

Life in Christ

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[0:00] If you have a Bible, you can turn to Galatians chapter 2. Let's read this.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Precious God, we pray as we look into your word today that you would examine our hearts, the condition of our lives, and move us towards a more obedient and joy-filled life.

We beg this of you in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, again, Happy New Year. It's fitting for me to wish you Happy New Year because this is the first Sunday I've been in this church. The last two weeks, I was away on a scout camp.

I lead a First Pineland scout group. It's not an advert. It's just, I do that. And so I was away. Also fitting to wish you Happy New Year is there's kind of a sense the New Year does not begin in South Africa until somewhere between the 15th of January and the 1st of February.

Because you might make some New Year's resolutions or set some goals, but you're still in holiday mode or you're actually on holiday until about the 15th. So until you get back to work and have a little bit of routine and capacity to begin to implement your resolutions or kids are back in school.

[1:55] So there's a sense in which the New Year's doesn't start until kind of this week. That was true for me because I was away in the camp. And when I came back on Sunday last week, very tired from a week away, I started on Monday morning just sitting down to go, Lord, what am I going to study this year?

What am I going to look at in your word? Is there a theme or something you've been instructing in my heart that I should pursue and dive into? And I came up with the idea of life in Christ or union with Christ as a theme I want to explore this year.

And so this sermon is a first outworking or first expression of that. So you're getting some raw thoughts just around life in Christ and union with Christ this year.

Life in Christ also happened to be the theme of our student summer ministry project we had this last November with university students from UCT. As I was sitting down with my staff team, we were kind of considering how are we going to anchor our project and help our students grow?

What theme or what verses helped to give us that rootedness or that anchor? And based on issues that students are facing, we came up with a theme of life in Christ in Galatians 2.20.

[3:08] It would be our theme verse. And here's the reason why, or two reasons why, we landed on that theme. So the first would be working with university students.

They often presume that if they begin to follow Jesus, there's a sense in which they totally lose themselves. They must stop being who they are. And in a sense that it's very negative, that they would see their life as a dispassionate life.

A life without ambition or goals or desires. That it's a flat life. So that's an issue we see with students. The second issue we see is that students are rife with anxiety and pressure to succeed.

Most students at university are first generation university students. They don't have the networks or family structures in place. Their parents often don't understand. Extended family don't understand what they're going through at university.

Their parents or families have them at university that they might succeed, get a good job, and be able to provide for the family back home. That is an inordinate amount of pressure to put on an 18 or 19 year old.

[4 : 15] Throw on top of that, the expectations from culture and social media that you ought to be in, you know, five, six, seven clubs and participating in them. You ought to be studying all the time because if you're not studying all the time, you can't be successful.

I mean, a regular conversation I've had more than once over the years at UCT is I have had students come to me as first years and say, and ask me the question, hey, how much should I sleep?

And I'm like, yeah, I know where this is going. And I've been told if I sleep more than four hours, I cannot be successful. What I usually do at that point is I find a second or third year student.

I say, come over here. Tell them how much they should sleep. And they say, what's going to happen is you're going to think you can only sleep three or four hours a night in order to be successful. And by March, you're going to be burnt out and want to quit.

And then you're going to bomb your classes after that. It's inevitable that that's what's going to happen. So we often see is this pressure for students to succeed is they either must study or at least keep up the appearance of studying all the time.

[5 : 20] And really what they do, you can't study all the time. So what you do is you shut your door and you doom scroll for several hours. But your door is closed, so people think you must be studying. You're really not. So there's a, if life in Christ is one where we are adding obligations to them, then they're just not interested.

The true good news is that Jesus takes our burdens, he lightens our loads, and he meets the obligations for us that ultimately matter. So this is what we wanted to communicate to our students, that coming to faith in Christ does not flatten your life.

It's not an ambition, a life without ambition. It's a life with ambition. It's a life that grows you as a person. And the second is that it's not something just added to your life of more burden or obligation.

