

Sunday, June 11, 2023

Christ In You, The Hope Of Glory

...The mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory...(Col. 1:26-27)

You may recall from Christ's Farewell Discourse that He promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and abide with us forever. And not only the Holy Spirit, but the entire Trinity would make their abode with us. It is one aspect of this that I would like to begin looking into today, and that is the reality of our union with Christ. (See John 14:16-23, 26; 15:4-7, 26; 16:7-16; 17:20-23, 26). We abide in Him and He abides in us. Jesus describes it in John 14:20 like this – "Ye in me, and I in you." And then He gives us an illustration in John 15 with the vine and the branches – "Abide in me, and I in you." Paul describes this in Romans 8:

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit...But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Romans 8:1, 9-10)

You see that he equates the Spirit of God dwelling in us with Christ dwelling in us. I take that to mean that it is through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us that Christ dwells in us. It is part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to maintain and cultivate that relationship with Christ. This is the fulfillment of His promise in John 14:18 – "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." We see the church experiencing this when the Holy Spirit descended on the Day of Pentecost (nearly 2,000 years ago in Acts 2), and it is just as much of a reality today.

My thesis today is that our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit is how we receive and experience the grace of God in all its manifestations, and to whatever degree we forget, neglect, misunderstand, etc., our union with Christ, it is to that degree that we have a warped view of the grace of God and the gifts that He gives. And a warped view of the grace of God means that we have a warped view of God Himself. That can only have unfortunate results in how we think and act, both with one another and with the unbelieving world. To state this another way, we are in trouble if we separate the blessings of God from God Himself, if we separate the gifts of God from the Giver, or, considering that the ultimate gift of God is Jesus Himself (see John 4:10), if we separate the gifts of God from the Gift of God, who dwells in us.

An example might help get at what I'm trying to say. "Strength" would be one of the gifts that God gives us. We ask Him for strength. He gives us strength. But if we think of "strength" as some abstract thing separate from God, like He puts it in a box and puts a bow on top and hands it to you as a gift and then walks away, you are looking at it all wrong. And O how easily we slip into thinking that this strength is MY strength. The way that you should be looking at it is that you have received the gift of Christ (John 1:12) and you are in union with Him. He lives in you, and it is HIS strength that is given to you. You don't have the strength apart from Him.

**And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.
(2 Corinthians 12:9-10)**

Before going too far down this trail, I'd like to caution everyone against being frivolous or maudlin with this concept of "union with Christ" – don't forget that you're dealing with the transcendent God of eternity. Some of the things I've seen on this topic are so flippant and unbelievable that I have to go back and double check to make sure I saw it right. A few years ago, I came across a movement where people were encouraged in the idea of "Dating Jesus" (seriously – including writing love letters to Him and setting date nights with Him). Just last week, I received an advertisement for a Christian college in the mail, telling me how important union with Christ is – and if I would just attend their college, I'd get to experience that in such solemn activities as ping pong and picnics. So please, don't turn this into some sentimental, superficial nonsense.

Also, before getting too far into this, I'd like to ask the question, is this concept of "union with Christ" some flight of fancy based on a couple obscure passages in the Bible? Am I making a mountain out of a molehill? I don't think so. The concept seems to be so pervasive in the New Testament that I would go so far as to say that in a sense, it's the connective tissue that runs throughout and holds it all together. Here's a summary (certainly not exhaustive) of the many ways that the message of "union with Christ" is presented to us. These things appear all over the place (hundreds of times!), so keep an eye out for them:

- Prepositional Phrases and corresponding verbs (to be, to abide, to live, to dwell)
 - In Christ and in me/you/us (and similar phrases like "in Him" or "in the Lord").
This is by far the most numerous.
 - Into Christ (and similar)
 - With Christ (and similar)
 - Through Christ (and similar)

- Compound words, most (if not all) of which appear only in the Bible and were minted by the Holy Ghost for the express purpose of telling us about this union with Christ.
 - Buried With – Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12
 - Planted Together – Romans 6:5
 - Crucified With - Romans 6:6, Galatians 2:20
 - Live With - Romans 6:8
 - Joint-Heirs With - Romans 8:17
 - Suffer With - Romans 8:17
 - Glorified Together - Romans 8:17
 - Be Conformed To or Fashioned Like Unto - Romans 8:29, Philippians 3:21
 - Made Conformable Unto – Philippians 3:10
 - Quickened Together With - Ephesians 2:5
 - Raised Up Together or Risen With - Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:12
 - Made To Sit Together - Ephesians 2:6
- Metaphors
 - Body
 - Temple/Building/House
 - Marriage
 - Vine/Branches
 - Putting On Clothing
- Ordinances
 - Baptism
 - Lord’s Supper

