

Matt Kruse  
NBC – AM Service  
1/3/21

## **Union with Christ: The Sure Antidote to Christian Consumerism**

**Series: Adversity – The Light of Truth for Dark Times**

**Series #1**

**Introduction:** Beloved, take your Bible and join me in Galatians 2 – Galatians chapter 2. If you paid any attention at all to the weekly email, or to the bulletin, you noticed that we are going to take a short hiatus from our series in the Gospel of John. Which is not a move that I make lightly. Our preferred method of corporate worship in the Word is to take one consecutive text after another as we walk through one book after another so as to proclaim the whole counsel of God's wise Word. These seeds of truth which are weekly implanted into our hearts bear an ongoing harvest of righteousness as we are built up in this most holy faith in our most holy Lord. But, there are times when a more focused approach is needed, and it is a matter of pastoral wisdom to know when that time has come.

As you read your New Testament you find that the epistles – Romans through Jude – are written with a pastoral concern from the author for those he is writing to. There has been some difficulty or threat or challenge to the local church and God's Spirit has directed the apostle to address it through an inspired letter. Those letters are written with the burden of bringing the light of truth into conflict with the darkness of a difficult situation. They are also written with a desire to help the church grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ in light of their present situation and context. And that is my heart and my burden in this little mini-series that we begin today.

2020 was quite the year! We all have stories of how our lives were radically changed or affected by a worldwide pandemic and political and civil unrest in our nation. You have too often heard the phrase "unprecedented change" – but in many ways, there were many unprecedented changes that came your way in 2020. I do feel the necessity to say that though these difficulties of the last year were unprecedented in our experience, we still lived in one of the most blessed and prosperous and peaceful times known in human history. People have never lived longer and had more stuff and more money and more food and more creature comforts and more peace from war than we have enjoyed in the last many years, including 2020. But, it was, in our experience of life, an earthquake of a year. Things were thrown off of the shelf of life that hadn't moved in a long time. And this earthquake of adverse and unsettling circumstances is good for your soul and for your growth in the grace of God. But it can also be bad. It can be bad if you do not bring the light of truth to shine upon the darkness of our unsettled times. It can be bad if you kick the proverbial dirt over the fault lines in your soul that this earthquake has exposed. And I think it could be bad if we as a church did that very thing. If we just put 2020 in the distant past, refused to look in the review mirror and sailed on full throttle into 2021. If we did that, we would be missing so much of the merciful kindness of God. There are things that God wants us to learn and that God desires to grow us in that he has mercifully exposed in the previous year.

And I am thankful that this is true. That God is doing a million things in the carrying out of his sovereign power, but that one of those main things he is always doing is building the church by sanctifying her and purifying her. And 2020 has exposed many ways in which the church is strong in the grace and power of Christ. And 2020 has exposed many ways in which she needs to continue growing and changing in her conformity to Christ. So, what I want to do over the next 8 weeks or so, is to address some of those things from the truth of the Word – some things like fear, trusting God in a broken world, the church’s relationship to civil government, loving one another when we disagree over matters of the conscience, the hope of prophecy in the face of so many unknowns, and the pursuit of godliness when we are faced with these bitter providences. All of these things have in common this one word, which is the word for our series – adversity. The adversity of the last year can be a wonderful school of God’s grace to shape our minds, our hearts, and our wills to love God and one another more fervently. So, it is with that goal that we dive in today.

Before we jump into our first topic in the series, I want to point out that there is great risk in doing a series like this. The first risk is that of eisegesis – where we read into the text of Scripture the realities of our situation and make it speak in ways it was never intended by God to do. So, we avoid that risk by letting the Scriptures speak to us in these areas where the past year has put so much pressure. And another risk, which is probably more dangerous for us than the first one because we will be more prone to it, is the risk of being easily offended. That is the joy of preaching the next text in a book. If it addresses something current and controversial, we can all stand in awe of God’s providence instead of getting mad at the preacher. But, in this series, it would be much easier to get mad at the preacher and be easily offended. You might hear me say something and think that I am aiming right for you. Or you might remember a conversation we had about the thing I am dealing with from the Word and think that I am counseling you from the pulpit. You must know that this is not my desire at all. The things I will address in this series are things that are not unique to you or to any particular group of people within our church family. All of these things have shown up in my own heart in the last year, and I am assuming you have had to deal with each of these in one way or another as well. So, I ask for your merciful understanding, and for all of us to maintain a posture of humility before the Word of God.

