

II. Being one with Christ: What does it mean to be united to Jesus?

Aim: To show how Christ takes all that is ours and gives us all that is his in his union with us and to explain that this is the centre of the gospel and the Christian life.

Review: Last week we looked at the greater story of the gospel by seeing God's acts in Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. We saw how the bible tells us the great story of the world and what wonderful plan God has with humanity. We looked at how God created us to be his image, how this image was lost through sin and how it is being restored through Jesus.

Last week we spoke about how we are justified by God through placing our faith in Jesus. Today we will look at the heart of the gospel. How can it be, for example, that we receive Jesus' righteousness when we believe in him? Or how are we reconciled to God and adopted into his family through faith?

2.1. Union with Christ as the centre

Today's topic is about "union with Christ". This might sound a bit abstract to you and you may have never heard of this. To make it more tangible, let's start with an **illustration**:

When people get married, they enter a union with each other. This has a legal dimension: They sign a document in the presence of witnesses that officially declares them a married couple. I don't know the legal peculiarities of this in the UK but in Germany that means you now live together in one household, you often have a joint bank account, you have a specific tax code and so on. Your official, legal, status changes.

But this also has a relational dimension. A married couple shares their lives with each other in most intimate way. They depend on one another, they walk through life together. They love and trust one another and are each other's closest companions. They are in this dynamic of knowing the other person but also getting to know that person more and more as the years go on.

They have entered a union with each other that is characterized by trust and love and that is framed by legal obligations. They each trust that the other will keep his or her promises made at the wedding ceremony. And even though they enter the deepest humanly possible

relationship, each one remains his own person. Yet you cannot think of one without also thinking of the other.

A married couple shares with each other all they have. Their material things like money, their home, cars, food. But also their emotions, experiences, time. One's joy becomes the other's joy. One's suffering becomes the other's suffering too.

When we become Christians, so when we put our faith in Jesus, he binds himself to us. He takes everything that is ours and he gives us all that is his.

The first thing we need to look at is what this union is and how it comes about.

First of all, the bible doesn't use the term "Union with Christ". We use it because it summarizes what the bible teaches about this theme. In the New Testament we mostly encounter this theme through metaphors like marriage, baptism and the body of Christ but also through phrases that especially Paul and John love to use, like "in Christ", "with Christ", "into Christ" and "through Christ".

When you read Paul's epistles, for example, you will encounter these phrases constantly. Pretty much on every page.

You will notice that while we can describe our union with Christ, we can't fully define it. It has so many facets. And at its core, this is a mystery. We cannot fully understand our union with Christ. It's something to behold and to worship God for. We can understand it enough to learn what this means for us as Christians. But we can't grasp it.

2.2. Joined to Jesus by the Spirit

Let's look at a text that illumines this for us:

Romans 8:1-2: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.

²For the law of the **Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus** from the law of sin and death.

There are many things here worth going into that we don't have time for. We will probably revisit this passage in a few weeks, when we talk about our new life in the Spirit. For now, I want you to understand two strange phrases that we encounter here.

The text begins with a statement: There is no longer condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**. What does Paul mean when he says that we are in Christ Jesus?

To be in Jesus means to be connected to him, to be joined to him. It means to be in a relationship with him. We are so closely tied to him that whatever is true of him is true of us. That's what we mean by the term "union": Jesus unites us to himself like a groom unites with his bride on the wedding day.

Why, then, is there no condemnation for those who **believe** in Christ? Because by faith, we **are** in him. He takes our unrighteousness away and gives us his perfect righteousness in this union so that we stand before God as righteous, clothed with Christ's garments.

What Jesus has accomplished **for us** becomes ours only when we are **in him**.

How are we united to Jesus?

Verse 2 shows us how, though this needs a bit of explaining. There are two opposites here: The **law of the Spirit of life** and the **law of sin and death**.

What is meant here with the word "law" is the "**authority**" or "**principle**" of the Holy Spirit on the one hand and that of sin and death on the other.