It's actually having burdens lifted and cared for and the obligations met that really matter. I would suspect that many of you might feel the same way. And that maybe a lack of growth in Christ or hesitation to be joined to him in faith in the first place might be for these reasons.

I know as you gaze across the year, you feel the heightened sense of obligation weighing heavy upon you. And if you see life in Christ's burdens and obligations to fulfill, your spiritual growth will stagnate.

[6 : 40] So my two points are this. In Christ, you are more yourself. And second, growth comes by remembering the gospel. So I'm kind of sneaking in actually three points.

But those are the two points I want you to really remember. In Christ, you're more yourself. And growth comes by remembering the gospel. So before we get to those two points, I've got another point.

It needs to be addressed in verse 19. And it relates to how Christians understand the use of the law. It often creates a lot of confusion. I would say this. One aspect of the law that God gives to us is that the law is like a mirror.

Look again at verse 19. For through the law, I died to the law that I might live for God. So many Christians are confused because you hear phrases like we're free in Christ.

Christ has fulfilled the Ten Commandments. We don't have to obey. You might even hear things. We don't have to obey the law anymore or the Ten Commandments specifically. For a really, really good treatment of this, I would encourage you, go to Union Chapel's website.

[7 : 45] Stephen did a series on the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus. It's phenomenal. It answers the question very thoroughly. I'll give an answer briefly, which is, yes, we actually do still follow Ten Commandments. That's a brief answer.

But I want to deal with how Paul uses the law here in Galatians 2.19. The law, it's like a mirror. It shows the true conditions of our heart.

So I've recently had a change in hairstyle for the first time in like three decades. So I didn't look like this in December. And the first few days after I shaved my head, I wake up in the morning.

I grab my contact case, my phone, walk out in our living room. We have a mirror in our living room. And as I would turn the corner and look in the mirror from my contacts in, I'd be like, well. Like I would give myself a little bit of a shock because like I forgot that I looked like this.

You know, it's like I used to have a little bit more hair. Now I don't have any. And I think that's a good picture of what the law does for us, what God's word does for us. It shows us the true condition of our heart.

[8 : 45] And that's what Paul's saying here is like through the law, when he realized his lack of, he's trying to keep the law. And in trying to keep the law, the law exposed in him his lack of righteousness.

And he came to faith in Christ. So I would say this, the Bible reads you. You don't read the Bible. Might be a little confusing. It's just a play on words. But the Bible reads you. A healthy response when you read the Bible is that you should feel like the Bible is seeking you out.

It's like a detective going after you to find the motivations and inner desires of your life that are out of step or out of sync with who God has created you to be.

We are created in his image to glorify him in all things and steward everything in the world for his glory. The law and God's word shows us how sin has corrupted that image and how we fail to love him, our neighbors, and rightly relate to the world.

So what do we do with the law and with all of God's word? We use it as a mirror to show us where we need to turn from trusting in ourselves and live in conformity to the image of God.

[9 : 55] Next, I point out, so this is my first real point. In Christ, you are more yourself. In Christ, you are more yourself. Look at verse 20.

I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So how does following Christ make you more of who you are and not less? It is a little confusing because the text does say, I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live.

So do I not matter? Is it just, am I just taken over by the Lord? But it also says, but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in my body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So you have some part of you that's dead, and some part of you that's alive in a new way. If you're following Christ, yeah, some part of you just died, and you're alive in a new way.

[10:59] The part that has died is this sinful part. It's a sin nature. Sin is like a virus. You were created in God's image to have knowledge, wisdom, and holiness, and dominion over the world.

Knowledge on how the world works, wisdom to always apply this knowledge correctly, holiness to always glorify God in all that you do. But sin distorted the image of God in you, and sin brings you into a state of misery.

It's like a virus. Over Christmas, the last day of the year I was working was the 19th of December. It was about 11 o'clock in the morning. I was supposed to have lunch with Brett.

