

Training Session 3 - The Foundation: Union With Christ

Objective

Activating your Union with Christ

Key Texts

John 4:14; John 15:1-5

Bible Study--

We are in a series looking at the pillars that will help us build a solid foundation for our lives. Last week, we discussed the importance of a foundation built on the Spirit of God. This week, our training session will focus on how to actually *live out* a Spirit-filled life. It only takes three words to describe how to live out a Spirit-filled life. Union. With. Christ. Three words to unlock the mystery and behold the glory and wonder and uncontainable joy of the Spirit-filled life we described last week. Admittedly, these first two training sessions are somewhat difficult to practically work out in our lives, which is why we're beginning with them because it will give us 40 weeks to work into these spiritual realities into the warp and woof of our lives![1]

In order to help you realize how critical the topic is for building a rock solid foundation in your life, let me allow a few spiritual giants to describe how important they believe union with Christ to be. Many consider Karl Barth to be the most significant theologian of the 20th century. He stated that union with Christ is the “principle controlling Christian existence,” which is something you don’t want to miss out on if you are a Christian! John Owen, who lived in the 17th century and is still widely considered to be the greatest English theologian that has ever lived, wrote that union with Christ is “the greatest, most honorable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of.” The greatest grace—this we need! Jonathan Edwards, who lived in the 18th century and is still widely considered to be the greatest American theologian, wrote, “By virtue of the believer’s union with Christ, he doth really possess all things.” All things! Edwards says the gateway to possessing *all things* is through our union with Christ. Finally, on a more popular level, we’ll allow the man who is the most influential and quoted Christian thinker in the modern world to weigh in. C.S. Lewis writes, “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ...He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” None of us want to miss the whole purpose of becoming a Christian, so let’s dive head-first into that purpose: our union with Christ.

In our training session, we have 2 questions to address:

1. What is union with Christ?
2. How do we activate our union with Christ?

WHAT IS UNION WITH CHRIST?

In its most simple terms, union with Christ means this, “I am in Christ; Christ is in me.” Few phrases pack that much power! That is something worth breathing in, literally! Inhale

this—I am in Christ. Now exhale—Christ is in me. I am not kidding. As you inhale, say out loud, “I am in Christ!” Now, as you exhale, say out loud, “Christ is in me!” Just as breathing happens automatically, requiring no thinking on our part, the hope is that over the next year our union with Christ will be so activated in our lives that our response to all of life will be worked out through the all-powerful and identity-stabilizing reality of our union with Christ. The goal is that we begin to respond to all things, even the worst ones, from the central principle controlling Christian existence, “I am in Christ; Christ is in me!” In and out, in and out, inhale and exhale—“I am in Christ; Christ is in me!”

Union with Christ controlled the apostle Paul, which is why he referenced the phrase “*In Christ*” 164 times in his writings (and failed to mention the ubiquitous modern phrase “*Christian*” one time!). Surely there is no more pregnant prepositional phrase in all of the Bible! It gave birth to such spiritual power in Paul that he believed it was possible to “Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God’s will for you *in Christ Jesus!*” (1Thessalonians 5:16-18). God’s will is for us to rejoice, pray, and give thanks continually, in all circumstances, and the only way we can pull this off is because we are *in Christ*. Shockingly, Paul could say things that seem to make little sense to easy-street Americans such as, “I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties...” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Why would anyone delight in these things we all can’t stand? Because each threatening situation revealed his weakness and Christ’s strength operating *in him*. Christ is in me, and I am in Christ-- that changed how Paul viewed and responded to things that previously would have sent him sideways. When you read these statements from Paul, the temptation is to say, “Well, Paul is from Venus; I am from Mars—I can’t imagine being able to accomplish any of the things that he is mentioning (or even wanting to!).”

Yet, before you check out, remember Paul acquired this skill. He “*learned* the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12). Paul wasn’t born with a constantly content soul—he *learned* the secret of life that unlocked contentment for him by learning to remain in Christ. In fact, he experienced his own funeral and resurrection—the old Paul died and a new one with new powers and a new outlook was formed that was so completely new that he said things like, “I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives *in me*” (Galatians 2:20). That, my friends, is union with Christ, and the good news is that it is available to all of us who are, by faith, united with Christ, which is why Paul says, “if *anyone* is *in Christ*, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

HOW DO WE ACTIVATE OUR UNION WITH CHRIST?

