

The heart of the gospel, the essence of Christianity, is this doctrine of our union with Christ that we have been looking at this past few months. When people, and some of you may be here today, think of Christianity, it is rarely the case that this doctrine of one's union with Christ by faith alone as our means of rightness with God is attributed as the defining characteristic of the faith. Yet, that is exactly what it is. It is precisely the heart of what it means to be a true Christian.

You see, there are two ways in which our understanding of this gospel can drift, two sides of the fence onto which we may fall into some pile of error. The first is what I would say is the most common misconception of Christianity: that we present our record of right works to God and then He accepts us because we have met some minimum standard of good works. This is self-righteousness – that we perform good works and avoid the really big sins and then God smiles at us.

The second error is also a commonly growing misunderstanding of the gospel: that God's mercy makes righteousness unnecessary, that God isn't even interested, and certainly not demanding, any kind of moral performance, any holiness, any goodness. He simply accepts everyone without any regard for righteousness. He is only gentle and never wrathful, only gracious and never furious. Therefore, any talk about our need to be changed, to be converted, to be saved is seen as obsolete and arrogant, a bigoted attempt of those self-righteous people to somehow judge otherwise morally neutral people into their way of thinking. Christ would never seek to convert anyone. In this view a holy way of life is inconsequential.

Neither of this is Christianity. Neither of these is good news, which is what the word 'gospel' means. Both of these are wrong. How can I be so arrogant as use a word like "wrong" in defining Christianity? Because Jesus told us so. He told his followers that "apart from me you can do nothing", which destroys the possibility that our works, our doings, could be presenting to God as something. They are nothings apart from Him. He also said that, "Nobody can come to the Father except through me." "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you can have no part in me." All such expressions are declarations that our only hope is that Christ Himself might bring us to God apart from our own righteousness. This is exactly what Paul has been expounding, that God

Himself, according to His great mercy, transferred us from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son, and only by being united to Jesus, bound to Him and His moral performance alone, are we things between me and God made right, are we reconciled to Him. Without Christ, we are enemies of God, and will suffer God's wrath as an enemy. Our only hope is the Christ and our works are empty nothings if we are not united to Him by humble dependence. For things to be made right between us and God, to be transferred from enemy lines to friends, is to die. The good news of Christianity is that we did die with Christ, was is the only qualified representative between us and God, and we were raised with him, so that our glory, our goodness, is hidden with Christ yet to be revealed. Thus, legalism, moralism, that self-righteous understanding of so-called Christianity is utterly wrong. We need nothing but Christ, the righteous one, his death and resurrection, received by faith alone.

Yet, Jesus also said, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the experts in the law and of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:20) This destroys the idea that righteousness doesn't matter, or that God simply overlooks our failures and sins. He also said, "Truly I say to you that unless you are converted and become like children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Conversion is necessary. Change is demanded. Righteousness matters. Obedience matters. The idea that God just overlooks sins and that change and holiness is not necessary for Christians is utterly wrong.

There is a danger of moving from legalism to licentiousness, from not grace to cheap grace, to being dependent upon our moral performance to make us right with God to rejecting the very concept of right with God as a necessary thing. So doing is jumping out of one pile of dung, over the fence to another pile of dung. It's a different side of the fence, but it's still dung.

The apostle, having just proclaimed the great heart of Christianity, that God makes us right with Him through the death and resurrection of His own Son, and that we are included in that great righteousness by faith in the Christ alone, immediately shows that this great gift of God logically demands a change of lifestyle, a conversion of our hearts, our speech, and our entire outlook upon life. It radically alters the way that we

see everything in the world and will, by necessity, produce a morality that is not the cause of our reconciliation with God, but the outcome of it which reflects the nature and character of the One who has made us new.

We are to live in the light of our union with Jesus, as those who have already died to sin. We are to kill the evil desires in our hearts because we have already died; the things for which God's wrath is being poured out and in which we all once embraced. But now, we have died with Christ, so let us be consistent with such a death.

And let us put off the clothes of our death days, of mouths which raged in anger and intent to harm, which slandered and blamed and corrupted others. Let us put off the clothes of old relational divisions, of self-righteousness based upon ethnicity or traditions or education or economics and remember that we are all only brought into God's delight through Christ alone, all equally and only because of Him. He alone is our sufficiency.