I was going to eat some sushi. I was really looking forward to that. And Brett and I were going to go over his end-of-year staff evaluation. About 11 o'clock in the morning, I started going, I don't know if I feel okay.

I feel kind of off a little bit. And then messaged Brett, hey, I think I should skip lunch. I'm feeling a little off. And then I worked until about 3 or 4 in the afternoon. And by 6, I was laying in bed with fever and chills and body aches.

[12:04] And my family felt sorry for me, but they were also, I think they were laughing at me a little bit. Because when I get fever and chills, it's not like I just, like, look miserable. It's like I shake so hard, the bed is like this.

It's like a cartoon character, but they were compassionate. But I think they were at least mildly entertained by my heart shaking. So answer the question then, am I more myself or less of myself with a virus?

Over Christmas, I did not go hiking. I did no vigorous exercise. I did not go to the beach. And if you know me, I love doing those things. Christmas Day, we had a picnic with friends.

I felt okay. I was here at the church service. And then I went to the picnic. And then this headache just set in. I ate lunch. And then just went and laid down in the grass. I'm even finding out.

I've missed on conversations. I'm getting looped back in now on conversations that actually happened on Christmas Day. I'm like, oh. Yeah, they're like, you weren't there. Well, you were there, but you were asleep in the grass. I'm like, okay. So I was less myself.

[13:06] And I would say sin is like a virus. It keeps you from being able to live as you were created, made in God's image to love him, love your neighbor, and care for the world. When Paul speaks of being crucified, he's speaking of the sinful nature, the sinful self dying, and then being united to Christ by faith, being made alive in him.

The Christian life is full of paradoxes. You're both dead and you're alive at the same time. So two things that are true but simultaneously seem at odds with each other.

And I think this is the chief paradox of the Christian life, is that life comes through death. There are stages of death and dying. So I think first when you come to Christ, there's this dying, death of the sinful nature, and then dying to selfishness and selfish desires.

And the Christian that then produce a life in you that blesses the world and blesses others. Every time someone or something dies in Christ, it becomes more alive than it was.

Jesus said that if you want to save your life, you'll lose it. But if you lose your life for his sake, you'll save it. When a follower of Jesus dies and they're with the Lord, they are more alive than they were when they were in their body.

[14:20] Us, we, who have come to faith in Christ, the Bible speaks about us in 2 Corinthians, as part of this new creation, like seeds of the new creation that's coming, where God will make a world into perfect peace, justice, and joy forever.

Remember, Jesus used this metaphor in John 12, 24 of his own life. Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

So this is, I think, the chief paradox of the Christian life. This dying to self and living in Christ is not living into some cosmic whole that you're absorbed into. It is not the loss of distinct personhood, but I think the escalation of personhood.

Listen to the pronouns in Galatians 2, 20. I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live. Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

If you do a casual reading across the New Testament, what you will find, well, it's actually a little bit hard in English, but there is, in the Greek, you get third-person plural pronouns.

[15:30] It's like the most often pronouns written at churches. So when Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, he says you, and he doesn't, to use the Southern American term, it's y'all.

He's not referring to you as the individual. He's referring to all of y'all, all of y'all. That's the normal language. So it's striking when Paul uses so many personal pronouns right together. And not only are there personal pronouns, but the tenses also matter.

So the first phrase, I have been crucified with Christ, is passive tense. It is something that has happened to you. God, through his spirit in your life, has crucified your sinful flesh.

He has destroyed that part of your life. He has destroyed the power of it. And then all the rest is active tense. So passive and all the rest is active. Active, you are partnering together with Christ in this endeavor of no longer living, of Christ living in you, of living in your body, of living by faith.

That's an active part of who you are. It's not the loss of personhood, but you become more of who you are. You see this in other places. In Ephesians 4, there's a list of spiritual gifts given to churches.

[16:41] So spiritual gifts are desires, skills, or abilities given by God to people to build up his church, to build up his church and serve other people. The list you see, we often read these lists wrong.

