

What is Union with Christ

a sermon in the series
Saved by His Life: Union with Christ

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, November 24, 2013
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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I Corinthians 6:17

“But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.”

I want to direct your attention to our theme verse for this series, Romans 5:10, specifically the last half of the verse.

“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”

The emphasis of this statement from the beloved apostle is this: at this present moment, Christ is saving us not only by His death but also by His life.

He lives to save us.

We’ve limited the concept of salvation to the cross and we’ve overlooked a key component to the New Testament explanation of the Christian life. We are saved not just by Jesus’ death on Calvary but we are being saved by His resurrected life. His life on earth and His life now at the right hand of God saves. He’s still doing the work of redemption. He’s not judicially redeeming us—saving us from the wrath of a holy Judge because the first part of verse 10 and all of verse 9 establishes He’s already done that for those who have trusted in Him.

“Much more then, having now been justified (past tense) by His blood we shall be saved from wrath through Him for if when we were enemies we were reconciled to Him by His Son.”

For those who have trusted in Him with their lives, this work of justification is done. But now He is saving, we believers, from our natural selves and the corruption of the world in which we sojourn as pilgrims. So the saying is true: Jesus saves!

Now God has a Promised Land for every believer and it’s His task to lead you into this land of milk and honey. I don’t mean heaven because entering the Promised Land for Israel required fighting and conquering; not a good image of heaven. I don’t plan on fighting devils at the gates of pearl to get into heaven, do you? Of course not. However, once Israel defeated the enemies and occupied the land to rest, we find the image of heaven. The entering of the Promised Land is to

represent resting in Christ for all the blessings that He is.

This is a concept rarely expressed in churches today. To rest in Jesus for all the blessings He *is*. Not the blessings He *gives*. When you say blessings He gives, the blessings become altogether separate from Him but they are not. What God gives is Himself and He expresses Himself in the very blessing and gifts He grants to us. The key to entering the Promised Land is being able to simply trust Jesus for all that He is.

We're not to wrestle from God these blessings by living a good, moral life. So many in Christendom today believe if they are to receive blessings from God they are to somehow live to such a degree of goodness that God is free to grant those blessings. That is not the New Testament doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I'm glad it isn't because I could never merit that kind of blessing.

What then remains for you and I to conquer? What are we to be saved from today? The answer is ourselves, the world, and the devil.

How do we do that? Paul answers that question: By Jesus' life.

Actually *in His life*. The exact translation of that last phrase in verse 10 *by His life* is *in His life*. The Greek preposition *by* is the Greek word *en* and is translated in the New Testament more frequently as the word *in* rather than *by*. *In His life*, thus signifying that we are in Christ and it's this union with Christ that saves.

The question is how does this union save us and what is it? How is this union, being made one with Christ, being in Christ, saving us right now?

It does a past work of saving through our justification and we'll examine that in the weeks to come but today as introduction I want you to see this blessed truth more than you've ever seen before. You are in Christ and because you are in union with Him there is something saving occurring even at this moment.

I. The Definition of Union With Christ

First, I'm going to define union with Christ and then defend and unpack it. It's amazing when you do a study on the term *union with Christ* that you find very few that attempt to define it. I understand the wisdom in not attempting a definition because it is a remarkable mystery. How do you explain something you don't understand? How can you put into words what it means to be made one with God almighty? How do you understand and grasp with these weak minds of ours what it means to be seated with Christ in heavenly places? What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? We are dealing with thoughts and themes that so supersede the human mind that I understand why theologians do not quickly try to attempt to define this doctrine. But even though a definition may not be complete or tell the whole of it, an attempt is worth the effort. I see it necessary in order that we begin to understand although without fullness.

I Corinthians 6:17 is a good place to start.

“But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.”

One spirit with Him. There is something that happens when a man or a woman puts their faith in Jesus Christ. At that moment they are literally one with Jesus in the sight of God, not two. A union exists.

Union with Christ = An identification with Christ that is a real participation and oneness in His mediatorial, redemptive, and personal achievements.