It is one thing to understand our union with Christ and quite another to activate our union with Christ so that it becomes the principle controlling our existence. Paul learned how. So did Hudson Taylor. In fact, Hudson Taylor’s life is a great case study for how to activate our union with Christ.[2] The reason studying the life of Hudson Taylor is helpful is because Hudson was already well into his Christian journey before he began to activate his union with Christ, which will be true for many of us. Hudson was a Christian, but he was like so many Christians-- joyless, stressed, spiritually dry, and filled with worry—until the light switch of his union with Christ was flipped on and a joyful, abundant, fruit-filled life swallowed up his old, spiritually dry life. Oh that our union with Christ will become so real for each of us in the next year that we will be like Hudson Taylor describing the moment his union with Christ became experientially real, “Oh, Mr. Judd, God has made me a new man! God has made me a new man!”**add footnote here

Here is his story. Hudson Taylor was born in 1832 and became a Christian at age 17. At the age of 21 he became a missionary to China. After seven years he contracted hepatitis and had to return to England for 4 years, where God put an unquenchable passion in his heart for China. He describes it this way:

“On Sunday, June 25th, 1865, unable to bear the sight of a congregation of a thousand or more Christian people rejoicing in their own security, while millions were perishing for lack of knowledge, I wandered out on the sands alone, in great spiritual agony; and there the LORD conquered my unbelief, and I surrendered myself to GOD for this service. I told Him that all the responsibility as to issues and consequences must rest with Him; that as His servant, it was mine to obey and to follow Him — His, to direct, to care for, and to guide me and those who might labor with me. Need I say that peace at once flowed into my burdened heart? There and then I asked Him for twenty-four fellow-workers, two for each of eleven inland provinces which were without a missionary, and two for Mongolia; and writing the petition on the margin of the Bible I had with me, I returned home with a heart enjoying rest such as it had been a stranger to for months.”

One year later, Hudson Taylor set sail for China with 16 missionaries, but what Hudson found was that he was doing lots of work *for* God, but he lacked a sense of working *with* God. He found himself filled with stress and worry and lacked a sense of joy in the work. Spiritually, he felt dry, like an empty cup being emptied out, continually. No doubt, many of us can relate.

So what did he do? What many of us do when we get in trouble—call mom! Only he didn’t have a phone back in the day, so he wrote his mother and here is what he said, *“[The need for your prayer] has never been greater than at present. I have continually to mourn that I follow at such a distance and learn so slowly to imitate my precious Master. I cannot tell you how I am buffeted sometimes by temptation. I never knew how bad a heart I have. Yet I do know that I love God and love His work, and desire to serve Him only and in all things. And I value above all else that precious Savior in whom alone I can be accepted. Often I am tempted to think that one so full of sin cannot be a child of God at all... .”*

Hudson Taylor was passing through what many have called a dark night of the soul. Then the Lord spoke to him through a friend’s letter that changed his life forever. Hudson writes, “When my agony of soul was at its height, a sentence in a letter from dear McCarthy was used to remove the scales from my eyes, and the Spirit of God revealed to me the truth of our ONENESS with Jesus as I had never known it before. The sweetest part, if one may speak of one part being sweeter than another, is the REST which full *identification* with Christ brings.”

Don’t miss this. Hudson Taylor was already a Christian laboring hard for Jesus and there was fruit in his ministry but not in his heart. Then he read the letter from his friend that forever changed his life. On the one hand, you see the power of friendship. So often God uses a trusted friend to open the eyes our heart to a truth that we know intellectually but not experientially. This truth, for Hudson Taylor, was his oneness, his union with Christ, and the Holy Spirit flipped it on like a light switch through his friend McCarthy. And here is what is so remarkable. The light switch was NEVER flipped back off. He describes it this way, “Never again did the unsatisfied days come back; never again was the needy soul separated from the fullness of Christ.”

