

The Application of the Incarnation

Romans 6:1-14

Merry Christmas!

That is a greeting that is on the decline in America. But for those of us who still believe that Jesus really is the reason for the season, we love to hear its tone of happiness and joy! For us, it is more than simply a hope for general merriness. It is a statement that in the Incarnation, God has solved the problem of evil in man.

“Merry Christmas!” is our shorthand way of saying to one another that God has acted to redeem His fallen creation. Hope and Peace and Joy have come to earth in the One who is both God and Man, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

You may be having a wonderful Christmas time. Or you may be having one of the most gut-wrenching seasons of your entire life. It does not change the truth that you should embrace the simple words, “Merry Christmas!” Christ has come to ensure the final happiness of all whom He calls His own.

This is the final sermon in a three-part series on the Incarnation. In the first sermon we looked at the goal of the Incarnation – that of knowing God. Jesus took on our flesh for the purpose of our knowing God. Last week, we looked at the details of the Incarnation. He who was and is fully God, as become what He was not, fully man. In this one person, we see the union of Godhood with manhood. This union of the two does not alter either nature. God remains fully God and man remains fully man. While we may not fully grasp how this can be, it is the foundation of our redemption.

In the Incarnation, we truly have Immanuel – God with us.
It is God who accomplishes our salvation as a man.

Romans 5:19-21 ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

What is accomplished by Christ must also be applied to our hearts? This is the focus of today's sermon: The Application of the Incarnation. As long as you remain separate from Jesus Christ, you cannot be saved. Your salvation is dependent upon a second union of God with man. You, individually, must come into union with God through Jesus Christ. The hope of the Incarnation... the hope of the Gospel... is Christ “in you” and you “in Christ”.

Read Romans 6:1-14.

In verse 1, we find ourselves in the middle of Paul's defense of the Gospel. In the first 5 chapters, Paul has established two major points: All men have all fallen short of God's perfect standard of righteousness. And God has provided His own righteousness for man's salvation.

As followers of Christ, we trust that our eternal salvation is based upon Christ's perfection and not our own. We confess the "righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." This deal is rather unbelievable. Jesus does the work, and you get the reward. In many ways, this goes directly against one of the basic principles of good character. It is like cheating on a test. It is like plagiarism. It is like stealing.

Good parents should teach their children the importance of hard work, putting forth the effort. How is it possible that the message of the Gospel will not result in our bad character? How is it that our faith in Christ will not turn us into spoiled, lazy brats?

Paul anticipates this very question in Romans 6:1.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

Are we to remain lazy bums who could care less about doing the hard work of holiness? Does the Gospel of Free Grace encourage loose living?

Poet, W. H. Auden believed so: "I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged."

But for the Apostle Paul, believing in the righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ does not lead us to continue living a life of sin. Just the opposite. Faith in Jesus Christ always results in the believer leaving a life of sin... working hard to pursue a life of holiness.

If your teacher promised you an "A" at the beginning of the semester, what could possibly motivate you to study hard to learn the material anyway? How is it possible that every true Christian will strive their entire life to be holy, even though they are convinced that their salvation does not depend on their holiness? Can the believer in Christ go on sinning?

² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Continuing to live lives of sin is an impossibility for those who have died to sin. If you have "died to sin" how can you go on living in sin? A person who dies physically is no longer enticed by this physical world. In the same way, if a person dies "to sin", then he is no longer enticed by sin. It no longer has a hold on him.

Let's compare sin to the attitude within the student to not care about the subject he is learning. That happens quite often. The student is taking the class because he has

to fulfill a requirement he cares nothing about. In these cases, the student will only do the amount of work that is required for him to pass the class.

But what does every good teacher want for the student? The teacher wants the student to love learning for the inherent value of learning itself. But because the teacher cannot force this love of the subject upon the student, he holds out the carrot of the grade to force the student to work. Very rarely do you find a student to be entirely motivated by the love of the subject alone. But this is precisely what Paul is arguing when it comes to sin. You have the passing grade at the beginning.

But because you are “dead to sin”, you will continue to pursue holiness for holiness’ sake, not just to get the passing grade.

I do not know about you, but I do not “feel” like I have died to sin. I am constantly looking for the easy road to holiness. I often would rather God carry me to heavenly bliss. But, Paul here assumes that the people to whom he is writing have “died to sin.” All who are in the church at Rome, he assumes have “died to sin.”

How is it that Paul can assume this? Does Paul know if all the people to whom he is writing have “died to sin”? And if they have already “died to sin”, why do they still need to be exhorted “not to sin”? Doesn’t the fact that they need to be challenged to not go on sinning prove that they have not really “died to sin” after all?

Do you still struggle to love holiness? Should you conclude, “I must not have died to sin”? In fact, there is a place for questioning whether you are truly saved. If you have no desire for knowing God or walking in holiness, you should question whether you are saved at all.

