

Union with Christ

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Date: 15 June 2025

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[0 : 0 0] So, as I said, we're thinking this evening about the theme of union with Christ, and that takes us to questions of our identity.

! This week, in the news, Ed Sheeran declared that he now identifies as culturally Irish. He was raised in Suffolk, but his dad's from Belfast. All his holidays were spent there. That was the music he grew up with.

He enjoys family gatherings, and so he identifies as culturally Irish. And what caught my eye in the middle of his interviews, he said this, I don't think there's any rules to it, any rules to how we identify. It should be how you feel and what you lean into.

And I like that phrase, because I think as Christians, it's so important that what we feel about ourselves, what we lean into, is the truth that we are united to Christ.

That should define our identity. Of course, we know that thinking about our identity, there's that whole complex web of things. There's the various hats we wear through our lives, and there's the titles that we carry.

[1 : 1 0] There's the relationships that we have. And you can think about those for yourselves, whether you're thinking about a family setting, whether you're thinking about the workplace, whether you're thinking about life and community in general.

We have so many roles and responsibilities, all of which probably go into shaping our own sense of self. Well, the wonder of the Gospel is that as the Spirit comes and gives us new birth, that we get a new identity.

And that new identity is so powerful that it's intended to give us this whole new lens through which we view ourselves, but also a lens through which we view everything else and everyone else.

When we say, I am a Christian, that is no mere title. That is the most basic and fundamental element of our existence. And we know that because the New Testament writers, they really got this.

When you read through, especially the letters in the New Testament, we can clearly see that for first-generation believers, what was so important for them to discover and to learn was the truth of this new identity, and how that was to shape and change everything in their life.

[2 : 2 4] And then it's really interesting to think about how are Christians described in those letters. So we typically talk about ourselves, if we're Christians, as Christians. But that title only comes up four times in the New Testament.

But the idea of being in Christ comes up over 160, especially in Paul's letters. He's constantly talking about being in Christ. So we've got a couple of introductions to his letters to think about. First Corinthians chapter 1 verse 2, he's writing to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified, set apart for God in Christ. And then he says, I always thank my God because of His grace given you in Christ.

How are we set apart? How are we saved? How do we receive grace? In Christ. Ephesians 1, 3, wonderful verse. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Every good gift that we have as a Christian comes because we are in Christ. And so it's helpful for us to think about that. And really helpful, I think, the Bible gives us pictures, metaphors, symbols to help us.

[3 : 3 4] And so we're going to think about those three passages briefly together that we've already heard, that it might shape how we feel. If we're followers of Jesus, that it would influence what we lean into as we choose how to think about ourselves.

And there's a couple of books which I wish I remembered to bring. One we used to have on the church bookshelf by a guy called Rankin Wilborn, called Union with Christ.

That's a really helpful book. And then there's a fairly new book. Some of you may know Sam Albury. Used to be down in Cambridge, now he's over in Nashville. He's got a book, One with my Lord. If you want to read a really helpful, you know, kind of popular level treatment of this topic, that's a really good one. But anyway, so let's turn first of all to John chapter 15.

Think about that image of the vine and the branches to recognize that in union with Christ, Jesus gives us life. It's been good weather recently.

[4 : 41] It was such good weather recently that for a short spell, we even played badminton in the garden. And the shuttlecock didn't get blown away. But one obstacle that we discovered in our garden was we had an overhanging branch.

So badminton is more important than good gardens. So I cut the big offending branch off and I placed it at the bottom of the garden. So now whenever I look out of my study, I see this brown withered lifeless branch.

It looks very different from all the other branches because it's been cut off. There is no life getting to it. And Jesus, when he comes to this image of the vine and the branches, it gives us that basic point.

That it's as we are united to the vine, as we're united to Jesus, there is life, there is growth. If a branch is cut off, there is death, there is withering. How does Jesus put it?

In verse 4, Remain in me as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine.