Christians obey God. They repent of wicked desires and actions. Coming to Christ is the end of the struggle to obtain righteousness with God, but it is not the end of struggle. We are called to do three things in vv5-11 as the outcome of our union with Christ, as the result of Christ being our life. These three commands are 1) to kill the desire to find life-worth-living in something besides Christ, 2) to take off the uniform of our old way of finding life-worth-living, and 3) to take off the old uniform of pretense with one another and walk genuinely in the light of our union with Christ and every other believer's union with Christ as our source and foundation of unity and acceptance of one another.

The search of this "life-worth-living", what we have called "belonging" and "righteousness" over the past few months, is the desire at the root of every human heart. We were made for a life-worth-living in dependence upon God. Since Christ is our life, then we should put to death every desire which seeks, which sets its heart upon, finding life-worth-living in anything else. This is the foundation of the first list of vices that the apostle commands us to put to death.

You have died to the old way of finding life-worth-living and come to the new way, Christ alone, so put to death that part of you which still feels the pull of the old way, which seeks to find its belonging, its righteousness, its life, through someone or something else.

You will seek something for belonging, you will set your heart and set your mind on something to make life-worth-living. It doesn't matter if you are religious or you sit here today and consider yourself to be an irreligious person. Everybody is converted to something, to some promiser of life-worth-living. Nobody is neutral. Nobody is free. Nobody is converted to nothing. We all turn to something, bank on something, center our lives and pursuits and hopes upon something. When we bank on something other than Christ to give us life, it actually kills us. Watch how Paul concludes this.

Paul actually uses a word which translators have found difficult to translate. It is the word “evil desire” in verse 5. It is literally a compound word, “over-desire.” Often it is translated “lust”, and it is followed by the word “coveteousness”, or “greed,” which is defined as “the motivating force for gaining something beyond an acceptable standard.” Both of these terms reveal the heart underneath this entire list, an over-desire for something. It's not just a desire for it, but an over-desire for it. It's not just an appreciation of something, a valuing of it, but an overvaluing of it. It is inordinate, out of order, moved too far forward in priority and has taken the place of giving a life-worth-living.

This is an important point because we usually think of these terms like “lust” or “evil desire” as desires for evil things, but the word is actually appropriate to apply to good things, too. It is an inordinate desire for good things. Sex is good in its proper place and with proper desire. A desire for possessions is good within its proper order, but an over-desire for possessions, a “gaining something beyond what is acceptable” is greed and wickedness. Paul tells those who desire to become elders that it is a “noble task that they desire”, but a desire for authority in order to lord over others is wickedness of the highest degree, according to Jesus, and completely unlike Him.

Therefore, Paul concludes this list, while here it only textually connects to “greed”, in the Ephesians 5 parallel is connected to all such desires, as idolatry. How are such

desires “idolatry”? Well, an idol is simply anything which promises you life-worth-living if you obey it. And idols are not merely stone statues or golden figures which somebody bows down to, but rather anything that we set up in our hearts as something that we MUST have in order to obtain a life-worth-living.

We endow such things with a presumed ability to do so, and they put forth systems of laws which we must reach in order to obtain their blessings of life, and if we fail them, they curse us. For example, if an idol of your heart is romance, then this idol sets forth a system of righteousness which you must follow, you must obey, in order to truly live. You *must* find a partner. Until you get one, you will not feel that life is worth living. What does romance promise? It promises significance. Importance. Meaning. Lovability and acceptability. Romance promises that you are wanted, respected, and cherished. But, if romance is what makes your life-worth-living, and nobody wants you romantically, you will feel cursed, so that life isn’t worth living. You will wrestle to obtain it because you believe that having romance is what makes life-worth-living.

