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So you know we're taking a break from Genesis for the summer and looking at a series where we'll be jumping around from different scriptures week to week. This week we're in John 15, verses 1 through 11. Here now the words of our Savior.

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Thus far the reading of God's holy word.

I have a question for you. It is a rhetorical question. I wonder if you've ever thought of the answer to this, who are you? Who are you? How would you answer that question if a total stranger walked up to you on the street and asked, "Who are you?" Well, you'd begin probably by giving your name, but then they'd say, "But no, really, who are you? What makes you who you are? What defines you? What sets you apart from others? Who are you really?" Well, then you might say, you're a parent, that's how you think of yourself. Or you're a spouse. Or you're a student, currently. Maybe you'll think of your occupation, you're a lawyer, you're a teacher. You might mention some hobbies that you're interested in, you're a pianist, you're a cyclist, you're an avid reader. Or perhaps you would list some associations that you have, you're a member of the local school

board or you're part of 4-H or the Lions Club. Or maybe you would give your a particular religion or denominational affiliation. These are all matters of identity, aren't they? Identity is something that our culture is really interested in talking about recently. A person's identity or their particular mode of self-expression is considered sacred nowadays. There's nothing more important, our society says, than allowing people to identify themselves how they see fit. And so people do. And where do they find their identity? Well, you see people saying how they identify themselves by their sexuality, or by their gender, or by their nationality, their race, their occupation. These are the things that people say make them who they are and it's no wonder there's a tension and division in our nation, in the world really, over these kind of matters, because they are important matters, this is really important stuff. The answer to that question, who are you, is extremely important and wouldn't it be a terrible thing to get that answer wrong? Fortunately for us, the Bible speaks to this whole issue of identity. It tells us exactly what we need to know about who we are, and it does so in just two little words, "in him." Everything we need to know about identity is packed into those two words, "in him," or that is to say, in Christ Jesus. That's what you need to know to understand who you are. You are in Christ.

Now, I want to say at the very beginning and through our weeks, we're going to come back to this, that doesn't mean that things like your sexuality or your gender or your hobbies and so forth, that they don't matter. Of course, they matter. But your identity in Christ claims those. Christ claims those for himself and therefore, your sexuality, your gender expression, and all these other things are going to come into conformity with what Christ says and with who he is because Christ claims all of these things for himself. So what we're really talking about in the weeks ahead is what it means to be a Christian. We are in him. The technical term for this is union with Christ. You're never going to find that in the Bible anywhere, that phrase, but you find that phrase "in him" a lot of times, especially the Apostle Paul loves this expression. He uses phrases like "in Christ, in him, in the Lord," no less than 164 times by my count. So the numbers speak for themselves. It's an important doctrine. Theologians have recognized this. John Murray, professor at Westminster Seminary years ago, says nothing is more central or basic than union with Christ. He says it's the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. John Owen says union with Christ is the measure of all spiritual enjoyments. Thomas Goodwin says that being in Christ is the fundamental constitution of a Christian. Calvin says that union with Christ should be given the highest degree of importance. And we can go on, all these men understand that the biblical evidence is relentless in impressing upon us the importance and the centrality of this truth that we need to grasp this if we're to understand what it means to be a Christian. We need to grasp it if we're to understand the riches and the reach of salvation in Christ.

And so I'd like to put it this way, that union with Christ teaches us that salvation is not something that we get from Jesus, but salvation is Jesus. Maybe that sounds overly simplistic, but it's a profound truth. It's, to some, a groundbreaking concept, because many of us are raised to believe that Jesus is a means to an end, that he is the way to salvation, but Jesus is salvation. He is both the giver and the gift. He's not a means to an end, he is the end itself. So we do not come to Christ looking for him to give us

something like justification, sanctification, salvation, or whatever, we come to Christ looking for him, and when we have him, we have all those things as well. So what this doctrine unashamedly teaches us, that Christ is truly everything. He is truly all in all and when we are in him, we have everything as well. That's what you need to understand. Apart from Christ, we have nothing. We can do nothing. When we're in Christ, we have everything and so this doctrine ought to grab hold of every aspect and avenue of our lives and make them conform to Christ but for that to happen, we need to understand it, we need to unpack it, and that's what I hope we can accomplish this summer as we look at a few of those essential Pauline texts that talk about being in him.

