

All Roads Lead Here: United With Christ
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 32:38-42a; John 14:15-21; Romans 6:5-11

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 6:5-11. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

One of my hometown’s claims to fame is the Indianapolis Union Station. Cities as grand as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles have Union Stations; Detroit had the Union Depot until 1974. But Indianapolis had the first Union Station in the world, opening in 1853. Union stations began when different railway companies had their lines meet at a central location where their passengers could switch trains. At its height, over 200 trains went through Indianapolis Union Station daily. The building is in the National Register of Historic Places

But Union State ran into problems when people stopped using trains. They revived Union Station in the ‘80s when I was growing up with boutique shops and an ice skating rink. It was a big deal until the shops folded. Once it was where the greatest train lines in America came together, united in serving their passengers. Now, it’s rented out for office space and weddings. Trains still travel through, but Union Station long abandoned its original purpose.

Just as Union Station lost its purpose of uniting railways, the modern church has lost the new theme Paul brings up this week: union with Christ. We often miss it because we come to faith looking for things we expect from religion – getting a ticket to heaven, being saved from hell, an eternal “get out of jail free” card. Most religions have this at their core, and Christianity has them too. But the point of believing in Jesus is not *just* to escape God’s wrath or to know where you’re going when you die but eternal union with Christ. That’s what we’re going to explore together today.

Paul starts this section saying, “If we have been united with him [Jesus] like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” And that’s our first point today: *Christians are united with Christ*. In every thing, in every way, we are one with Christ. Remember what Jesus said to His disciples in John 14: “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” We are loved by Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit by Jesus, we are one with Him, we are united with Him.

Scripture is full of the concept of Union with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says that our bodies are members of Christ. He goes on to say, “He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.” In Ephesians 5, Paul discusses how husband and wives should treat each other and act towards one another, and he compares them to the church and Christ. In fact, he quotes the Old Testament from Genesis 2:24, saying, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” Paul writes that “this is a profound mystery -- and I am talking about Christ and the church.”

The best metaphor we have for our union with Jesus is marriage. That symbolism is all over Scripture. In the Old Testament, God described Himself as the jealous husband of unfaithful Israel. Jesus tells parables about the Kingdom of God being like a wedding feast. In Revelation 19, John has a vision of the wedding feast of the lamb who was slain, Jesus – and His bride, the church, has been prepared for Him. The church needs to hold onto its understanding of marriage because marriage gives us a picture of how God relates to His people.

It’s not surprising that we’ve lost the notion of marriage in our culture and the notion of union with Christ in the church at the same time. In modern culture, marriage has gone by the wayside for a lot of young people because they have other pursuits and interests besides a family. Our culture has so many distractions that deep personal relationships like you find in marriage gets backburnered. And many young people fear marriage; they live together without it, because they fear getting stuck with the wrong person. But marriage calls for commitment. Studies show that couples that don’t live together before marriage do much better than those who do because from the beginning, there was a commitment. There was a union of heart and mind from the start. When we live together without a marriage bond, we are there for what we receive from the relationship. We move on when we don’t get what we want. We haven’t made the commitment to love, honor, and cherish until death do us part.

In the same way, we don’t have a strong understanding of union with Christ because we are distracted by our own desires – what we want from Jesus. Need salvation? Come to Christ! Feel tired and worn down? Jesus will fix that. Jesus can handle your finances, make parenting easy, turn you into a leader rather than a follower, give you confidence, ease your mind, and calm your fears. None of that is terrible. But they aren’t the goal. They aren’t the reason to become a Christian. The reason is to be united to Jesus. Many people let go of their faith or become very casual Christians once they’ve gotten what they came for.

It would be really bad to marry someone for the benefits alone. Imagine if you were Dad talking to the young man who wants to marry your daughter. “Son,” you say, “why do you want to marry my daughter?” Imagine if he said this: “Well, I want someone to cook and clean for me. I want a companion to do things with me. I want to enjoy the physical pleasures of married life, and I want kids. I want someone who can contribute to my finances and buy me presents on my birthday and holidays. I want to grow old knowing I’ll be cared for. And that’s why I want to marry your daughter.” Now I don’t have a daughter, which is why I don’t own a shotgun. But if I did have a shotgun, this would be about the time it’d be comin’ out!

If I had a level head, I'd reply with something like this. "You want someone to cook and clean – get a maid. Want a companion? Buy a dog. Want kids? Adopt. Want someone to contribute to your finances? Get a business partner. Want to be cared for in your old age? Get a life insurance policy. Why do you want to marry *my* daughter? Why does *she* matter to you?"

The same thing is true of Jesus. Do you want Jesus for Jesus' sake? Paul says in Philippians 3:10-11, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." Is that our desire? To know Christ?

If you desire Him for the goodies you'll get alone, if you only believe for what you'll get out of it, that's dangerous faith. I don't know if you've seen the pictures coming out of Missouri this week, but it's flooded up to the interstate signs outside of St. Louis. I saw a video of a house that had lost its moorings and floated down the way and crashed into a bridge. That's faith based on what we receive from Christ alone. When things get difficult, it will just fly off the foundations and break apart in the storms of life.

But being in union with Christ, being united with Him, being determined to love Him for who He is, through the wonder and the mystery, loving Him when He consoles you and when He challenges and disciplines you, following where He leads – to share your faith when it's hard, to pull up stakes if He asks you to or plant roots if He asks you to, to give up a night a week for Bible study and a weekend here and there for a retreat, to lose personal time to daily turn to Him in His Word, spending time with Him in prayer – that's building a solid faith. That's building on a solid bedrock with firm timber and strong brick that will hold firm when trials come.