Imagine that for just a moment. It seems so foreign to all of us, doesn't it? Impossible, we all say. Yet, from age 37 until Hudson Taylor died at the age of 73, he could honestly say, "Never again did the unsatisfied days come back." This doesn't mean he was never sad again, that he never had a bad day, or that life was all roses and rainbows after the age of 37, but it does mean that he found a way to become so satisfied in Christ that he always had His joy, His love, His peace, and all that Christ's presence brings on ready supply right smack dab in the middle of a really demanding work and family life. One Episcopal priest, who spent time with Hudson Taylor later in life, described him this way, "Here was a man almost sixty years of age, bearing tremendous burdens, yet absolutely calm and untroubled." I want that and I'm guessing you do too, so let's look at a few of the Biblical principles that helped ignite Hudson Taylor's union with Christ.

Activating our union with Christ means continually drinking, by faith, the Living Water

All of us drink water. Without it, thirst settles in and life doesn't go so well. The same is true spiritually. Whether we know it or not, we all crave or thirst the Living Water that Jesus Christ offers in the Holy Spirit, which is why we began last week's training Session with a look at a Spirit-filled life. Jesus puts it this way, "*Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst*" (John 4:14). Boom. Mic drop. Marinate in those words for a minute. Jesus says it is possible for us to never thirst again, to be so satiated and so satisfied that we don't feel spiritually parched again. Ever!

When the Holy Spirit activated these words in Hudson Taylor's life, it was a watershed moment. Things would never be the same again. In fact, almost thirty years later, he harkened back to the day that the Holy Spirit flipped the light switch of John 4:14 on in his life: "We shall never forget the blessing we received through the words, in John iv. 14, 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him *shall never thirst*,' nearly thirty years ago. As we realized that Christ literally meant what He said — that 'shall' meant shall, and 'never' meant never, and 'thirst' meant thirst — our heart overflowed with joy as we accepted the gift. Oh, the thirst with which we had sat down, but oh, the joy with which we sprang from our seat, praising the Lord that the thirsting days were all past, and past forever!"

Hudson Taylor found a new well that could actually satisfy his thirst—and it never ran dry! C.S. Lewis famously captured the essence of what Hudson Taylor experienced and what Jesus Christ offers when he wrote, "*Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exist. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling desires to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire, which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.*"[3]

C.S. Lewis acknowledges that all of us are filled with desires and those desires are pointers to the real thing that our hearts long for: Christ! Put another way, we hunger and thirst for all sorts of things, yet find that the desires within us are never quite satisfied. Fools, according to C.S. Lewis, put "*the blame on the things themselves: He goes on all his life thinking that if only he tried another woman, or went for a more expensive holiday, or whatever it is, then this time, he*

really would catch the mysterious something that we are all after.” All of us have drunk deeply from the wells of life and each time we think, “Well, it didn’t quite satisfy my thirst, but surely I must have gotten a bad well and on and on we go in search of a new job, a new spouse, a new car, and a new well to satisfy our thirst.” C.S. Lewis, Hudson Taylor, and Jesus are all saying the same thing, “Stop! There actually is fresh, living water that will so deeply satisfy our souls that we’ll never thirst again.” To use C.S. Lewis’s analogy, our desires are indicators that we are made for another world and Jesus heralds the good news that it is possible for that other world (heaven) to invade earth and so deeply satisfy our soul through our union with Christ that we will never thirst again. Never means never! So, the first step in activating our union with Christ is to continually, perpetually drink from the only water—the living water—that will satisfy the deep longings of our heart.

Activating our union with Christ means abiding in Christ

Abiding is closely related to continually drinking, though it presents a different metaphor that helps shed new light on how we activate our union with Christ. The classic text on abiding—and union with Christ—is found in John 15. Jesus is instructing his disciples on how to walk through the world and he says, “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener*” (John 15:1). Pretty straightforward here with the analogy. Jesus is the vine and His Father is the gardener or vine dresser. Then it gets a bit more complex. “*He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful*” (John 15:2).

Some of you are wondering, “What does he mean when he says he cuts off every branch “in me?” Is Jesus saying that he is going to cut off Christians? Is he saying I can lose my salvation? No! We know this isn’t the case because just a few chapters earlier in John Jesus said, “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand*” (John 10:28-29). Jesus is clear that the Father protects and holds his sheep in his hands and won’t let anything or anyone harm them, including wolves in sheeps’ clothing who are acting like they are one of the flock (i.e. that they are in Christ or “in me”). Wolves, in sheeps’ clothing, will be separated or cut off. This is what he is referencing when he says he cuts off every branch “in me” that bears no fruit.

