

United with Christ

Romans 8:5-7

Several things happen at once when a person commits to Christ in faith. When a sinner turns from his life of sin and calls on Christ Jesus the Lord to save him and change him, that person is ***born again***. Some call this conversion or “getting saved.” The theological term for the new birth is **REGENERATION**: it’s the beginning of a transformation that will be complete at the moment you die or Jesus comes back. Regeneration is a miraculous work of grace performed by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the promises of Ezekiel and Jeremiah - giving the believer a new heart of flesh in place of their old heart of stone. This new heart becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit Himself as the new controlling center of the believer.

We’ve already talked about four other **results of our salvation** to add to this baptism in the Spirit:

- **Forgiveness** - the new believer is set free from the ***penalty of sin*** - all of your sin was removed from your account and nailed to the cross of Christ.
- **Freedom** - the law of sin that once reigned over you was broken - your chains shattered, the door of your prison cell thrown open so that your sinful flesh no longer owns and controls you. Since you are in Christ, you are free not only from the penalty of sin but also from its ***controlling power***.
- **Justification** - credit for the perfect righteousness of Jesus was transferred to your account so your standing before God is JUSTIFIED – God has ***declared you to be righteous***, holy and perfect.
- **Holiness** – as one who has been given the righteousness of Christ, ***you have new desires*** and new power to live and grow up into the image of Christ. And fifth:
- **Baptism in the Spirit** - the Holy Spirit immediately comes to live your heart as His eternal dwelling place. Because you are one with Jesus, you have become the temple of the Holy Spirit!

All five of these infinitely precious gifts are found IN CHRIST and only IN HIM. You cannot receive any of these gifts apart from Christ, nor can you earn them on your own. ***If you have Christ and He has you***, then you have forgiveness, justification, freedom, holiness and the Holy Spirit. If you do not have Christ, you don’t have any of it.

For ***JESUS HIMSELF IS THE GIFT***. When you belong to Christ all of His gifts become yours.

This is just like our **modern process of adoption**. How would you feel about a child in Africa or China calling you on the phone and saying, “Hey! I hear you love kids and want to open your home to a child! Sign me up! Here’s what I’m after: could you send me a couple thousand dollars, for starters? You see, I need shoes and clothes and to enroll in a new school and to get a sweet iPhone with a data plan - just the basics, right?”

What would you say to a request like this? "You're getting a little ahead of yourself there, buddy!" You wouldn't start sending cash and gifts to a child you had just met. Those kinds of provisions and blessings come AFTER the whole adoption process.

Now, once you've paid the adoption fees and signed on the line and the child is officially a part of your family - it's a whole different situation. As your adopted son or daughter you would take them out shopping for shoes and clothes. You would get them enrolled in a good school. You would take them to the doctor and get all their vaccinations up to speed. You might eventually get them a smart phone of some kind. But **those PROVISIONS would come as a result of their new POSITION** as a member of your family.

No one is likely to get your stuff before they have an established RELATIONSHIP with you. And the same thing is true with God. Lots of people try that number with God - asking for His stuff - His blessings, His provision, His lavish generosity - without first establishing a formal relationship with Him. And God shakes His head and says, "You're getting ahead of yourself!"

Have you heard the phrase, ***"Seek the GIVER not the GIFTS"***? That's a helpful principle both spiritually and practically. No one likes a friend who is always bumming cash and rides and asking for help without investing in the relationship. If someone is just after your GIFTS and they don't care about ***you as the GIVER***, how long is that relationship likely to last? But when someone cares more about you as a person than they do about your stuff, the natural response is to be generous in how you care for them.

Here is the point for us as believers: **JESUS is the GIFT**. Jesus Himself. ***If you have Jesus, you have everything***. If you don't have Jesus, you don't have anything. In Christ every other spiritual blessing is found. Outside of Christ there is only emptiness, slavery, suffering and death. The gift that precedes and surrounds the other five gifts we've talked about, and all the other ones is UNION WITH CHRIST.