The way in which sin and death work is to enslave us, to make it impossible for us to help ourselves or even seek for God and they make us guilty before him. Under the power of sin and death we are justly condemned by God.

The way the Holy Spirit works is that he sets us free from the power of sin and death and gives us new life. How does he do this? In Christ.

What I believe this means is, the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus. If the Spirit does not work in us, then Jesus remains outside of us. Everything that Jesus accomplished (forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, new life, and so on) remains completely useless to us so long as we are not united to him.

Illustration:

Think of a woman that has fallen very ill. She is so ill, in fact, that she is completely bed-bound. There is a medicine can heal her, but it's out of reach. Then the doctor comes, brings that

medicine and gives it to her. That is what the Spirit does: He takes the medicine we so desperately need and feeds it to us. That is: He unites us to Jesus by faith.

The theologian John Calvin expressed it this way: “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectively unites us with himself.”¹

The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ unites us with himself. But how does he do it?

Ephesians 2:8: For **by grace** you have been saved **through faith**. And this is not your own doing; **it is the gift of God**.

What does this text say? Our salvation is our own work by 0.0%. The grace we have received as well as the faith by which we received that grace is all a gift of God. It is his work in us.

Do you remember what we said about the nature of faith last week? It is to look away from ourselves and anything else than Jesus alone. To put our faith in Jesus is to fix our eyes on him and to stretch out our open and empty hands to receive him.

Here we learn that not only his grace but even the faith we need is something we cannot do. But God gives us faith as a gift. Now, Paul isn't bothered here to explain how exactly this happens. But he does in another passage where he talks about how we receive the love of God.

A few chapters earlier in Romans 5:5 Paul writes: **God's love** has been **poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit** who has been **given to us**.

We see here that the Holy Spirit has poured the love of God into the hearts of us who believe in Jesus. He is the agent in this. We are filled with God's love through the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean that the love of God is poured into our hearts?

God has shown his love for us by sending Jesus to die for us while we were still enslaved to sin and to satisfy the Father's wrath to reconcile us with him while we were the enemies of God (5:6-11).

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection we can be forgiven and reconciled with God. When Paul says that the Holy Spirit has poured the love of God into our hearts, he means to say that

¹ Institutio, III,1,1.

the Spirit is the one who connects us to Jesus so that we receive the forgiveness and reconciliation he has won for us.

Now, interestingly, Paul mentions that this is done **through the Spirit who has been given to us**. God lets us know his love by a person. God gives us his Spirit and so the Spirit is the love of God present in us.

Imagine a cup that into which the best drink you can think of is poured so that it's overflowing. In this picture, our hearts are like an empty cup. As the Spirit comes to us he fills this cup, our hearts, with the love of God.

By choosing the word "love" Paul reminds us that God's motivation to save us was love. He saved you because he loves you. And having the love of God poured into our hearts by the Spirit who has been given to us means that the Spirit brings us into a relationship with God that is characterized by love. We experience God's love through the Holy Spirit because he binds us to Jesus.

Our salvation is entirely the work of God. Even our faith. God places us into the reconciled relationship with himself through the Spirit.

An immediate application here is that we can be certain that God loves us. Maybe you struggle with doubt about whether God still loves you after you did something wrong. Maybe you don't feel like God loves you because of the mess you are. That may be because we treat our family members badly, or we have a bad habit or addiction we keep falling into. Now, clearly these things are bad, and we must walk in obedience to God rather than not caring about our sin. But messing up does not change God's love to you.

Jesus reconciled us with the Father while we were his enemies. It's the Spirit of God that has poured the love of God into your heart by joining you to Jesus. God's love to you depends on himself, not on you. You don't have the strength to earn God's love or to be worthy of it. But the work of God in you is that he pours his love into your heart out of grace. And because the Spirit dwells in us, we can be certain that God continues to love us. He is no Hollywood star who has a new lover every other week. He is faithful.

