in Me through their word

Jesus implied that the disciples would be faithful and successful in their gospel proclamation.

The Christians for whom Jesus prayed are identified as “those who believe,” a phrase that emphasizes the ongoing act of believing (those who are continually believing). Note the repetition of “believe” and “know(n)” in verses 20–26.

“There are hints elsewhere of Jesus' recognition that further generations of believers would arise and express allegiance to Him. Nowhere in the New Testament, however, is that larger company (including the readers of this exposition!) so clearly in Jesus' direct vision as here. Jesus [stands] between the conclusion of His earthly task



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EXPLORING THE CLASSICS

John 17:20–26

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

INTRODUCTION

Christians have a proud heritage. The great saints of old have left a lasting legacy to the church through the centuries. Their holiness and zeal are motivating, their sacrifice and commitment are inspiring, and their Scriptural insights are a rich resource from which to draw. Three such saints are Matthew Henry, Alexander Maclaren, and Charles Spurgeon.¹⁷

Matthew Henry (1662–1714) was a minister in England who authored many well-known works such as *Directions for Daily Communion with God*, *A Method for Prayer*, and *A Discourse Concerning Meekness and Quietness of Spirit*.¹⁸ He is best known for his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Charles Spurgeon gave Henry’s commentary a ringing endorsement:

First among the mighty for general usefulness, we are bound to mention the man whose name is a household word: Matthew Henry. He is most pious and pithy, sound and sensible, suggestive and sober, terse and trustworthy. You will find him to be glittering with metaphors, rich in analogies, overflowing with illustrations, superabundant in reflections.... Every minister ought to read Matthew Henry entirely and carefully through once at least.¹⁹

Matthew Henry’s detailed observations on John 17:20–26 offer profound, practical guidance to understanding and applying this passage.²⁰

¹⁷ The works presented in this section have been altered in places to make them more understandable to modern readers. Scripture quotations in this section are taken from the New King James Version.

¹⁸ A free summary of *Meekness and Quietness of Spirit* and other Bible-based resources on unity are available at beunitedinchrist.com.

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), 13–15.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (New York, NY: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1827), 772–775.

The second selection comes from the “Prince of Expositors,” Alexander Maclaren (1826–1910). Maclaren preached for more than 50 years and was known for his careful examination and clear explanation of the Scriptures. Maclaren’s sermons on John 17 highlight the beauty and hope in this text.²¹

Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) was the most prominent preacher of the 19th century. At age nineteen he was appointed pastor of the New Park Street Chapel, which later became the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the largest Baptist church in London. During his thirty-eight year ministry, he preached thousands of sermons that fill sixty-three volumes. His impassioned sermon “Unity in Christ” is an inspiring conclusion to this Be United in Christ exegetical guide.²²

²¹ Alexander Maclaren, *The Gospel According to St. John, Chapters 15–21* (New York, NY: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1908), 203–209.

²² Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1885), 12:1–12.

MATTHEW HENRY

Matthew Henry divides John 17:20–26 into two parts: verses 20–23 and verses 24–26. The first two levels of his outline are summarized here to make his commentary clearer.

John 17:20–23

- I. Who is included in this prayer: all Jesus' disciples, both present and future (v. 20)
 1. Only those who believe in Christ benefit from Christ's intercession
 2. It is through the word of the apostles that souls are brought to believe in Christ
 3. It is certainly known to Christ who shall believe in Him
 4. Jesus intercedes not only for great and prominent believers but also for the lowliest and weakest
 5. Jesus had an actual regard for those of God's chosen remnant who were yet unborn
- II. What is intended in this prayer: that all Jesus' present and future disciples may be one (v. 21)
 1. His disciples' unity means they are all incorporated into one body, the church
 2. His disciples' unity means they are all moved by one Spirit
 3. His disciples' unity means they are bound together in love and share one heart

III. The basis of this prayer: God's oneness, Christ's ministry, and the church's witness (vv. 21–23)

1. Jesus' request for unity is based on the oneness between the Father and the Son
2. Jesus' request for unity is based on His communication of light and grace to His disciples
3. Jesus' request for unity is based on the church's witness to the world

John 17:24–26

- I. Christ's petition for His Father to glorify those given to Him (v. 24)
 1. The connection between this request and the preceding requests
 2. The manner of this request
 3. The request itself
 4. The argument used to back this request
- II. Christ's conclusion reinforcing His petitions (vv. 25–26)
 1. With regard to His Father
 2. With regard to His disciples

John 17:20–23

“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. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”

After praying for His disciples’ purity (John 17:17–19), Jesus prays for their unity, because “the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable” (James 3:17). Friendship is friendly indeed when it is unified, like the oil on Aaron’s head and like the dew on Zion’s mountains (Psalm 133).

Verses 20–23 indicate three main facts about Jesus’ prayer: who is included (v. 20), what is intended (v. 21), and on what the prayer is based (vv. 21–23).

