

Message: “United with Christ”

Have you ever taught a toddler to swim? I haven’t. And I’m not sure I really know how, so I’d rely on a swimming coach. To be clear, I know how to swim, just not how to teach it.

Alex was in the same boat. He says, “When my daughters were toddlers, we signed them up for swim lessons. They figured it out and could make their way across the pool correctly and buoyantly. But the next time we went to a pool, they’d undo all their learning, begin a frantic but stationary doggy paddle, gasp for air and get great exercise. We’d spend the rest of the pool time with a life jacket or them holding on to my arm for dear life. Back to lessons the following summer.

Here’s the thing: they know how to swim. They know what it feels like to swim. They know it’s better, but it’s not comfortable. It’s not what they’re used to, so they go back to the old way. That’s the way we are sometimes about our bad habits, relationship skills and toxic thoughts.”¹

As an update, Alex’s daughters now swim well. They were on the swim team this year, but we’ll stick with the metaphor as is.

In our passage today, Paul has explained the grace offered us in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and a renewed relationship with God. Now, he takes on a strange idea that came up around Christianity. Apparently, Paul was accused of this. We still face it today.

Here’s the idea: If God saved me from my sins by grace (a free gift), and if this grace gives God glory.... Then, the more sin God forgives, the more glory God gets, right? So, the more I sin, the more I’m forgiven, and the more glorified God is. This means my goal in life should be to sin as much as possible so God’s mercy can be celebrated.

Crazy, huh? There’s another way this plays out.

Have you ever intentionally sinned while thinking, “It’s okay, I can go to Jesus afterward and receive forgiveness and grace. That’s what it’s for.” Ever done that? I have. And I won’t ask for a show of hands.

¹ <https://theorchardchurch.org/blog/2023/08/09/romans-6-1-11-our-new-life-in-christ>

Those who see righteousness as something we can obtain are off track. In this view, you're either born into it or you earn it by doing good. Paul takes this head on, arguing God's grace is available to all who believe, and faith alone makes us righteous.

Paul imagines us answering his argument with one of our own: doesn't free grace just promote free sin? If God's grace is so free, so all-encompassing, and there's nothing I can do to earn it, why bother being good? If God is going to forgive me anyway, why not just go on sinning to my heart's content? In fact, doesn't it make sense to sin more, so God can forgive me more?

Certainly not, Paul tells us. Why? Because we've chosen to align ourselves with God, and not with sin, *we've been changed.*

Paul then asks, "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (v8). This is key. This is where change comes from. Like an addict, we realize we can't save ourselves. We can't live a completely sinless life. We need help to change. This is why Paul says we must "die to sin."

But what does this mean? Paul helps us understand by explaining how Christ identifies and is united with us. And Jesus finds in doing so.

Paul paints this picture: in our baptism, we are united with Christ. This means we also suffer and die with him. Before our baptism, there is this old self, addicted to sin and enslaved by death. Sin and death have power over us, primarily through fear.

Jesus conquered this power when he died on the cross and rose again. We are united with Christ not only in his baptism, but in his life, his suffering and death. And we'll be united with him in resurrection. We are raised to walk in the newness of life.

That's what unity is all about, embracing a new life. Our new life frees us from living half a life, always afraid, anxious and depressed. Our spirit is no longer bound and limited. We are free to raise our eyes, hands and voices in praise to the One who saves us.

There's something important to remember. Unity isn't a one-time deal. It isn't like you were a dirty rotten scoundrel before you were baptized, and then, after you're baptized, you've become this completely enlightened, sin-free person. We know this isn't true.

Being with Christ is a process. It's a daily practice of dying to the old self and living in the power of Jesus' resurrection. Each day we rediscover what it means to be Jesus' sibling and a joint heir of God's love and grace.

Martin Luther said we are simultaneously sinner and saint, always working this out. John Wesley said we are walking toward our salvation.

Some psychologists and spiritual directors use different language.

Rather than old self and new self, they talk about the false self and the true self. The true self is who God has created us to be, with all our gifts and the inherent image and likeness of God. Yet, as we grow, we wrestle with a messed-up society, and so we construct a false self to survive.

There are four basic ways our false self can develop.

There is self-importance. This often develops among those who have been born into privilege or have worked hard and come into privilege.

There is self-protection. This is the natural result of fear. We know some people are dangerous, so we are willing to take any measure necessary to protect what we believe we deserve.

On the flip side, there is self-loathing. Many people have grown up in a world where they are told they are worthless. Sadly, religion plays a regular role in this scenario.

Finally, there is self-indulgence. Sometimes we self-medicate to escape self-loathing. Sometimes it is the result of self-importance and we gorge ourselves with luxuries.

In invite you to pause and take a breath, as this may touch you.

Which version of the false self is alive and well in you today?

When Jesus says, "*Take up your cross and follow me.*" I believe this is what he means: we are invited to die to this false self, so we can walk in the true self, the self completely dependent only on the love of God.

This is what our unity, our daily dying and rising, is all about.

There's another way of thinking about it: Growing Up. It is part of natural human development. We begin our life needing boundaries, clear rules of right and wrong. We also need a strong tribal identity.

When we grow into adolescence, we are confronted with a complex world with so many kinds of people and so many different cultures. This overwhelms us and we construct a false self to survive.

We move from dependence *on* God to independence *from* God.

This is where Jesus is like a shock to our system, waking us up.

To move to a place of humble *interdependence*, we need to unite with Christ in all ways. This starts with honesty: we acknowledge the world is bigger and harsher than we can understand. Then we see how God's love is wider and deeper than we can imagine, and we are all connected in this amazing mystery. This is the way Jesus showed us.

It's a process. It is three steps forward and two steps back. And the Holy Spirit is flowing through the whole thing, helping us to grow up.

Accepting salvation doesn't just wipe the slate clean. It's not just forgiveness for past and future sins. It also does something *to* you. To accept Jesus' death for your life is to accept your own death to sin. You are dead to the things Jesus died for.

This is the meaning of our unity with Jesus. When Christ died on the cross, evil and sin did their worst to kill Jesus, so when he rose from the dead, Jesus broke any power sin and death can have on you. We weren't just "sinners," we were addicted to sin. Jesus has broken the power addiction has over us. We're set free. That is, of course, unless we let evil have power over us.

We are raised to new life in the resurrection. We are now new creations, new people living by new power, the power of love, able to live the life God called us into with joy. Therefore, we don't walk back to our old life to get more forgiveness, we walk into the new life to see how much better it is than our former sin.

We don't celebrate swimming coaches because they keep us from drowning. We celebrate them because they teach us to swim. There's good news: you can swim now. Let's enjoy the pool together. Amen

Let us pray ...

Romans 6:1-11 (CEB)

Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.