

Union with Christ

Colossians 2:6-15

Rev. John Pennylegion
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Well friends, it is good to be with you this morning. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it's great that we can gather and worship and give glory to God if you are a guest or a visitor. We're glad that you're here, and if we haven't had the opportunity to meet, I would love to welcome you, love to formally greet you. I usually kind of hang out by those doors in the gathering area after the service. We would love to welcome you and say that we're thankful for you being here. But if you've been with us, then you know that we are in the book of Colossians, and we are in Colossians 2 this morning. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Colossians 2. If you don't have a Bible, we have Bibles in the chairs, and the passage is found on page 984. Now if you were with us a few weeks ago during our first sermon, then you maybe remember that I quoted a commentator who said that Colossians is perhaps the most Christ-centric of the New Testament letters. So of all the New Testament letters, the letters by Paul, of Peter, of John, that this is the most Christ-centric one of them. And at the time, maybe you remember, I said, "well, that felt a little bit like hyperbole," right? Because every New Testament book is pointing to Jesus, and in fact, the entire Old Testament, all of scriptures, right, they find they're fulfilling Jesus. Like the Jesus Storybook Bible says, every story whispers his name. And yet, it feels over the last few weeks that quote is playing out, doesn't it? Because it seems as though every paragraph, every verse, every sentence of Colossians seems to talk about Jesus, doesn't it?

And this is actually good for us. It's good for us to be reminded of who Jesus is and what he has done each and every week, each and every page, each and every verse, because Jesus is who we ultimately need. More than theories, more than philosophies, what we need is Christ, and we're going to see more of that today. As Paul emphasized what it is that Jesus has done, we're going to see how Jesus unites us to himself. So with that in mind, let's read Colossians 2, beginning in verse 6. Paul writes,

"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word and ask that you would help us, help us to see your goodness, help us to behold the beauty of Christ, help us to understand what you would

have for us from this passage. Father, we need your help, so we ask, open our eyes, unplug our ears, soften our hearts, that we would behold your glory. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.

Now, I know some of you aren't aware of this, but others of us are well aware that there are only 31 more games to the Major League Baseball season. So, that means the World Series is quickly coming, and my mind has been thinking about the World Series for the last week or so, and as I was thinking about the World Series, I was thinking about World Series rings. World Series rings. Rings are given to World Series champions, right? They get the World Series trophy as an organization, but then the individuals, they're not given medals, they're not given little miniature trophies, they get a ring. Have you ever seen a World Series ring? They're enormous. They're giant. They're incredible. I had the good fortune when I was a child to wear a World Series ring. Brian Doyle, who was the second baseman, the New York Yankees, in the '78 World Series, happened to be at my home eating dinner at my dining room table, and he was wearing his ring, because why would you ever take it off? And I remember, I was a child, and I remembered asking him, you know, "could I wear it?" I didn't know any better, right? So, I asked him, "can I put on your 1978 World Series ring?" And he was gracious and generous, and he took it off, and he put it on my finger, and it was giant. It's full of gold, and diamonds, and jewels, and it said champions. It had the New York Yankees symbol on it. It was amazing. It was incredible. This is what he was given, and he has it for the rest of his life. World Series rings, that's what champions get.

The last two years, it's been the Los Angeles Dodgers, and so names like Otani, and Yamamoto, and Freddie Freeman, they're the ones who are getting these rings, but when they were given these rings at the beginning of this season, there was someone else who got one. His name is Chico Herrera. Chico, I like that name, Chico. It's not his real name, it's a nickname, but Chico Herrera, and while many of us, even if you're not a baseball fan, you've probably heard of Otani, you've maybe heard of Freddie Freeman, or Mookie Betts, some of these players, I guarantee you that you might be the most rabid baseball fan, and you have never heard of Chico Herrera. That's because Chico Herrera has never thrown a single pitch from the mound. He's never had a single at bat or hit. If you looked him up, his stats, there are none. He's the bullpen catcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers. He's the bullpen catcher, and yet, though he will never give a Hall of Fame speech, and no fan will ever sing his praises, he has a ring. He has a ring because he's on the team. Because though he's not Otani, though he's not Yamamoto, though he's not these great players, he still gets the same reward of everyone else who played in those games. He gets that ring, that reward, and that's what Paul is telling us about us.

