

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Union With Christ

**Sermon Text:** Romans 3:24

**Rom. 3:21** ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

**Rom. 3:22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

**Rom. 3:23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

**Rom. 3:24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

**Main Point:** The only way any person can enjoy the benefits of Christ is by embracing the whole Christ and who he is for sinners.

## **Outline:**

1. Redemption “In Christ”
2. The Whole Christ

## **Introduction**

If you have been a Christian for long enough, there will be things in Scripture that you can see a thousand times and never actually notice it. Passages, references, doctrines that are right there in front of you, under your nose, but until someone pointed it out you never saw it.

Well I want to draw attention to one of those truths today, which will be essential to appreciating all of the rest of Romans. But more important than helping us read a text, this is a doctrine that I truly believe will have a deep impact on our spiritual life if we take it seriously.

That doctrine which it's time for us to directly concentrate on is Union with Christ.

To introduce union with Christ, Let me ask a question: how does Scripture tell us that we receive the benefits of redemption? What are the means by which God takes what Jesus has done and bridges the gap between who he is for sinners, and who *we* are as sinners in need of a Savior? Now, part of the answer (and this would be correct) is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who applies the work of Christ to the believer.

But there is a deeper answer, and it is one that is all over the New Testament. It's in Paul's writings, it's in Hebrews, and it's in Peter's first letter as well. And here it is: we receive the blessings of redemption by being "in Christ." As we are "in Christ," we receive all that is in Christ. In other words, we receive all that Christ is "in him."

Today's verse is the first (but definitely not the last) time Paul refers to being "in Christ" in Romans. He will talk about being in Christ a dozen more times in this letter.

Just think about this: how many times have you seen the phrase "in Christ" when you are reading the New Testament? I bet you have seen it and just thought, "This is how Paul talks. Very religious. Very Jesus-centered. This is how Christians talk." But in fact, this way of speaking is important (the words are chosen carefully), because it speaks to how it is that we relate to God, and it speaks to how we enjoy God and all of his blessings directly.

But even more, it speaks to how the gospel answers our deepest human predicament. Sin is a problem, but it is a problem because it separates us from God. Sin is a problem, but it's a problem because we were made to know God and glorify God, and when sin is left unaddressed and unanswered, it makes it impossible for us to be restored to God.

We were made to behold his face, to live in his presence, and sin sends us away from his face, and away from his presence. And so what is so important to me today is to tell you, “Your greatest need is personal. You need to be restored to God, to be restored to the king of kings. You need to know *God*.” Even the benefits that Christ gives his people exist to bring us back to fellowship and enjoyment of God himself.

Here is how John Piper puts it: “The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God.”

This is actually how scripture talks. For example, 1 Peter 3:18: “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

Jesus, in John 17:3, is praying to the Father and he says, “This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Sometimes we read that and think, “It’s eternal life because Jesus gives us the benefits that get us eternal life.” No, that’s upside down: the blessings of the gospel exist so that we can know God.”

Psalms 73:25 says, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.” Do you see how God-centered the desire of Scripture writers is? He’s not “heaven-centered,” he’s “God-centered”. Heaven is precious because God is there. It’s not precious because of what it is, but because of who is there. We need God. Not a place. We need God. We were made for him. We desire him. Our need is personal. “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” (Ps. 42:1).

Do you see? They want HIM. The yearning of our heart is not for us to possess blessings or real estate; it’s to know God. Augustine (for the thousandth time): “You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

And yes, blessings come from being in Christ, and being restored to God. But if you think a Christless heaven sounds totally fine, then you haven’t understood your deepest need. If you think that a heaven with family and friends, but no God would be perfectly fine, then you haven’t grasped the greatness of God, or why the gospel really exists: God’s goal is to remove our sin so that we can have HIM.

The book of Romans is so doctrinally focused and precise in its argument that it would be easy for us to just get sucked up into the theology and to lose our moorings.

So today is a good day for us to dwell on the personal nature of all of this that Paul is talking about.

Not only is the goal of life (to glorify God and enjoy him forever) highly personal to the core, but the goal of heaven is personal to the core (to be restored to him, and know him face to face). To one day behold what theologians have called the “beatific vision.”

And today I want us to see that even the means of getting there is personal to the core, because we only find those things in the face of Jesus Christ and in our being united to him by faith.

So what I want you to see as we think about Union with Christ is that God’s Word knows that your greatest need is profoundly personal at rock bottom. It’s not fundamentally a doctrinal or abstract problem. It’s not really a philosophical problem. Philosophy and doctrine are only tools to describe and get down to what’s really going on. And here it is: You were meant to enjoy God, and we are separated from him by our sin. And the person of Christ and all that he does for us is HIMSELF the gospel because when we are in Christ, we are restored to God himself.

Jesus Christ is himself the gospel. In him are all the benefits of redemption, but those benefits are never separated out from his person. Nor are those benefits separate from his mission of bringing us to God. Therefore, the only way any person can enjoy the benefits of Christ is by embracing the whole Christ and who he is for sinners.