[5 : 46] The vine in the Old Testament was that picture of God's people Israel. And now Jesus identifies himself as the true vine, the true Israel. He is the one who reveals the glory of God.

He is the one who will continue to build and establish the kingdom of God. And there's that wonderful truth that as we come to faith, we are grafted into the Lord Jesus.

And so we now have the possibility of life and fruitfulness. And Jesus' language is that of remaining and abiding.

Verse 5, I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. On the flip side, apart from me, you can do nothing.

So it's a very basic image. We must be in Christ for our spiritual life and vitality and growth. And the wonderful truth and the promise is that Jesus says He remains in us and we remain in Him.

[6 : 47] And then of course there will be life. Michael Reeves, the theologian, says the vine holds nothing back from its branches, pouring all its life into them. And if you think about that picture, in Christ we have life, we have blessing, we have grace flowing to us constantly.

To return to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul gives thanks because of God's grace to you in Christ Jesus. And then he goes on to say, For in Him you have been enriched in every way.

Enriched. Like the gardener tending to plants and flowers, giving the flower food to ensure there's the right nutrients, the right goodness.

In Christ, Paul tells us, we have a rich supply of enriching grace. And so, Jesus speaks the Word of God to us. Jesus gives His Spirit to live within us.

In Jesus, we claim all God's promises as yes and amen in Him. In Jesus, we know the presence of God in our lives. In Christ Jesus, there is a fellowship that we enjoy together.

[8 : 00] In Jesus, there's a worship that unites us. We have been enriched by God's grace in every way in Christ Jesus. What does this mean for our identity, for our experience?

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. Jesus gives us life. Let me suggest two things. In Christ, we find our place.

I think we all understand that location is something that's important to us. And important to our idea of identity and self. If I find the right city to live in, or if I find the right getaway from the city, if I find the right home to live in, if I have the right environment, then everything will be good.

That's our great hope, I think. If I find my sense of belonging, then I will find true flourishing. And this picture reminds us that here is, for the believer, our dream, our true location.

We are vitally connected in Him. In Him, we have life. A life that leads to joy. And so, we're invited to lean into that.

[9 : 12] But also, this image reminds us that in Christ, we find our power. Because remember, Jesus does that contrast. In the vine, there is life.

Outside of the vine, there is nothing. Maybe we can think about another cutting-off story in the Old Testament this time. Remember the story of Samson? And in his long hair, and in the hair was the power.

A woman, his hair was cut off, and he didn't realize, he presumed he would be exactly as strong as he was before. And there's that lesson for us that it's dangerous to presume that we can do in our own strength what we need to get from Jesus.

It is dangerous for us to presume that we can grow and have life and please God apart from Jesus and abiding in Him.

And when we do make progress in the Christian life, if there is any evidence of growth in us, if we do have the joy of sharing our faith with someone else, if we are laying down our lives to serve someone and God has given us gifts and we're using those gifts, We need to recognize that any fruitfulness, any growth that comes from Him, so that He, not we, get the praise.

[10:36] That the pattern of our life is service, but it's humble thankfulness that He has given us everything that we need. We recognize, as verse 5 reminds us, if Jesus is in us and we in Him, we will bear much fruit, but apart from Him, we can do nothing.

So, Jesus gives us life is one of the important ideas that we receive from John 15. Now, let's flip over in our Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4.

That's on page 1175. And again, a lot of these images are related, but here, perhaps we can have the emphasis that Jesus gives us growth. There's that image of the head and the body.

Now, I am not a gardener by any stretch. I don't know much about vines and branches. I know even less about biology, but I do know this. Every body needs a head.

I think we all know that. It is amazing to see the developments in medical technology. There are many artificial body parts available, but there will never be, I don't think, except for maybe in sci-fi, an artificial head.

[11:51] Okay, a body depends on a head for life and for growth. A body depends on a head for its direction. It is our control center.

And it's that imagery that Paul picks up in Ephesians chapter 4. Verses 11 to 16, there is this picture of the church growing in truth and love and becoming a mature body and doing so in dependence on Christ, the head.