Union with Christ

You see, we didn't contribute to Christ's victory over death, and we didn't cause him to rise again. In fact, we are the reason he went to the cross in the first place. We are the reason that he had to go to his death. It was for our sin, and yet, we get his reward. We get the victory of Christ, and we get it because we are united to him. We're united to Christ in his death and his resurrection, so that his victory is now ours. We're united with Christ. Did you see, I don't know if you paid attention, or were noticing closely, how often the phrase "in him" and "with him" showed up in our few verses? There's not many verses, but it's there. Nine times by my count, we hear "in him" or "with him." Seven times it's explicitly referring to our relationship with Christ. We hear we walk in him, we're built up in him, we're filled in him, in him we were circumcised, in him buried with him, raised with him, alive together with him. That

language of being with or in him, Paul is using to show us that we are united to Christ, so that what is true of Jesus is true of us.

In other words, what's true of the Savior is true of his saved people. As the king goes, so go his subjects. That's what union with Christ means. That what Jesus has done, it's credited to his people. We see it in verses 11 through 12. In him also, you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. So we hear Paul picking up this Old Testament language of circumcision, right? We heard in our Old Testament reading that circumcision was the mark of the covenant, and it was made with hands in the flesh. But now, in Christ, we have a circumcision not made with hands, and not in the flesh. No, we have a circumcision that is given to us through Christ. That we put off the flesh as we are buried with him and circumcised in him. That we are now marked out. Marked out. That just that circumcision marked out the people of God in the Old Testament. So now, as we are baptized in Christ and buried with him, we are dead to our flesh, we now are marked out with him. We are baptized into the death of Christ. In baptism, we die with Christ's death. And when he rose, his resurrection is applied to us. We rise with him.

Paul is telling us that Jesus did what we couldn't do for ourselves, and he gave it to us. What he did is now ours. Through Christ's death and resurrection, in verses 13 through 14, we hear that those who were dead in our sins are now alive in Christ. That those who had trespassed against God's law, we are now forgiven. That those who accumulated a debt because of our transgressions, that debt is canceled. That our sins are nailed to the cross. That Christ's life, the merits of his death, the victory of his resurrection, it is credited to you. And it's credited to me. And it is credited to all who trust in him. God has nailed our debt to the cross. Now, you remember from the gospel accounts, there was an actual sign that was nailed to the cross. Do you remember? That when Jesus was crucified, when he was hung on the tree, the Roman authorities, they nailed a sign to the cross. And that sign, it said, "the King of the Jews." And they nailed it to the cross as a way to mock him, to scorn him, as a way to shame him. And that's actually an aspect of crucifixion. Shame. Crucifixion, those who were crucified, they were oftentimes crucified naked, exposed to the whole world. I know that in artistic representations, the crucified people are often covered with a small loincloth. And we understand why they would do that in art. But in reality, they were naked, exposed to the world, exposed to abuse and ridicule and shame. This is what Christ went to.

And yet what Paul is telling us is that a great reversal took place. Because the means by which the enemies of Christ sought to bring shame on him was the very way that God shamed them. We see it in verses 14 and 15, canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him. That's what Christ did. That what the enemies of God believed would bring shame to Christ was actually a time of great victory. A time when Christ took our sin upon himself and he died and was buried and he rose again. That death, that accounting for the debt of our sin, that rising to new life, he has credited to you. It is now true of you. Your sins have been wiped away. Your debt has been done away with. Your transgressions have been nailed to the cross. Now that is incredible to think about. That this one who in verse 9 is described as the one for whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily, that this one, this second person of the trinity took on flesh and gave his life so that we would have life. What is true of Christ is true of you. And so that

means, since we have been united to Christ, that we're not our own. It means that we belong to Christ.

