

The Centrality and Supremacy of Christ to the Individual Believer

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christ being central and supreme in the believer's life, and how this can be achieved through faith, listening, and responding to Christ.

Scripture: Galatians 2:20, Galatians 4:19, Ephesians 3:17, 2 Thessalonians 1:10, Hebrews 1

Topics: "Spiritual Maturity", "The Supremacy of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the centrality and supremacy of Christ in the life of the believer, explaining that Christ is not only present within but is the very essence of the believer's life. He discusses how believers must recognize Christ as their life source, moving away from legalism and embracing grace through faith. Sparks highlights the importance of having a clearly defined understanding of Christ within, which leads to spiritual maturity and victory over sin. He concludes by affirming that the ultimate goal is for Christ to be glorified in the believer, reflecting His glory to the world.

Transcript

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-14.

We now go on to the second of the aspects of "Christ in you" and come to the familiar words of Gal. 2:20. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me."

2. CHRIST THE LIFE WITHIN

The first is the revelation of Christ within the heart; the second is the life of Christ within. It is important for us to recognize that this is not just the fact that Christ lives within, not merely that Christ is within us, living in us, but this carries with it something more than that; that Christ is the believer's life. Christ within is the very life of the believer; He must be central and supreme as our life, and He is our life just in the measure in which He is central and supreme, no more, no less. But we want to understand in what way Christ within is the life of the believer, and this whole letter to the Galatians helps us to that understanding. I do not want to be too doctrinal or theological in a technical sense, but I do feel that the Lord's people should be clear on the great doctrines of grace. Hence, I would ask for a brief consideration of the background of the

statement before us.

We often speak about Christ being our life, we often say things to that effect, that He is our very life. We use another fragment of Scripture which is not in the same realm as this passage exactly, although linked with it: "When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory." The principle of Christ being our life is the same, but here there is a background to that. It is not just that Christ is to us the vital energy which we call life. Of course He is that, He is the life; the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life in us, but here that is explained by the context and given a deeper meaning. If you look at the immediately surrounding words you will see that this statement of the Apostle represents a change. This letter, as you know, is dealing with the legalism into which the Galatian believers had fallen, by which they had been overcome, overtaken or ensnared. You notice how chapter 3 begins: "O foolish Galatians, who did bewitch you...?" literally, "Who did cast the witch's spell over you?" They had come under a witch's spell, and it was the spell of a false legalism. Now what Paul is saying here in verse 20 represents a change. Paul had lived, in the old days, by holding on to the law. His position as a Jew was that under the law man must live by the law. The law was: "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not." When the 44 "shalts" were complied with, and the "shalt nots" were observed and avoided, then a man's life was preserved by God. If a man wanted to live and prolong his days upon the earth, then he must keep the law, and so he lived by holding fast to the law, the law of commandments. And we know, even from one like Saul of Tarsus who rigidly kept the law, that it was a tremendously burdensome thing, and it represented always condemnation and death. It was like the sword of Damocles always hanging over the head. Deviate one hair's breadth and you die, you come under condemnation, judgment and death. And the observances associated with purification and right relationship to God never for one moment touched the conscience, never touched the heart, they were merely, shall we say, expediences for the moment; they were purely outward, and there was always the inward sense of something wanting, something lacking. But Saul had lived by holding on to the law, he maintained his life by holding on to the law with all its burdensomeness, all its wearisomeness, all its threat, judgment, condemnation, and its shadow of death which it always kept in view. That was his past life.

Now, no man had ever been found, as Paul makes perfectly clear in the first chapters of his Roman letter, who in his own nature could perfectly satisfy God on every point and requirement of His Divine law. All had broken down, all had failed, and in no man was the root of righteousness found. God could never be satisfied with mere external righteousness which was not in man himself; a sort of theoretical righteousness and not a practical one; and there had never been found a man in whom there was righteousness as in himself, and the whole race is gathered up in Paul's own declaration about himself with all his ceremonial righteousness: "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing."

LIFE BY RIGHTEOUSNESS, IN CHRIST

Now Christ, the only one who could do so, had fulfilled the law up to the hilt in virtue of inherent righteousness, and having satisfied God, not externally, ceremonially, theoretically, but inherently as being the Righteous One, without sin, had in His own person fulfilled the law and put it out of the way. That is done with. God only wanted it fulfilled and then He can put it away. Christ had fulfilled it and put it out of the way and had introduced a new dispensation, not of law but of grace. He has brought in a new regime where the government is not the government of "thou shalt not" and "thou shalt," not a government of systematized legalism, but of grace, and the new dispensation is the dispensation of faith in Christ; faith in Christ as the One who has satisfied every demand that ever God made of man, and has satisfied God on the behalf of all men; faith that in Him all who believe are gathered up and represented, and God is

satisfied with all such in Him: He has produced the righteousness that God required in man and God is satisfied. He has produced it as man for man, and God is fully satisfied and content.