It’s identification with Christ. There is a relationship with Jesus Christ; I identify with Him and He identifies with me. When you become a member of this church, for example, you are not Oak Grove Baptist Church but you identify with it and thereby you become a representative of it and we represent you. There is an identification that goes on. So union with Christ means that you identify with Him and He, even more remarkably, identifies with you.

In this identification is a **real participation**. You participate and cooperate, which means there is an activity between you and Christ that creates this oneness in three particular areas of Jesus’ life. **His mediatorial life**, meaning as our mediator, our go-between, our advocate with the Father. Everything that Jesus does as our mediator, we participate in because of this union. Everything Christ did in coming to this earth, being born of a virgin, living His life in perfect obedience, doing ministry for three and a half years, subjecting Himself to the evil will of men who put Him to death, and rising from the dead. We are participating and identifying in all of that **redemptive work**. Why? Because we’ve been made one with Him. And in any **personal achievement**, as with Jesus Christ’s ascending and seating at the right hand of God, we participate. We are one with that event and all of those achievements of Jesus Christ.

That’s what I mean by union with Christ. Let me say what I don’t mean: You are not deity.

To be in union with Jesus Christ does not mean you become God or that you receive a divine nature. I know this is the terminology often used but I think it’s wrong. The Bible never says you receive a divine nature, it says you participate, share, in the divine nature of God. You are a partaker, but that means you *participate* in it. You and I will never be deity; we will never become little gods.

Jesus functions completely separate from us in His deity. But in His humanity, all that He does for us, you and I participate because there is a oneness in His humanity.

A. Aspects of Union With Christ.

1. It’s a spiritual union.

“But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” (1 Corinthians 6:17)

The Apostle Paul puts this union on a spiritual level. By using the word *spirit* or *spiritual*, Paul does not want you to believe that this union is somehow unreal. When we use the word *spiritual* so often we mean something invisible and, because it can't be seen, we somehow think less of it. It's not material and if it's not material we don't think it's real.

Union with Christ is not a doctrine you are simply to accept because the Bible says so and that's all there is to it. It's not just a positional, abstract truth. It's concrete.

Here is a problem you and I have in dealing with spiritual concepts and doctrines. Because we are material beings living in a material environment it's difficult for us to believe these truths are as real as what we see, touch, smell, and hear. But union with Christ is not just a material fact or some abstract truth that has no reality in my life. If that's your concept, you're cheating yourself of real blessings today and a reality in your life with God is sadly missing because you have wrongly thought of this blessed truth. Spiritual union is very real. When you say *God is Spirit* that does not make God any less real. Again, when we think of something as spiritual we think of something without substance. But all reality of the physical world comes from the spiritual. The greatest reality in the universe and beyond is God Himself and do not think God isn't real because you cannot touch, see, or hear Him.

Remember what Jesus said to Thomas a week after the resurrection? “Because you see you believe, blessed are those who do not see and yet believe.” There is something real here even though we may not be able to touch or see it with our physical eyes.

So what is this spiritual union? Your spirit and Jesus' has been brought together as one. His Spirit dwells within you. Before He left He said, “I will be in you and you will be in Me.” He also said, “I will send you another Helper.” Of course, He was speaking of the Holy Spirit who is the very Spirit of Christ. Jesus said, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” He's come to us through the Spirit. The Spirit of God inhabits a person when he or she puts their faith in Christ and turns from their sin. I can't explain it any better than that. That's where my mind has found its limits. I cannot explain how God dwells in us except to say it's true.

Not only does the Bible say it's true but I know it's true because I've experienced it. Oh the joy of spiritual fellowship! To be alone with God and to hear His voice in my heart and know it's God speaking to me is a fellowship even more significant than one we can see in the material realm. It's a spiritual union.

2. It's also a *representative type of union.*

In other words, Jesus represents me to the Father and I represent Him to the world. This goes back to the idea of identification.

Paul explains this by telling us about two men, the first and last Adams. Paul says you are either in one or the other. The men are Adam and Jesus Christ.