This reminds me of that most famous of scenes from *Les Mis*, right? Victor Hugo's amazing work, the story of Jean Valjean, this criminal who's gone out of prison and he's needing a place to stay. And so he knocks on the door of the bishop and the bishop welcomes him into his home and gives him a place to rest and food to eat. And in the morning, Valjean is gone with all the silver. And he's arrested and brought back to the bishop and the police, right? They laugh and they joke. He said that you gave it to them, to him. And of course, the bishop, what does he say? "Well, I did. I gave him all the silver. And in fact, Valjean, Jean Valjean, my brother, you forgot the candlesticks." And the police officers, they were flabbergasted, right? They couldn't believe it. And so they leave the room and all that is left is the bishop who was gracious and the criminal who needed mercy. And the bishop said, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you. I withdraw it from the black thoughts and the spirit of perdition. And I give it to God. You no longer belong to evil. Your soul belongs to God."

Living Out Our Union

Because of the grace that was shown him, he is no longer his own. And neither are we. Because of God's grace, because we are united to Christ, we are not our own. *The Heidelberg Catechism* puts it this way: "I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." That's who we are. United to Christ, we belong to him. What's true of Christ is true of us. That because we belong to Christ, because we have died and risen with him, are united to him, that means that we now live out our union. We live out our union. That's how our passage began: "As you receive Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." So walk in him. Walk. So notice, though, that Paul adds that qualifier, right? "As you received Christ, so walk in him." So think about how you first received Christ. So for some of you, right, you grew up in the faith, you grew up in a covenant family, you can't remember a time not believing in Jesus. For others of us, we came to faith later in life, we have great, you know, we have lots of memories of when we didn't believe, and so it's maybe easier for us to remember when we received. But regardless of whether we received Christ at a young age, or we can't remember when, or an older age, how did we receive him? We received him with faith and repentance, with trust and thanksgiving, right? It wasn't just simply mental awareness or cognitive ascent. No, there was a deep transformative change that took place, a sense of relief and freedom that my sin, all my sin, all of our sin, it is truly forgiven.

Do you remember when you first believed that? When it first became real to you? And the thanksgiving that wells up in your heart for what Christ has done, for the faith that we now have in him, for who he is, that's how we received him. But how we received him, we don't stop that, we don't move off of that, we don't say, "well, that was great when I was 5, that was great when I was 15, that was great when I was 35," right? We continue to walk as we received him with faith, with trust, with repentance, and thanksgiving. That is the whole of the Christian life, walking with him, recognizing who he is, submitting to him as our Lord, not just when we first believed, but all of our life.

Did you see how Paul described Jesus? As you receive Christ Jesus, the Lord. He is the king of the universe, the king over the creation, the king over our lives. We heard that just a couple

weeks ago. Jesus is the preeminent one over the world and over us. And so we don't just submit to him back when we first believed, but we submit to him now, today, in all of our days, as we walk with him. And so as we walk with him, that means that our lives are going to be oriented with regard to the ways of the Lord and not to the ways of the world. That's what Paul said in verse 8: "Walk in him now, see to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ." So you hear what Paul's saying, right? As you walk with Christ, as you are walking in him, do not be captive to the world. So for the Colossians, the thing that they were in danger of being captive to were the philosophies and deceitfulness and traditions that they thought set them apart. Now, I find it really fascinating that Paul uses this word captive. I find it fascinating. It's very evocative to me because not only does it give us that picture of being in prison, right, of nowhere to go, of being surrounded, right? But when we remember where Paul's writing this from, he's in prison, right? He's behind bars. He does not have freedom, and yet he's warning those who have no shackles to be weary, to be on guard of being captive. It's as though Paul is saying, "this one who is in prison, I am actually free because I walk in Christ." That there is a captivity greater than bars, that is greater than jail, that is greater than prison. It is the captivity of the world.

