

“I in Thee, and Thee in Me”

A sermon in the series

“Summer Memories: Scripture Verses Worth Remembering”

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- 2 Corinthians 5:14-18 (Common English Bible)
Memorization Verse: ¹⁷ So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!
- John 17:20-24
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: When we strive to live our lives “in Christ” what’s true for Jesus is true for us, too.

In today’s “scripture verse worth remembering” we heard Paul use the expression “in Christ.” That’s not entirely unfamiliar. We’ve probably come across it before. But have we ever wondered what that’s supposed to mean, to be “in” someone? Maybe we recall a sportscaster talking about how some athlete had gotten “into the head” of his opponent. That’s psychological. The old European story of Little Red Riding Hood says that she and her grandmother were both “in” the wolf, having been eaten by him. Happily, they were quickly freed unharmed from the animal’s belly by a woodsman or hunter, depending on the version. But that’s a fairy tale intended to convey a moral lesson.

So let’s consider that tiny phrase “in Christ.” What *is* that?

...To be fair, it’s just a hard idea to get your head around. I mean, what does it mean exactly to be *in* Christ, or for that matter, in anyone? If someone tells me I *follow* Christ, I get that. *Under* Christ? Yes, I know what it means to be under someone. *Saved* by Christ? Got it. *Inspired* by? Check. And so on. They are concepts I understand: Christ as a leader, a lord, a saviour.¹

A Christian writer trying to make sense of Paul’s phrase “in Christ” offered this analogy:

Imagine yourself at the airport, about to board a plane. The plane is on its way to sunny Orlando, and Orlando is where you want to be. What relationship do you need to have with the plane at this point?

Would it help to be *under* the plane, to *submit* yourself to the plane’s eminent authority in the whole flying-to-Orlando thing? Or would it help to be *inspired* by the plane? To watch it fly off and whisper “One day, I hope to do that too.” What about *following* the plane? You know the plane is going to Orlando, and so it stands to reason that if you take note of the direction it goes and pursue it then you too will end up there.

Of course, the key relationship you need with the plane is not to be under it, behind it, or inspired by it. You need to be *in* it. Why? Because, by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you. The question “Did you get to Orlando?” will be part of a larger question: “Did the plane get to Orlando?” If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you were in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you.

[That author concludes by writing,] I think, at heart, the biblical idea of being in Christ is something like that. According to the New Testament, to be in Christ is to say that, by union with him, whatever is true of him is now true of us. He died, we died. He is raised,

¹ Rory Shiner, June 1, 2011, “Union With Christ” <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2011/06/union-with-christ/> accessed 8/2/2017. For preaching purposes “Orlando” was substituted for the author’s original “Melbourne.”

we are (and will be) raised. He [was put down but later] vindicated, we [may feel beaten down but in time will also be] vindicated. He is loved, we are loved. And so on, all because we are in him.²

That's the powerful meaning behind the assertion that you and I are "in Christ."

- Because God has drawn us close...
- because God has worked to restore the trust we should have with God...
- because God came to us in Jesus in order to lead us home to God...
- because God so loved the world that God gave the only Son...
- because of all that God has done...

whatever is true of Jesus is now true of us. Our lives take place "in Christ," which is why Paul declares, "So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation."

I don't think Paul was trying to exclude when he wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation" as though some believers qualify and others don't. It might help to imagine that Paul was saying, "For all who strive to live their lives in the manner of Christ, they'll find they're part of something new that God's doing." We shouldn't fret about whether or not we belong. No, if we seek to live our lives within the spirit of Jesus, we're part of God's new creation.

It seems to me that today's verse is both a declaration of what is and a pledge of what we hope will be. So let's look at the second part of today's memorable Bible verse. Paul explains that idea of a "new creation" by adding "The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" That part of the verse explains the significance of our lives playing out "in Christ." The verse declares that if you're "in Christ" you are part of something new because "what used to be" is no more. We've heard that sort of thing before – that being "in Christ" causes some kind of transformation in us:

- maybe our behavior becomes kinder, more forgiving, more generous, more patient;
- maybe our thoughts and our words becomes more accepting and less judgmental, more peaceful and less combative, more hopeful and less anxious.

This second part of the verse is both a statement about what is and about what can be. It's a "declaration of what is" because the death and resurrection of Jesus have sent packing that great old fear of death (the "old thing" that has gone away). In its place is the "new thing": a trust in eternal life beyond earthly death.

But there's also hope implied in Paul's assertion that "The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" You see, when we strive to live our lives "in Christ" so that what is true of Jesus is true of us, the reality is that we don't measure up to Jesus. We cannot match his generous love, his perfect obedience, his endless reservoir of forgiveness, his rock-solid faith. We *want* to be like Jesus, and at times our attitudes and actions *do* rise to a higher plane. But other times we fall back to our accustomed ways: pettiness, selfishness, prejudice, combativeness, ingratitude. So we must confess that the "old things" haven't *quite* gone away.... Nevertheless, our avowed goal is to strive for a life lived "in Christ," a life absolutely grounded in love, a life that elsewhere Paul calls "a still more excellent way."³

We've learned that this verse reminds us that we aspire to live our lives "in Christ" so that what's true of Jesus is true of us. The reason I picked this verse for this Sunday is because our worship would include the Lord's Supper. We'll receive everyday elements of bread and cup that, Jesus told us, remind us of his sacrifice made through his body and his blood. He told his disciples to imagine that what they ate was his body, and what they drank was his blood.

Here's what it comes down to: As we strive to live our lives "in Christ" so that what's true of Jesus is true of us, at the same time Jesus longs to live his life "in us."

So let us accept Christ's invitation to eat the bread and drink the cup. Let us take Jesus into ourselves. Let us embrace him. Let us welcome him. From his graceful presence within us we receive power to live lives that are more Christlike and less like the lives we used to lead. For "...if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!"

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² Ibid.

³ 1 Corinthians 12:31 (New Revised Standard Version)