As we begin this series, I want to start with a focus on one of the most important truths about our relationship to God in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a truth which is so clearly presented in Galatians 2:20 where Paul summarizes his relationship to God by speaking of being united to Christ Jesus his Lord. He says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This is Paul’s identity, his purpose statement, his mission statement of life, his core understanding of his relationship to God through Jesus Christ. It is all dependent upon Jesus Christ. This is how the New Testament presents our relationship to God. It is one of God graciously uniting us to Jesus from beginning to end. One of the New Testament’s most used descriptions of our relationship to God is that we are in Christ. Just listen to the apostle John in 1 John 5:20: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”

Not only are we in Christ, but He is in us – as Colossians 1:27 says – Christ in us, the hope of glory! Those who are in Christ have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, according to Ephesians 1:4 – meaning that there has never been a time when God has thought about his elect apart from Christ – we have always been “in Christ” in the mind of God. This election before the foundation of the world guaranteed God’s work to accomplish and apply our redemption from sin through Jesus Christ. Those who are saved from sin’s penalty and power are saved singularly by and in Christ. He accomplished what is needed completely, and He is the only Way, the only Truth, and the only Life – there is no life outside of Him. So, the New Testament says that we are redeemed from our sin in Christ, forgiven of sin in Christ, declared righteous in Christ, sanctified in Christ, and alive in Christ. We have died with Christ, and have been buried with Christ, and have been raised with Christ to this newness of life. We have been seated in the heavenly places with Christ because we are in Christ. We are created in Christ and God has made us into his workmanship to accomplish the good works he has appointed for us in Christ. There is also no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We are adopted into God’s family in Christ. We are made holy in Christ and we bear the fruits of righteousness in Christ. We will be resurrected from the dead in Christ and we will be raised to meet Him in the air. We will reign with Christ in the kingdom to come and we will forever dwell in the presence of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! Being united to Christ is an A-to-Z reality. Every aspect of what it means to be a Christian can be traced to this glorious truth of being united to Christ.

But this is kind of a mystical and mysterious thing to say isn’t it – to be united to Christ? What does that mean? How does that shape our understanding of our relationship with God? Well, there is more to say here than we have time for, but the Scriptures are so helpful in how they present this union with Christ to us. There are four specific metaphors – or word pictures – which help us understand what it means to be in Christ. And each of these analogies helps deepen our understanding by shedding more light on this union with Christ.

But why go here in the wake of 2020? Why spend this time focusing on our union with Christ after the year we just had? Well, this past year has certainly challenged our view of the church. Never before in our lifetime has the Christian’s connection to the church been more tested and therefore, more exposed in our lifetimes, than it has been in 2020. When the entire church ministry and church gatherings and church relationships are interrupted to the level they were in the last year, then there is tremendous opportunity to see what it is that we really think about the church. This last year showed us just how connected, or not connected, we were to the Church. And it showed us just how important the church was to us – or on the flip side, how unimportant and easily replaced she was. And at the heart of this issue is a challenge that is prevalent in the American Church – and that is the heart posture of consumerism. We have known for a long time that this consumeristic mentality is a major threat to the life and health of the church in our day. That is not to say that the church of past eras has not struggled with self-interest and a “what’s in it for me” mentality. You only need to think of what was going on in the church of Corinth to realize that selfish consumerism has always plagued the church. But we live in a day when we are uniquely shaped by our culture, our conveniences, our media intake, our food consumption and options, and so many more realities in our life – to be tempted to approach our relationship to the church with this same mentality of consumerism.

