

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 25, 2020

Joined to Jesus

Galatians 2:15-21

"If you are tired of the load of your sin, / Let Jesus come into your heart; / If you desire a new life to begin, / Let Jesus come into your heart." So we sing in one of our hymns. And what we sing is in sync with what we say, what we pray, what we preach. Let Jesus come into your heart. Our Christian speech, especially within the evangelical branch of Christ's church, is filled with talk about "Jesus in my heart."

There's a lot of truth in this phrase. But it's certainly not the Bible's, including Paul's, only description of salvation. In the letters associated with Paul, there are a few times when he speaks of "Christ in me," including this morning's text from Galatians. But there's another description that Paul uses far more often. It's the phrase "in Christ." He employs it 165 times, which tells us that we're dealing with a reality that's at the heart of the gospel.

Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (v. 20). Paul isn't holed up in a library cubicle, ruminating on theological theories about the nature of God. He's in the heat of pastoral work, trying to help the Galatians stay united by sticking with the gospel he first preached among them. Toward that end, Paul draws upon some of his own personal narrative. He cites an incident he had with Peter, and in reflecting on their disagreement, Paul talks about his own personal bond with Christ.

Notice how Paul can't talk about his own story without talking about Christ's story. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." The core of Christ's identity, his death and resurrection, has been, and is, taking shape in Paul. Paul himself has a new identity. He has died to his old identity that was grounded in his obedience to the religious law and his ethnic affiliation. God's reconciling love in the cross of Christ has brought Paul into the reality of the new creation, where Paul is being transformed into a new person, a person filled with the life and power of Jesus. In other words, Paul is in Christ, and Christ is in Paul.

You may have noticed that in a lot of my correspondence, especially my email communications with you, I say what I have to say, and then sign off with "In Christ, Pastor Kevin." That's more than just a concluding formality. It's an expression of the fact that I'm writing to you as someone who lives in the same location as you. In one respect, you may be miles away from me, on the other end of a digital highway. But in another respect, you and I occupy the same space. We both dwell "in Christ." God's action in the death of Jesus has moved us out of the realm of sin and death and into the realm of righteousness and life. When you receive the gospel, you experience the freedom of forgiveness and claim your place in the realm of where Jesus Christ is Lord. You are in Christ, and Christ is in you.

What a difference a preposition makes. A preposition is a word that's normally placed before a noun, pronoun, or other substantive to express a relationship of some sort. Prepositions indicate associations, connections, and togetherness. Examples include words

like at, on, by, from, and for. When Cody and I first talked about what it means to come to faith in Christ and get baptized, one of the key passages I shared with him was 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, where Paul writes, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." Here, Paul's emphasis is on living *for* Christ, which is certainly part of what it means to be a Christian. But in today's text, and so many others, Paul's emphasis is on being *in* Christ. Prepositions are often small words that make a big difference. You in Christ, and Christ in you.

Sometimes what's conveyed by a preposition can be captured by a symbolic act. That's part of what we do when we baptize. We use immersion in water to proclaim the believer's relationship with Christ. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul says, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:4). Dying *with* Christ, being buried *with* Christ, being raised *with* Christ. Where would we in the church be without our water and our prepositions?

Dead in Christ is part of who we are. Rodney Reeves tells about the time he, his wife, and their six-year-old daughter Emma were driving past a cemetery, and Emma asked, "Who lives there?" Rodney replied, "That's where dead people live." From there he and his wife tried to carefully explain some of the basics about death, funerals, caskets, dead bodies, and the hope of Christ. A few minutes later, after the conversation had turned to another subject, Emma interrupted, "Then why does our church have a cross on it? Dead people don't live there too, do they?" The more Reeves reflected on what Emma asked, the more he could see that there was some truth in what she was saying. In one respect, the church is where dead people live.¹ Being dead in Christ, because that's what precedes being truly alive, in Christ.

