

The Spirit of Christ

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[0 : 01] So over the past few weeks, we've been thinking about our union with Christ. This is the idea that to be a Christian is to be united to Jesus himself in his death and in his resurrected life.

This morning, our focus is on the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. And the Spirit of Christ is integral to our understanding of how our union with Christ actually works.

Now, I suspect that Christians can often treat the Holy Spirit as a bit like the force from Star Wars. Now, don't get me wrong, I love Star Wars, but I don't think it's a good guide for our theology. We can tend to think of the Holy Spirit as a mysterious, impersonal power that guides, directs, and imparts abilities.

We can think of him as a spiritual force rather than actually as a spiritual person. The Holy Spirit is not the force. He is God himself.

God is one. He's also three persons. Father, the Son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Christians call this idea the Trinity. And sometimes Christians can be potentially too quick to focus on the separateness of the three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

[1 : 18] As we continue to reflect on our union with Christ, we have to also remember the oneness of God. It's God's oneness that means that the Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit.

And that's the Spirit of Christ. He lives in believers, and he works in believers. And this is Paul's focus at the start of Romans 8. This morning what we're going to see is we're going to have a look at the role of the Holy Spirit, the role that he plays in our union with Christ, and see just how he makes living as a Christian, as someone who has been united to Christ, possible.

So we have three points. First, the Spirit makes our union with Christ possible. The second, the Spirit makes our assurance possible. And the third, the Spirit makes living for Christ possible. The Spirit makes our union with Christ possible, our assurance possible, and living for Christ possible. So Paul begins Romans 8 by showing the Roman Christians that it is the Spirit who makes our union with Christ possible.

Because through Christ, the law of the Spirit takes hold of our lives and changes us. Paul begins, Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[2 : 41] Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. What is the law of the Spirit?

And what is the law of sin and death? Well, the end of the previous chapter gives us a little bit of context for what Paul's saying here. Towards the end of Romans chapter 7, Paul says this about the law of sin.

I find this law at work. Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law. But I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

This is Paul's reflection that once we're aware of sin and aware of what is sinful, we see ourselves doing the wrong that we don't want to do.

And we see ourselves not doing the good that we know that we should do and we want to do. And I imagine every Christian is familiar with this sort of experience. Once we're aware of sin in our lives, we become aware of this law.

[3 : 51] That we see ourselves sinning even though we don't want to. We're very much creatures of habit, aren't we? From the earliest age, we're having to undo bad habits of thumb sucking or dummy sucking.

We continue to have to get rid of bad habits as we grow older. Sometimes even these habits take over our lives and become addictions which cripple and ruin us. Our fallen bodies are liable to habit and old habits die hard.

And that's the law of sin and death. Our bodies are fallen so death is still inescapable, even though we are united to Christ. Our bodies are fallen so the old habits of sin, which our bodies have developed, are still there, even though we are united to Christ.

Our bodies and minds have yet to be changed, though that will happen. And so the experience of the one united to Christ is the experience of wrestling with a body inclined towards sin and wrestling with a brain that has been shaped by sinful habits.

You could say that we have neural patterns of addiction to sin. This is the law of sin that's at work in our bodies. So we can recognize this law of sin in our own bodies just as Paul did.

[5 : 11] But Paul goes on to say that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Isn't that encouraging? How often do we reflect on the bad things that we've done and the good things that we've neglected and condemn ourselves?

Paul's warm encouragement is that if you're united to Christ, there is no condemnation for your sin. Because, and here's where the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ comes in.

Through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. So the Spirit of Christ is, if you like, the antidote to the law of sin and death.

Paul goes on to explain how the law of the Spirit is rooted in the work of Christ. He is, as we've said, the Spirit of Christ. And in the Spirit, because of the work of Christ, there is freedom from sin and there is no condemnation for sin.

For what the law, that's the Old Testament law, was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh, to be a sin offering.

[6 : 32] Flesh, that is our fallen and our sin-habituated minds and bodies, means people need more than commandments to change. They need Jesus.

Jesus came in the likeness of that sinful flesh. The word likeness there is key. Jesus was not sinful, but his flesh was subjected to the realities of mortality and pain, and he was tempted in every way that we are.

Every way. That word likeness helps us, though, to make a distinction between Christ and us.

Indeed, it was his very sinlessness which meant that he could be the sin offering.