Because we are all descendants of Adam we are all, therefore, in Adam. There is identification, a union, a participation with Adam that is common to everyone born. Because Adam rebelled against God Adam became a sinner by nature. Since we are united with Adam from birth, we have received the image of Adam and are therefore also sinners by nature. What Adam did in the garden, he did as our representative and therefore it impacts us today. But God sent another Adam, the last Adam, and He did not fail the test of God but fulfilled it, perfectly obeying the Father's will as our representative. If you trust in Him, you are taken out of Adam and placed in Christ. Now you have a new representative. The old man with its identification with Adam is gone. Adam is the fountainhead of all humanity, but the moment you place your confidence in Christ, surrendering your life to His control, you no longer have this union with Adam and participation with his sin. You are placed in Christ and He is now your representative before God and you are Jesus' representative on this earth.

“For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)¹⁸ Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.¹⁹ For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:17-19)

What does he mean, “many were made sinners, many were made righteous”? I thought everybody was a sinner when they were born, why does he use the term *many*? Because, not all of us are in Adam anymore. However, those who never place their confidence in Christ and serve Him are in Adam and all of them, are sinners. Why? Because of their representative, Adam.

The moment Adam rebelled against God, Adam's sin and corruption so marred the image of who he was that from that moment he could not produce anybody in the image of God, he could only produce man in his own image. In other words, all of his offspring were just like him. *The many* are made sinners. But those who put their confidence in Christ have a new head, a new representative. They come from another fountainhead—Jesus Christ. And all of those, *the many* who believe in Him, are made righteous.

Who are you in? Have you identified with Christ so that you are His representative in Christ? I didn't ask if you prayed a prayer and asked Jesus to come into your heart, I'm asking if you're so identified with Him that others know whom you represent? That's the only kind of salvation the Bible teaches.

There are other metaphors that describe this union, Christ and His body, the temple of God, but I want to highlight this next one:

3. It's a marital union.

This is the kind of union it is, a marital union. Two separate people who have their own ideas, likes and dislikes, come together and in a marriage covenant they become one.

There is something mysterious about the act of marriage. It's hard to understand how two totally contrary people can come together, consummate that marriage in the physical act of sexual union and from that moment on grow and develop until they become less themselves and more like each other. Still two separate people with separate identities, but over time those two identities blend as one.

The moment a couple is married they are one in the sight of God, but that union is just getting started. God doesn't mean for you to be one on a piece of paper called a marriage license, He wants the union He sees to be real. The marriage relationship begins. Days, months and years go by and difficulties, challenges, tests and stress come upon that union but instead of breaking it apart it only strengthens it. With time, the two become less disagreeable and stop thinking so independently but begin thinking together with the same goals, aspirations, wants and desires, so they experience what I'm talking about. Two separate people become one flesh.

This is what's happening in the physical relationship between a man and a woman but that's only an illustration of the union we have with Jesus Christ. When you begin with Christ you're immediately one with Him; you don't altogether think like Jesus, do you? There are a lot of sinful habits that have to be undone, a lot of godly habits that have to be learned; there is growing in grace that must happen and with time it does. All the more He becomes your life and you think with the mind of Christ. The two have become one.

"So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.³⁰ For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.³¹ "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."³² This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5:28-32)

In these short verses, Paul unpacks the mystery of this union and gives us some grasp, even if we feel like we're grasping by our fingernails on the very edge of this concept.

A man loves his wife like his own body, why? Because she is. This is how God created marriage. Two bodies become one, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. I don't know how to explain it. I'm at a great loss. All I can tell you is that it's true. God has blessed Karen and I with something remarkable and we acknowledge it's not us but the grace of God. For 32 years we have been married and you couldn't have put two more opposite people together than Karen and I. We are completely different and yet, as the time has rolled by, something has happened. I am more like her today than I used to be and she's more like me, but together it's not Michael or Karen, it's a completely new identity.

I don't have to stomp my foot and insist, "I'm the head around here and you're going to do it my way!" I don't do that. I don't need to. Why? Because she's my body and my body goes where I go. My head wants to take care of my body. We have watched with amazement two people who think on two separate tracks now think each other's thoughts and say each other's words as we're trying to form them in our mouths—it's scary at times! The truth is, I'm the better. God has done a work in me to make me more in line with my body. I'm not the same man I was 32 years ago and she's not the same woman.