We read them as like, oh, these are all the spiritual gifts. No. These are categories or types of spiritual gifts. There is no set list of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are desires, skills, or abilities you have to build the church and help and serve other people.

You got a lot of those desires, skills, and abilities before you came to faith in Christ. A lot of those desires, skills, and abilities you just were born with. God is sovereign over your life.

And no one's desires, skills, or abilities, no one's spiritual gifts, are exactly the same. There are no cookie-cutter Christians. Everyone is uniquely formed and made by God as a sovereign God over their life.

An example of gifts, oftentimes I'll meet with a university student. They'll come to faith in Christ. And it's often someone who's, let's say they play rugby.

[17:41] This is a conversation I've had several times. It's a conversation I've had several times. Since I've come to Christ now, I've realized that my desires, my motivation for rugby was wrong. I've made it about myself.

I've let my emotions be controlled by my sport. I've been selfish. Therefore, I'm going to quit rugby. My counsel to them is to take them to 1 Corinthians 7, verses 17.

It's a little bit confusing because it's a verse about marriage. You don't have to turn there. I'll just explain it. But the situation is this. You have two people who are married, not believers. One of them becomes a Christian.

The other does not. What do you do? Because the Bible also says not to be married to unbelievers. So what do you do? So this is Paul's advice. Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned them, just as he has called them.

This is my rule I lay down at all the churches. Each person should remain in the situation they were when God called them. So here's the principle. God is sovereign over your life.

[18:43] If you played rugby and then you come to faith, continue to play rugby. Just because you did something and sin corrupted how you did it, let Christ redeem you.

Let Christ redeem the situation. No longer live for yourself. No longer let it dictate your emotions. No longer let it control you. But glorify God in it. Give thanks back to him in that.

Love your teammates. Live as Christ would live in that situation. Christ is sovereign over your life. What he did before you came to faith, he might have intended that you would continue in that.

Now I'd say there are some hobbies or some vocations that are incompatible with following Christ. But by and large, those are very few. So I just encourage you to think about God's sovereign and he's made you who you are for a reason.

And to glorify God in those places, in those vacations or hobbies. So return gratitude and thankfulness to him and love those around you. So practically, if you run Tuesday trails, you go surfing, you're part of Scouts, you have happy hour with friends, I would say do those things.

[19:50] But do them for God's glory and for the love of neighbor. The sinful part of you has died and you're united to Christ. Live as Christ would live in those places. You are his representative.

Go and enjoy the good gifts God has given you. And know that God has a sovereign hand over your life to craft you into who you are. Also, in terms of how we grow into, and this is very brief, but how we grow into more of who we are.

Think about this. Before you have security and the approval of God in Christ, you're living for something else or for the approval of someone else.

But in Christ, we have this divine approval and freedom to grow further into the image of God. To be free from living for the opinions of others and seeing our worth through our accomplishments.

Our worth and our dignity is in Christ himself. We no longer have to earn the approval of others because we have the approval of our creator and redeemer. As the writer Frederica Matthews Green says, the indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he ever was before.

[20:59] My second point is this. Growth comes by remembering the gospel. Look at verse 21. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.

So if coming to faith in Christ is a work of grace, then, in terms of growing in Christ, do we set aside God's grace that we might grow in practical righteousness?

The answer is no. We grow by remembering the gospel. As the years have gone by and I've grown in Christ and I've seen other believers grow, I can attest that genuine growth over time does not happen by having the right Bible study method, curriculum, or praying in a certain specific way or using certain language.

I would actually warn those. What I've often seen is apparent conversion of certain people who have very, very rigorous spiritual disciplines.

But in their spiritual discipline, they lack humility towards other people. What I've often seen in those people is they seem to walk with Christ for a few years and then burn out and no longer walk, follow Christ or even say they deconvert.

[22:22] Why is this so? A person who's naturally driven or motivated can use the disciplines of the Christian faith to provide for themselves a sense of self-worth. They might have traded a worldly thing for an apparently good and godly thing, but they're not animated by the gospel.