And that brings us around to our second thought: *We are united to Jesus in dying to sin.* We're called to be united to Jesus in a death like His. Paul says, "The death he died, he died to sin once for all." And when Paul comments on us and our death, he says, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."

Now that's pretty complex, pretty hard to figure out. Let's take it piece by piece. Throughout His whole life, Jesus died to sin – He always chose His Father's way rather than a path of disobedience. He was human, but He constantly and completely died to the sin nature attached to our humanity. When Jesus died physically, because He had no sin, His death could cover our sins. By His one sacrifice, sin was conquered, and death no longer has any control over Him. As Paul wrote, "Death no longer has mastery over Him; He cannot die again."

When Paul says we are united with Christ in His death, it means that we too now are expected to die to sin. And we have a perfect example in Christ. Jesus never did anything but the Father's will for Him. We cannot be perfect in that, but we do have a Lord who has given us forgiveness, who has been there Himself, and who sent the Holy Spirit to counsel us so that we might in all things turn to God's ways.

But why would we *want* to die to sin? Why should we *want* to deny ourselves? This is where the difference between wanting presents from Jesus and wanting Jesus becomes clear. Because if you want the gift of eternal life, if you want the gift of heaven and not hell, but you don't want to change your life in any way, you don't actually want what you think you want. If you don't want to be with Jesus and want to be like Jesus, if you don't want to be near Him or united to Him, heaven isn't the place for you. Because that's what eternal life is – life with God.

Let me put it this way: there are people out there who don't like chocolate. I don't know how, I don't know why, I'm so sorry for them, but they're out there. And many of them aren't like, "yeah, it's fine," it's like, "no, I don't want that, it's awful and terrible, no thank you." They'd rather not have dessert than have a piece of chocolate cake, those poor, miserable souls. We can eat the same thing, but what is fantastic for me is awful for them.

In the same way, if you don't want to die to sin, if you don't want to please God – I'm not talking about the ability but the desire, if the desire is there but the ability is not, that's different – if you don't want to be like God, enjoy what you enjoy here, because it's all you've got. If that's where you're at, I encourage you to pray that God might change your heart. To be united with Christ is to die to sin daily, to die to disobedience to God's will for us.

Now let's go deeper. If you want Jesus, you *want* to die to sin. Why? Because you love Him and want what He wants, especially because you know what He wants for us is perfect. This is a part of being united with someone – you do things that help and please the other person out of your love for them. Jesus has already done that for us – He has given His life so we might be free of our sin nature, giving us the chance to please the Father. So we do it on the other side.

We go back to the analogy of marriage to understand why we die to sin. In every marriage, there are things you do and things you don't do. Maybe you watch old movies together or golf together or watch the sunset together. You do it because it pleases the other person. There are some things you don't do because the other person doesn't like them. Maybe you skip onions because they make your breath stink. Maybe you stay away from subjects that make you argue. When you're married, some things are off limits for the good of the marriage.

In the same way, we die to ourselves; we desire to fulfill God's will for us. God wants us to be His. God gave the Jewish people dietary laws; they couldn't eat pork or shrimp. It isn't immoral to eat them, but when you love someone, you'll give things up for the sake of the relationship. He now says those foods are OK for us. God said give at least a tenth of what you get away. 10% isn't a magic number, but it was God saying, "For me, do this."

To die to sin is hard. Sin has a real pull on us. We like what we like. If the only reason we're doing it is to avoid punishment in the afterlife, we'll fail over and over again because while that's a valid reason, it's never a sufficient reason by itself to keep us away from sin. But if we want to be united with Christ, if we want to be His brother, His sister, if we want there to be a real family resemblance, Jesus has made the way for it to happen.

And the blessings are our final point: *we who die to sin with live with Christ both now and forever*. Paul reassures us, “if we have been united with him like this in his death, we will *certainly* also be united with him in his resurrection.” Notice Paul’s emphasis there – there is no doubt of resurrection if we have been united to Jesus. He does on – “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

When we come to Jesus for Himself, when we come to Him because He is truth, because He is goodness, because He is beauty, we receive not only Christ Himself but also all the blessings that come from Him. When we are united with Jesus, we don’t have to fear death because we will live again. He will not His faithful ones see decay, as the Psalms put it. He will have us with Himself both now and forever.

We celebrate when a couple says they’ve been happily married for fifty years. It requires commitment. It requires a certain frame of mind to be happy despite going through the richer and poorer, the better and worse. But now imagine being with Jesus through time beyond time. No longer afraid of death or dying; no longer worried about disease; no fears of being separated from Him. Where in this life you only saw Him faintly, now you will see Him face to face.

Our relationship with Jesus will be deeper than any earthly marriage because we will know and be fully known in ways we can’t be now. At our best, we guess well about our spouses and loved ones. But when we are with Jesus in eternity, we will know. And while we know very little about what eternal life will entail – what we will do or how things will happen – we know it will be good because, for once, we will be loved and love perfectly. That’s our assurance. When we are alive to God in Christ, it means always and forever.

And once we have died and we are with Christ, we will be dead to sin. Finally, we will be able to please God for eternity. For those of us who trust in Christ, that is a great comfort. When we finally reach everlasting life, we will be in God’s good pleasure and remain there because we will not disobey. For the war to finally be over and won will be magnificent.

There’s plenty more to say, but Paul continues on the theme of dying to sin and living to Christ next week, so we’ll pick it up then. For now, find peace in your union with Christ. Determine to die to your sinful desires as a faithful follower of Christ, and know that He will be with you, beside you, both now and forevermore.