The believer is UNITED with Christ by faith - you are IN HIM and His Spirit is IN YOU. Because of this union; because you are in Christ, there is no condemnation for you. **Because you are One with Christ** and His Spirit lives in you, you are no longer controlled by the Law of Sin but are led by the new law of the Spirit of life. Because you are one with Christ, you are no longer moving toward slavery and death but now have assurance of life and peace forever!

Listen to how Paul presents this in Romans 6.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Baptism represents our UNION WITH CHRIST. Going under water represents your *old self* being buried with Christ. Coming up from the water represents your *new self* coming to life with Christ. The old YOU was united with Christ in His death. And a new YOU was born when you were united with Christ in His resurrection. This is why we practice baptism by immersion, because of this passage in Romans 6 and how it describes baptism as an IMMERSION in Jesus. Thanks be to God we are not just sprinkled with a little bit of Jesus. ***We are soaked on the outside and filled up on the inside.***

If you have never been baptized by immersion in water as your own decision and not the decision of your parents, I would love to talk with you more about this. Read Romans 6 for yourself and pray about how a public baptism could reinforce the truth that you have been united with Christ. ***The water doesn't save you but it symbolizes the salvation Jesus accomplished for you*** – how you have become ONE with Him. It is your way of going public with your personal faith and saying, “I am not the person I used to be. Now I belong to Jesus! I am His and He is mine!”

Now turn back with me to Romans 8 and let's look at our next section together.

“In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh,

but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Romans 8:4-8

You can immediately see that this passage is **a contrast between two states of being**, two realms of existence that result in two radically different ways of life. Six times in five verses the phrase “in the flesh” is set against the Spirit of Christ (stated four times in this passage and six more times in vv. 9-11).

This is not contrasting two different kinds of Christian – a Spirit-filled believer and a carnal or fleshly believer. No. “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” That does not describe a reborn follower of Jesus. To be in the flesh is to be outside of Christ and in the world, still under the law of sin and death.

So let's walk through **five contrasting characteristics** of life in the flesh compared with life in Christ. We'll look first at who you WERE in the flesh, then we'll turn to who you ARE now in Christ.

Who you WERE in the Flesh :	Who you ARE now in Christ :
- A Citizen of this World	- A Child of God
- Controlled by the Law of Sin	- Directed by the Law of the Spirit
- Doing what your Flesh told you	- Doing what the Spirit tells you
- Being Defined by your Self	- Being Defined by your New Life in Christ
- Thinking about your own Desires	- Thinking about God's Word and God's Will

First, in your old life **you were a citizen of this world**. You were at home here. Even if you don't remember much of your life before Christ, you were born with a sinful nature and your default settings were worldly, self-centered and corrupt. You were in the realm of the FLESH, the kingdom of this world, whose ruler is satan.

Second, in the flesh, you were **controlled by the law of sin**. Your own desires and thoughts ruled you and drove you wherever they wanted. You thought you were free, but you were enslaved to your flesh. Because you also had the image of God stamped on you, there was good in you and you had a conscience that spoke truth to you about right and wrong. But everything in you was twisted and corrupted by the underlying, permeated and all-contaminating law of sin. People jokingly wear shirts that say, **"It's all about ME,"** and talk about "Me time" and say "I need to focus on me for a while." That is spot-on, accurate theology for the person who is in the flesh.

Third, in the flesh you were **doing what your flesh told you** to do. This was your basic lifestyle, as we see in verse four - "who walk according to the flesh." **You had a Master whose name was "you"** and you followed that Master's instructions like a toddler who insists, "I do what I want to do because I love my own self."

Fourth, in the flesh your whole **being was defined by your Self**. This is the word that appears in verse five, translated "who live according to the flesh." The word, "walk" in verse four refers to conduct and behavior. The word, "live" in verse five refers to identity and being. **"Those who are being according to the flesh** set their minds on the things of the flesh." This word for being is the Greek word *ontes* from which we get *ontology* – the state of being.