This mentality, or heart posture of consumerism in the church is primarily seen in a take or leave it approach to the church evident in many lives of professing Christians. If something is appealing to me and I like it then I will go. That is, in part, why we can draw 200 people to a midweek piano concert and only 25 to a prayer meeting. Because we all have built into our worldview a consumeristic bent that plays off of our self-interest. This often forces church leaders into a constant struggle with pragmatism. So, if people like this or that, then they will come and participate then that must be what will work, so give them more of what they want. Some churches have even, infamously, built whole ministry models by surveying the unbelievers of their surrounding neighborhood and asking them what they want in a church and then doing accordingly. The church becomes the retailer who is selling their religious product and pastor's become salesmen and spiritual gurus who convince people that their product is better than the church down the street. If their church experience is better than any other in town then they will be bigger and draw more folks and, as the thinking goes, make more of an impact on their community.

And now Covid and 2020 have brought even more clarity to this consumeristic mentality which plagues the church. People who were lightly connected mostly as consumers were able to be easily enticed to look for better options where their needs were more sufficiently met – and they could do it all from the comfort of their own living rooms in their pajamas. This last year has also exposed our inner selfishness where if we simply don't want to go to gather with God's people or serve God's people we can skip out and blame it on the pandemic, and no one will think twice about it. Now, if I list every exception and state every variance you won't make it to work on time tomorrow, but you know that I know that there are legit times to not be together with the gathering of Christ's church, and this last year has proven to be one of the most difficult seasons to make some of those decisions. There are also legit times to leave a church and find a new fellowship to join yourself to. That is not my point this morning. My point this morning is to hold up the mirror of the Word before our hearts so that we might see if there is any selfish consumerism in us as it relates to the Church.

And the truth which will expose this spiritual cancer the best and also provide the best cure is the truth of our union with Christ. This truth proves to be the best diagnostic and the best cure to a self-focused approach to church. This union with Christ is the bedrock truth of who we are as Christians, and therefore of who we are as the church. This spiritual, mysterious, and eternal relationship we have with Christ is what puts us in relationship with one another in the Church. The connection we have to the church is not a connection to its organization – to its polity or to its programs or procedures or how they run their services or to the staff or to the leadership. The connection we have to the church is not primarily a connection to its organism either – to its community and to our fit within that community, to it feel as a church, or to its relationships and makeup. Rather, the primary and central reality of our connection to the church is the connection we have to the Church's Lord. The fact that we are in Christ is what secures the reality that we are members of one another. Beloved, listen to this – we are united first with Christ by grace through faith, and then we are united with one another in His Church. The church is not what unites us to Christ, but it is Christ who unites us together in the Church because we are first united to Him!

But what is the significance of that truth as it relates to our constant temptation to be selfish in our approach to the church? Well, I want to look quickly at four word pictures in the New Testament which powerfully present to us the nature of this relationship we have with Christ. God is so kind in His Word to put the cookies on the bottom shelf, so that we can all partake. His Word is filled with infinite riches will stand forever proclaiming His glory. But His Word also takes deep truths and puts them in easy-to-understand analogies and word pictures. And that is what we have in the Scripture to help us more fully grasp what it means to be united to Christ. Several of the word pictures are found in the book of Ephesians, and the first one is found in Ephesians 2:19-22. All of these texts deserve a sermon series of their own, but there is a powerful truth to be exposed by considering them all together as well.

