

The Importance of Union with Christ for the Pursuit of Holiness**Review:**

We have entered that segment of our study of sanctification that focuses on the outworking of holiness in our day-to-day living. In the last session I highlighted the fact that the pursuit of holiness requires human effort. Human effort is essential for human beings to live holy lives; it does not simply happen. We must will and we must work. However, the work of sanctification clearly does not depend upon mere human effort alone, not even in the first instance. In fact, human effort alone is powerless to attain holiness in conduct.

The work of sanctification is not unlike Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. The disciples came to Jesus suggesting that the crowds be sent away into nearby towns to buy food. By this time late in the day, they would be getting hungry. But Jesus told the disciples, "You give them something to eat." And then Jesus empowered them to do just what he had instructed them. It was the disciples who gave the people the food, but it was Jesus who performed the divine work without which they could not have done what they did.

Similarly, though the pursuit of holy living requires human effort, it would not happen without the supernatural and enabling work of God. His supernatural work is multifaceted. There are aspects which enable and empower that pursuit, that break chains and open doors so we can go through. And there are aspects which encourage our exertion and perseverance. In coming weeks our attention is going to be on the provisions of God that make possible the accomplishment of living in holiness.

In this session, our focus is on our union with Christ. Our union with Christ and understanding what that means is critical to our pursuit of holy living. Let's first seek to get a basic grasp of this union and then demonstrate the practicality in our pursuit of holiness.

I. A Basic Grasp of Union with Christ

John Murray wrote that "union with Christ is . . . the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. . . . It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption" (Redemption—Accomplished and Applied [Eerdmans, 1955], pp. 201, 205).

The New Testament uses two interchangeable expressions to describe union with Christ:

1. We are in Christ – 2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:4, 5, 7; 1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 12:2; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 1:4, 2:10; Phil. 3:9; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 John 4:13
2. Christ is in us – Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 3:17

John 6:56; John 15:4; 1 John 4:13 explicitly combine both concepts.

Anthony Hoekema says that we should see union with Christ “extending all the way from eternity to eternity.” He outlines his material in this way:

(Saved by Grace [Eerdmans, 1989], 64.)

1. The roots of union with Christ are in divine election (Eph. 1:3-4).
2. The basis of union with Christ is the redemptive work of Christ.
3. The actual union with Christ is established with God’s people in time.

Under the third point, he shows eight ways that salvation . . . is in Christ:

1. We are initially united with Christ in regeneration (Eph. 2:4-5, 10)
2. We appropriate and continue to live out of this union through faith (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:16-17).
3. We are justified in union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:8-9).
4. We are sanctified through union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; John 15:4-5; Eph. 4:16; 2 Cor. 5:17).
5. We persevere in the life of faith in union with Christ (John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:38-39).
6. We are even said to die in Christ (Rom. 14:8; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 14:13).
7. We shall be raised with Christ (Col. 3:1; 1 Cor. 15:22).
8. We shall be eternally glorified with Christ (Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Biblical marriage is a portrait of this union. When a man and woman come together, each brings to the union all that they are and all that they have. They become one. Think what this means. When I come into union with Christ, I bring what? Sin of every kind, legal guilt, pollution, corruption, death, darkness, former hostility, debt I could never pay. And what does Christ bring? Holiness, righteousness, perfect obedience, the riches of heaven, satisfaction for my sin, renewal, his mind, payment for all my debt.

Sinclair Ferguson explains in a nutshell why union with Christ is the foundation for sanctification (Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification [IVP, 1989], 58):

If we are united to Christ, then we are united to him at all points of his activity on our behalf. We share

- in his death (we were baptized into his death),
- in his resurrection (we are resurrected with Christ),
- in his ascension (we have been raised with him),
- in his heavenly session (we sit with him in heavenly places, so that our life is hidden with Christ in God),
- and we will share in his promised return (when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory) (Rom. 6:14; Col. 2:11-12; 3:1-3).

This, then, is the foundation of sanctification in Reformed theology. It is rooted, not in humanity and their achievement of holiness or sanctification, but in what God has done in Christ, and for us in union with him. Rather than view Christians first and foremost in the microcosmic context of their own progress, the Reformed doctrine first of all sets them in the macrocosm of God's activity in redemptive history. It is seeing oneself in this context that enables the individual Christian to grow in true holiness.

II. How Union With Christ Affects Our Pursuit of Holiness

A. It tells me that in Christ I have everything I need. In the midst of my exertion, I look to Christ. A new creature, a cleansed conscience, an example of holiness,

B. My union with Christ is the basis of communion with Christ. Union and communion with Christ produces fruit. I must see that constancy of fellowship with Jesus is essential to pursuing a life of holy conduct. When communion with Jesus is neglected, it is as though he has been sent outside of your life. The church in Laodicea had shut Jesus out of communion. He depicted himself on the outside knocking. If anyone would hear his voice and open the door, he would come in and they would dine together. This would be the key to their repentance and overcoming.

C. The permanence of the union gives me assurance in the midst of the pursuit to keep on going and not to despair when I fail. As marriage is to be a permanent union, our union with Christ is a permanent union. "Nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus." He will hold me fast!

The following is from Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 48-49.

One of Satan's attacks is to try to convince you that you are not a genuine Christian after all. He will say something like, "A true Christian wouldn't think the evil thoughts you've been thinking today." Now it may be that six months ago Satan would not have come to you with such a suggestion because you were not troubled about your thoughts. But now that the Holy Spirit has begun to reveal how sinful your thoughts of lust and resentment and pride really are, you may begin to have doubts about your salvation.

A number of years ago, God was allowing me to go through some deep inner struggles to teach me something of the sinfulness of my heart. During this time I was leading a weekly Bible study at a military base about an hour's drive from where I lived. Every Monday night as I left the fellowship of that Bible study and started my lonely drive home, Satan would begin to attack me; "How can anyone who is having the struggles you are having be a Christian?" he would ask. I began to fight him by resorting to an old gospel hymn which begins, "Just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidst me come to Thee; O Lamb of God, I come." I would sing through that hymn and by the time I finished I would be praising God for His salvation given freely to me through Christ.

You, too, if you diligently pursue holiness, must often flee to the Rock of your salvation. You flee there, not to be saved again, but to confirm in your heart that you are saved through his righteousness alone.

Conclusion

Union with Christ makes a ton of difference in the pursuit of holiness. Sustenance and assurance and provision.

The bottom line is I need to consistently affirm in my mind and heart my union with Christ. I am his and he is mine. I need to treat him as my "chiefest" marriage partner. All that is good in marriage teaches me about my union with him. I must cultivate the union through communion. Abide in Christ. Stay in him. Commune with him. How? Live in fellowship with Christ. And bear much fruit. But without him I can do nothing.

Praise God for giving us his Son not only for all he does for us but also for the blessing and pleasure of being in union with him.