Fifth and finally, in your old life in the flesh you were **thinking about your own desires**. You were consumed by your own will. "I want." "I need." "I think." "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh." You were **trapped in a cycle of being, thinking and doing**. You were enslaved to the law of sin and on your way to the destination that awaits all who are citizens of this world: death. "For to set the mind on the flesh is death... the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law, indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

That is a grim picture of who you were in the flesh. You can see it was a downward spiral – a whirlpool. This is exactly the picture Paul paints in **Romans 1 – a whirlpool of death**. Though everyone has a built in awareness that God exists, we all fail to give Him the praise and honor He deserves. And so God gives people over to the sinful desires of their flesh. Three times in Romans one people choose their own flesh instead of God and three times we hear, “God gave them over.”

Their minds were darkened, and God gave them over to their fleshly thinking. Their foolish hearts were hardened and God gave them over to their fleshly being. Their lives were corrupted by sin and God gave them over to their impure desires. A vicious downward spiral of thinking, being and doing – this is the whirlpool of death that is life in the flesh.

That is who you were. More precisely, that is WHERE you were. You were in the world and you were of the world. You were governed by the law of sin, a slave to your selfish desires. Therefore you did what your flesh told you and your whole identity was shaped by your SELF as you went through your days thinking about “me, me, me.”

Sadly, it’s not hard to find examples of this. **Chris Farley** was one of the great comedians of my teenage years – made famous by his SNL character, motivational speaker “**Matt Foley**” who was known for his warnings about making good choices or else you might end up “living in a van, down by the river...” like he was... On the surface, Chris Farley had reached the pinnacle of success in Hollywood and seemed to be happy and free. But underneath he was tormented, constantly feeling the pressure to “be the most outrageous guy in the room.”

And so he turned to drugs and alcohol for an escape. He tried rehab a few times but always fell back into his self-destructive patterns of doing, being and thinking. Though it looked like he was free – like so many wealthy people and celebrities, **Chris Farley was a slave to his flesh**. He was governed by the law of sin and trapped in the whirlpool of the flesh until one day Romans 8:6 became true for him. “To set the mind on the flesh is death.” He had a little too much of something and was found a few days later having died of an overdose. He had circled the toilet bowl of the flesh lots of times but eventually, the law of sin sucked him down to its inevitable destination: death.

The flesh presents itself as a life of freedom and happiness, but it is a deadly cover up for the truth that to be in the flesh is to be trapped in a whirlpool of walking according to the flesh, being defined by your own Self and becoming focused on your own desires. This cycle draws people down and away from God for – v. 7 “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law, indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” And verse 13 – ***“If you live according to the flesh, you will die.”***

Understanding this about our own past and our friends and neighbor's present reality should fill us with a deep and sincere **compassion for people** – along with patience and grace toward them. If we are judgmental of those who are enslaved to sin and blinded by it, if our hearts have become hardened to those who are trapped in the whirlpool of sin – it means we have forgotten that every one of us was drowning in those same currents not so long ago. We should not be judgmental of non-believers, we should be compassionate toward them and **consistently reach out to them with the lifeline of the gospel**.

So remember the bad news of **who you were, trapped in the whirlpool of death**. Let's turn the page to the good news of who we are now in Christ and study **the spiral of life**. You can see it's a direct contrast at every point. **Where the flesh drags you down, the Spirit lifts you up!**

Instead of being a citizen of this world, the believer is reborn as **a child of God** and a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. John 1 says, **"To as many as received him he gave the right to become children of God."** Paul contrasts believers with worldly people in Php. 3. "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. **But our citizenship is in heaven** and we eagerly await a Savior from there, Christ the Lord" (Php. 3:19-20). You no longer belong to the realm of this world. You have a new home – a great and glorious, eternal inheritance. As the song says, "All I know is I'm not home yet; this is not where I belong! Take this world and give me Jesus, this is not where I belong!"