The way this plays out is that the appeal of the gospel is relational between us and God. It’s all about restoring and bringing us back to the one we were made to serve and know. The one we used to walk in the garden with in the cool of the day, before sin entered in and broke our fellowship with Him.

Today, then, I hope to help us understand this better today with two points. First, redemption “in Christ.” Second, the whole Christ.

I want us to see that if we ignore union with Christ, if we don't dwell on the person of Christ, and who he is for us, we will be led into a distorted view of God, which will lead to serious and fundamental errors that will keep coming up over and over again in this book of Romans.

So if we get union with Christ right, we're going to get the gospel right. But more importantly, we're going to be restored to enjoyment with God, which is why we were made.

## **1. Redemption "in Christ"**

First today, we see the Paul speaks of Redemption "in Christ."

I want you to see the personal focus of Paul. Paul is writing as someone who has met Jesus. Twice in his letters Paul tells us that he has seen the risen Christ. This is part of his argument for his status as an apostle.

For him Jesus is not merely an idea. He is Paul's savior, his friend, his Lord, his master, the one he loves, the one he serves, the one his whole life is about. He is the one that Paul is "in" through faith.

Sometimes Paul talks about us being in Christ, sometimes he speaks about Christ being in us. For example in Romans 8:9 Paul says, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness."

Two things to notice there: Paul says that for the believer, we are in Christ. But Paul also says that Christ is in us. How? Through the Spirit of Christ. So the Spirit is the one who unites us to Christ. We also see this in Ephesians 2:18: "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." Notice how Paul uses this trinitarian speech to show that we relate to Christ through the Spirit and have access to the Father through Christ and His Spirit.

How does this happen? How do we become united to Christ? The Scriptural answer to this is faith. Galatians 3:2: "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" So Paul's answer is that they received the Spirit through

hearing with faith. Faith is the means of our receiving the Spirit, but the Spirit is the one who brings the realities of the gospel alive in us.

The Spirit grants us faith in Christ, thus uniting us to Christ at the most personal and fundamental level, and in Christ we enjoy his blessings and restoration to God.

One of the clearest places we see this is in one of Paul's other letters. There is this verse in 1 Corinthians 1:30. In it Paul says that God chose what is low and despised in the world so that no one would boast in the presence of God. And then Paul says,

“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

Think of how intimately Paul writes about our relationship to Christ here. United to Christ, we have his wisdom, his righteousness, his holiness, his redemption. We have it all in him. All of it we have because we are “in Christ” by faith. Calvin writes about this verse in his *Institutes*, and what he says is very important. Listen to this:

“We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us... All that he possesses is nothing to us until we are united with him. (*Institutes* 3.1.1)

So here is Calvin echoing Paul here and saying, “you can't have justification without having Christ. You can't have forgiveness without having Christ. You can't have sanctification or adoption or glorification or any other blessings that Jesus has if you will not have Christ.”

This is why fundamentally we preach Christ. In him is everything. Everything.

These things are profoundly personal and rooted in Jesus himself and who he is for sinners.

And this actually takes us right to the second point today.

## **2. The Whole Christ**

Second today, Union with Christ confronts us with the *whole* Christ, not a part of Christ.

Here is what I mean: it isn't unusual for us to think of salvation as the doctrine of justification, or the doctrine of the atonement, or as any other doctrine. Now, you might think wait a minute, did he just say that salvation is *not* the doctrine of justification? Well we are always in danger of reducing salvation down to any one doctrine, even a doctrine that is precious.

And justification by faith alone is precious. There is no hope without it. But even that very real and precious doctrine is only a part of the whole of salvation that Jesus provides to those who are united to him by faith. But as Christians we are sometimes tempted to want to take the doctrine and not Jesus. We get so focused on justification or sanctification or adoption that we start to think, "This one right here. This is the star of the show," and we miss the one who provides these things in himself.

And when we think this way we may start to think of the gospel as being a principle, or being a rule, or being a doctrine. That feeds the error of depersonalizing the gospel. But in reality God himself is the gospel. And Christ himself is the good news of the gospel. Why? Because in him is everything: everything we will ever need, everything we will ever want (ultimately), and everything that we are becoming. Everything God intends for us to become is found "in Christ."

And what I want to belabor (and what Paul never gives up throughout any of his letters) is that we must never abstract the blessings Christ provides from the person whom Christ is *for us*.

I'm showing you that salvation is deeply personal: that the blessings of Jesus can only be ours in union with him. They aren't ideas that we grab hold of, they are truths that belong to us in the person of Christ, who loves sinners and lives to bring us to God.

Think of that passage from 1 Cor. 1:30 again: "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and

redemption.” Paul does not say, “You have wisdom from God, righteousness, and sanctification.” And he could have said that and it would be true.

But Paul wants us to know how we have those things, and in whom we have those things. So he says, “You are in Christ, who is HIMSELF those blessings. You enjoy those things because you enjoy HIM.”