Analogies in Scripture which help us understand this union with Christ:

- I. **A Building & Its Foundation – Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5**
  - a. The first word picture is that of a building and its foundation. At the risk of being like your busy doctor who flies through your diagnosis and treatment in 2 minutes so that he can move on to the next appointment – I am going to rush through these texts and the exposition of their truths – simply because I believe there is a great point to be made by considering them collectively. So, in Ephesians 2 – look at verses 19-22.
  - b. Paul is speaking to Gentile believers who were once far off – though they were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – verse 12 says that they were separated from Christ, having no hope and without God in the world. But then in verse 13, in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Jews and Gentiles are now no longer strangers and aliens and there is no longer a dividing wall of hostility. They are brought together into the same household by the precious blood of Christ. And this household, in verse 20, is likened to this building that is built upon a foundation which has already been laid. That foundation is that of the apostles and prophets with the chief cornerstone of that foundation being Christ Jesus himself. The ministry of the apostles and prophets came immediately after the ascension of our Lord in which they spent the book of Acts testifying that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament and that he suffered, died for sinners, was buried, and was resurrected and is soon returning to judge the living and the dead. The foundation they laid was in completely perfect alignment with the chief cornerstone of that foundation – the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - c. And that is what is true for the building that is being built upon that foundation – it is in perfect alignment with and rests wholly upon the chief cornerstone who is Christ. The building does not stand together based upon religious effort or ethnic identity or spiritual accomplishment. The whole building is being joined together and is growing into a holy temple in the Lord. This is what it means to be united to Christ by grace through faith. It means that it is all dependent upon Him. You are being joined together with other building materials and are being put in plumb with the chief cornerstone and you are growing up into this holy temple all in and because of and by the great power of Christ!

- d. We won't turn there, but in 1 Peter 2 this same idea is presented, and we are told that Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected and threw away. The religious elite had no use for Jesus, but it turns out that He was God's cornerstone. He was the first and most important stone to be laid. And upon that cornerstone we are all like living stones being built into this holy temple for our Lord in which we offer spiritual sacrifices of worship to Him.
- e. In other words, the individual members of the church are first aligned to Christ and put into the building in relationship to Christ. He is everything. There is no steadiness of building – there is no growth – there is no true worship – there is no purpose – there is no mission of the church – there is no function of the church – there is no unity in the living stones of the church – if there is no Christ. He is the chief cornerstone!
- f. And this is the potent medicine which hunts down and puts to death the cancer of consumerism in our hearts. The church is not about us or for us or by us. The church is not ours. The church is not our plan, our idea, or our building. We have not lain the foundation. We are not joining together one stone after another to make a glorious temple in which true spiritual worship can happen. But God is doing this! It is His building, and we are his bricks, and we are in this building only because we are united to Christ who is the chief cornerstone!

## II. A Husband & His Wife – Eph. 5:22-33

- a. The second word picture is found in Ephesians 5, and it is that of a husband and his wife. Christ is like the husband and the church is like the husband's bride. We often come to this passage to learn how God wants us to fulfill our role as a husband or as a wife, and we should. But listen to it with an ear for what it teaches us about our union with Christ as the Church. *Read 5:22-32.*
- b. So, what are the defining marks of this union with Christ that are seen in this word picture of husband and wife? Well, the preeminent one is the oneness between Christ and the Church. Like in a human marriage, the two are one flesh. The wife becomes one with her husband as he leaves father and mother and holds fast to his wife. And this great mystery of God's work points to an even more profound mystery – that of Christ's union with His Bride – the Church.
- c. This oneness is inseparable and filled with the sacrificial love of Christ. In other words, the Bride – the Church – is constantly the object of Christ's committed and sacrificial love for her. He never leaves her nor forsakes her. He never decides he has had enough of her half-hearted commitment or submission. He loves her as his own body because she is his own body – she has been mysteriously joined to Him and has become His own. Therefore, he has loved her, and continues to love her, as His own. And this becomes a life-giving and soul-purifying love for the church where she is nourished and fed and washed with the water of the Word of Christ. In other words, the greatest health of the church is dependent upon the love of God for her in Christ Jesus. As her husband, the Lord Jesus always has her truly best interest in his heart as he sacrificially loves her.
- d. And the Church responds to this great love of Christ. She is drawn to her husband and like a godly woman in a healthy Christian marriage, she finds her

greatest joy in submitting to her head, the Lord Jesus. The magnet of his love for her keeps her in willing and loving submission to his headship over her.