That’s the good news. The bad news, however, is that none of us can avoid the knife. Don’t miss the resolve of the vinedresser to see to it that his vine bears fruit. He has no tolerance or place for a vine that doesn’t bear fruit and so He either cuts the vine back or He cuts the vine off. Those are the options—to be cut back or cut off! Either way, cutting is involved, which makes all of us cringe because none of us like to get cut, but don’t miss this--cutting back is absolutely necessary “*so that it will be even more fruitful*” (John 15:2).

Without pruning, there will be no fruit. I know this firsthand because I failed to prune not one but all three trees in our urban San Diego yard. When we first moved into the home, we had a newly planted orange tree that was a whopping 3 feet tall. In year 1, this fledgling tree yielded 2 oranges. Sadly, we never plucked another orange from that tree because we never pruned it. Once.

Finally, we lost patience with the tree because, clearly, it was the tree's fault! So we cut it down and replaced it with a tangerine tree, feeling certain we had simply planted a dud previously. Same story with the tangerine tree. The problem, as you know, wasn't the tree but the vinedresser. We really didn't care that much if our trees bore fruit because they were not a priority to us. Our Father, thankfully, has a different set of priorities and a different resolve when it comes to bearing fruit—He is joyfully committed to our fruit-bearing! The good news is that there is no such thing as a tree that doesn't bear fruit in his garden, but the bad news is that there is no such thing as a tree that escapes pruning.

Think back to the last job you lost. Pruning! Sickness, budget challenges, kids that are behaviorally challenged, kids who get sick, relationship challenges, car trouble, the promotion you didn't get—all things that are painful and yet all are the redemptive pruning of the vinedresser who is cutting back and cutting away *“so that [we] will be even more fruitful”* (John 15:2). Maybe we should shift our perspective a bit on all the hard things that we can't stand about life. James figured this out and, as a result, uttered these (seemingly) puzzling words, *“Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”* (James 1:2-4). Pure joy. I can't say pure joy is the first thing that came to mind when we looked at our budget recently and realized that expenses were greater than income. Nor did it feel like pure joy recently when our three oldest kids were fighting before school, each convinced that the other was responsible for making them late to school. But the word James uses is consider. Maybe it's less about how life feels. Stop and consider, James says that the vinedresser is pruning all of us through all of the stuff we don't like, *“so that we will be even more fruitful.”* Game-changer! Consider. It. Pure. JOY!

But how does this relate to our union with Christ? Our role, in all of life, but especially in the tough stuff, is to remain (or abide) IN CHRIST! *“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing”* (John 15:4-5) Remain is used 6 more times in the next 5 verses. One key, then, to union with Christ is, just by sheer repetition alone, remaining in Him.

Think about that word. Remain. Remember the game that you played as a kid called “Red Rover, Red Rover?” The whole point was to remain together as one cohesive line, unbroken. As long as you remain together, unbroken, you win. The same is true with Christ. If we, by faith, stay linked to him, we win. Period. So much of life is simply this. Remaining in Him through thick and thin. Rejoicing in Him when all of life is falling apart. Giving thanks in all things, both in failure and in success. Trusting that when the pruning knife is cutting deep it is for greater fruitfulness and that it is done in love (or allowed in love). “Remain in my love” (John 15:9). Despite what life throws at us, we relentlessly fight to remain in His love.

Hudson Taylor found a way to remain in the love of Christ. Once the truth of His union with Christ was activated in his life in 1869, his life fell apart (from a worldly perspective), which should not be a surprise if you have been walking with Christ for any length of time.

His son Samuel died in January of 1870, followed by the death of his newly born son Noel in July of 1870. As if losing 2 children in one year is not enough, Maria contracted cholera on July 23 and died at the age of 33. Imagine that. Hudson is now a single father of four battling through the loss of 2 children and his beloved wife in one year. The only picture that comes to mind for me is fetal position; yet, Hudson was able to say that after his union with Christ was activated in 1869, “Never again did the unsatisfied days come back; never again was the needy soul separated from the fullness of Christ.” Never! Not through losing 2 kids and his wife in one year, not through the Boxer Rebellion (where 58 adults and 21 children on his staff were slaughtered by Chinese nationalists), not through demanding work did he lose the ability to say, “as to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible, or so difficult; but the weight and strain are all gone.” Isn’t that what we all want? To work hard and well and bear much fruit but without the weight and strain.

