

Our last lesson in our series on union with Christ, we're looking at today, growth in the union. Remember, thus far, we've been looking at union with Christ, and we've kind of set out a basic definition for union with Christ. And obviously, it's inadequate, because that's why we have an entire class on it, because it's not something that can be defined in a single sentence. But our best try was, union with Christ is defining our relationship to God in terms of our relation to Christ. We would define a relationship with God in terms of our relation to Christ. And then we kind of looked at our two atoms, the old atom being in Adam, and the new atom being in Christ, and how salvation is really a movement from the kingdom of Adam, the kingdom of darkness, the old creation, into the new creation.

And then we talked about how the imperatives of the Christian life, sanctification, be holy, pursue holiness, they're always grounded in the indicatives of who you already are in Christ. You are righteous in Christ, therefore be righteous in Christ. You are holy, act holy.

And then last week, we looked at the rhythm of union with Christ, how it consists in mortification, putting our sins to death, and vivification, being brought to life in Jesus Christ. So this morning, we're gonna be taking a closer look at the second part of that, vivification, growth in our union with Christ. Before we begin our lesson, let's begin with a word of prayer. Our Father and our God, as we look at this last section here, and we feel like we've just scratched the surface of the wonders of being in union with Jesus Christ. How when you look at us, you see Jesus. And how when we strive, when we work, we always work in the strength of Jesus Christ. We ask, Lord, that you would cement these truths, not just on our minds, but in our hearts. Pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right, so we'll be looking at this under three major points. We're gonna look at the source of life, the nourishment of life, and the fruit of life as we look at this growth in union with Christ. And our sort of framing text, the text we're gonna be looking at to sort of frame our thoughts around growth in the union is found in John chapter 15. So I'd encourage y'all to turn there in your Bibles, John chapter 15. And we're gonna begin by reading verses one through 11. Reading in Jesus' name.

I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you, as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered together and thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

So as we look at this, what Jesus is saying here, the metaphor that we're going to be focusing our attention on is the metaphor Jesus gives in this passage, the vine and the branches. How many of y'all have ever been to a vineyard before or at least seen a grapevine before? Okay, most of you are nodding yes. And so if you've been to a vineyard, at least a well done vineyard, you'll be familiar with this basic shape. You have your main stock, your vine, coming up out of the ground. And then up here around here is where your trellising is. And here is where you have your branches coming out from the vine and that's where the fruit comes from.

And what Jesus is saying is that growth in the Christian life is like the growth of branches on a grapevine. Branches cannot bear fruit by themselves. That's our first point. Christ is the source of life. Christ is the source of life. A branch cannot bear fruit all by itself.

You take a branch, you cut it off, it's not going to do anything. It's going to dry up and it's going to die. But if it's connected to a vine, it'll produce fruit. This is true even if the branch didn't even grow on that vine. If you clip a branch off of one vine and graft it onto another, there's a good chance it will accept that grafting and start bearing fruit from that new vine. The source of life, the source of growth, is always from the vine. And the same thing goes for our union with Christ. Any growth we experience, any power we have in our sanctification, always comes from Christ. He is the source of life. As Jesus says elsewhere, apart from me, you can do nothing. And as Martin Luther said, nothing is not a little something. Nothing is nothing. Apart from you, you can do nothing.

Christ is not just the source of our justification. He is the source of our sanctification. He doesn't just reconcile us to God. He doesn't just take us out of Adam and into Christ. But being in Christ means we grow to be more like Christ. So Christ is the source of our sanctification. And again, when we think about union with Christ, union with Christ is this unifying principle. Both justification and sanctification really are just two aspects of being in union with Christ. We saw this earlier.

In Adam, we experienced a complete condemnation. From birth, from the moment we drew breath, from the moment of our conception, we were guilty in Adam. We received his corruption. We were part of a fallen race. And from the moment we were conceived, we were worthy of death. We receive a complete condemnation. That's not all we received in Adam. We received an ongoing profanation. That's my made up word, but I think it works. Profanation, where over time we become, where over time we work out that condemnation in our actions. Doesn't mean we don't occasionally do some good things and some, there's some civil righteousness at work, but it's never truly righteous because it's all in Adam.