2.3. Adoption

This takes us to a teaching in the New Testament we call "adoption":

It says in **Galatians 4:4-7**: ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ **to redeem** those who were under the law, **so that we might receive adoption as sons.** ⁶ **And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”** ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

What does this text say?

- God sent his Son
- Jesus became like us: He was born of a woman, so he has become true human. And he was born under the law of God as all humans are.
- He did this to redeem “those under the law”. That’s you and me. While we are all unable to keep the law of God because of fallenness and enslavement to sin and are thus under the condemnation of God, Jesus was able to keep the law of God perfectly in our stead.
- By redeeming us God also adopted us as his children. By annulling our guilt, Jesus also reconciled us with the Father, so that we might receive sonship instead of staying slaves.

Verse 6 means this: Jesus’ work on the cross is the **objective** or **legal** side of this. Sending the Spirit into our hearts is the **subjective** or **relational** side of this.

Illustration: Any coin has two sides: heads and tails. Both sides show different symbols: One side shows a portrait of Queen Elisabeth II with a number of latin inscriptions. The other side shows different symbols, the worth of the coin, namely two pound and shows the year it was printed, in this case, 2006. Both sides belong to the exact same coin.

Redemption and adoption are like two sides of the same coin. Those who are redeemed by Jesus are also adopted by God. Because Jesus has redeemed us and bought our adoption into God’s family, God also sends his Spirit to unite us with Jesus so that we share in his sonship.

Think about this: Because the holy Spirit unites us with Jesus, we can call God “Father” in the same way that Jesus calls him Father!

We see again that what Jesus has done only becomes meaningful for us when the Spirit works in us. Jesus is present in us through his Holy Spirit who dwells in us and unites us to Jesus so that we adopted into God’s family.

But Jesus’ sonship and our sonship through adoption are not completely the same.

Jesus has enjoyed the love of the Father perfectly and fully from eternity, without interruption, and that did not change when he took on a human nature.

When the Spirit joins us to Jesus he shares with us his standing. **He is the unique Son of God. When we are united to Jesus, we become son's.**

He has always been the divine son of God by nature. We become children of God by grace. We don't become Jesus, but we become like him. Jesus shares the love of God with us. In him we can be sure that we are loved, because the Father never stops loving the Son and so, never stops loving us in the same way he loves Jesus.

2.4. Jesus is the gospel

What I hope has become clear now, is that the Holy Spirit is the one who joins us to Jesus. We are in union with Christ because the Spirit works faith in us and binds us to Jesus.

Earlier I have said a few things about what being in this Union with Christ means. I used sentences like "He takes everything that is ours and he gives us all that is his", or "What Jesus has accomplished **for us** becomes ours only when we are **in him**".

Let's make these phrases a bit clearer. The essence of this is that we come to enjoy the gifts of grace which Jesus has for us when we receive Jesus himself. That is, when we enter into union with him.

Illustration:

Think of the gospel as a spider-web. On this web are different circles that are all areas that the gospel touches. Say one of them is about what Jesus accomplished at the cross, another is about the resurrection, another is about how we become children of God and yet another is about the church. "Union with Christ" is the thread of the web, that runs through all these topics and connects them.

That means, everything that God does, he does in his Son Jesus. And we receive everything that Jesus accomplished by **being in Jesus**.

The gospel is not primarily about what we get from Jesus – **Jesus is the gospel**. Our faith is not about **acquiring** the benefits Jesus has but about **embracing** Jesus. When we put our faith

in Jesus, we cling to him. And he lavishes his gifts on us.² So at the heart of the gospel is communion, or fellowship with Jesus that is made possible through the Spirit who dwells in our hearts. A personal relationship that is so deep that we are said to be **in** Christ.

Now, let's look at some texts that show us the riches we receive in Christ.