Take a minute to reflect on a small slice of the fruit from Hudson Taylor’s life. In a closed country with little to no Christian presence, he did what couldn’t be done—he founded the China Inland Mission which grew to 825 missionaries living in all eighteen provinces of China with more than 300 mission stations, more than 500 indigenous Chinese helpers, and 25,000 new Christians!!!! Today, the China Inland Mission is called the Overseas Mission Fellowship and has roughly 1600 missionaries. It is run by a Chinese man, and is committed to seeing “an indigenous, biblical church movement in each people group of East Asia, evangelizing their own people and reaching out in mission to other peoples.” Ponder the fact that in China around 1905 (when Hudson Taylor died) there were roughly 100,000 Christians (25% of whom came to Christ through Hudson’s missionary efforts!) and today there are upwards of 150 million Christians in China. A gospel pandemic broke out through the life of one man’s union with Christ.

For Hudson Taylor, union with Christ wasn’t new information. He was already a Christian and a student of the Bible, but what was new for him was learning how to abide and remain in the truth of his union with Christ. It was a truth that he knew, but didn’t know, until he learned to remain in the truth of his union with Christ. When you are remaining (or abiding) in Christ, He carries the weight, and in exchange gives you a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light (Matthew 11:30).

One final note about activating our union with Christ and how it connects with our ongoing struggle with sin. When reading the life of Hudson Taylor, one can get the feeling that he experienced a 30 plus year run of abiding and fruit-bearing and joyful union with Christ in a way that seems unattainable for us. It almost seems like sin wasn’t in the equation of his life. Hudson, however, distinguished union from abiding, noting, “*Union is not identical with abiding: union is uninterrupted, but abiding may be interrupted. If abiding be interrupted, sin follows.*” In a sense, then, abiding could be substituted for activating, the word we have used throughout this training session. When we abide in Christ, we experience His presence and power and our union with Him is *active* and alive and well, producing much fruit. When we fail to abide (and sin!), while our union with Christ is still an eternal reality (for nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ), our experience of our union with Christ feels deactivated. As we walk in sin, we are not remaining or abiding or activating the power source

for all fruit-bearing: Christ! Oh that we may abide in Christ and bear much fruit without all the weight and strain in the days ahead!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Define union with Christ.
2. What part of Hudson Taylor's story resonates with you? Challenges you? Confuses you?
3. John 4:14 says that those who drink the living water that Christ offers will *never* thirst. What does this look like for you to never thirst in the midst of demanding work and family life, bad days, success and failure, etc?
4. John 15 says that remaining (or abiding) in Christ is critical to activating our union with Christ. How do you remain in Christ when he is pruning you?
5. What is the difference between remaining (or abiding) in Christ and union with Christ?

LOVE DOES

Take a few minutes and come up with one thing you are going to do every day this week to activate your union with Christ. What is one thing you could do this week to help you remain (or continually drink the living water)?

- An example might be every waking hour, on the hour, you take 10 seconds to breathe in, "I am in Christ, Christ is in me."

[1] Please read Rankin Wilbourne's excellent book entitled *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God*. I had the privilege of serving as a friend and thought partner to Rankin on this book, which I share only because it means that Rankin's fingerprints are all over this training session. His thoughts on this subject and his friendship have deeply influenced my own union with Christ and, hence, this training session. If you want a more-full treatment of this topic, please read his book. It will bless you! Moreover, in Chapter 5, Rankin Wilbourne brings together the four voices (Karl Barth, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, and C.S. Lewis) quoted hereafter..

[2] When it comes to the life story of Hudson Taylor, I am indebted to the great work of John Piper in his sermons on Hudson Taylor and in his book entitled, "*A Camaraderie of Confidence: The Fruit of Unfailing Faith in the Lives of Charles Spurgeon, George Muller, and Hudson Taylor*."

[3] *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis Pg. 137.