They still count their worth and their accomplishments and are not filled with gratitude for what God has done for them. They may have formerly found purpose in their identity in sports, grades, or career advancement, but now they find their purpose in spiritual activity.

They'll say things like, you can't really meet with God unless you use this certain Bible study method or use a certain language when you pray or even things like, you surely can't be a Christian if, I'll let you fill in the blank, what you think there.

But think about that from a life stage perspective. What does it mean to walk with God and to have spiritual disciplines and be motivated by the gospel when you have young children?

If you have a young child who decides for unknown reasons that they want to be awake from midnight to 4 a.m. for the next six months, that is going to wreck your life. I mean, it just is.

[23:31] We've been there. It's going to wreck your life. So how do you walk with God in that moment? What do the spiritual disciplines look like? Or if you're moving, a new job, a new career you undertake, or a long illness, our circumstances are going to impact what our disciplines look like, but what has to be underneath our disciplines is a motivation that stems from gratitude in the gospel, remembering the gospel.

Maybe a quick word to parents. I know a lot of them are over here, but if you're listening there next door, just when your kids are little, like I think the best thing you can do is read the Bible with them, is live the story of the Bible with your children when they're little.

Your toddler, they can memorize scriptures. They can memorize songs. Sing silly songs with them. Memorize scripture with them. Just do life with them. You might have had like a quiet time with Jesus where before you had kids, you sat and did it by yourself.

You know what? When you have a toddler, it might be you're going to read half the content with them on your lap out loud. They might even rip the pages of your Bible. It's like, it's okay. Do that with them.

Model a life before them. But hear me on this. I'm not saying that disciplines don't matter. They do. But the motivation under the disciplines is what chiefly matters. What do you do if you're not motivated towards a discipline that's good for your spiritual growth?

[24:52] You remember the gospel. Remember the gospel and remind yourself the true identity you have in Christ and then move towards living in light of that identity. How do you know if you're remembering the gospel?

Let's do this activity together. So when you think of God's face towards you, so when you think of God and you think of his face and he's thinking about you, what does his face look like?

What's God's face towards you? If you think about anything other than God is overjoyed towards you, you have a relationship with God or aspects of a relationship with God that's based on your performance.

This might be because Christians often unintentionally misrepresent God when presenting the gospel. I'm borrowing this from Dr. Kapik. It's a really good book I've been reading.

And he does an analysis of oftentimes how the gospel gets shared in evangelical circles. It's like this. God is holy and loving. You are a sinner. God hates sin and can't be in sin's presence.

[25:56] But don't worry. The cross brings good news because now the Father no longer sees you but looks at Christ and sees his cross. Intending to convey the good news of the gospel, this type of gospel presentation makes God out to be simply angry and judgmental and one who only needs to be appeased.

This presents the good news of God as having divine tolerance of you because of Jesus. This is a misrepresentation of God. It is not God who cannot be in sin's presence.

It's sin that can't be in God's presence. I mean, think. We just came through Christmas. Christmas is literally about God coming to dwell with sinners. When you come to faith in Jesus, what does God do? He gives you his Holy Spirit.

The power of sin is broken in you. I've been crucified with Christ but you still sin and God gives you his Holy Spirit. God moves towards sin. Also, this view, this view pits God against Jesus and the Holy Spirit which is a misrepresentation of who God is as a Trinitarian being.

In an interaction with one of the disciples towards Jesus, they said this to Jesus, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough. Jesus answered, Do you not know me, Philip? Even after I've been among you such a long time, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

[27:11] How can you say, show us the Father? The Father and Jesus are the same. It's not the same person. It's a Trinitarian being but they're the same. So God's face towards you is overjoyed towards you.

When our pulpits and psychologies link the Father with wrath and the Son with love, we end up with a deeply distorted conception of God. John Owen, 17th century pastor, addressed this misconception reckoning that delight, rest, and love all shrivel up rather than grow when this view takes root.

