

UNDERSTANDING UNION WITH CHRIST - Why It Isn't Just Religious Pretending - Part one

Teaching #1922 - Sunday, October 16th, 2016 - 10:00 a.m.

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Colossians 1:24-29 - "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, [25] of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, [26] the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. [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. [28] Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. [29] For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

Some misunderstandings of the Christian faith are more minor in nature. Not that any truth is insignificant, but some errors aren't of such a nature that anything of the core of Christianity is damaged. People have had strange and conflicting ideas about angels, demons, and the millennium for as long as ideas about these things have existed.

Other misunderstandings are fatal. I don't mean they are always *perceived* as fatal to spiritual life. The fact that these major distortions of truth even exist proves people aren't always aware of their danger. But there are some central core realities that can't be distorted without changing the religion we're participating in. Some truths *define* what the Christian religion *is*. Remove them and we're not discussing Christianity anymore. We're talking about *another* religion while still using the remnants of Christian terminology.

This is a series of teachings about *union with Christ*. And the text I chose to open with is important for *two reasons*:

First, it's important because Paul repeats the idea of union with Christ from both ends of the doctrine. And what I mean by that is he writes both of *Christ in us* - "...Christ in you, the hope of glory..." and he writes of *our being in Christ* - "...that we may present everyone mature in Christ." So the emphasis is on *union*. Christ is *in* us. We are *in* Christ. And, whatever Paul means by those terms, this is clearly the *means by which* we are benefitted by the life and death of God the Son. Everything seems to hinge on *oneness with Christ*.

Second, this text is important because in it Paul underscores his point that it is only this union with Christ that offers any one of us hope - "...Christ in you, the hope of glory." Clearly, what Paul means to say is it is only this *union with Christ's Person* that accomplishes anything *hopeful* for all of us who profess His Name. So there is this distinction made between hope coming from something Christ has done externally *for* us and hope that comes from our being *in* Christ - united in what He accomplished *in His Person*.

Notice, hope doesn't reside in receiving something *from* Christ. I'll spend weeks expanding on this central point because it is one of those points where any misunderstanding *dismantles Christianity into another religion entirely*. But for now just note that hope - and in particular, *hope of eternal glory* - as described in the teaching of Paul and Jesus and John and the rest of the New Testament, resides in *being one with Christ*. The *union* is what brings the *hope*. We are *without hope* apart from this union with Christ. Hope isn't found in any *gift* Christ gives *externally from Himself* or any *accomplishment* of Christ *externally applied*.

This union with Christ is so important the New Testament doesn't know how to speak of Christianity apart from it. Paul alone uses these *union expressions* ("in Christ, "in Christ Jesus," "in the Lord," and "in Him") **164 times** in his letters. Contrast that number with our common emphasis on *"receiving Christ"* (used twice) or *"accepting Christ,"* (which is never used even once in the Scriptures).

And yet *union with Christ* or *oneness with Christ* receives much less mention in the church than other subjects describing how Christ affects change in believers. And that's what we need to look at first:

1) **THE NEW TESTAMENT NEVER TREATS THE BENEFITS OF SALVATION AS EXTERNAL GIFTS FROM JESUS CHRIST**

A quick survey is all we can accomplish here:

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

Justification is to be had *in Christ* - **Romans 8:1** - “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*.”

Sanctification is had solely *in Christ* - **1 Corinthians 1:2** - “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified *in Christ Jesus*, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours....”

We are “**seated in heavenly places**” *in Christ* - **Ephesians 2:5-6** - “...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together *with Christ*—by grace you have been saved— [6] and raised us up *with him* and seated us *with him* in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*....”

We are **created anew** *in Christ* - **2 Corinthians 5:17** - “Therefore, if anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

We receive **adoption of sons and daughters of God** *in Christ* - **Galatians 3:25-26** - “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, [26] for *in Christ Jesus* you are all sons of God, through faith.”

It would wear us all out to prove the point that this concept isn’t exclusive to Paul. John’s gospel and epistles creak under the mass of the same kind of references, only John is more inclined to ***picture*** this reality than ***describe*** it. John constantly points to the nature of our ***union with Christ*** by speaking of Jesus (and often ***quoting*** Jesus) as ***living bread*** eaten and digested, and ***living water*** taken internally, quenching thirst. The disciples are stunned and confused at Jesus’ instruction about “***eating His flesh and drinking His blood***.” Jesus is described as ***being eternal life in Himself***. Jesus is ***the vine in which the branches abide*** so the life of the vine is ***in*** the branch. He is ***the way the truth, and the life***. Notice, He doesn’t just ***bestow*** these things. He ***is*** these things in His own Personhood.

So here’s where I land looking at this first point. It is no exaggeration to say ***union with Christ*** is simply ***the*** definition of Christianity in the New Testament. Its authors - and our Lord Himself - have no other way of considering the Christian life. It can’t be explained in any other way without seriously reducing or distorting it. And that has huge implications for Christian discipleship.