But in Christ, we said we receive a complete justification. Where in Christ, we are completely justified. We are completely righteous in God's sight. But not only have we received a completed justification, we receive an ongoing sanctification. See how this actually makes sense.

There's parody here. And so when we talk about Christ being the source, Christ being the vine, us being the branches, we see that Christ is the source of our justification, also our sanctification, just as Adam was the source of our condemnation and also our ongoing profanation. So Christ is the source of life, and another thing, he is the only source of life. It is Christ alone who is our source of life.

This is an important note to make. If you are an unbeliever, you will never be sanctified. Those who are not justified cannot be sanctified. If you look at union with Christ, it makes sense. You can't receive the life of Christ if you're not in Christ. So if you're going to be sanctified, you have to be in Christ. Christ alone is the source. That's also important for us believers to remember. We don't do our sanctification in our own strength. God doesn't pull us out of the mire, set us on a path and say, all right, I took you out of there. I took you out of your condemnation and Adam. You're now justified. Now you're on your own. Go do the sanctification thing.

No, it is Christ, Christ who is His strength that continues to be the source of our strength and our sanctification. It is the true vine that causes the branches to bear fruit. Now, how does that happen? How do we get this strength from Christ? I mean, it's one thing to talk about, get your strength from Christ. How does that happen? Well, Jesus tells us right in this passage, abide in me. Abide in me. Now you may ask, well, how do we abide in Christ? That also sounds kind of trite. What does that actually look like?

Well, to go back to something we said last time, The means to Christ are the means of grace. This takes us to our second major point from the source of life, Christ, to nourishment, the nourishment of life, which comes from the means of grace, primarily Christ's word.

What does Jesus say in John chapter 15? Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. If my word abides in you, Jesus nourishes the life that He has given us in Him through the Word. How do we get access to the strength of Christ? How do we get access to the life of Christ as we pursue sanctification?

We do so through the means of grace, primarily through the Word. It is the word that gives us life. It is through Christ's word that Christ imparts his strength to us. That's why we call it the means of grace. The means of grace are really just the means of Christ, the means to Christ. They are the means by which Christ imparts himself to us, his strength to us. So the word is the primary means of grace.

Sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth, Jesus prayed. Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you, as Paul writes in Colossians. Christ does this through his word, and that includes when you read his word privately, but even more so when you hear his word publicly taught and preached. Ephesians chapter 4, I believe, talks about how God gave gifts to men. After Jesus ascended on high, he gave gifts to men, and he gave some as apostles, some as prophets, and some as pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry. The preached word, the offices of the church are God's gift to you to impart that great means of grace, to impart his word to you.

Doesn't mean you shouldn't read the word on your own. Absolutely you should. But you need both. You need the word of Christ. Why? Because it is your nourishment of life. It is the primary way that you get Christ into you. You get Christ into you, feed on Christ through his word.

But that's not the only means of grace. The Word is the primary means of grace. But there are other means of grace. There's baptism. Baptism is a means of grace. It is the Word made visible. It is baptism, as we said a couple weeks ago, baptism into the name of Jesus Christ, into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's putting His name onto you.

And God uses that by His Holy Spirit to increase your graces. And that works not just for the person being baptized, but if we're watching a baptism, that's a means of grace to us too. We can see that and remember the promises God made to us in our baptisms. And that becomes a means of grace, a means of reminding us of the promises of Jesus Christ. And God uses that by his Holy Spirit. It's a means of grace.

One of the more obvious ones, communion. What is communion? It's taking in Christ's body and blood, not in a carnal way, obviously, but in a true way. You truly do, in the Lord's Supper, feed on Jesus Christ. Why do we talk about that? Because the means of grace are the means to Christ. They're getting Christ into you. That's the point of communion, to get Christ into you, to remember his sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit uses that to grow you in your sanctification, to give you that strength, to give you that life. That is the sap from the vine flowing into the branches. That is their nourishment towards life. Another means of grace is prayer.