So that's a good analysis. Do you have delight in the gospel? Is your love growing? Are you able to rest? It might be because you have a distorted view of God's face towards you. To quote Dr. Kapik, the biblical witness is that the Son and the Spirit are the fruit of God's love, not the thing that secures his love.

Let me read that again. The biblical witness is that the Son and the Spirit are the fruit of God's love, not the thing that secures his love. This does not mean that the Father is indifferent towards sin.

Jesus, the eternal beloved Son of God, had to die to deal with our sin. Reflecting on and giving thanks for the gift of the Son and the Spirit naturally produced this gratitude and humility in us.

[28:28] We do not have a relationship with God because of our performance. It is because he has made us and redeemed us. It is because God is our creator and redeemer. We are doubly owned by him. When I was 18 years old, I began a bit of a crisis of faith.

I've been a Christian for about four years and I fell into this pattern of needing, in order to feel secure in God's love, I needed to have spiritual experiences.

I needed to feel it. I needed to have, you know, emotional highs with God, like go to a worship concert or like when I read my Bible, just get this overwhelming sense of God's love. What I was doing was I was basing God's approval of me on my emotions.

Emotions can be easily manipulated. What I needed to understand is what Paul is teaching here and what Paul understood that God demonstrated and proved his love for us on the cross.

He loves us and gave his son for us. This is what Romans 8.32 says, he did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[29 : 29] The cross, as the historical fact, gives me certainty of God's love. what I needed to remember when I was 18 is the gospel. It is not the strength of our faith that saves us.

It is the object of our faith. B.B. Warfield, the 20th century Princeton theologian said this, it is not faith that saves but faith in Jesus Christ. It is not strictly speaking even faith in Christ that saves us but Christ that saves through faith.

I think 1 John 3.1 is a good summary to this point. See what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are so let us remember the gospel.

Let me conclude with this quote from Dr. Capik and then a thought. In Christ we are renewed or new creatures free to worship and enjoy our Lord.

When Paul says that we've been crucified with Christ he reminds us that all our sin and shame were also crucified in light of the cross. We happily see that Christ not our sin defines us.

[30 : 37] Paul's declaration in Galatians 2.20 means that he sees his own life now as constituted by the presence of Christ within him. Similarly in Colossians 3.3 he declares for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

The result of this union and burial with Christ is that your life your value your dignity your future are secure in Christ. They do not depend on your performance or your perceived acceptability before God and others.

Instead they depend on the steadfastness of the risen Christ. This equates us this equips us with confidence to encounter our limits without fear. This Christ to whom we are united is risen.

Therefore the last word is not death it is not sin it is not terror or fear no the last words are the first words he has risen and so we rise. We worship on Sunday the first day of the week because in the dawning of the new creation he has come as king bringing us into his kingdom.

Yes us we who believe are in Christ and Christ in us. This union is our comfort our hope and life there is no salvation apart from this union in Christ the creator also acts as a redeemer.

[31 : 51] Last thought this gospel the gospel is not only the door into the Christian life and the kingdom of God it is the means for our growth. Remembering the gospel is the power for ongoing transformation not simply the deliverance from the penalty of sin but the release from sin's power.

The gospel is what makes us right with God and frees us to take delight in him. Our sinful nature has lost its power having been crucified with Christ with the power of sin broken in our lives we are free to become more of who we are in Christ.

May we grow in grace as we remember the gospel. Let's pray. God we pray that we would take delight in your gospel we would see your face as ecstatic as happy towards us.

We would give thanks for the work you have done to rescue us and to redeem us. Lord I pray this year also in 2026 that as we consider growth in Christ Lord you would give us power to engage in spiritual disciplines.

You would help us to use our spiritual gifts for the growth of the church and for loving and caring for others. God we pray that as we have the rest of this Lord's Day to rest and spend time with others possibly pray you would help us reflect on this message and reflect on the goodness of the gospel.

[33:18] I pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Thank you.