He bore the sins of those who believe, freeing them from the law of sin and freeing them from the condemnation of sin. As Paul says, and so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law, again, that's the Old Testament law, might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

So those who live according to the Spirit and are united to Christ have met the requirements of the law. The law might not have dealt with sin, but its requirements still need to be met.

[7 : 52] Jesus met them when he took the judgment that we deserve for sin. And being united to Jesus, that requirement has, therefore, been met in us.

Although it's hardly original to mention C.S. Lewis's Narnia in a sermon, few stories illustrate this quite as well as Aslan going to the stone table to die the death that Edmund deserved in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

In the story, Edmund betrays Aslan and his siblings as a traitor. And according to the deep magic from the dawn of time, because he's betrayed his brothers and sisters, because he's betrayed Aslan, his life is forfeit.

So Aslan takes his place. And the result of this in Edmund is that he changes. Before, he was a lying, selfish, mean-spirited character.

After Aslan frees him from the penalty of his actions, he becomes kind, he becomes selfless and heroic, even prepared to sacrifice himself to defeat the White Witch. At the end of the story, when he becomes a king, he's known as King Edmund the Just.

[9 : 06] And so it is with us when we're united to Jesus. We now live a new life, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. The Spirit of Christ makes our union with Christ possible and allows its effects to take root in our lives.

Jesus bore our sins to the cross, and now as a result, his Spirit enables us to live in a way that is spiritual. This is the law of the Spirit at work within those who believe and who are united to Jesus. But how can we know, how can we know that we're united to Jesus? Well, it's his Spirit who makes such an assurance possible. And this takes us to our second point. It's not uncommon for Christians to wonder whether they are truly united to Jesus.

The sin that still exists in our flesh can make believers weary. Perhaps you know something of that yourself. The battle against indwelling sin, it can just really knock your confidence.

I'll tell you what, the devil loves this. He is the accuser. That's what the name Satan means. When we feel the sting of accusation and the shame of our sin, well, that accusation of our failure can really make us doubt, can't it?

[10:30] So how do you know? How do you know if you're living according to the flesh or living according to the Spirit? How do you know if you're united to Christ? Well, Paul says this in verse 5.

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires. For those who live in accordance with the Spirit, have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

So to start with, there is a question of desire. What do you desire? To be united to Christ is to live in accordance with a new set of desires.

This doesn't mean the old desires have gone away completely. The flesh and its sin, as we've said, are still there. Nevertheless, there are now new desires that govern the mind of the one who is united to Christ.

And the one who is united to Christ has started living in a way that reflects these new desires. Now, the change can often be slow because of our sin-habituated bodies and minds, but it is there.

[11:34] The Christian has their minds set not on what they used to desire, but on what the Spirit desires, and what Christ desires. Paul goes on, the mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

There is a self-destructiveness to the mind of flesh. The mind ruled by Christ's Spirit does away with that because the spiritual mind is able now to submit to God's law.

Verse 7 reads, the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

The one who is governed and ruled by the flesh instead of Christ is in a position where they will not and cannot submit to God's law. Now, Paul's writing to Christians, which is why he could say with confidence to the Romans that you, however, are not in the realm of the flesh, but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you.

I think that like verse 1, where Paul says that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ, verse 7 is intended to create confidence and assurance. And if you're united to Christ, hostility to God is not going to be one of your traits.

[12:56] And you will love God's law, even if you keep it imperfectly, as indeed all Christians do. And we might add these words from chapter 10 of Romans, just to hammer home the confidence that the Christian can have.

In chapter 10, Paul says, if you declare with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Our minds are, by nature, habituated to sin. Before we're united to Christ, we might even say trapped in an addiction to sin. When we have the spirit of Christ, it suddenly becomes possible to rewrite and rewire these old habits and addictions to sin.

The writer, Grant McCaskill, puts it really, really helpfully. He says this, our identity in Christ is always assaulted and continues to be at odds with the bodies that we, with what the bodies we occupy have always done, habitually and naturally.

One day, our bodies will be transformed and we will no longer inhabit such weak flesh. But until then, we must intentionally put off the instinctive habits of our old self, which are now wired into our neurology, and put on the deliberative goodness of the new man.