Jesus says to his disciples, you have not because you ask not. Do you pray that Christ would sanctify you? Do you pray he would reveal more of your sins to you? Do you pray that he would give you more faith? That's His means to get that strength into you. God doesn't need your prayers, but they are His way, His method of accomplishing good in your life. He's promised to hear our prayers.

It is a means of grace. And again, the means of grace are means to Christ. Sometimes we think of the means of grace as though, the sacraments, as though they are something, they're added on top of Christ. The word is something added on top of Christ. That's not true. They are the way that Christ, who is in heaven, gets his life down to you. Tangible, practical things. So the means of grace. That's not the only way our life is nourished in Christ. Yes, the sap of grace, the sap of Christ flows into the branches from this nourishment of life, from the word, from the means of grace. But there's another way that you nourish a vine. You don't just nourish a vine by just letting it grow, letting the branches go wild. Something else you have to do, you gotta prune. You gotta prune. We see that right away in this passage.

I am the true vine, and my father is the vine dresser. I remember the first time that I ever properly pruned a grapevine that we had in our yard. Dad had planted a grapevine a long time ago, and it didn't really do anything, so he mowed over it for a couple of years, and it came back, so Dad put up a little trellis and produced grapes the first year, but then the second year it wasn't really producing much, and it was just looking kind of scraggly. And Dad didn't really think much of it. I was like, well, Dad, let me prune that. I've been working at the vineyard lately. I can prune this thing.

And I remember I pruned it up, and Dad comes to me later. He's like, Hunter, I think you killed it. What'd you do? Remember that, Dad? Like, I think you killed it. What do you think you're doing? Because I'd taken this branch, and I'd cut off everything except for these two little branches. And he was like, what's going to happen? I was like, just you wait, Dad.

Because the way pruning works is now all that sap from the vine, all that sap doesn't go to maintaining all this wood, maintaining all these branches. Now it goes to just produce, so that these branches produce fruit. And that's true in your Christian life. Sometimes we think of pruning as though it's just removing the dead stuff, and that's definitely true. You remove the dead branches so that they don't get diseased. But the vast majority of what you cut off when you're pruning is living branches, living shoots off those branches that are full of green sap.

And you'll think, why are you cutting those off? because you gotta focus the plant's energy on producing fruit, and that is what God does in your life. This is why this passage is one of the scariest for me, because I read this and I'm like, that means God isn't just gonna cut off the sinful things in my life. He might cut off non-sinful things. He might cut off perfectly fine things, perfectly good things, things I love and enjoy, simply because he wants me to focus on producing fruit. Now how does God do that?

Well, they can think of two ways. One is mentioned right here in the passage through the word. What does Jesus say in verse two? In verse three, already you are clean because of the word I've spoken to you. This interesting word play happening here. The word for pruning is the same word used for cleansing. And so when Jesus says you are already clean because of the word I've spoken to you, he's saying you are already pruned because of the word I've spoken to you.

There are times you'll be listening to a sermon, you'll be hearing the Word, you'll be reading the Word, and you'll realize there's something in your life that shouldn't be there. It may not be a bad thing, it could be a bad sinful thing, but it could just be a distraction.

And that's God's Word pruning you. There's another method, the rougher scissors, so to speak, of trials. How many of you experienced a trial, a difficulty, that has functioned as something to prune in your life, that has removed things that you thought were important, and they're moved away, and all of a sudden you have all this energy to serve Christ. That is God's gracious pruning.

It's not fun. If you were to like, if plants could speak, if the grapevines could speak, and I was walking down the rows of the Red Trail Vineyard cutting away at all the vines, they'd be yelling, no, I need that branch, no, don't cut that one, I need that one. That's a really good one, but it's going the wrong way. That's what it looks like.