Now, you've noticed today, I hope you've noticed, that Paul didn't write John; we're not in a Pauline epistle today. Today's something of an introduction. We're giving a broad answer to this question of what does union with Christ mean, why does it matter, and the reason we're in John today, before we go into Paul's epistles in the weeks ahead, is because I don't think there's any better place to turn for the answer than to Jesus himself. In these verses, Jesus gives us the answer to why does it matter if we are found in Christ, why is this an important doctrine, and the first thing, the preeminent thing that Jesus wants to get across is that the only way for us to have life is for him to live in us and for us to live in him. Life is found in Jesus. That's the first thing. Union with Christ is about life.

Look at verses 4 through 5 again. "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus' use of vine imagery is very powerful here. Vines exist not for themselves, not for their own beauty, but predominantly to produce fruit. The vines live to give their life. Once the fruit is ripe, the vine dresser will go around, he'll cut away the dead end parts of the vine and allow the whole process to start over again. And this is Jesus, the one who lives to give his life, the one who lives to give his life as a ransom for many, the one who lived here on earth for the sole purpose that we might live in heaven. He lived on earth so that we might live, have life eternal in heaven.

"Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." The word for abide that Jesus prefers in this passage carries with it the sense of a continual presence, a continual dwelling, remaining. Interestingly, Jesus is using this word just after he told the disciples some pretty radical things. Do you remember what just happened in this section of John's gospel? He just told them that he's going away, that he's going to leave. He told the disciples, "I'm going back to my Father," and so the question is, well, how can he abide in us or be continually present with us if we are separated by the immeasurable distance between heaven and earth? How can Christ be in us if he's gone from us? And the answer is, of course, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says in 14 verse 10 that "it's in the day that the Spirit comes that you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you. The Spirit will reveal to you that we are united."

As the Nicene Creed puts it, the Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life. Through our fellowship with Christ by the Holy Spirit, we can indeed abide with him and live in him, and so simply put, this is the glorious reality of our union and our communion with Christ. It's life. That's the reality. You live. Just as there can be no fruit if there is no vine, we can have no life if there's no Jesus and if we are not in him. Of course, there's an objection, right? We're all thinking of this objection that many people are walking around with functioning lungs and organs, with families, with good jobs, with contented lives, right, they're alive, they're living, and yet they have no relationship with Christ whatsoever. We're wondering, so how can Jesus say what he says here? How can he say that you can have no life apart from me when we know plenty of people who are apart from Christ and are living? Well, that's true but is it true life? Is it really life that they're living? Look how Jesus defines the life that one has through union with him. He says, "he it is that bears much fruit," or if you look at verse 8, he says that by bearing much fruit, his Father is glorified. This is a real life, a real life is one that glorifies God. True living is bearing fruit and doing all things to glorify God and enjoy him forever and your non-Christian neighbor or coworker who seems to have it all together, is really slowly dying, is trapped in the grips of death, because they're not seeking to bear fruit for God's glory.

So it's quite simple as Jesus says in verse 6, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away, he is burned." It's simple, friends, to be in Christ is to live and to be outside of him, to be separated from him, to be apart from him is to die. There's life in Christ and there's death apart from him. We can search all we want for satisfaction and fulfillment, try to attain to the good life. You know the world wants you to do that, that's why we have movie theaters and shopping malls and the internet. They all thrive on the fact that millions of people think they can find their life's meaning and satisfaction through these things, and they're all going to be greatly disappointed because to those looking for some meaning outside of Jesus, he speaks these chilling words in verse 5, "apart from me, you can do nothing." Nothing, he says. Apart from Jesus, our search for fulfillment is an exercise in futility. Apart from Jesus, though we may be pedaling, we're not going anywhere, the wheels are just spinning. Apart from Jesus, we cannot live.

Now, it's not just that abiding in Christ gives us life, or the life that we're supposed to have and yet we don't want to have, yet entertainment, the culture of entertainment, movie theaters, shopping malls, internet, I understand you're telling me that doesn't give me everlasting life, but at least that's a fun life, and then Jesus is some kind of boring life. We're not saying that. Jesus doesn't just give us a life, he gives us a life, as we're going to see now, that is filled with love and filled with joy. First, love. Notice that Jesus says in this passage that it is through our union with him that we experience the love of the Father. Verse 9, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." Abide in it. He's saying, "Dwell in it continually. Be always present in my love. Remain in my love. Live in my love."