Second, you are no longer controlled by the law of sin but are now **directed by the new law of the Spirit**. Romans 8:2 **"the law of the Spirit of life has set you free IN CHRIST from the law of sin and death."** As we are learning from Pastor Colin Smith, "Sin is still your enemy, but it is no longer your master." When you were in the flesh, sin reigned over you. Now that you are in Christ sin remains in your life but it no longer reigns over you. In Christ, you are free! The Spirit of Christ lives in your heart to guide you and empower you – to fill you with new desires and give you new power to carry them out.

Third, you are increasingly **doing what the Spirit tells you**. We saw God's purpose in salvation last week in v. 4 **"in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."** God's purpose was to satisfy His own righteous requirements IN US. The result of this miracle of grace, called justification, is that we WILL walk in step with the Spirit. We have been made new in Christ, reborn, regenerated and transformed.

You are not the same person you were before Jesus. **You are a new creation in Christ so you will live differently**. The Holy Spirit starts teaching you what to do and what not to do. The Spirit is a gentle leader, like a shepherd. He is not a slave driver, like the flesh that used to shout at you, berate you, seduce and entice you. No, the Holy Spirit is patient and understanding, "He remembers that we are dust." He knows our every weakness and turning to sin; He knows our

every temptation. And He gently encourages us, speaking quietly to our hearts and minds, leading us along in the way we should go.

Notice that verse five is not a command, exhorting us to walk a certain way. ***It is a statement of FACT.*** This is what people in Christ DO. There are plenty of places in Scripture where God does flat out command us to “be holy” or “love your neighbor” or “serve one another.” But here in Romans 8 Paul is describing a totally **new POSITION**, a totally different CONDITION. Apart from Christ people are in the flesh. But once you are joined to Christ, everything about you is different. And because of that ***you will increasingly do things differently because you ARE different.***

Verse five says: ***“for those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”*** Being united with Christ affects not only what you do, but who you ARE. Remember the word translated “who live” in verse five is the Greek word for BEING. “Those who **are being** according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” So our fourth characteristic in Christ is that we are **being defined by our new life in Christ.** We no longer let our old self define us, any more than we let our flesh control us. You have a new identity and it is all about Jesus. This is where it’s so important to understand what it means to be united with Christ.

You did not just arrange a transaction with God to get some of His stuff – forgiveness, entrance into heaven, a little help with this or that. No. You surrendered your life to Christ. ***You let your old self DIE.*** You asked Jesus to take that old YOU and nail it to the cross, taking it away from you so that it was buried with Him. Baptism paints that picture of going under the water and your old self goes down and does not come up. You are dead to those old ways of living, being and thinking.

Think about it. **Where is your flesh now?** Where IS your old self? It was nailed to the cross and died there on the cross with Jesus. It was buried with Him in that old tomb, sealed away with Him. And when Jesus emerged from the tomb on the third day did your old self come strolling out with Him? No! You can say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I live in the body I live by faith in Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Your old self is dead and buried. How could you live in that rotten old corpse any longer? You can’t! That isn’t you! True, the old self is like a zombie. Like a terrible old movie about the undead. That flesh monster will keep trying to pry itself off of the cross, so our job is to nail it back up there every day. Romans 8:13 “If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.”

The Spirit of God enables us to keep killing the remaining sin in our lives. Read the Acorn article this week on Fighting sin. John Owen says, ***“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”*** Every time

you feel that familiar temptation, it is your flesh calling to you from the cross. Will you fight that sin by the power of the Spirit or will you give mouth to mouth to your old, rotting self?