- I. Who is included in this prayer: all Jesus’ disciples, both present and future (v. 20)

Jesus does not pray “for these alone.” He is not praying here exclusively for His current disciples, those men and women who followed Him when He was here on earth. Jesus is also praying “for those who will believe in Me through their word.” That is, Jesus now prays for His future disciples who will come to believe in Him through the word preached by the apostles in their own day or written down by the apostles for future generations. Jesus prays for all His disciples, present and future, that those who have a stake in His prayer will be one and will benefit from it.



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THE GEM IN ITS SETTING

John 17:20–26

Jesus' Prayer for Unity

JOHN 17:20–26 IN CONTEXT

Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:20–26 is a glorious gospel gem. It reveals our Lord's ultimate gospel goal: all His disciples perfected in unity and forever present with Him, seeing His glory and forever experiencing the Father's love. But this jewel of a passage is even more spectacular when viewed in its setting. The historical and biblical contexts of John 17:20–26 reveal additional facets of Jesus' passion for unity and reinforce the crucial importance of Christian love.

Historically, these seven verses conclude Jesus' final hours with His disciples before His arrest. Fully aware of the physical torment, spiritual agony, and divine wrath that He was about to suffer, our Lord focused not on Himself but on His disciples. With precious little time left to prepare His followers for His departure, Jesus repeatedly stressed to them the urgency of their living together in selfless, visible love.

Biblically, Jesus' prayer concludes His Farewell Discourse, which He introduced by washing His disciples' feet and opened by giving them the new commandment to love one another. By word and deed Christ taught that mutual love must characterize those who truly know and serve Him. He then reinforced this dying demand by explaining that all who abide in Him bear abundant fruit through Him as they obey Him and lovingly lay down their lives for one another.

At the end of His life, Jesus prioritized His disciples. At the end of their discipleship, Jesus prioritized their loving unity. For their last lesson, Christ demonstrated sacrificial love, demanded mutual love, and then prayed for their loving unity, so that others would come to know Him as Savior. At the end of His life and ministry, Christ prioritized Christian unity.

A Humbling Example

Matthew, Mark, and Luke begin their accounts of the Last Supper with Jesus reclining at the table; John begins his with Jesus rising. What prompted Christ to interrupt their meal was an argument taking place between His disciples. “There arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24). They had had the same debate the year before, and even the week before (Matthew 18:1–5; 20:17–28; Mark 9:33–37; 10:32–45; Luke 9:46–48), and now with their Lord preparing to leave them, they were at it again.

So Christ corrected them once again.

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves. (Luke 22:25–27)

Jesus reinforced His instruction with an unforgettable act of humble service (John 13:1–20). On the night before His crucifixion our Lord:

got up from supper. For Jesus to interrupt a meal in process would have captured His disciples’ undivided attention.

laid aside His garments. Jesus stripped down several layers to His loincloth, which was the humble garb of a slave.

taking a towel, He girded Himself. Jesus wrapped a long piece of cloth around Himself, leaving a length free to dry.

poured water into the basin. The water and basin were there all evening. What was lacking was someone willing to use them, for only slaves performed this most menial task.

began to wash the disciples' feet. The King of creation knelt down before each disciple to wash the dirt from his feet.

and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. Every disciple had his Lord handle his feet, including Judas. Judas left to betray his Master with clean feet.

when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments [He] reclined at the table again. What John records in three verses took many awkward minutes to perform. Twelve disciples and twenty-four feet perhaps meant emptying the basin and refilling the pitcher several times.

When Jesus reclined again at the head of the table, only one person's feet remained unwashed—His own. The disciples had witnessed a sinful woman wash Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50). They had recently seen Mary anoint His feet with expensive perfume (John 12:1–3). Yet not one of them thought to do for their Lord what He had just done for them.

Jesus then explained and applied His actions to His disciples.

Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13:12–17)

Disciples of Christ claim Christ as their teacher and Lord, so they should embrace His instruction and obey His command to love other disciples. Jesus' followers must follow Jesus' example, which means humbly serving other Christians. If we do so, we are blessed. If we don't, we prove that we are not actually Christ's disciples and followers.



Note: some pages are omitted from this book preview.

Did you know that Jesus prayed for you? What an amazing thought! Jesus, your Lord and Savior, prayed for you, His disciple. But what did He pray, and why does it matter? Our *John 17:20-26* exegetical guide helps you listen in on our Lord's prayer that you would be one—united with Him and other believers.

This resource will forever change the way you view yourself and other believers. Come see yourself through Jesus' eyes and catch the passion of what He prayed for you. Let this exegetical guide transform you with the vision that filled our Lord's heart just hours before He was crucified.

Editor's Note: This exegetical guide includes a rich "Exploring the Classics" section that brings fresh insights from great Christian minds of the past to help you enjoy this relevant passage.

The Be United in Christ Outreach Ministry's mission is to teach and promote Christian unity in accordance with God's Word. Visit BeUnitedinChrist.com to learn more!