Or, consider sexual pleasure, which is distinct from romance. If you believe that you must have sexual pleasure, you will be willing to do anything to get it, because that is what makes life-worth-living. Why is pornography such a horrible cancer upon the hearts of men in our society? It objectifies women, demeans the personhood of all involved, and is an enslaving temptation to more than 3/4 of the men in this room, including myself? It is because sexual pleasure is an idol which makes promises of power, pleasure, and the feeling of being pursued and desired. In an idolatrous sexual fantasy, I deceptively feel wanted. I believe the lie that this ‘encounter’ makes me meaningful. I pretend to be important...you could even say that I am seeking to be worshipped. Why is pornography a \$13.4 billion-per-year industry? Because men idolize sexual power and pleasure as the promiser of a life-worth-living.

Now, I know that I am painting with a very broad brush, but the statistics do reveal something truthful. In the words of Jean Calvin, “The heart is an idol factory.” We are constantly looking to something, entrusting our life-worth-living to something which falsely promises to grant life as long as we can obtain and keep it.

But the reality is that all idols are false promisers. They are incapable of delivering on that promise because it is outside their created power to do so. It is a lie that anything makes your life-worth-living, other than Christ. They are deceivers. They are enslavers. Those things which promise glory, which promise honor, which promise freedom and life, actually enslave us to them. We have to have them. We sin to get them. We end up doing things that we never imagined we would do in order to keep them.

And when you fail them, they don't forgive you, they beat you down. They humiliate you. They harbor your heart in the darkness, leading you to lie and hide and cower. They destroy your freedom and your personhood, they lead only to destruction and death. Not because they are bad in themselves, but because they make horrible gods. Romance and sexual pleasure are good things, in their ordinate places, but they make horrible, horrible life-givers. They cannot give you, nor were they ever made to, life and glory and honor.

Only Christ can give you that...and He gives it to you. He is your life. He is your glory.

Seeking to find our lives worth living in something other than Christ is idolatry, plain and simple, and is something to be fought against, waged war against, put to death as completely out-of-line with having already died and been raised with Christ Jesus. The gospel of our union with Christ leads us to put to death such idolatrous liaisons with false-promisers of life.

And isn't that exactly what sin is: a seeking of a life-worth-living in something out of order, something other than Christ? Sure! Sexual immorality is seeking to find life-worth-living in sexual relationship. It's not just a desire for a sexual relationship that needs to be put to death, but when it is the thing which makes life-worth-living, so that we are willing to pursue it and set our minds upon it as our means of life, that needs to be killed.

And note that such idolatrous desires are what brings the wrath of God, not because our sins are mere faux pas, but because they are mutinous rejections of God as worthy and an embrace of that which competes for His glory.

And we used to live our lives according to these desires, according to these false promisers, believing that if we could obtain sexual pleasure, or power and influence, or possessions and wealth, then we would really live. But, we don't live that way now, because we have seen the futility of those promisers, that they cannot deliver on what they promise, and that the life which they deliver is void of true and abundant life. We died to such promises and live now to God, according to the life which Christ has purchased for us, that hope of glory, waiting to be revealed.

Such efforts to obtain and protect these idols of the heart, these false-promisers of life-worth-living, naturally lead to the destructive double-barrel of comparison and defensiveness with one another. Therefore, Paul immediately, in agreement with Jesus' words that "out of the heart the mouth speaks", addresses a series of things that are all related to speech towards one another. Wrath, rage, malice, slander, and abusive speech. This connection between the heart and the tongue helps us uncover the desires of our hearts. For example, where do we speak in anger? What are we trying to protect so vehemently? Is it our reputation, our honor, our respect, our comfort, our sexual pleasure, our possessions? Any of these could be a coveted thing, and our anger and wrathful speech reveals that we are loving something too much, depending upon it for something which it cannot support, and is motivated by an overdesire which ought to be executed in the light of the promises of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul says that we are to take off such language like we change out of our old uniform of death. Such language comes from an idolatrous heart which must constantly compare our possessions and pleasure and power with one another. If your idol is physical attractiveness, then how do you respond when someone criticizes your appearance? Anger and rage explode out of defensiveness, because someone has come between me and the pursuit of my idol. We that we have to be recognized as righteous in this area, so we attack when people question us. It's the irony of idolatry. In trying to defend our honor, we act so demonstrably dishonorable. In fact, it is most likely that the sin which is killing you the most right now is the one that you are most defensive about, or of which you accuse others.