2) **CHRISTIANITY IS CHANGED INTO ANOTHER RELIGION WHEN THE BENEFITS ACCOMPLISHED BY CHRIST ARE TAKEN AS EXTERNAL GIFTS RATHER THAN PARTICIPATED IN ONLY WHEN WE ARE LIVING OUR WHOLE LIVES “IN CHRIST”**

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think there is one Christian in a thousand who regularly ***thinks*** of his or her Christian life in the theological setting I’ve just described. Our ***oneness with Christ*** is not an easy concept to ***picture*** and is even ***more*** difficult to describe. So, no, I doubt very many of us wade through these deep waters that often.

That’s not my point here. My point is the church has been ***affected*** by this misunderstanding even when not ***considering*** it. And I think you can see it with me when you stop to look at it.

Just as an introductory example, how do you picture receiving ***forgiveness*** from Jesus when you sin? Do you picture Jesus, perhaps with a loving, patient smile on His face, standing somewhere near you, holding out a hand, offering you forgiveness the way I used to offer my daughters an allowance? I mean, do you see

forgiveness as some kind of **external gift Jesus offers you?** Do you see Him **giving it to you** when you need it and then you can come **back** to Him if you need it again?

Don't feel bad if you do. I think this is the common mental picture many of us have been raised with. But there are huge problems with this **external gift picture of forgiveness**. Sooner or later you're going to wonder about that forgiveness. Perhaps you'll feel you've sinned too seriously, or once too often. And what if Jesus gets impatient - tired of extending forgiveness over and over for the same sin?

Or worse, you may start into some repeated sin with growing carelessness because you can just **get your forgiveness from Jesus and live the rest of your life on your own terms**. After all, if you get your forgiveness from Jesus **externally** why can't you live the rest of your personal life **externally** from His Lordship as well?

But what if we all began to think differently? What if we all came to see we never do **receive** forgiveness from Jesus like an external Christmas present? What if we all came to see the whole goal of our lives was to live in **union with Christ** - to be so constantly and consciously **"in Christ"** who is the One who **paid sin's price on the cross and fulfilled the law of God perfectly** - who is the very Person in whom **redemption is accomplished** and a **brand new creation is begun?**

And what if my forgiveness doesn't rest on my **feeling** forgiven and my **attitude toward holiness** is shaped by being **united to the One who never sinned?** What if we all really understood forgiveness never could be **taken from Christ** apart from our **ongoing abiding in Christ?** Wouldn't that go a long way to take the **cheapness** out of grace? Wouldn't we start **looking for deeper transformation** in our hearts?

I know I haven't yet actually analyzed the nature of this union with Christ. I know we haven't yet considered its shape and how it happens. That's all yet to come. But I want to wrap this teaching up with a shocking text that, at the very least, drives our minds deeper into a reality that, once understood, shapes everything else about our walk as disciples of Christ.

3) THE SCRIPTURES MEAN FOR US TO TAKE ONENESS WITH CHRIST VERY LITERALLY

This is constantly seen as a behavior altering reality. And here is just one very shocking example:

1 Corinthians 6:13-29 - "....The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. [14] And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. [15] Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? ***Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?*** Never! [16] Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." [17] But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. [18] Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. [19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Just to be clear. It is **not** the argument of this text that Jesus doesn't want us to commit sexual immorality and I want to please Jesus, so I will stay pure. To see only that in this text is a drastic reduction of its message.

Paul **isn't** saying, **"Jesus would never have sex with a prostitute so you, as a follower of Jesus, shouldn't either."** Paul is saying something far more shocking than that. And here it is. Paul is saying **"When you have sex with a prostitute, such is the nature of your oneness with Him by the Spirit, that Jesus is having sex with her too! Are you going to drag a Jesus into your actual union with a prostitute?"**

And if you find that too mind boggling to believe, I can't find any other way to interpret those explosive words in

verse 15 - "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? *Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!*"

This is unbelievable. It has to do with **two very different** approaches to holiness. If I resist sexual impurity because Jesus says I shouldn't misbehave I am trying my best to keep a rule - even a very good rule. But if I'm aware of my **union with Christ** my motive for holiness becomes **love for Jesus oriented**. There is a **relational** issue at stake. Not a **rule** issue.

My union with Christ is **literally** (just because this is a spiritual truth doesn't make it any less a **literal, actual reality**) - my union with Christ is literally just as real as my physical union with a prostitute would be.

My closing point needs restatement. Union with Christ is a **behavior-shaping** truth. It changes the way we consider everything to do with Christ and those who profess faith in Him. The **teachings** of Jesus can be received **externally**. But there is nothing else in the whole Christian faith that works apart from our being **"in Christ Jesus."**

You can study this truth and live in the greatness of it for the rest of your life - **"Christ in you - the hope of glory!"**