

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation

Lecture 6

The Mystical Union of the Believer with Christ

Today we are going to start a new subsection on the doctrine of salvation on our *mystical union* with Christ. I think that this lesson will be a real encouragement to every regenerate believer.

In speaking of our mystical union with Christ we are not talking about the total absorption of the believer into deity such as you have in pantheistic religions, for example, Bhuddism, where at death like a drop of water returning to the ocean so the individual returns to The All or The Totality of Being, and as a result really ceases to exist as an individual thing. We are not talking about that sort of mystical union such as you find in pantheism.

Rather, what we are talking about is the wonder of a personal relationship and identification of the regenerate believer with Jesus Christ. It is rather like the marriage relationship that Paul describes in Ephesians 5 where he says that the man and the woman become one flesh. Yet, they still exist as two individual persons. It is not as though they somehow merge into one person. They are two distinct persons, but they are so closely united that they become identified with one another as a unit.

I think that the notion of our union with Christ is the primary meaning of the popular phrase “having a personal relationship with God.” When we say that in coming to know Christ you come into a personal relationship with God, we are not speaking primarily of the subjective experience of fellowship with God. Some people who don’t have that sort of intimate fellowship with God or who have their Christian experience come and go as emotions wax and wane or as times change will sometimes say, “Where is this personal relationship with God that I am supposed to have as a Christian?” What they fail to understand, I think, is that this personal relationship with God is not primarily a subjective experience. It is primarily an objective relationship into which you have come and in which you stand whereby you are identified with Christ regardless of the shifting sands of experience and emotion. It is primarily an objective reality, not a subjective experience.

Let’s turn to look at the biblical data concerning the mystical union with Christ. In both the Gospels and in Paul’s epistles we have a great deal of discussion of salvation’s consisting in our union with Christ.

Let’s look first at the data of the Gospels. Let’s turn to the Gospel of John 15:1-8. Here Jesus gives his parable of the vine and its branches. He says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

Here Jesus describes the relationship between himself and his disciples as being like the relationship between a vine and its branches. There is a deep union between the two. He says “abide in me and I in you.” It is the person who is abiding in Christ and in whom Christ is abiding who is united with and identified with Christ and therefore is a fruitful disciple of Christ. So in the parable of the vine and the branches we have an illustration of this close union that the believer has with Christ. Not a union that obliterates our individuality but one that unites us intimately with Christ and he with us so that we become fruitful.

Another example is in John 17:20-23. This is the high priestly prayer of Jesus for the disciples.

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

Now, many times this passage is appealed to as teaching the unity of the church. Christ is praying that his followers would be so united, so unified, that the world would see that they are indeed followers of Jesus. But even more fundamentally, this is a prayer for unity of the believer with God the Father and God the Son. Verse 21 says, “that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us.” So the fundamental union here is not the union among believers, horizontally so to speak, rather it is that vertical union of the believer with God the Father and God the Son. As the Father is in the Son and the Son is in us, we are then in God the Father and in God the

Son. There is a unity between the believer and the Godhead that comes through knowing Christ.

Finally, Luke 10:16. Jesus tells his disciples, “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” Here again you see the unity of the believer with Jesus and then of Jesus with the Father. So the person who rejects the preaching of the disciples is said to reject Christ. It is not just the disciples that he rejects; he rejects Christ because Christ is so intimately united with his disciples. And he who rejects Christ rejects God because God is so intimately one with Christ. So in this passage as well we see the mystical union of the believer with Christ and the Father, as we are identified with Christ and personally related to him.

In the Gospels, there are many different examples of this sort of union. For example, in the Gospels Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” But then he also says to the disciples, “You are the light of the world.” They are the light of the world insofar as they are united with Christ who is the light of the world.¹ So as a result they also can be said to be the light of the world. We’ve already seen the parable of the vine and its branches. The vine isn’t something that is distinct from or devoid of the branches. The branches are part of the vine. They are unified and identified with the vine. Also, as in the example from Luke 10: how people treat Christians is how they treat Christ. So Jesus says that even someone “who gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in my name gives it unto me.” He gives it to Christ insofar as he ministers to Christ’s children. So there are various examples in the Gospels of this close identification of the believer with Jesus Christ as we abide in Christ and he abides in us.

Let’s turn now to look at some of the data from Paul’s letters. In the Pauline epistles, this notion of the believer’s union with Christ becomes a central theme. Paul uses the expression “in Christ” or “in Christ Jesus” 164 times in his epistles. It is a marvelous Bible study to look up all that we have “in Christ” according to Paul. Insofar as we are in Christ we are heirs to an incredible number of blessings and privileges. Let me just look at a few of these this morning and then next week we’ll continue our examination of Paul’s letters.

1. *In Christ we are chosen.* Ephesians 1:4, Paul says, “even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” So in Christ we are chosen.

2. *In Christ we are called.* 1 Corinthians 7:22, Paul says, “For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a

slave of Christ.” Calling, regardless of your circumstances, is said to be in the Lord or in Christ. Insofar as you are in Christ you are called.

3. *We are foreordained or predestined in Christ.* Ephesians 1:11-12,

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined [or foreordained] and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.” So we are predestined or foreordained in Christ.

4. *We are created for good works in Christ.* Ephesians 2:10,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

5. *In Christ we are sealed.* Ephesians 1:13-14,

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

We are sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day at which we inherit our eternal estate.

6. *In Christ we are justified.* Galatians 2:17. Paul is speaking here of our being justified by our faith in Christ rather than by works of the law, and he says, “But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not!” The phrase I want to focus on here is that phrase “justified in Christ.” It is in Christ that we have justification.

7. Similarly, *as we are in Christ, we are sanctified.* 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul says,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

Again, the key phrase in this verse is “sanctified in Christ Jesus.”

8. *We are crucified with Christ.* Romans 6:1-11,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

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. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be

enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Here Paul explains that it is in Christ that we are crucified with Christ. We are united with him in his death in dying to our old sin nature so that we might live in resurrection life, a sanctified life pleasing to God.

We will continue with Paul's list next time. But just to summarize, look at already what we've seen concerning the blessings that the regenerate believer has insofar as we are in Christ. In Christ we are chosen, called, foreordained, created to good works, sealed with the Holy Spirit, justified, sanctified, co-crucified, and risen with Christ. There is more to come, and we'll look at that next week. In the meantime, may God guide and bless you.²