Now that Christ, with whom the Father is completely satisfied on the matter of all righteousness, is within the believer; so that the believer in Christ has all righteousness in Him; God is satisfied. The believer is not any more righteous in himself than he ever was, but the Righteous One is within. God does not look upon us, He looks upon His Son in us; and so now Christ lives within, and Paul says in effect, "Now I live, not by holding on to the law but by holding on to Christ, and the thing with which I hold on to Christ is faith." "And that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God." "I am holding on to Him by faith, and I live." There is no condemnation, therefore there is no death; for righteousness is here, and where righteousness is there is no condemnation. There is no sin in Him, and there being no sin in Him, death and judgment have no power, no relationship. He is here, and therefore, He is the living One in the power of a life indestructible, unassailable. "I live by holding on to Him in faith." How? By saying, when the Accuser comes to lay a charge at my door, to bring me under condemnation and death: "Christ is my righteousness." When the Accuser assails with a fiery dart and says: "You are displeasing to the Father" (providing I am not willfully indulging in sin, knowingly doing that which is displeasing to the Lord, and the enemy tries to bring upon me the sense of being displeased to the Lord and get me down into death), I say: "Christ, who satisfies the Father for me, is in me, the Father is well pleased with Him and He is in me"; and if by faith I hold on to Him, link myself with Him, instead of dying I live, instead of coming under condemnation I triumph; and in that sense Christ within is the life, that life which we live. We live triumphantly not by struggling against sin, and not by trying to answer back the Accuser as on our own ground, but by presenting Christ and holding on to Christ as within us, by faith.

Christ is God's satisfaction within our own hearts. What more do you want? And faith constantly holds on to Him as God's satisfaction. "I have been crucified with Christ" - Why rake me up then? "... and it is no longer I that live" - Why try and charge me with something then? "He that hath died is justified from sin" "... but Christ liveth in me." If you can charge Him with sin, and if you can lay sin to His charge, then there is no hope for me; but inasmuch as He is to the Father all that the Father requires in me, and I constantly keep the link of faith strong in what He is to the Father for me, I live. I do not die, I live, He is my life; He becomes my life in that sense. You see it is something more than our regarding Christ as the vital energy within us which keeps us alive. There is a great background to this whole thing. It gathers up all that Christ is in His person towards the Father, and all that Christ has done in His work on the Cross to satisfy the Father, and that is brought into us to be our indwelling portion, and then faith links on with that, keeps hold of that, and we live, "... and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me."

That has put into a small compass a very great deal of the Word of God, but I feel that it is something for us to dwell upon. You see what is involved is the bringing of the Lord Jesus back to His place of centrality and supremacy as our life, and it is only as He is that that we live. We live by Christ. Christ is our very life in that sense. Oh! answer back the Accuser with Christ!

The phrase "breastplate of righteousness" is only a metaphorical way, an illustrative way, of putting this truth. The breastplate of righteousness is Christ. He is the Righteous One, He is made unto us righteousness, and it is no use our trying to meet the enemy in ourselves, good or bad; we must meet him with Christ, answer him with Christ every time. And if the Father is making high demands, He has provided Himself with all that He needs in His Son, and He says to us: "All I ask of you is to bring both hands full of My Son; bring both hands full of Him in His perfections, that satisfies Me." Christ is central and supreme in

the believer as the believer's life. I would have you make more of the Lord Jesus. The whole stress of these words is upon what He is in the thought of God; and as we grasp this livingly, not merely as doctrine, grasp it in the heart, we shall know what triumph is; we shall know the victory life; we shall know what fullness is. Beloved, I am convinced that it will be in the measure in which we are taken up with the Lord Jesus Himself that we are triumphant, victorious, overcoming children of God, and nothing else can be substitute for that, for what Christ is.

3. CHRIST FORMED WITHIN

We pass now to the third aspect of this inwardness of Christ, the hope of glory. Gal. 4:19: "My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." "Until Christ be formed in you."