[14:23] The new man there is Christ. This is what Paul is saying as he continues on. Paul writes, We have righteousness because of Jesus' death, and we are able to be righteous because of the Holy Spirit living in us.

This is the life that the Spirit gives. And this is most powerfully illustrated in the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel's vision of a valley of bones, which Paul is certainly alluding to here.

Ezekiel, in his vision, he finds himself standing in a valley filled with bones, a graveyard in the wilderness. It's a pretty dark place to be. The idea of standing in a valley filled with skeletons of the dead probably sends a shiver down your spine.

God told Ezekiel to speak to these bones and to say, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you and you will come to life.

The word for breath, interestingly, in the Old Testament is exactly the same word as the word for spirit. What happened after Ezekiel said this was the bones rattled and they came together and skin and muscle and sinews grew back onto the bodies of the dead.

[15 : 55] There was still no breath in them. So Ezekiel spoke again commanding this breath or spirit into the bodies. Then they came to life and stood up. It's a remarkable and powerful and strange vision.

At the end of it, God says that it's about his people. He says to his people that I will put my spirit in you and you will live.

This is what happens in the life of a Christian. The spirit of Christ has been breathed into you and you now live.

Before you were like dry bones in the desert waste but now you are alive. And because of this you can have confidence in God.

Unlike Maria von Trapp who sang I have confidence in me the one who is united to Christ has confidence in Christ and in Christ alone. But that's a much better confidence to have.

[16 : 58] Our culture is much more interested in finding confidence in ourselves. This idea that in us are the reserves to do anything and everything. I don't want to spoil anyone's dreams but the world doesn't usually work like that.

Sometimes Christians can fall into this mistake as well. Despite being saved by grace instead of continuing by grace and in the power of the spirit we continue the Christian life trying to run on our own reserves and our own effort.

It's very easy to functionally live as if grace and the Holy Spirit have no role in the Christian life. And when it comes to having assurance and living for Jesus digging deep and finding power within ourselves it's just not going to work.

If you dig deep into yourself all you'll find is dry bones. Assurance comes from the Spirit and the ability to do God's will and live for God comes from the Spirit.

This is why the presence of the Spirit is absolutely integral to our understanding of our union with Christ. Christ doesn't unite Christians to himself and then kind of leave them to their own devices.

[18 : 13] That really goes against the whole idea of union. Christ unites us to himself and breathes his own Spirit, the Spirit of God into us so that we can now live a new life in our mortal bodies.

This is the power of Christ's resurrection in us. This is the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and he gives life to our bodies which are still haunted by mortality.

As Paul says, if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

The Spirit gives us new life now and this is in anticipation of the resurrected life which is to come. When we recognize the Spirit's presence in our lives, we can be confident that this is our future.

Our future is union with Christ but freed from all the frustrations of a fallen world. And all this is really building up towards our final point which is that the Spirit makes living for Christ possible because there's a lot of living to do before we reach that future free from sin and death and it's the Spirit of Christ within us that enables us to do it.

[19 : 43] Paul focuses on two things as he talks about living for Christ. One, because we have the Spirit of Christ we have an obligation. Two, because we have the Spirit of Christ we have an identity.

And actually it's the identity that makes fulfilling the obligation possible. Paul tells us firstly what the obligation is not. therefore brothers and sisters we have an obligation but it is not to the flesh to live according to it.

In other words our obligation is not to the sin that so easily tempts and entangles us. For says Paul if you live according to the flesh you will die but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live.

Now what he's not saying is that our salvation is based upon our performance or how successful we are at putting sin to death. He's not saying that.

Our life comes from Christ's death and resurrection. As he said in verse 1 there is no condemnation for those in Christ. But he is saying that to be in Christ you will change.

[20 : 56] To be in Christ does mean living according to the Spirit and killing the sinful habits that plague us. John Owen a theologian from the 17th century put it really powerfully when he said be killing sin or it will be killing you.

Be killing sin or it will be killing you. And he's absolutely right. But when we set out to kill sin we cannot do it on our own. We need the Spirit of Christ.

And this is where our new identity comes in. Paul says for those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you receive does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again.

Rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. If you believe in Jesus and are united to him then the Holy Spirit has made you a child of God.

We call this adoption. God is your Father. This is really important. God is not the Father of all humanity. He created everyone and created everything.