2 Cor 1:20: ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

This is such a stunningly comprehensive statement. In the context of this passage Paul is emphasizing the faithfulness of God. How does he know that God keeps his word? By looking at Christ. But he claims more than that. He claims here that God has fulfilled or is fulfilling all his promises in his Son Jesus Christ. That means, friends, that we receive these promises not by our own merit, but by being in Christ.

Remember the Promise God made in the story of the Fall when he spoke to the snake? That promise is fulfilled in Jesus. God has promised to Abraham that in him all peoples of the earth shall be blessed and that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in heaven. This promise, too, is fulfilled in Christ. Take every promise God has made in the Old Testament: They all find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

Romans 6:23: ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is **eternal life in Christ Jesus** our Lord.

In our union with Christ, we receive the free gift that is eternal life instead of the death we deserve.

Romans 8:1: There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.

We have talked about this verse earlier. We are no longer under God's condemnation but are now in Christ.

Colossians 1:13-14: ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ **in whom** we have **redemption**, the **forgiveness** of sins.

Before we were redeemed by Jesus, we were under the power of darkness, that is, sin and evil. But God has rescued us from darkness and has put us into the kingdom where his Son Jesus

² Macaskill, Union, 82-4.

reigns. And in our union with Jesus, we have redemption, which is the forgiveness of our sins and with that the rescue from the power of sin over us.

Colossians 2:9-10: ⁹For **in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily**, ¹⁰and **you have been filled in him**, who is the head of all rule and authority.

This sounds a bit difficult because Paul expresses himself poetically here. What he means is this: In Jesus, who is true man and true God, God is fully present.

Everything God the Father is, Jesus is. In Jesus, God really has come to us. Anyone who sees Jesus, sees the Father. Jesus is the full, and perfect image of God.

“you have been filled in him” means that Jesus shares his glory with us and brings us into the presence of God. Christ is in a perfect union with God the Father. He is in a relationship with the Father that is indescribably glorious and beautiful. By being filled in Christ, we partake in this wonderful relationship.

You could say that Jesus brings us into the fullness of God where we become complete and restored. Also, being filled in him means to have everything we need fully there. There is nothing to be found outside of Christ: No higher spiritual experience, no glory, no life.

As a side: This is really important for our everyday life. Where do you seek your fulfilment? Jesus gives us all we need and more. And also: Jesus is not just the starting point of the christian life, he is the christian life.

So please, do not follow those who promise you “higher” and “better” spiritual experiences through special methods or by having “enough faith” for your hope to become reality. Cling to Jesus. You don’t save yourself by having “enough faith”. You are saved by Christ through placing your weak and feeble faith on him to save you.

2 Corinthians 5:17: ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is **in Christ**, he is a **new creation**.

We’ve talked about this text in our last session. Today I only want to point out how we become part of the new creation: By being in Christ. That is, one with him, united to him. He brings about the new creation. Being in him, we are part of this new creation.

2 Corinthians 5:21: ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that **in him we might become the righteousness of God**.

Again, Jesus carried our sin but was sinless himself and has given us his righteousness, while we have no righteousness ourselves. Being in Jesus, we receive his righteousness. An exchange happened: Jesus took away all our sin and gave us his righteousness. This is because we are so closely identified with Jesus in our union with him, that what is true of him becomes true of us.

Colossians 2:6-7: ⁶ Therefore, as you **received Christ Jesus** the Lord, so **walk in him**, ⁷ **rooted and built up in him** and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

We are saved when we receive Christ in faith. That is how we begin in Jesus. But our new life as Christians too is in Christ. To walk in him means to continually believe and remain in Jesus. So Jesus doesn't just help us back on our feet and then asks us to walk in obedience to him with a little help from the Spirit. Every breath we take and every step we walk as Christians we breathe and walk as people who are united to Christ. In this union we are saved and walk in obedience to him. More on this on our last session.

It is not only we in Christ but also Christ who dwells in us through his Spirit:

Colossians 1:27: To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**.