Such defensiveness leads to malicious gossip and slander, abusive forms of speech which become the weapons of the mouth aimed and slung with the intent to demean and belittle and tear down another person's honor. Why? What do we hope to accomplish with such demeaning and destructive words? We hope to show that we are honorable, that we are good, that we are acceptable, that are righteous, *because we must*. It is our idol. If somebody brings up our failures in an area where we are idolizing something, where we are entrusting our life-worth-living, then we quickly lash out at another person's failures, trying to take the eyes off of our failure and put them on someone else's supposedly bigger failure. We seek power and control over others rather than service and edification of others. Such slander rejects the gospel, for it denies that I am accepted and approved and belong, that I am righteous in Christ Jesus. That He is my life and my glory. Instead, it destroys another person to defend my own righteousness. Such behavior should be put off, like an old uniform, because such defending of our own righteousness is no longer needed. I am bound to Christ. He is my righteousness. He is my belonging. I can "lose" to another, for their sake, to build them up, because I no longer need to be approved of by others because I am fully approved in Christ Jesus. I can admit my failures, my wrongdoing, even the deep-down-dirty ones, the wickedness (there's a word we don't use much anymore...why?) and perversity and crookedness of my own desires, which I am seeking to execute but which keep rising up like zombies, groaning that they can give me life-worth-living.

That old way-of-belonging, of obtaining a life-worth-living by obtaining something other than Christ, is what Paul calls "the old humanity" or "the old man." I like "old humanity" better, because God is building a new community with new hearts, not merely individuals. And although every community is made up of individuals, the emphasis here is on a new identity, a new humanity fit for glory because it is no longer united to Adam, but to Christ. As our head, we a new people, declared to be righteous. The old humanity operated according to the self-righteousness of idolatry and the function of pretense, of deception, of pretending to have it all together. This is why Paul commands us to tell the truth to each other, to lay aside pretense and deception and speak the truth. The new humanity operates according to the grace given to us in our union with Christ Jesus, who is our life-worth-living and our glory to be revealed,

so that truth-telling is the norm, the daily attire of the Christian, because he doesn't have to pretend. In fact, the faithful Christian sees pretense as destructive, as deadly, as an enemy of the gospel and of Christ.

The old humanity, however, is deceptive because it puts forth counterfeit fruit. We called it love, but it was not. It was deceptive. It was really co-dependency, serving others so that they would appreciate me, honor me, need me. It uses others by serving others. We called it joy, but it was not. It was a lie. It was really pleasure in the gifts rather than the giver, a child who gleefully devoured candy, but later found that he was ill and unhappy and blamed his parents. We called it peace, but it was appeasement, a desire to avoid conflict so that people weren't mad with me. That would be devastating, paralyzing, horrifying, because I idolized their approval, even when it was clothed in apathy and indifference. We called it patience, but it was really cynicism, believing that dealing with a problem was beneath me, carelessness in Christianized disguise. We called it kindness, but it was just niceness, that deceptive cousin who fears telling the necessary truth because it will hurt, even when silence harms more. We called it goodness, but it was all about me, about my glory, about my honor, about people appreciating me and valuing me and seeing me as significant.

In reality, the old humanity compares ourselves with others and defends ourselves to others all the time, and such pretense come out of our mouths. We speak over others because we are comparing our idols with superiority over others. We look down on those who cannot perform well in the ways that we think they should, and we treat them as lower than us. We gossip about their failures, we boast about our successes, we demean and belittle to prove how superior we are, or how superior our thoughts and reasoning are, we are harshly critical and by so doing we make much of us and make little of Christ.

Richard Lovelace summarizes this dynamic very well in his work, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. He writes,

“Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons, much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant

bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity...”

But, when we put the idols of our hearts to death, when we recognize that they are powerless because they are dead and because we are foolish, and that our only hope of life is hidden in the heavens in Christ, with God, then we can lay aside the compulsion to defend ourselves and tear down others. We can serve others for their own sake and for the sake of Christ. We can offend others when they sin, for their sake. We can let people be mad at us, and recognize it as sin rather than righteousness, and not give in to sin ourselves. We can rejoice in other people’s success rather than boast of our own, and actually do and speak what is best for others without feeling the inordinate need to build up myself or defend my own righteousness. Not because I don’t need any, but because I have all that can be had in Christ Jesus. He is my life. I do not need another’s approval. God loves me that much, so I don’t need to win the love of others, or bow to their demands. I can love them enough to speak the truth, even if it wounds, not for my righteousness, but for theirs.