Look at verse 15. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work. So, there is a context in this chapter.

Paul is talking about gifts of grace that Christ gives, the victorious ascended Christ gives to his church. And among those gifts, end of verse 11, are pastors and teachers.

[13:06] And then Paul goes on to explain what the role of these pastors and teachers among others is. Verse 12, to equip the people of God for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

So, Jesus uses his word and the teaching of his word to equip his people in the church, to bring unity in the gospel to a church, to bring maturity and fullness among his people.

He is the head who ensures the healthy growth of the body. Verse 14 continues the image when it says, then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves.

It's kind of a little bit stormy, a little bit infant-like, but I think the idea, and we know this from toddlers, as they're making that progression, as they begin to walk, they're unsteady.

[14:23] And then there's that wobbly phase, while children, while toddlers are trying to get their balance, where they're learning to walk. And any little thing, any bump, even a strong wind, perhaps, might knock a child over.

But the goal is growing up to have stability and balance as part of the maturity. And Paul takes this idea and he says, the stability that we have, the maturity that we have, it comes from knowing Jesus in his word.

And when we have proper balance, there is truth and there is love. That's the kind of balance and stability and maturity that Jesus wants his body to have.

That we value truth and we're committed to love. Within Ephesians 4, there are two important truths.

And they're connected to this idea that Jesus as the head wants the body to grow healthy, which for Jesus is also to grow up to be more like him, to grow in holiness. One is this, we all need to be committed bodybuilders.

[15:42] Again, full disclosure, I'm not a skilled weightlifter. You can probably tell that. But I do know this. I do know that you need more than biceps to lift a weight.

There's a whole set of muscle groups that need to be involved in the work of lifting a heavy weight. Leg, muscles, core, back, chest, arms, all need to get stronger.

All need to be operating for a body to grow in strength. And the principle that Paul gives in Ephesians 4 is that God gives ministers to a church and their role is an equipping role.

To equip people with the word of God so that the people of God might be building each other up. That we might all be committed to bodybuilding. That it isn't just the job of a preacher.

It's the job of every Christian to build up others within the body through the use of God's Word. That it's God's Word that gives us growth.

[16:49] That it's God's Word that will give us that maturity and stability and balance of truth and love that Jesus looks for in His church. So, have a think about what that might mean for us this week.

It certainly means that things like community groups provide a wonderful opportunity for us to build one another up in truth and in love as we spend time together around God's Word.

But it also means every time that we are with another Christian, we're just having a cup of coffee or we're going for a walk or we're having a conversation. Or we're sending them. We have opportunities to equip one another so that together we would be growing.

That we would all be committed to this progress in maturity. As verse 13 says, until we all reach unity in the faith and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Which takes us to the second issue. If we need to be committed to that work of bodybuilding, and we are, we also need to hear another truth. And it's related to Jesus the head.

[18:01] To recognize that He is committed to growing us up. And that's really foundational. Jesus is the one who is committed to ensuring that His church grows.

I don't know how many of us have struggled with issues about our height and we wish we were taller. I remember when I was a child reading the story of a goalkeeper. I can't remember now who it was.

I have a feeling it might have been Peter Shelton. The one time England goalkeeper who as a youth decided he wanted to be a goalie. He was quite short. He wanted a longer wingspan. So he would spend hours hanging from his banister hoping, I don't know whether that works, but he was hoping that it would help him to grow.

But maybe you can remember, you know, those height charts and wishing you were up there and you're still down here. Maybe you have some of that spiritually.

Wow, I wish I was more mature, but I seem to be stalling. The good news of union with Christ is that Jesus, our head, is absolutely committed to growing His body.

[19:08] And growing His body in such a way that in the end we will be as tall as He is. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head that is Christ.

Jesus is never going to stop working on His church. He's not going to stop growing His people until we are made perfect and glorious.