The sheer volume of all this shows the importance of the topic. The variety of ways it’s taught to us shows the complexity and multi-faceted nature of it. (We see this type of thing all over the place in the scripture – for example, the atonement of Christ: it’s represented in terms of reconciliation, ransom, substitution, surety, victory over Satan and death, forgiveness, propitiation, etc., not to mention all the different shadows of it in the Old Testament, like the fact that one type of sacrifice wasn’t enough...you had to have the burnt offering, the peace offering, the wave offering, etc., to paint the whole picture). The best advice I can give is to not get too worked up about the mechanics of this supernatural union, but rather recognize it as a reality for every child of God. John Calvin: *“For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration... Whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our own comprehension. Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse.”* Thomas Boston: *“It is a real union...Nothing is more real than what is spiritual, as approaching nearest to the nature of Him who is the fountain of all reality, namely, God Himself. We do not see with our eyes the union between our own soul and body;*

neither can we represent it to ourselves truly, by imagination, as we do sensible things; yet the reality of it is not to be doubted. Faith is no fancy, but 'the substance of things hoped for' (Heb. 11:1). Neither is the union thereby made between Christ and believers imaginary, but most real: 'For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones' (Eph. 5:30)." And Thomas Boston again: "It is a mysterious union. The Gospel is a doctrine of mysteries...the mystical union between Christ and believers, 'This is a great mystery' also (Eph. 5:32). O what mysteries are here! The Head in heaven, the members on earth, yet really united! Christ in the believer, living in Him, walking in Him: and the believer dwelling in God, putting on the Lord Jesus, eating His flesh and drinking His blood! This makes the saints a mystery to the world, yea, a mystery to themselves." A mystery, indeed! Paul says that the mystery that is now made known to the saints is this: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27).

I said earlier that if you forget, neglect, misunderstand, etc., your union with Christ, you're going to have a warped view of the grace of God. So let us talk about saving grace for a few minutes. I want to show you how the two (i.e., union with Christ and the grace of God) are so intertwined that you can't have one without the other. "Grace" is not some concept that you can abstract out from the Savior Himself. For the grace of God to be with us is the same as the Lord Jesus Christ being with us. In his exposition of the phrase "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," John Owen says, "*Yea, [Paul] makes these two, 'Grace be with you,' and, 'The Lord Jesus be with you' to be equivalent expressions.*"

I can't think of a better way to illustrate this than to go back to our "first love." (Revelation 2:4). Now, a few weeks ago, Sam reminded us of Philippians 3:13 – "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before." Of course, this verse does not mean that you're never supposed to remember things that happened in the past. There are, in fact, plenty of commands in scripture to remember things, and to not forget them. But that verse out of Philippians is important for what I'm about to say, because one of its meanings is certainly "don't rely on past experiences such that you rest on your laurels and stop pressing toward the mark." Keep that in mind, please, as I continue.

Every person in this church at some point in their lives did not love the Lord Jesus Christ. You "were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." (Ephesians 2:3). In fact, you hated Him! If it wasn't an active, virulent hatred, it was at least a hatred of indifference. And every person in this church presumably does love the Lord Jesus Christ today, and I hope that love has only grown with time. But I want you to think back to a time that you didn't love Him, and then think back to a time that you did – your "first love." Some of you may have been living lives of open, flagrant, notorious sin against God. Some of you may have been living relatively moral lives. Some of you were saved by compassion (Jude 22). Some of you were saved by fear (Jude 23). Some of you may have had a "Damascus Road" type of a call from God, where

you can tell me the date, time, and place where you first believed. Some of you may have been called so gradually and imperceptibly by the Holy Spirit that you don't have the first clue when and where it happened (it might have taken weeks, months, years for you to figure out what was going on!) – you just know that at some point, you didn't love the Lord, and now you do. However the Lord dealt with you in your particular case, it is true for all of us that at one time we were “the children of wrath...without Christ...having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:3,12) – profane, notorious sinners and moralists alike. There was a time when verses like the following were preached to us but they didn't mean anything to us; at some point, though, they became music to our ears, and now we can take great comfort in them:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (John 7:37-38)

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:17)

There was a time when you didn't feel like you were laboring and heavy laden, when you didn't thirst, when you thought you had “money,” when you were not willing to take the water of life freely. But at some point that changed. So, the only question is, why? Why you and not another? Why did you start to thirst? Why did you become willing? And anyone here ought to be able to give the answer: Grace! Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward sinners. And it's not just that you didn't deserve the favor of God – it's that you deserved the exact opposite. That is grace. That is the gift of Christ. John Bunyan: *“There is nothing in heaven or earth that can so awe the heart, as the grace of God. 'Tis that which makes a man fear, 'tis that which makes a man tremble, 'tis that which makes a man bow and bend, and break to pieces. Nothing has that majesty, and commanding greatness in and upon the hearts of the sons of men as has the grace of God.”*

The first time we read of “grace” in the scripture is Genesis 6:8 – “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” It has to do with how God looks at us – that is, He looks upon us as those to whom He desires to show some favor. It is a theme throughout scripture. Almost every epistle in the New Testament begins and ends with an appeal to grace (for many reasons, not the least of which is because we could never accomplish the things spoken of in the epistles without grace). In fact, the Bible ends on a note of grace: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” (Revelation 22:21). Saving grace is the particular work of a sovereign God – that is, God gives it to whom He will. It is costly on His part (it required the death of His Son). But it is free of charge to us (“come, buy wine and milk without money and without price”). And it is freeing to us - it releases us from bondage to sin, Satan, the law. It teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world (Titus 2:12). And it is enduring – it will see us through to the end (see Romans 8:31-39).