Paul says that he had to die to the Law in order to live for God. He had to be crucified with Christ for Christ to live in him. The goal, remember, is to be truly alive. And for that to happen, you need to be united with the one who has already passed through death and been raised from it. Jesus already has the fullness of life that God intends for humankind and for each of us. You can't get it by earning it. You can't get it by being good enough. You can only get it by faith, which means you joined to Jesus in such a way that his faithfulness takes shape in you and operates in you.

This is why we talk about being a new person, and living a new life, through Christ. Becoming a Christian isn't a matter of saying that I see how I've failed God in many ways, but now I want make a fresh start and try harder. You'll never be fully human, in the image of Christ, by just trying harder. It takes something different. It takes being joined to Jesus at the very core of your being, so that his risen life can transform you.

In the 1983 film *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall plays a once-famous but now washed-up country music singer-songwriter named Mac Sledge. Mac is stringing together dead-end jobs and battling the bottle. He's befriended by a young widow named Rosa Lee and her little boy, Sonny. Late in the movie, Mac and Sonny get baptized at the local church. As they're driving home in a pickup truck the following conversation ensues:

Sonny: "Well, we've done it, Mac. We're baptized." Mac: "Yeah, we are." Sonny: "Everybody said I was going to feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different. But I don't feel a whole lot different. Do you?" Mac: "Not yet." Sonny: "You don't look any different."

(Sonny sits up to look at himself in the rearview mirror.) "Do you think I look any different?"
Mac: "Not yet."

With faith in Christ and the act of baptism comes the anticipation of change. Usually not instantaneous change, though there can be some of that. But in most cases, the kind of change that occurs over time as you grow into your new identity in Christ.

Baptism marks a beginning. I like the way that Julie Canlis puts it when she says that there's a personal part where we each have to decide what we're going to do with God's act of uniting himself to our humanity. According to Canlis, "The Spirit says to each of us, 'Okay, who's in?' Then we are ushered into the Spirit's primary work in the universe—to put all things into Christ and to be joined to him."² Today's baptism is Cody's way of publicly declaring, "Okay, I'm in," acknowledging the work of the Spirit in bringing him to faith in Christ and in joining him more closely to Christ over the course of time.

But it's not just Cody and Christ. It's Cody and Christ, and the community of Christ's people. Part of the experience of Christ is individual and personal. Cody is able to say with Paul, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." But that "me" is joined to a "we." As Julie Canlis says, "When you are united to Christ, you are put into a family. There are no 'only children' in the kingdom."³

Your spiritual siblings are all around you here this morning. And God's family is a unique kind of family. As Paul says later in his letter to the Galatians, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (4:4-5). That last segment could be more accurately translated as we receive "adoption as children." In other words, through Christ, God has adopted us into his own family.

Preacher David Bartlett tells about some friends who adopted four children and had one biological child as well. For purposes of the story, he calls the biological child Sam and his younger adopted brother Mark. At an appropriate age, the parents explained to each adopted child how he or she was chosen and how deeply he or she was cherished and loved. After Mark heard their explanation and the difference between his story and Sam's, he turned to his parents and said, "Gosh, that's wonderful. Can't we adopt Sam, too?"⁴

When you get joined to Jesus, you get joined to a family called the church, in which we're all adopted children. Though he and his family now live in another area where they've been able to explore and experience other congregations of Christ's people, what a blessing to have Cody and his family return to us today for the occasion of his baptism. It's a testimony to the bonds of love that get formed within the family of God, and a reminder that the church is the relational space where God puts us in order to nurture our union with Christ. May he dwell more fully in each of us, and in our life together.

¹ Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to Paul: Imitating the Apostle of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011) 21-22.

² Julie Canlis, "The Bible's Best Description of Salvation Is a Phrase We Rarely Use." Christianity Today website. January 29, 2019. Accessed October 21, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-web-only/bibles-best-description-salvation-is-phrase-we-rarely-use.html>>.

³ Canlis, "The Bible's Best Description of Salvation Is a Phrase We Rarely Use."

⁴ David L. Bartlett, "Preaching to Galatians," *Interpretation* (July 2000) 291.