But if I could bring this together with what Calvin said earlier, this is so profound. Calvin says, “If you’ve truly got righteousness, then you received it in the person of Christ. And that means you *do* also have sanctification and redemption and all his other gifts.”

Salvation is not a buffet where we can pick our favorite things about Jesus and sort of ignore the things we don’t.

We can’t pick our favorite things that Jesus is and reject the other things. When we do that we’re just tearing Jesus apart. Tearing him into pieces.

Many people I suspect would be happy just having redemption, but not having righteousness or sanctification. “I want to be saved.” But they’d also say, “I don’t really want to be holy, though.”

Many people do talk about Christ this way: “trust in Christ to be justified.” But many of those same people would say, “God doesn’t expect you to be holy now, or grow in sanctification or to show the fruits of spiritual growth.”

It's very common in the church today to treat Jesus as though he is a get out of Jail free card, but to forget that Christ is more than the justifier. If I could put it in the language that some people use to describe this, many people want Jesus to be a Savior, but not a Lord. They want him to rescue them, but they don’t want him to rule over them or to make demands on their life.

You see, this attitude still sees God’s law as a curse and not a blessing – this takes us back to a couple weeks ago. Some people can’t imagine any good use for the law, so they think, Jesus must be saving me from the law. They fundamentally still see God as opposed to them, and think that really the gospel is about getting away from a God whom they don’t see as a loving father. And because they fundamentally misunderstand God and his attitude toward sinners and His law, they think they should want forgiveness but

nothing else from him. They think they can just have Jesus as forgiver, but not have him as all the other things he is for sinners.

But Calvin already said this: Jesus is not meant to be broken into pieces and used: he is the person that we are united to by faith. Imagine a marriage where the wife said, "I want to share a bank account, but not the rest of our lives. Give me your money, but let me have my own place, my own car, my own life. I'm basically going to go on living as if you don't exist, or at least as if you only exist to give me money." That would be ridiculous and offensive, and it would be a mockery of marriage. And we instinctively know that it's silly to be united to someone and live as if we're not united to them.

Well it's also silly for someone to say they are a follower of Christ who wants to keep Jesus at a distance.

If we're united to him, then we have received his blessings, including forgiveness, but also holiness. And that means that if we're united to him by faith, then we should also show some kind of fruits of holiness. Not perfection, but signs of life. "Is there a spiritual breath or pulse at least?" in other words.

We don't just receive one blessing like justification when we are united to Christ. We also receive sanctification. We receive adoption. In other words, we receive Christ and all he is for sinners.

And if we don't have any of those other blessings, we are meant to question if we're united to Jesus at all. We are called to holiness. What might that look like? Well it would mean repentance of sin when God shows us our sin. It looks like progressive growth in holiness. It looks like the baby steps of the Christian life. It's not perfection, but it is at least a spiritual pulse.

That holiness that we look for isn't the foundation of our peace with God, but the Reformers were fond of saying that it is an important *evidence* of it. This is what it means to receive the whole Christ: we receive all that he is for us, not just a part of him. We don't just come to him for justification, we don't just treat him like a get out of jail free card, but we treat him as someone whom we know and love and whom we're united to. And we embrace him along with all of his blessings and benefits.

## Conclusion

Of all the blessings of being united to Christ, I hope you've seen it already: the greatest blessing is Christ himself. To know that God doesn't regard you or me from afar... it's not like God is over there, and he notices us and sees us, and thinks, "Aww. She's got her doctrinal ducks in a row. She memorized the catechism. She understands justification by faith alone. I guess she's in."

That's such a distant, abstract, cold understanding of who Christ is for us. What Union with Christ says to us is that God loves you, unites you to himself by faith, and adopts you into his family. In other words, he brings us near, and he himself comes near to us.

Scripture pictures this in different ways, but consider one illustration Jesus used in his own preaching. In John 15:5 Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Jesus says, "I'm the source of life, and you're connected to me, and everything you get you get through me." Think of that connection. It's organic, vital, life-giving. No one says, "Man, that branch is doing great even though it's not connected to the tree." No, all of its life flows from that connection. If you're in Christ, it's not just that you've learned the right things or done the right things. It's that your very life—your hope, your growth, your strength—comes from being in him, day by day, moment by moment.

Union with Christ also means something more intimate when it comes to prayer. When you pray, you don't come before God as a stranger. You come in the name of Christ because you are *in* Christ. That means God hears you the way he hears his Son. Think of how often Jesus prays in Scripture. It was primary in his life, and he prayed all the time. And because you are united to Christ by faith, you are not an outsider trying to earn a hearing—you are already inside the throne room as family, not on a legal technicality, but because you are in the Beloved.

In Christ, you are not on the outside continually trying to get in, trying to be approved, trying to be welcomed. If you have Christ, you have everything in him. If you have Christ you don't just have his blessings, but you have him. In Christ you

are indwelt by the one in whom the fulness of the godhead dwelt bodily. In Christ you have the one whom your soul loves, and whose soul loves you.

*Let's pray.*