And Paul's saying, be mindful, be on guard. He's warning those knotting chains about the captivity and enslavement that comes from not walking with Christ. And so for the Colossians, it was the philosophy of the day that encouraged them to move on beyond Jesus. It was human traditions. Most commentators think human traditions is referring to Old Testament Jewish practices that it would have been easy for Jewish converts to want to return to. That's what they're in danger of being captive by. But what about us? What are we in danger of being held captive to? Maybe it's the allure of power and influence. Maybe it's the promise of comfort that a middle class life might offer. Maybe it's the enticement of sexual expression, or the charm of finding meaning in relationships, or ultimate meaning in our families. Now, all of these things in themselves have, in their right place, are good and beautiful. Power and influence, when it's used for the sake of those who have no power, when we give voice to those who have no voice, that is using power in its right way. Sexual expression, right? In the confines of a marriage between a man and a woman, right? That is a beautiful thing. It is a gift from God. A family is a place where we can express the gospel to one another and to the world.

These things can be good and beautiful and they have the danger of holding us captive if we walk in them rather than in Christ. And so, what is it for us? It was philosophies, it was traditions for the Colossians, but what about you? What about me? Paul is saying, be on guard. Be aware. Don't be held captive to anything other than Christ. Listen, y'all, Christ didn't go to the cross and he didn't scorn and shame, and he didn't descend into the grave or rise triumphantly. He didn't unite us to himself so we'd go along with the infatuations and entanglements of the world. No, no, he united us to himself so that we would live in light of our union with him, rooted in him, built up upon him, established in faith, abounding in thanksgiving. Because we, with him and through him, have died to those ways and we have risen to new life that we would walk in him. What's true of him is true of us. I love that Chico Hernandez has that same ring as Shohei Otani. I love it. I love that this person, this man, that we will probably never hear about again after this sermon, has the same reward as Freddie Freeman. But I bet that if Chico Hernandez, we were to meet him, maybe we would have the privilege of having him to dinner at our house, and he's sitting around the dining room table, and I imagine he'd be wearing that ring just like Brian was. And I could imagine that we

could ask, "can I wear it?" And he'd let us put it on, and as he would talk about the ring, I'm sure he would talk about the ring.

But you know what I bet he wouldn't talk about? I bet he wouldn't talk about how great he is at framing bullpen pictures. I bet he wouldn't talk about how he is the best at warming up those guys before they go to the field. I bet he wouldn't talk about how his knees ache from squatting all those innings. No, he wouldn't talk about himself, because he never set foot on the field. He wouldn't talk about himself. No, I bet he would tell us stories about Otani on the mound, and Freeman's head, and Yamamoto coming in from the pen. He would talk about how great and victorious they were, and how thankful he could be part of it. He had nothing to do with it, and yet he still gets credit for it. Friends, as we live out our union with Christ, it means we're going to know that we didn't have anything to do with that victory. It means that we will know that we had nothing to do with his triumph over death. No, but we will know that because we are united to Christ, we share in that victory. We share in his death. We share in his resurrection, because as Christ goes, so go we. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you that you have sent your Son to live, and to die, and to rise again, so that we would have life, so that the death by which he died, and the life by which he lived now, is credited to us. Father, we are thankful for that, and filled with rejoicing and celebration that what is true of Christ is true of us, not because of anything that we have done, but simply by your grace. And so we pray, Father, that you would help us to fix our eyes on Christ, and that we would walk in light of the union that you have afforded to us, so then all of our lives, not just when we first believe, not just when we first receive, but all of our lives would be filled with trust, with repentance, with faith, and with thanksgiving, that what is true of Christ is true of us. And we pray this in his name, and God's people said together, Amen.