This is exactly what happens in the relationship you have with Jesus Christ. He looks upon you as His very bone. He is a man, still yet in a body made of flesh, and you are not separate. He cannot think of you apart from Himself if He had too. You're together. This union is a great mystery, Paul says, but he's not talking about the husband and wife, he says, "I speak concerning Christ and the church." This is amazing.

B. This Union is Based Upon the Eternal Choice of God.

"just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love," (Ephesians 1:4)

You are not in Christ because you prayed a prayer and accepted Jesus. You are in Christ because God chose to put you in Christ. He chose to save and redeem you. That does not destroy or do away with my responsibility to obey the Lord and humble myself in faith and repentance. It does not remove my responsibility to cry out to the Lord that He would save me. What it tells me is that my salvation is not based upon what I do or don't do; it's based upon the sovereign choice of God and His electing love. You are eternally secure in that love and in that choice, which means God is making sure you will love Him and seek Him and turn to Him. But left to ourselves, Isaiah says, we are all like sheep gone to his own way. That's the way of all those who are in Adam. But God in His mercy, before the world began, choose us in Him.

II. The Nature of Union With Christ

A. Union With Christ is Instrumental to Salvation.

This is why I say almost weekly that salvation is not just the forgiveness and the removal of sins. If that's all salvation was, union with Christ would be unessential, but salvation is not just having your sins forgiven. I wish I could rid people of that thought. I wish I could say to people who go to church in this country every week that to be saved is so much more than having your sins forgiven—it's union with Jesus Christ.

Let me show this to you. To do so we need to go back to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden.

Before the fall, man's condition could be described as this: **his life was an extension of the life of God.**

In the Garden, Adam's life was an extension of the very life of God because he was in union with Him. God formed man out of the dust of the earth and the Bible said God breathed into him and that breath created life. That should not amaze us because often life is symbolized by breath. When there is no breath in the body there is no life. God's very breath energized that clay statue and this man was filled with God. The Spirit of God was given to him and therefore he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. The very life of God lived in Adam so that all of Adam's life depended on the life of God. He existed by that life, lived and worked by that life.

Therefore, Adam also was a representative of God on this earth, equipped with the authority of God to be caretaker of His creation. But the moment Adam fell his condition changed. The Spirit of God departed from Adam and he was no longer an extension of the life of God. The very reason for his existence was gone. He was made to inhabit the life of God and to be His extension and expression, but he no longer had that life after the fall and how could he now fulfill his purpose? He couldn't. His life was separated from God and at the moment he disobeyed his union with God was severed.

That's what death is, separation. Death means—to be severed. That's why people who are not saved never truly live. They don't understand life and therefore they can't enjoy it. You were made for much more than you are experiencing. I would not deny that sinners can be happy. I believe sinners can be just as happy as Christians can. There's pleasure in sin, the Bible says. But the one distinct difference will be this: the unsaved man or woman's happiness doesn't last. It could be six weeks or six months but whatever is making them thoroughly and truly happy will lose its power and they have to go somewhere else to find it again. Why? Because man was made for God. You were made to be an extension of God's life. You were made to be filled with the life of God and you will never find what you're looking for anywhere but God. He is the source of genuine, lasting, eternal pleasure. You don't have to go to anything else for pleasure after experiencing Christ.

You may say to me that you see a lot of unhappy Christians. I would agree. There are a lot of miserable Christians and for one reason only—they have left the purpose for which they were created. They are no longer living by His life and are trying to serve God in their own strength. We will thoroughly deal with that in this series.

You were made to be an extension of the very life of God Himself and therefore salvation has to be a restoration of what Adam lost. It cannot just be forgiveness of sins. If that was the case, then you could be forgiven of your sins and continue on living life seeking the purposes you want, but that's not happiness or true fulfillment either. For salvation to be as God fully intended, it must include restoration and this restoration enables the Christian to live the Christian life as God intended.