But Paul does not argue this way here. He simply assumes that every member of the Church has “died to sin”. This is the whole basis of his logic. You cannot go on sinning because you have died to sin.

It is like the teacher telling the student, “You cannot fail to study hard to learn the material, because that which would normally keep you from studying has been removed.” And if your teacher told you this, you would look at him like he was crazy.

³ Do you not know
that all of us
who have been baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?

Here Paul believes that everyone who was baptized into Christ Jesus has “died to sin”.

This is like the teacher telling his students, “When you signed up for this class, the same love of this subject that I have as the teacher, is also yours.”

When a person believes in Jesus Christ, and receives the sign of baptism, he is baptized “into Christ Jesus.” Faith in Christ, symbolized in the covenant sign of baptism, unites us to Jesus Christ. Therefore, the attitudes and behaviors of Jesus Christ are united to us. What Jesus Christ did, we also did.

Jesus chose to die. Why did he choose to die? Because He loved obedience to His Father more than anything this world had to offer. Jesus loved learning obedience for the sake of obedience. He was not just trying to pass a class.

Paul believes that everyone who is baptized into Christ, has been united with Christ’s attitude of submission and obedience. Paul is not saying that every believer already experiences perfect death to sin. Rather, every believer has been united to Jesus’ perfect death to sin.

This union is a mystery. But by calling it a mystery, it is not less of a reality. In the Incarnation, the Son of God is united to fallen humanity. But in salvation, another sort of Incarnation occurs. You are united to divinity, through your union to Jesus Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit. It is only your union to Jesus Christ that produces within you the same love of holiness that drove Jesus throughout His earthly life.

Do you not know that if you have been baptized into Christ Jesus that you have been baptized into the death of Christ Jesus? Exchange the theological word of baptism with that of “united”. Do you not know that if you have been united to Christ Jesus that you have been united to the death of Christ Jesus?

Your ability to overcome the sin of your old nature is dependent on your union with Jesus Christ. No union with Christ means that you will continue to live in sin. Union with Christ means that you will no longer live in sin. It is your union with Jesus that determines the choices that you make day to day.

Look closely at Paul’s wording in vv. 4-5.

4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,
in order that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead
by the glory of the Father,
we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his,
we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Three times Paul uses the phrase “with him”. We were buried “with him.” We have been united “with him” in a death like his. We shall certainly be united “with him” in a resurrection like his.

Paul is not saying that they have personally died to their sin. If that were the case, he would not have to be encouraging them to quit living a life of sin. Instead, he is telling them that they have been united to the one who has already “died to sin”. They have been united to the one who has already been buried in the tomb and is now resurrected up out of the tomb.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is mystically connected to the Christian walking in newness of life. Since you are united to the death and resurrection of Jesus, his choice to obey God unto death and then to be raised up into glory is true of you and will be true of you.

The union between you and Jesus is such that all that He has done, you have all done. And all that He has done, you will do.

6 We know that our old self was crucified with him
 in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing,
 so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

Paul here uses the same phrase “with him”. Because we are united to Jesus Christ by baptism, we know that our old self (that body of sin) was crucified “with him.” The purpose of this union is so that our sin “might be brought to nothing.” The attitude within you that cares little for knowing God and obeying God has been crucified with Christ.

This is a definitive act of God. He is the one who unites you to the death of Christ. Your death is not something you conjure up on your own. It is the fruit of your union with Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 7.

7 For one who has died has been set free from sin.

How is it that you have died? You have died with Christ when Christ died on the cross.

I will continue to use the human illustration of the classroom.

Occasionally, there will be the teacher who has such a love of his subject that his love rubs off on his students. His devotion to his subject is contagious. This is sort of what happens with those who are united to Jesus Christ. His love of holiness becomes our love of holiness.

necessary to unite you to Jesus Christ. It is only this union between the baptized and Christ Jesus that forever changes our trajectory.

Sin separates you from God. But as long as you remain separated from God you have no hope of overcoming your sin. The Gospel is that God provides a way for you to come into fellowship with God, even while you still have sin in you. It is in this union between you and the Risen Christ that guarantees that your sin will be destroyed. The fruit of the Incarnation is being born in us who are baptized into Christ. It is here, at this one point, that true Christianity is distinguished from every other religion of the world. Every other religion begins with self. Only Christianity begins with God.

Romans 1:16 ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation.

Overcoming sin is the fruit of the Gospel. Overcoming sin is the working of God's power. God's power has united itself to fallen people for the purpose of destroying their sin. Pause for a moment. Take that in. In Christ, the God who is holy, holy, holy, who could not even look upon sin, has united Himself to you. You can hear that and not be all that impressed. But if you believe it, it will overwhelm you.

When you feel the evil of your sin, it is right to sense that God should turn away from you. But your only hope of dying to that evil, is if Jesus unites you to himself. Only His light will dispel your darkness.

Now, this union is entirely the work of God's grace. But we have a part to play. Not in establishing the union, but in living in light of the union.

¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves
dead to sin
and
alive to God in Christ Jesus.

What does Paul mean by "consider yourselves... dead to sin and alive to God"?

The KJV translates it "reckon". The NIV translates it "count".

Paul's point is that before you experience the death of your sin, you must consider it already accomplished. You are not yet fully dead to your sin. But "in Christ Jesus" (Because you are united to Christ Jesus in His death and resurrection) you are to reckon that you are already dead to sin and alive to God. This considering of yourself is an internal mental struggle. You feel the presence and power of sin very keenly. Your

natural tendency is to believe that what you feel about yourself defines who you are and who you will forever be.

But the Gospel tells you that you must believe the opposite of what you feel. That which most defines who you really are and what you will become is your union with Jesus Christ. This is what you must believe about yourself. This believing... this counting... is not something you do once and move on to other things. Considering yourself dead to sin and alive to God is an ongoing action of your will. It is what it means to by faith rest in Jesus Christ and what He is doing in your soul.

The uniting of you to Christ occurs once and for all. But the considering of yourself dead to sin and alive to God is life-long. God has revealed to us in His Word of the Union that exists between us and Jesus Christ. He requires us to live by faith in that Union. This is the first step that we play in this process of sanctification.

The second step is found in vv. 12.

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies,
to make you obey their passions.

We are called to actively drive a nail in our sin. We are commanded to crucify our sinful passions because we are united to Christ who has himself crucified those passions in his own death on the cross. Hate sin and put its every expression in your life to death. Why? So that you can earn the grade and get to heaven? God forbid! No, because evil is evil and contrary to the goodness and beauty of God with whom you are united.

Colossians 3:5-10 ⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

This pursuit of holiness is messy. As you live each day, you study the Word of God to determine the moral will of God. And then you seek to apply this knowledge to your particular situation. This is what God wants of me as I pursue holiness. This is what holiness looks like for me in my particular life. No two lives are exactly the same. And

even in your own life, there is constant change. But every day you ask, “What does it look like for me to submit my will to God?”

When you choose sin, you must quickly turn away from that sin and back to God. You must make changes, however small they might seem, to alter the course of your life. Make the little choices to turn yourself away from sin, always trusting that the true work is being performed by God within your soul.

Philippians 2:12-13 ¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Christian life is a lifelong struggle to put sin to death. The Confession calls it an “irreconcilable war” between the old sinful nature and the Spirit of God living in the new nature. But the Christian life is not only a struggle “against” sin. It is also a struggle to “do” something good with our lives.

¹³ Do not present your members to sin
as instruments for unrighteousness,
but
present yourselves to God
as those who have been brought from death to life,
and
your members to God
as instruments for righteousness.

The picture is one of a soldier who has been taken out of action. He has been rendered dead by his sin. But now he has been saved from the clutches of death through his union with Christ. And he is now able to present himself again for duty.

Our strength is small. We cannot do all that we imagine we would like to do. We wonder if anything that we do could be considered a true act of righteousness. And yet, our task is not so much to do great things as it is to “present ourselves for duty in God’s service.”

He delights in the heart that offers itself in His service. Often, we might like some written direction, some specific order. But most of the time, we are given the general principles, the character qualities to embrace.

Colossians 3:12-15 ¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Meditate on passages like this one. Think about what it would look like for you to have more compassion and kindness with those around you. Consider what it would look like to react with humility and meekness and patience when you have been hurt by others. What does it really mean to “let the peace of Christ rule in your heart”?

The qualities of holiness and true godliness are described as like clothes that we put on. Wake up in the morning, and as you are getting dressed for the day, say a prayer asking that God would clothe you in His righteousness. Give me the grace Lord to more reflect your character today.

If you live your life with little or no thought of presenting yourself to God as an instrument of righteousness, you must repent. You must openly confess to God that you are continuing to obey the desires of your heart rather than His will.

He is compassionate. He is faithful. He has united you to Himself. And it is to His glory that you bear the fruit of righteousness.

¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you,
since you are not under law but under grace.

Paul finishes the loop of his logic. The Christian is not forgiven of his sin so that he might continue in sin. He has been united to God through Christ. This union was brought about by the grace of God alone. And it is this union that guarantees not only the partial victory that we enjoy in this life. This union of grace guarantees full and complete victory.

Our destiny as those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus is that “sin will have no dominion over” us. None whatsoever.

The application of the Incarnation is that the God/man is now united to you. Are you connecting your personal struggle against sin with Christ’s perfect victory over all sin? Or do you think that Jesus died to forgive you, but now he leaves you to yourself to conquer sin?

Do not expect the conquering of sin to be easy. Expect it to take far longer than you think it should. But do not doubt its final outcome.

When you reflect upon the baby in the manger, remember that God is also Incarnating himself in you, through the working of the Holy Spirit. He is forming Christ “in you.” This is the mystery of all mysteries. Paul calls it the mystery of godliness. It is Christ in you, the hope of glory!