Paul says that the full scope of the gospel has been a mystery that was only revealed when Jesus came. Now we see this mystery unveiled: Christ is present in us and that is the sure hope of glory. That is, because Jesus unites us to himself, we can be certain that we will be with him in the new creation.

John 15:4-5: ⁴ **Abide in me, and I in you.** As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you **abide in me**. ⁵ 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.

Jesus tells his disciples that we are to remain in Jesus. That is, to continually put our faith in him. The picture Jesus uses here is that of a wine tree. A branch will only bring fruit if it is joined to the vine. If it remains in the vine, it will bring fruit because it receives life from the vine. If the branch is cut off from the vine it will die and not bring any fruit.

Jesus applies this to us: We are to remain in our union with him. So we are to stay in communion with him. And he promises that he will remain in us too. By focusing on Jesus we will bear “fruit” that is, we will live in our new life in Christ and we will be changed.

This is merely a small collection of texts. And I have only focused on Paul’s epistles here. Btw there is so much from Colossians here because that’s where I’ve dealt with this topic most extensively. But this really is all over the New Testament.

Summarize:

- We receive all of God’s promises in Christ.
- In Christ we receive the free gift of eternal life.
- In Christ there is no condemnation.
- In Christ we are redeemed and our sins are forgiven.
- In Christ we partake in the wonderful relationship between Jesus and the Father.
- In Christ, we are part of the new creation.
- In Christ we receive his righteousness.
- As we received Christ, so we also walk in him in our new life in Christ.
- Christ is in us, this is our hope.
- As we remain in Christ and Christ in us, we bring fruit.

Virtually every aspect of the gospel, of what it means to be a Christian and what Christ has done for us, flows to us from our union with Christ.³

2.5. Dying and rising with Christ

I want to look at two short passages with you in which we are told that when Jesus died, in a sense we died too. And when God raised him from the dead, we were raised with him.

Colossians 2:12-13: ¹² having been **buried with him** in baptism, in which you were also **raised with him** through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And **you, who were dead** in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **God made alive together with him**, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [...].

³ For further study: John 5-6.14-16.17; Rom 6.8; 1 Cor 7-8; 1 John 1-2.

Our baptism signifies what happened to us when we put our faith in Christ: As Jesus' dead body was buried, so were we. As Jesus was raised by God on the third day, so we were made alive with him. It wasn't just your sin that Jesus bore on the cross – it was your old, dead self.

When Jesus died on the cross and bought our redemption, we died with him. By faith we are also raised to resurrection life, as new creatures. Like Jesus.

Now, we must be careful here. There are important ways in which our death with Christ is not the same as Christ's: Only Jesus took care of our sin and paid the price. Only he carried the wrath of God and bore our punishment. And only he was able to swallow up all our sin and be victorious over death, sin and Satan. Jesus did that. We didn't.

But, in our union with Christ we are so closely identified with Christ that we participate in this event: Because we are united to Jesus, his death for sin means that our old sinful selves died there. His resurrection means that we were raised with him to new life.

But how can someone who is dead in sins die? There is a paradox here: In union with Christ, we die to our deadness and become alive to a new life. The point is that this is only possible in and with Christ.

Christ's death and resurrection are in very important ways events that happened without our direct involvement in it. Christ did this in our stead and for our sake. But as the Spirit joins us to Jesus through faith, we become identified with Jesus and what he did: Suddenly, his death to

Sinclair Ferguson: *"Believers are so united to Christ that all he is and has done for us becomes our possession too. When Christ died upon the cross, in some sense we died with him; when he rose from the grave, we also rose with him."*⁴

2.6. **From suffering to glory:** Sharing in the suffering and glory of Jesus. Descent, death, Resurrection, Ascension

The last theme I want to look at with you is how we share in the story of Jesus. Jesus condescended from his heavenly glory and entered humanity. He united himself to us by becoming human. Now, when we are united to him, he shares with us all that is his. And that

⁴ Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 61.

includes his story: Jesus suffered in his life as human and death on the cross, he was raised from the dead in victory over sin and death, and he ascended into glory. In our union with Christ, we are taken into these events.