Even faith and repentance are gracious gifts of God. Incidentally, I think that faith and repentance are two sides of the same exact process. In the scripture, when the gospel is preached, sometimes we see both faith and repentance mentioned: “Repent ye, and believe the gospel.” (Mark 1:15). Sometimes we see only faith mentioned: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” (Acts 16:31). Sometimes we see only repentance mentioned: “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17). At its simplest, faith is turning to God away from your sins, and repentance is turning away from your sins to God. Neither is a one-time event – they are both life-long activities. There is, of course, a false repentance – you might feel sorry about some sin, so you turn over a new leaf, or modify some habit, but all you end up doing is turning from one sin into the arms of another sin(s). And there is a false faith, where you put your trust in anything other than Christ (self-help programs, 12-step group therapy programs, shrinks, your own will power or determination, etc.). But true faith in God will always be accompanied by repentance, and true repentance will always be accompanied by faith in God. And both are gifts that He gives. In Acts 18:27, we read of those “which had believed through grace [Greek: charis].” Philippians 1:29 tells us “unto you it is given [Greek: charizomai] in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” 2 Timothy 2:25 tells us that repentance is something that “God peradventure will give them.” The same God who gave you those gifts of faith and repentance is the One who “spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all,” and the One who will “freely give [Greek: charizomai] us all things” (Romans 8:32) to ensure that we persevere to the end. Salvation, from beginning to end, is all grace.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship [Greek: poiema], created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

I said earlier that I was going to talk about the grace of God so that I could show you how intricately it is tied to the idea of “union with Christ.” Like the example of “strength” I gave above, “grace” is not something that God packages up and gives us apart from Christ. If you don’t understand that, you don’t understand grace properly. My friends, you didn’t just get grace – you got the Savior Himself! You didn’t just have your sins forgiven – you had the Lord Jesus Christ take up residence in you! The reason that you found grace in the eyes of God is because of your union with Christ. That grace predated you. It predated the creation of the universe.

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began... (2 Timothy 1:9)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-6)

So I’ll ask again - why did you believe? Even because you were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. You were given the grace of God in Christ before the world began. The Father gave you to His Son before the world began. And why do you continue to believe? Because Christ dwells in you. And why do you have whatever spiritual blessings that you have? Because God has blessed you with those blessings in heavenly places in Christ. “But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:7). And why do you feel compelled to obey God and live a holy life? Because you are in Christ Jesus, who is made your sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30) and because “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” (Galatians 2:20). You have been crucified with Christ and have risen with Him, so you should live in newness of life, and you will live with Him both now and forever (Romans 6). But how can you, a sinful creature, ever expect to stand in the presence of God in heaven? Because Christ was made sin for you and you are made the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). You should never think of the people of God without thinking of them being united to Christ, and you should never think of Christ without Him being united to His people. This is a union that spans eternity, and that all God’s children will partake of at some point in their lives. You can only join John in wonder and thanksgiving:

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved,

now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)

[Let me take a short detour here to make sure that we all understand that there are eternal and temporal aspects here. In other words, there's the predestination of things, and there's the accomplishment, application, and experience of the things that were predestined, as we live on this earth. I think it's vital to understand this, because if you focus on only one of those things, a lot of the Bible isn't going to make sense to you. This is how in Ephesians 1, Paul can tell us that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and then in Ephesians 2, he can tell us that there was a time that we were children of wrath, without Christ, and having no hope. Both things are true. There's a sense in which we've been united with Christ from eternity past, and there's a sense in which there was a time in our lives when we were without Christ.]

John Owen said the following in his Commentary on Hebrews: *"Union with Christ is the greatest, most honorable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of."* He came to this conclusion based on his own experience, which we learn about by something he said regarding the background of his book, *"The Forgiveness of Sin: A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm 130"*: *"I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm cxxx. 4, 'But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared;' from whence I received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery."*

So, my prayer for this church is that each member would experience this *"greatest, most honorable, and glorious of all graces,"* even if up until this time, you've had *"very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with"* it. I will reiterate that if you forget, neglect, misunderstand, etc., your union with Christ, you are going to have a warped view of the grace of God. And when you separate the gifts of God from God Himself (and from His presence in us), you are in danger. Two of the most common ways for things to go south is for a person to slip into legalism (works-righteousness, the spirit of bondage) or antinomianism (lawlessness, cheap grace). This can happen in a lot of ways, some of which are quite subtle. Lord willing, I hope to talk about those two dangers in a future sermon(s).

The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit. Grace be with you. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:22)