[22 : 06] But because of sin and the way in which humans have rejected him, he is not everyone's father. He is Christ's father. When a person believes in Jesus and chooses to follow him, because they are united to Jesus, they are then united to and share in his sonship.

we can only call God father because he is the father of Jesus. And we are united to Jesus, participating in that very same sonship through the spirit.

Which is why it's by the spirit, says Paul, we can cry Abba father. That's an Aramaic term that Jesus himself used when crying out to God his father.

Before he was arrested, knowing that he was about to bear the wrath of God for the sins of the world, Jesus cried out, Abba father, everything is possible for you, take this cup away from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.

What Paul is saying is that Christians can cry out to God the father of Christ in the same way that God the son cried out to him in the garden of Gethsemane.

[23 : 22] I don't think we can adequately comprehend just what mental and spiritual turmoil Christ was in as he prepared to go to the cross, but we do know that when we face temptations of our own, we can cry out to Abba father because of our union with Christ and because of our union with Christ and the spirit who brought about our adoption, God the father listened.

reasons. As Paul says, the spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. So God looks at us and he loves us as he loves Jesus because we have been united to Jesus.

So don't try and wrestle through life on your own. For one thing, it just doesn't work. But also, we don't have to. We have been adopted by God who will help us through as our father.

In particular, given the context of Romans, he will help us when we face the trials of sin and temptation. God the perfect father will never abandon his children.

His love and compassion will guard us and keep us safe, no matter what happens. And make no mistake, bad things will happen. God does allow bad things to happen in our lives.

[24 : 54] But never forget, he is with you in your suffering as a perfect father is with their child through their suffering. As one of the Psalms says, he shall cover you with his feathers and under his wings you shall take refuge.

Which is just such a wonderful image of him wrapping his wings around us and sheltering you whenever trial and temptation and suffering comes. One day, when the sufferings of this life are over, we will share in the glory of Christ.

Verse 17 reads, now if we are children then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If indeed we share in his sufferings in order, that we may also share in his glory.

What is Christ's will become ours. Christ is the son of God. What God has given him, we will receive. That means glory. His glory and majesty and honour will be shared with us because we participate in him and are united to him.

And this, this is the end point of union with Christ. The day when Christ returns and he proclaims the final victory is the day that we get to share his glory forever and ever and ever.

[26 : 17] that's where all this is leading. Perhaps life can feel aimless, without direction.

With Christ and his spirit you get given a direction, a new purpose, a new life. If you don't know God as your father and you don't know his spirit or his son, perhaps that's your experience.

Life just kind of happens without a clear destination of where it's all going. We make our own meaning of course, but that meaning can very quickly become quite empty when the tragedy strikes or when the unexpected happens.

And eventually, as the end beckons, as it inevitably will, we might conclude that it was all rather pointless. But that's not what the one who is united to Christ concludes.

Because even in those stretches where life looks aimless, the one who has the spirit of Christ has a purpose and a direction beyond themselves and beyond even this life.

[27 : 21] And that direction is Christ. Some people like to create vision boards to help them press on towards their goals. Some people like setting targets for what they want to achieve.

Some people like having their three or five or ten year plans for their life. But the reality is we don't know where life is going. No one really predicted a pandemic that's lasted longer than a year and seems to keep on going.

Life is unpredictable. When the spirit dwells in us, Christ becomes our horizon. He is the one we look to day after day.

Despite an unpredictable year, the horizon of the Christian has remained exactly the same. We don't need to reassess our goals for life. We don't need to redesign our vision board or change our plans.

Because the hope of an eternal future with Jesus is still very much a reality. And so as we finish, what I really hope is that you'll be spurred on by that hope.

[28 : 29] If that hope is one you have and you are united to Christ, I trust that you'll find confidence in him. I hope that you'll be comforted by the future of our union with Christ.

If you haven't yet believed in Jesus and received his spirit, I really hope you'll consider the Christian hope of glory. The union with Christ is not just a blessing for this life, but it's a blessing forever.

And the offer is open to everyone. But of course we're not in eternity yet. There's still some living to do. In a world so saturated by social media where everyone's looking for people to follow them, the way of the spirit is very different.

We follow him. Follow the spirit's lead and he will bring you one day to your father's house where you will share in the glory of Christ.

This is the power of the spirit in you. And this is the hope of our union with Christ. Let's pray.