A life in Christ is a life that is marked supremely by love and it's not just any love, friends. Did you notice that? It's love to its fullest because it's the very same way that God the Father has loved his eternally begotten and perfectly obedient and righteous Son. That's the love that we experience when we're Christians. That very thought should, I

think, take the breath away. It should buckle our knees, should it not? That's what James Boice says. He says, "Jesus tells us that he has loved us not with an imperfect or even perfect human love, but rather with the greatest love that there is, namely the love which has existed within the being of the Godhead from all eternity, and which will exist to all eternity, the love of the Father for him, and obviously his love for the Father, and is there greater love than that," Boice asks? It is impossible that there could be for this love is without beginning or end. It is without measure. It is without change. It is according to the measure of this great love that Christ loves us.

I remember quite vividly the first time that I told Carrie Anne that I loved her. We had been dating for some time and it was no secret to either of us that we would be getting married, yet still there was something awfully nerve-wracking about kind of bearing those feelings, hearing myself say them in front of her. The nerve-wracking aspect is, of course, the fear of not hearing them in return. Even though Carrie Anne gave me no reason to think that she would not also openly proclaim her feelings for me, the moment I said it, the split second those words were in the air, I'm thinking of all the reasons, you know, she wouldn't say them. I mean, after all, I'm not that talented, or I'm not that good looking, or I'm not that funny, I'm not this, I'm not that. That's all I could think of, the reasons that she wouldn't echo the words back to me. Or maybe she would, but it would be timid or hesitant, and if you've been there in that situation, you know that's just as bad, right? Now, I know everybody's on the edge of your seats. You've all woken up to hear the end of the story. Don't worry. She said, "I love you," and it was immediate and it was heartfelt, and not only was she willing to declare her affection for me in that personal, private moment, but she was willing to declare her feelings openly in front of hundreds of people on our wedding day.

Now, if that's true on a human-to-human plane, think about that in terms of our relationship with God. There is nothing in us that he should love us. You get that, right? You bring nothing to the table. We're not good looking enough. You're not holy enough. You're not smart enough. You're not righteous enough, we could say. In Luther's words, he says, "The truth is, I am all sin." That's what we bring to the table, sin and sinfulness, unworthiness. We are loveless, at least we should be. But in Christ, we are not loveless. When you're in Christ, you are in fact loved. Our union with Jesus is God's open declaration to a watching world of, "I love you. I love you." And the only reason that we are loved and not loveless is because we are in Christ.

A recurring theme of being in Christ, of our union with Christ, as you're going to see, is this fact of being viewed as Jesus is viewed, and so, when we're in Christ and God looks upon us, he doesn't see us in all of our sinfulness and all of our wretchedness. He sees us in his Son and so, he doesn't love us the way that we deserve to be loved, which is to say not at all, but he loves us with his perfect eternal love, the love that his Son deserves; because we are in his Son we receive what Jesus receives. Because we're in Christ, we experience something of the eternal. I have to be careful here. It's something of. It's not the full thing. We could never fully experience this, but we experience something of the love of the Trinity. In a way, it's as if we are caught into the Trinity and we experience a love unlike anything we could experience with another human. Yes, human relationships

give us a taste of this love, they're a picture of it, they're a reflection of this love, but they are weak tastes and poor pictures and muddy reflections at best. Yet to be in Christ is to step into that perfect love in all of its fullness, in all of its awesome reality.

So how astounding is it that even with all of our shortcomings and our failures, our God and our Savior is not ashamed, he's not timid or even hesitant to say, "I love you." Doesn't that give you joy? Doesn't that bring to you just the greatest joy imaginable? It ought to. The whole reason Jesus tells us about the love that is ours as we abide in him is so that we would also know the joy that is ours when we abide in him. That's the last thing we're looking at, the joy that we have when we are in Christ. Verse 11, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." Just as we abide in Christ and therefore abide in God's eternal love, so too we will abide in joy. This passage teaches us that when Christ is in us and we are in him, his love and his joy will be in us as well.