Romans 8 gives us the resources to fight sin. And the one thing, the main thing is this single idea of **being united with Christ**. ***I am in Christ*** – verse 1 – so there is no condemnation for me. I am in Christ – verse 2 – so the law of sin no longer reigns over me but I am now free to follow the Spirit who lives in me. I am in Christ – verse 4 – so I have been declared perfectly righteous – all of God’s requirements have been satisfied IN ME! I am in Christ – verse 5 – so my very being has changed. I am not who I was. I am no longer defined by my sin, my desires, my old ways, my old life. I am defined completely, 100% by Jesus. I have been united with Him. We are One!

That old self is not me anymore – that is who I was BEFORE Christ. Now I belong to Jesus!

Kevin Deyoung has a great book called *The Hole in our Holiness*. In it he talks about the important difference between **Union and Communion**. It is a theological fact for the believer in Jesus that we have been united with Christ. We have a new position before God. We are no longer dead in sin, we are now alive in Christ. So we have a complete and eternal UNION with Christ. We are one with Him and nothing can change that – now or ever.

That is our ***eternal, unchangeable position***. But in practice, our communion with God can fluctuate. We can walk in step with the Spirit, or we can fall out of step with the Spirit. We can draw near to God or we can grow distant from God. We can fix our minds on God and His Word, or we can become distracted by the world and the “busyness of life.”

That doesn’t affect our UNION with Christ but it does affect our COMMUNION with Him. Do you see the distinction? ***This is just like a marriage***. Once you say your vows before God and some witnesses, you are married. It is both a legally binding contract and a spiritually binding covenant. The two have become one. There is an unbreakable UNION. You cannot be more or less married. You are either married or you are not.

If you are married, your UNION is established for life but your ***COMMUNION in marriage can fluctuate***. You can be closer with your spouse or farther apart. You can develop a deep and intimate bond through open and honest communication and a wonderfully intertwined life together. Or you can “grow apart” by living parallel lives, failing to communicate love and respect. Your union is still real – you ARE married, whether you like it or not. But your communion has suffered.

This is why ***all marriages need regular tune-ups*** – and why all married couples or soon to be married couples should come next weekend to the Marriage Seminar! But this also applies to God. Our union with Christ is established forever at the moment of saving faith. Nothing can

change this new reality of your position in Christ. But our communion with Christ depends on what we are doing, being and thinking.

So that is the fifth and final characteristic of one who is in Christ – you are increasingly **thinking about God's Word and God's Will**. Five times in this passage we hear the phrase, “to set the mind.” ***“To set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Rom. 8:6***

You were trapped in the whirlpool of death that was your flesh. Now you have been united with Christ and His Holy Spirit is lifting you up, every day, in the spiral of life. You were a citizen of this world but now you are a child of God and a citizen of heaven! You were controlled by the law of sin but Jesus set you free from that law, filled you with His Holy Spirit who now lovingly directs you according to His ways.

You were doing whatever your flesh told you to do but now you are learning more and more to listen to the Spirit and obey His leading. You were defined by your self but now your whole being is wrapped up in your union with Christ. You don't say, “It's all about me,” anymore – in fact you consistently remind yourself, ***“It's not about me!”*** You regularly preach the truth to yourself that “I am not who I was! I'm not defined by my past failures or my past successes, I belong to Jesus and I am defined by Him!”

Finally, you were consumed with thoughts of your own desires. You were focused on your own ideas, your own plans. You were focused on yourself. But now you are thinking more and more about God, God's Word and God's Will. The Spirit of God dwells in you and is filling you with new desires and appetites. We'll learn this week in Momentum that we can ***cultivate an appetite for the things of God*** just as we try to do with healthy food. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.”

Jesus is the gift. Oh brothers and sisters, seek the GIVER not the gifts. Seek Jesus. Remember all that you have in Him. We have been united with Christ! Your old self was crucified and buried with Him and you were reborn in Christ, a new creation, raised up and seated with Him now in the heavenly places.

Let's pray and give thanks to the Giver of all good gifts – the source of every spiritual blessing!