- e. This means that the individuals of Christ's church are united together into one body as the bride of Christ. And each part of the body flourishes as it is loved by the Head with this inseparable, unbreakable, and sacrificial love from Christ. Our bonds holding us together then are not bonds we create or that we nourish, but they are a bond nourished and maintained by Christ and His great love for His bride. So, we aren't drawn together by what we do for one another or for what we can be provided with through this corporate, business like entity. Rather, we should see ourselves as uniquely blessed to share in this great union with our Head, the Lord Jesus. His purifying and sanctifying love should constantly wash over us then as we are connected to Him and to one another. This should make it incredibly difficult to come as a consumer to the relationships of the Church where we see ourselves as the ultimate end. Rather, we ought to be so filled with this great love of Christ that we gladly submit to His will of loving service with and to one another in the Body.

### III. A Head & Its Body – Eph. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:13

- a. The third word picture is that of a head and its body, and that is found in Ephesians 4:15-16. Christ is the head, and we are the body, similar to what we just saw in chapter 5 with marriage. The context of this passage though is that of the gifts that God has given to the church so that every believer is equipped for the work of the ministry and for the building up of the body of Christ. Every member of this body is to be nourished to the unity of maturity in the Lord. And this happens as we speak truth in love to one another rather than being tossed around by every wave and wind of false doctrine, human cunning, and deceitful schemes – like pragmatism built upon consumeristic desires.
- b. Rather, speaking the truth in love, verse 15 says, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. There is so much here, but just think briefly about the physical body. The body is completely dead without its head. You can amputate a leg or a hand or a finger or a toe or an arm, but you cannot get rid of the head and still have a living body. And you can have a malformed body if some part of the body refuses to grow properly along with the rest of the body. There is still life there, but it is a malformed and improper life.
- c. And 2020 has given us the opportunity to see where we are malformed as a body, where we as individual parts still need to grow up into our Head, who is Christ. In a healthy body, no one part demands all the attention of the other parts but is content to receive the constant care and nourishment directed by the head. There is mutual care given and received by the parts as directed by the head. My hands and my feet and my legs and my nose are all doing their best work when they are receiving commands from the head and are thriving in accomplishing whatever the head directs them to do, rather than demanding to be the center of attention or refusing to do its part in the overall function of the body.

- d. And this beloved, is so helpful in thinking about our relationship to one another in the body of Christ, isn't it? Being members one of another as parts of the same body we have the glorious privilege to function as the Head so determines and directs so that there is great synergy and unity and maturity in the overall body. This kills selfish consumerism and causes selfless service to the glory of the Head!

#### IV. A Vine & Its Branches – John 15:1-8

- a. And the last word picture is found in John 15 where we see that Christ is likened to the vine and we are the branches. The Father is the vinedresser who is constantly pruning and caring for the branches of the vine. And like those real-life branches, if we are cut off of the vine, we will not be able to survive. In verse 5 Jesus says, I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing! In other words, Christ is the source of our life and sustenance. If we cut ourselves off from Christ, then we die. He is everything! Without Him, we can do nothing!
- b. But in Him, abiding in Him, we will produce fruit as his life flows through us. And this fruit will be the righteous works of Spirit in us and through us. Our lifeblood is not the gathering of the body, it is not the skill of our pastor, or the affinity we have for one another. Our lifeblood is Christ. He is our everything! Without Him, we can do nothing!

**Conclusion:** This is the bedrock truth of every thriving and healthy local church – that Christ is her head and she is the body; that Christ is the loving husband and she is the submissive wife; that Christ is the chief cornerstone and she is the household He is building up; and that Christ is the vine and she is the branches. I wonder where your view of the church needs to be re-shaped by these wonderful word pictures. Where do you need to see the church and your relationship with the church through the lens of our shared union with Christ rather than through your consumeristic mindset? What would change in your life if that shift were made? Let's pray!