So simply put, a life in Christ is a life of joy. It's a life of joy. There's no way around it. Friends, if you're claiming to be a Christian and you can't rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, according to the words of Peter, if you can't say that's true for you, then you're missing something. You're not getting it. Christian and joy, they go together. I'm not talking about happiness, you recognize that. Certainly, there are many things in this world that that dishearten us, many reasons why we might not be happy, but we're talking about something that is not surface level here. We're talking about the joy of knowing Christ, the delight of delighting in God, and it ought to pervade even dark moments that we might go through. It's not a surface level emotion, it's that joy, it's the joy, joy, joy, joy down in your heart, right? That's what we're talking about, something that's deep, rooted within you. Friends, as you are one with Christ, you experience the immeasurable love of God in the immense life of Christ. That should bring you joy and if you're struggling with that, you should pray the prayer that David prays, "Restore unto me the joy of your salvation. Help me to know again, Lord, what it means to be saved in Christ, what it means to have joy."

Did you notice what kind of joy it is that marks the Christian's life? Verse 11 again, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy might be in you." Jesus is saying, "My joy, that's the joy you need." It's the joy of Jesus and what does that mean exactly? No doubt there are countless things that could be said, but I think one thing is important to notice here. If you want, you can turn to Hebrews 12 as we look at verse 2. It's another portion of scripture that speaks of this joy of Jesus. Hebrews 12, verse 2, encourages us to be "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Here we're learning about the joy of Jesus, and we're told that it's rooted in the glory of God, in the glorification of his Son. Let me say that again, the joy of Jesus is rooted in the glory of God, in the glorification of his Son. While Jesus kept his eyes on the cross, he also kept his eyes on the seat of glory that awaited him in heaven. So maybe another way to put it is that his joy is a big picture joy. It's a joy that takes in the whole scope of the story, a joy that is founded upon the plan of the Father begun in eternity that will come to fulfillment at the Second Coming of Christ. It's for the joy that was set

before him he could endure the cross. It's because he knew that God would be glorified through this plan of redemption.

So knowing the whole story, seeing the big picture gave Jesus a joy, and that's the joy that he gives to us. We're united to that big picture joy, and Jesus wants it to be full. At the end of verse 11, "my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full." It's the only way that you can have a full or fulfilled joyful spirit and disposition in this life is if you take the big picture, you look at the whole scope, because a full joy is not founded upon circumstances, just as Jesus' joy was not founded upon circumstances, not founded upon feelings, it's founded upon facts, the fact that God would glorify his Son, that he would raise his Son, exalt his Son. And if we're in Christ, guess what? That means we're glorified. We're raised. We're exalted. That's the big picture. That's what you need to understand, that it's not just what you see around you, it's not just this life of misery and woe and things that just break down and don't work. The end of the story is much better than that. It's a big picture joy. We know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is, 1 John tells us. This is the fact.

So for us, just as it was with Jesus, we make our way through this wilderness of woe, knowing that it's a cross first, but then a crown. It's a cross, then a crown. It's not just a tree of agony, but it's a throne of glory. And one day soon, we will reign with Christ. He will make us kings and priests. That's our big picture joy. That's joy to the fullest and that's the joy that is yours when you are in Christ. So friends, are you in Christ today? Are you in Jesus today? Consider again those ominous words, verse 5, he says, "apart from me you can do nothing." It's a serious word, it's a scary word, but it's where we need to begin in this whole discussion. It's a life or death matter. You need to be in Christ to live and this isn't a scare tactic; you recognize that Jesus is sweetly inviting you into this life. It's a life of love. It's a life of joy. Because we are in him and he is in us, we have life, we know love and we are filled with joy. What could be better than that?

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we thank you for your work of redemption that Christ would not just go to the cross and accomplish the redemption of sinners, but that that work accomplished would be applied to us by your Holy Spirit, uniting us to Jesus and all that is in him, all of his perfections, all of his goodness and glories. Lord, give us a desire to make this our identity, that we are in Christ and that what is his is ours. Give us a desire to have life to the fullest, a life of love and a life of joy in Christ. We ask this for his sake. Amen.