Fully mature in glory. And He's committed to that. So we commit knowing that He is committed to us.

So Jesus gives us growth. The third and the final thing to think about from Ephesians chapter 5 is that Jesus gives us love.

There's that image of the groom and His bride. Ephesians chapter 5, beginning there at verse 25. It's a text that is read at many Christian weddings.

[20:19] And I imagine that for many of us we understand that marriage is a wonderful picture of the gospel. When that passage is read and we listen to Paul, we recognize here is a call to costly, covenantal, cross-shaped love.

A love that sacrifices. A love that commits. A love with cost. And it's a beautiful truth for a beautiful day. That Jesus shares His life, shares His love with His church.

Jesus is the perfect husband. And there's so many rich parallels within this text. In verse 28, for example, in this same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

Why? Because it's a picture of the love that Jesus has for the church. Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church.

Jesus enters into this wonderfully committed relationship. He is committed to the holiness of His church.

[21 : 39] Committed to loving His church. In verse 31, for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

This is a profound mystery, but I'm talking about Christ and the church. Jesus enters into this vital spiritual union with His bride, the church.

And it's a permanent covenantally committed union. He will love His bride. He will make His bride holy. And ultimately He will have the joy, the eternal joy of His bride, now made perfect, the church being with Him forever.

The Bible has the ultimate romance story, the ultimate happily ever after, the ultimate bride and groom in the gospel.

And it's important that we understand this and we not miss this. Back to verse 32, when Paul says, this is a profound mystery, but I'm talking about Christ and the church. Sometimes we think, oh, the gospel is a bit like marriage.

[22 : 46] But Paul wants us to understand, as amazing as marriage is, actually marriage is just a bit like the gospel. It's the gospel that comes first. It has the primacy. His point here is that the union of Jesus to His redeemed people, that's the dominant picture.

That's the eternal plan of God. And God gives marriage to help us see the still bigger and more beautiful reality of God's steadfast covenant love for His people.

I am sure some of us have gone to the Louvre and you've spent a bit of time trying to see maybe the most famous picture on display, the Mona Lisa.

But let's imagine that you were to get to the front of the queue and you took your Polaroid picture and then you went to a different part of the Louvre and you stuck your Polaroid Mona Lisa on the wall.

Which is going to gather the crowd and which has the most value? It's so important that we understand that marriage is the Polaroid, but the gospel of union with Christ, that's the masterpiece.

[24 : 01] That's the Mona Lisa. And so marriage is always a little window into the much more wonderful reality of Jesus' commitment to be united to His church.

And I think that takes us to one of the great and central themes of union with Christ, that it's an invitation for us to find both security and joy in knowing that Jesus loves His bride.

If I'm a follower of Jesus, Jesus loves me. John Stott on this text writes, this relationship is nothing less than a vital, organic, intimate union with Jesus Christ, a shared life, a shared love.

Key to the Christian life, Jesus loves me, this I know. It's the answer to so much of our anxiety.

It's the antidote to that feeling that we might have about ourselves where we feel so hard to love. It's the healing to those wounds of bad relationships that make us come with our struggles to consider the gospel.

[25 : 23] As we understand trusting in Jesus as Lord and Savior, I am deeply loved. I am personally loved. I am eternally, covenantally loved.

That Jesus has taken all the debts, all the disgrace of His bride to Himself, and He freely gives to us His wealth, His honor, His righteousness.

That in sacrificial love, He has laid down His life freely to freely give to His bride the gift of eternal life.

That we can live every day and for all eternity knowing His joy, His love, His pleasure. That He now shares His life with me and I am free to enjoy life with Him.

It's the wonder of union with Christ. Being one with our Lord. Being one with our Lord. It's the way that we receive, as Paul says in Ephesians, every spiritual blessing.

[26 : 33] It's how we receive life from Jesus. It's how we grow in Jesus and to be more like Him. And it's how we live to enjoy, day by day, the wonderful love of Jesus our Savior.

So let's pray.