Reconciliation implies restoration.

“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” (Romans 5:10)

The word *reconciliation* literally means to *exchange* or *change*. The idea is to replace the hostilities of two parties into a relationship of peace. You exchange hostility for peace. That's restoration. You've been reconciled to God.

How many of you know God and His life is in you? Then you've been reconciled to God. There is a purpose for that restoration. Not just to lay down your weapons against God and for God to lay down His weapons against you but that what Adam lost in the Garden can be restored to us and the life of God can be joined to us once again.

He who is "joined to the Lord is one spirit." Now you can pick up what Adam lost and you can be the Lord's representative on earth filled with all the fullness of God Himself.

Paul the apostle prays for the Ephesians to be strengthened with all might in the inner man. What does that mean? It means that your spirit be full of the Spirit of God you would know the joy of God on a level superseding anything material, that all the benefits of Christ's life can be transmitted to you by the Spirit.

B. All the Benefits of Christ's Work Are Transmitted To Us By Our Union With Christ.

First Corinthians 1:30 says to us that everything Jesus has accomplished as a mediator, redeemer and advocate with God, exalted in the heavens is for us. Everything He's done in those regards is ours.

"But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—" (1 Corinthians 1:30)

I think the translators rightly inserted the long dash. Why? Because you can't list everything that Christ is to us. All you can do is start rejoicing. To be one with Christ means everything that God is in Christ is yours. Do any of you lack wisdom? James says to ask of God. What are you asking for? Most would say he's asking for some specific kind of knowledge for a specific kind of situation; he needs some wisdom. Paul answers yes, but that's not found in a word but in a Person. Not in a fact but in a relationship. Christ is your wisdom.

How many of you want to be more like Christ, holy and sanctified? Christ is your sanctification and because you are one with Him, you are sanctified in the sight of God so that what is true about Jesus is true about the Christian.

C. What is True About Jesus is True About the Christian.

Whatever you can say about Christ's humanity, although glorified, is true about you. That's what it means to be in Christ. Let me finish by a real simple illustration with this piece of paper.

Let us suppose I put this piece of paper in this Bible. The paper is now in the Bible. Whatever is true about the Bible is true about the paper. If I am to hand the Bible off to one of you, then wherever that Bible goes, the paper goes. If I drop it in a bucket of water, I'm not only dropping the Bible, I'm dropping the piece of paper. If I package this Bible and send it to our missionary, Florin, in Romania, this paper will go with it. You could, in fact, say I'm shipping the paper and using the Bible as the means to get it there. Whatever is true about the book is true about the paper because the paper is in the book.

Friends, it's simple. All of this deep stuff can be boiled down to this one little concept—whatever is true about Jesus in His redemptive love, obedience to God, exaltation and resurrection is true about you.

You've been crucified with Christ.
You've been raised with Christ.
You've been seated with Christ.
You've been blessed in Christ.
You've been forgiven in Christ.
You've been justified in Christ.
You are being sanctified in Christ.

Whatever is true about Jesus is true about you because you are in Him. How much favor does Jesus have with the Father? Infinite favor. And whatever is true about Him is true about you because you are in Christ—you have infinite favor with God.

Oh the glory of which I have spoken and done so in such an ill manner. Corrupted lips have spoken of incorruptible things and you know the result—imperfect understanding. I pray you would understand the majesty of this kind of love and that God would raise you up in Christ and elevate you to this degree of comprehension.

But as wonderful as my exaltation in Christ is, I don't think that's the glory of it all.

The most glorious thought in our union with Christ is that Jesus would humble Himself and be identified with us. It is most remarkable that Christ, God of God, would belittle, humble, and reduce Himself, so He could be joined to someone like you and me. This is unbelievable. That God could love us this way goes beyond the ability of language. It is overwhelming to think He would become one of us and stand before His Father and say "I am not ashamed to call them My brethren."

May our hearts revel in these truths. Let us take joy today realizing that Christ sees us as bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh—one with Him in all matters that pertain to godliness. Amen.