

“That the World May Believe”
John 17:20-23

The words of Jesus that we just read are extraordinary. They're extraordinary in that this is the only time in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ where He directly addresses you and me. Most of the time what Jesus says is for His immediate audience: the disciples or the crowds or those opposed to Him. In verses 6 through 19, Jesus' focus is on His disciples, the 11 men who had followed Him faithfully for three years. But then in verse 20 He turns from them to all those who will ever believe in Him, all those who will call Him Savior and Lord of their lives throughout human history. He turns to you and me and says, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,” that is, the message of His original disciples. The message is this: Jesus Christ is one with God the Father, and He had come from the Father. Jesus then prays for us as He prayed for His disciples in verse 11: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” Jesus' prayer for us is that we enjoy the unity, the oneness that He enjoys with His heavenly Father. That's significant, really important. But what's even more important is the reason He prays for this unity among us who call ourselves His followers – “so that the world may believe” that the Father had sent Him. So critical is this that He repeats these words of verse 21 in verse 23: “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.” Please understand what Jesus is saying here. The love and unity we demonstrate, we exhibit, we live in Him is a powerful statement about our Savior and Lord to people who are not Christians. It is not “theology,” it is not “truth,” it is not “correct doctrine” that convinces the world that Jesus is the Son of God Who came into the world to bring forgiveness, salvation, life abundant and eternal. It is not what we believe, it is how we behave, how we as followers of Jesus Christ relate to, love each other that convinces people that salvation comes from no one else but Jesus Christ. There is no clearer evangelistic statement in the whole New Testament than these words of Jesus to you and me! My two points today speak to the significance of this statement.

First, during His ministry Jesus proved He was God by performing miracles, what John called “signs” or “miraculous signs” in his Gospel. While John acknowledges that Jesus performed many miraculous signs, he writes about just seven. I've listed them for you on your outline. The purpose of these miracles? They are recorded “so that that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). His miracles proved Who Jesus was and what He came into the world to do.

Second, in chapter 17, we see that now Jesus is getting ready to leave the world. He will no longer be visibly present to demonstrate miraculously and convincingly that He is the Christ, the Son of God, the source of life. And so in speaking to us, He asks His heavenly Father for a new kind of miraculous sign, a sign that will be no less convincing than feeding 5,000 or walking on water or raising His friend Lazarus from the dead. That sign is oneness and unity and love among His followers. You see, we—you and I together—are the sign. We can show the world without Christ another kind of miracle, the miracle of a unified body of believers reflecting faith in God, hope for the present and the future, and love for one another and all people. What's so special about this oneness, this loving unity? It's special because it affirms our diversity. Loving unity in Jesus Christ is not conformity or uniformity. We are not called to be Christian clones, where we are all exactly alike (or are supposed to be alike). The insistence that others be just like us is one of the most dis-unifying forces in the church. It comes not from the One who said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” We're not all the same, we're incredibly diverse, uniquely created in the image of God, and that's great and that's fine and that's to be celebrated and enjoyed. I like the way the early church leader Augustine addressed our unity and diversity. His words are found on the top of our bulletin: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity,” that is, love. This loving unity is unique especially when you consider how futile is the world's pursuit of unity. I just saw the latest example of this. Louise Montle gives me her copy of the Economist magazine every week. One of the reasons I read it is that it regularly gives me important news about the countries where members of our missions family are serving, news that I can't get elsewhere. I have to say that I just laughed when I saw the cover of the November 6 issue. It's a picture of George Bush, with the title, “Now, Unite Us.” Regardless of whether you voted for George Bush or John Kerry, does anyone really think that President Bush will unite us politically, economically, or ideologically? So that we Americans are of one purpose, or one mind, or even one love? It's just not going to happen! One of the many reasons it's not going to happen is that the unity the world

wants cannot tolerate diversity; everything and everyone must be the same. The world's attempts at unity are always futile. And loving unity is special because it is not natural, it's supernatural.

A little girl and her mother were looking at a magazine when the girl saw a picture of Jesus. Her mother, seeing an opportunity for a lesson, asked, "Do you know who that is?" The little girl answered, "Why, yes, Mommy, that's Jesus. He goes to our church." There's a sense in which that little girl is absolutely right. Jesus goes to the church where He's alive in His people, He's alive in the relationships of men and women, boys and girls who call Him Savior and Lord. My friends, Jesus Christ is a supernatural presence, a supernatural power coming to and working in His church, His people! Loving unity is special because it's supernatural, and when it's authentically demonstrated, it's irresistible to people looking for acceptance, love, and a sense of belonging for their lives. It is this oneness that declares to a watching world that Jesus is God, Savior, and Lord. What comes through clearly in Jesus' teaching on loving one another is that the world has the right to question whether you are a Christian, whether we are followers of Jesus Christ. He gave them that right. In terms of the world's judgment of us: It is not a question of what we know or how much we know. It's not a question of what we believe, it's a question of how we behave. It's a question of our unity, our love. The truth that this is how the world really judges us was confirmed centuries ago by the early church leader Tertullian, who wrote, "It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. They say, 'Look, look at how they love one another!'" How do we stack up against this important standard for evangelism that Jesus Himself gave us?

This fall I've enjoyed meeting with new people the Lord has been drawing to this church. A common thread in those conversations has been statements like, "The people in your church really care for one another; they've been very warm and welcoming. There's real love here in this church." And last week I attended a Pastor's Breakfast hosted by the Salvation Army. I was told that our care for hurting and needy people who come to our church weekly has made us a beacon of hope and love in our community. We have a beautiful building, we have a beautiful dynamic going on in our life as a church family. For that, I am grateful to God, and to you.

But I'd like to respond to this great evangelistic statement of Jesus and to our Missions Conference by talking just a moment about evangelism in our "world" that is the United States. Last month I attended a meeting of denominational leaders at the Billy Graham Training Center in Asheville, N.C. One of the major issues of discussion was our outreach for Jesus Christ in the United States and in our communities. While some parts of our world are seeing the church expand six-fold, sixty-fold, one hundred-fold in a year, in our country it's another story. The statement was made at our conference, and I've included it on your outline: "In every county in the United States, the percentage of Christians has decreased in the last 10 years." Is the cause of Jesus Christ advancing or retreating in our country? Maybe you don't care. I hope that's not the case. If God is greatly expanding His church in other parts of the world, but His church is in decline here, I think He's telling us something that should alarm us, wake us up. I've been really wrestling with what He's telling us, what He's telling me for a number of weeks now. My wife Cindy spoke to one aspect of our problem yesterday when she said, "If we really understood the truth of lostness in eternity, then sharing Jesus Christ would be something we 'get to do,' not 'have to do.'" That is, if we were truly convinced that a Christ-less eternity is an existence where there is nothing but unspeakable suffering, torment, and pain, then sharing Jesus Christ and the salvation found only in Him would be something we urgently and joyfully do. Studies have shown that believers in Jesus Christ such as ourselves are in relationship with an average of seven non-Christians. These may be family members, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. That is your immediate mission field. I want you to take a moment and write down on your outline the names of five people you know who are not believers in Jesus Christ. Won't you commit yourself to serve your Savior and Lord in this, your mission field, to pray for those five, and to share how Jesus Christ has made a difference in your life? And let me encourage you to invite some of those five to the Candlelight Christmas Dinner. It's a beautiful event and a great way to introduce people to our life and love in Jesus Christ in an informal social setting.