That's how we're nourished. That's how we grow in our union with Christ. It's like a vine. We get the sap from Christ through the means of grace, and the Father graciously prunes us. Graciously prunes us. And that leads from the nourishment of life into the fruit of life. What is the fruit? What is the fruit that God wants us to focus on as we grow in our union with Christ? Well, in one word, it's love. It's love. Look what he says, look what Jesus says in John chapter 15. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

This idea that the fruit of the Spirit can be condensed down into love shouldn't surprise us. What are the two great commandments? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the Law and the Prophets. Ultimately, it's love. Now, how should we express that love? Is this love just some ethereal feeling as though we're just supposed to be nice to everyone? No, the Bible actually tells us how to exercise that love.

And that's the commandments, particularly the Ten Commandments. If you want a summary, that's not me talking, that's Jesus talking. Look at verse 10, if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. How do we abide in the love of Christ? We keep his commandments. That's how we do it. And when we keep the commandments, when we focus on keeping the commandments, when we learn the 10 commandments, when we strive to keep them as best as we can, we're not being legalists. Rather, we are abiding in Christ. We are striving to be more like Christ.

Jesus even says, as I have kept the commandments, you keep them. As I have kept them, you keep them. That's the fruit. It's ultimately, ultimately, to conform our lives to God's word, to conform our lives to what God has said, is really to conform ourselves to the image of Christ. What was Jesus like? Look at what God commands. You shall not covet. Jesus never coveted anything. You shall not lie. There was no deceit in his mouth.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus loved the Father with all his heart, with all his mind, and with all his strength. He loved his neighbor as himself. That's who Jesus was, and that is who we are to conform our lives to.

One more note here as we wrap up. When we talk about the nourishment of life, being in the means of grace, some of you might be thinking, well, that seems so commonplace. I mean, the means of grace, you know, the Word, the sacraments, that's what everyone has. Isn't there something more? Isn't there something else I can look for, I can find? Isn't there like a way I can get directly to Christ? I want to caution you against that.

Now, We wanna preface this by saying, Christ can and does show up in unexpected places all the time. You might be hiking in a mountain, you have this profound experience of the grace of Christ and you realize, wow, Christ is amazing, God is glorious. And you have this revival in your life and God shows himself to you in that instance. And that's wonderful, that's great.

Christ is not subject to our commands. He can do as he pleases. But where do we look for Jesus? Where do we expect to find him? We expect to find him where he's promised he'll be. Jesus never promised to be with you on a mountain. Jesus never promised to reveal himself to you by in some strange vision or dream. What has he promised? If you abide in my word, if you come to my table, that is where Jesus has promised to be. If you come to me in prayer, if you come to me in baptism, that is where I've promised to be.

If I'm looking for Rob, I might meet him at the grocery store. I might meet him at the hardware store. I might meet him passing on the street. And if I do, cool. If I'm looking for Rob, I'm going to his house. I'm going to his workplace. I'm going to where he said he'll be, especially if he were to call me and say, honor, if you need me, this is where I'll be.

That is how we grow in our union with Christ. We grow in our union with Christ through, ultimately, through the source of life, Jesus Christ himself. It is in Jesus we grow. He is our source of life, and we need no other. How do we get to Christ? We get to Christ through the, how do we nourish in that life? We are nourished through the means of grace, the means he's given us, the word, the sacraments. And that life continually is nourished as God graciously prunes us, cutting away things that aren't helpful, things that will divert our attention, sinful things that will harm us. And what is the fruit that we're to strive to grow?

Well, it's keeping his commandments. It's loving him. Will we ever do it perfectly in this life? Of course not. Will we strive? Will we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling? We must. It's wonderful. Any questions? All right, let's close with a word of prayer.

Our Father and our God, we thank you for this glorious doctrine, this great comfort to us that we don't have to look and strive and go on some quest to find you, but you have revealed yourself to us. You've given yourself to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. You've given us these gracious means of grace, these things that are commonplace, and that's good, because we're common people. Ask, Lord, that you would help us to treasure these, to treasure your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, more. even as we continue to grow. In His holy and precious name, amen.