Colossians 3:1-4: If then you have been **raised with Christ**, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ **For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.** ⁴ **When Christ who is your life** appears, then you also will appear **with him in glory**.

Two decisive things have happened to us in union with Christ: Our old selves have died with him, and we were resurrected to new-creation-life with him.

As those who were resurrected with Jesus, we are to turn our whole attention on Christ who is in heaven and live in the new life in Christ. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, and we are to set our minds and hearts on him and live lives in accordance with Jesus.

Him being “seated at the right hand of God” means that he has been exalted after his humiliation on the cross and now reigns over his kingdom. God the Father has appointed him to be king.

Then Paul writes something staggering: And your new life is hidden with Christ in God. At some point, Christ will return in glory, and then we will fully share in his glory.

Last week we spoke about how Jesus began the new creation through his death and resurrection and how this is not yet fully there. While we wait for Jesus to come, we are hidden with him from the eyes of this world in God the Father.

Jesus is presently hidden from the eyes of the world. He is in heaven and “**in God**” like we are in Christ. So, he is in the deepest and most wonderfully intimate relationship with the Father. That we are hidden **with** Christ **in** God means that we partake in this relationship because Christ shares this with us. Our new life is hidden, because Christ is hidden.

This means, **firstly**, that our new-creation-life is hidden away from the sight of nonbelievers. To the eyes of the world it seems like nothing is there. The kingdom over which Jesus reigns seems not to exist. It’s hidden.

Secondly, our life is secure in Christ. It cannot be destroyed or stolen. We are safe. Think of a Baby that grows in the mother's womb: It's the best place for the baby to be. It's nurtured, warmed and protected. And it is hidden. It's already evidently there. And the longer the pregnancy the clearer that will be. But until the day of the birth. The child remains hidden and safe.

Thirdly, our life hidden with Christ means that we have yet to wait for the fullness of glory with him. While we wait, we must suffer like Jesus suffered.

He promised us that himself:

John 16:33: In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Tribulation means hardship and suffering. Because we belong to Jesus and the world hates Jesus, we will be hated too.

As Jesus was humiliated and suffered, so will we be humiliated and so we suffer with him. But we do this in communion with him. If he suffered, we suffer. If he died, we die. If we was resurrected, we are too. If he is now glorified, we will be too. We share in his history.

When Jesus appears in glory, we will be glorified with him. The fullness of our life with him will be revealed then. In verse 4 Jesus is called "our life", because we receive everything from him and with him. There is no life outside of him. As believers we are so closely identified with Jesus and so closely united to him that he **is** our life.

Illustration:

Think of an acorn. The fruit that grows on oak trees. The way oak trees grow is through these acorns. They fall on the ground and get covered by the earth. As this acorn sits in the ground its dark, no one knows where it is, and it dies. But given enough time, a massive tree will grow out of this acorn.

As we are hidden with Christ in this way, often we see only darkness and death, and our walk with Christ certainly feels like dying at times. But to have my own life so intimately connected to that of Jesus frees me from the fear of death. It frees me from the fear of loneliness - for how can I be truly alone when I am hidden with Christ?

In our life in Christ, we go from suffering to glory. As people who have died and risen with him, who are hidden with him and will be glorified with him, God changes us into people who resemble Jesus.

End

Friends, you are hidden with Christ in God. Jesus shares everything with you he has and is. He even shares in very life with you. Take heart. You are safe in him. Don't be discouraged. What is hidden now will be revealed in glory. Not even death can take away from you what you have in Jesus. So, turn your eyes upon Jesus. Enjoy him and the wonderful gifts he lavishes you with. Embrace him. Throw yourself onto him. Trust him. Jesus is the gospel.