This is how we can put off words and speech that tear down and divide and are full of pretense. In fact, it is the reason that we do so. Paul says, “because you have put off the old humanity with its practices and have put on the new which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it.”

Having been united to Christ Jesus, you are being renewed into His image, into the image of the one who, though he was existing in the form of God, did not regard His equality with God something to be clung to, but He laid aside such honor and humbled Himself, taking the form of a servant, and was obedient all the way to the cross. That is the image into which we are being pressed and formed and shaped – the shape of entrusting ourselves to God and nothing else.

Jesus didn't entrust Himself to His own righteousness! He entrusted Himself to the Father and took the blame for all the unrighteousness of the world! He didn't argue His own performance, even though He had it! He told the Father, "Let your will be done." It was hard for Him, and he asked for another way, but in the end He entrusted Himself to the Father rather than to any idol which the Enemy cast his way.

That is our calling, too. And when we do this, when we entrust our life-worth-living to Christ Jesus, to answer for us, to hold us in the heavens, to be our life and glory, we must, then, lay aside every seeking of honor outside of him, every performance of which we may boast, every failure of which we may shrink in shame, every promiser of life-worth-living as pretentious and deceptive and powerless...dead.

When we do this, every cause of boasting dissolves. Every comparison of others fades away. Every defense of our own righteousness and the slanderous destruction of others' honor is cast off into the hamper of the old humanity, and all that unites us Christ. Therefore, there is no division between Jew and Greek, Barbarian and Scythian (educated and uneducated), slave or free (rich or poor), for Christ in all of us in the same way and in the same fullness regardless of our wealth, our education, our power in society, our honorability according to our culture, or our possessions. Christ is all.

This looking at Christ as both in all and being all, is the power to destroy the idols which tempt your heart. It's one thing to identify an idol, to discover what it is that I tend to trust to make my life-worth-living, but it's a completely different thing to know how to kill it, how to cast it off. **How do you kill a desire? How do you execute an affection?**

The only way to displace an inordinate affection is by the expulsive power of a greater affection (Chalmers). Only when I comprehend that Christ's gracious union is superior to all other promisers of life-worth-living to me, the messy and needy failure, will I then feel enough security to grant such grace towards others...

When a deep comprehension of God's great love towards us in Christ Jesus is rooted deeply in our hearts, we are much less concerned with our own feelings, how we have been hurt or ignored, how we compare with others or how we must defend our

rightness. Rather, we are way more concerned about making much of Christ and of edifying others, how their hearts can rest in Christ and depend upon Christ as their joy. We are patient as the Spirit works in them; we speak the truth in love so that Christ is formed in others; we are humble when we are admonished because our weakness doesn't surprise us and Christ is our righteousness, so we are fully accepted by God in Him even though we are a mess.

When we embrace this we will vault over all the walls of culture, race, gender, and economic status, the things which so often become dividers and boundaries by which we compare, so that others are built up, strengthened, and growing in their knowledge of God and what truly unifies us, i.e. the grace of God in Jesus Christ – the Lamb slain for our sins and the Lion who gathers and protects us all equally. Christ is all and in all.

I must see Jesus, the only truly perfect one, become sin for me. Though I am wrong, He took the blame. Though I need to be changed, He entered in to me and embraced me, even to the point of death. When I behold that Christ died for ME! For ME! I'm not staring at my brother's sins and struggles, I see my own predominately and I see that MY sins beckoned him near, not pushed Him away, and MY sins were paid for by Him, so that I am declared right by God, not according to my spiritual achievement, but His alone. When I comprehend this, and only then, will I wage war against the desires of my flesh, strip off the old uniform of comparison and defensiveness and shame, and seek to encourage others in the same grace, to embrace others as equal and beloved family in Christ as myself, will I pour my life out for their deeper appreciation and love for Jesus and for the holiness of their walk as those sanctified by God's grace.