Firstly we have: Christ in revelation within; secondly, Christ in life within; thirdly, Christ in formation within. Now here again discriminations are necessary. There is a similar passage in Romans 8, or one which appears to be similar. It has words which are very like these, but the two again are not of the same nature although they point to the same thing. Here it is: "For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son." There the believer is being conformed to the image of God's Son. Here it is Christ being formed within. There are similitudes, there are differences, and we are occupied with this one in Galatians for its own specific meaning and value.

Take again the whole letter to the Galatians. Bring to mind its object, see what it is that the Apostle has as his motive for writing; that it is the correction of an error. That falling into that error, the becoming bewitched, under the witch's spell, is due to spiritual immaturity. These believers had not gone on as they should have gone on in the Lord, and because of their belated maturity they had fallen a prey to this thing that was going about. Now the Apostle, writing to correct the error, puts his finger upon the root of the matter, right upon the spot, and he says in effect: "All this is because of the indefiniteness of Christ in you." Follow the metaphor closely and you will see what he is saying. In verse 19 the emphasis is upon the word "formed" "... until Christ be FORMED in you." It is a very strong word. What he is saying is: "Yes, Christ is in you inasmuch as you are believers and children of God, but it is an ill-defined Christ, an unformed Christ, a Christ without features developed; He is there, but He has not yet come to clear definition in you, the features are not developed, and because of that there is all this - this weakness and this aptness to be misled; the Christ that you have is one that has not yet come to formation." You see that this is a different thing from Romans 8:29. That points on to our progressive growth, unto the ultimate image of Christ the Son of God. That is what is going on. We are being conformed by chastening, by suffering, by tribulation, by pain, by discipline, by things which the Lord allows to come to us, we are being conformed to the image of Christ. That is what is going on daily, but that is not what is here, this is something else. This is the implication of Christ being clearly defined in our hearts. There was confusion, indefiniteness, because they had not seen clearly that "Christ is the end of the law to them that believe"; that Christ really represented a clean cut between the old dispensation and the new, the old order and the new; that Christ had fulfilled the law and put it out of the way. They had not grasped the clear definition of Christ in their hearts, and because they had not grasped clearly those features of the meaning of the person and work of Christ, they were a prey to anything that came along. Now there are a lot of the Lord's people like that. They are a prey to all sorts of things because they have not recognized the clear implications of Christ within.

THE NECESSITY FOR A CLEAR APPREHENSION OF CHRIST

Why are so many of the Lord's people just beaten and harassed and tormented by the Accuser causing them always to have their eyes turned inward in self-analysis, self-conscious introspection, occupied with themselves all the time; so tied up with themselves that they are useless to God and to other people? Why? Because they have not clearly recognized the implications of Christ; that Christ has answered to God on their behalf in all that God ever requires of them; they have not grasped that by faith.

That is the way of deliverance from ourselves. That is deliverance from self into Christ. But still they are in an ill-defined way trying to provide God with satisfaction, and it is an awful struggle. They have not seen the clear features of Christ. Christ is not formed in them. He is (if you will suffer it) an unformed, ill-defined indweller. It is rather a difficult thing to explain, but probably you see what I mean. Immediately we grasp the clear implications of Christ dwelling in the heart, we have come to a settled place, we have come to a strong place, we have come to the place where no legalisers can come along and sweep us off our feet.

It is what John meant when writing about the anti-christs, and about the Lord's people saying: "I wonder if this is right, if this is true? It looks very much like it." "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you." Inwardly you know by the anointing whether the thing is right or wrong. You are not able to put it into words, not always able to analyse the thing and say, this or that about it is wrong; you are not able to put it all straight; but in your heart you have a witness that there is something about it of which you have to be careful.

There is all the difference between our suspicions and our prejudices and the witness within. Do not try and project your mind into anything; don't think you have to take up a suspicious attitude and question everything to keep yourself safe; don't think you must be prejudiced for safety's sake. If you are walking in the Spirit you can have your countenance open, your mind open; you can be without fear, the anointing in you will teach you, you will know every time. You may not be able to define it, but you will say: "There is an intangible something in my heart; I know."

That word was spoken in regard to antichrists, about which the Lord's people were not sure - "the anointing teacheth you." That is Christ formed within. You come to a clear, defined place. The features of Christ have been defined, delineated; senses have been exercised; Christly faculties have been developed. It is not an unformed thing but something clear; the formed Christ within. Paul says: "I am in anguish, I am in travail over you my brethren, your state of things puts me into a travail that you may come to a place where Christ is defined in your hearts; where He takes form, and is not a formless Christ." That is the meaning of Galatians 4:19.

4. CHRIST SETTTLING DOWN (HOME-MAKING) WITHIN

And then the next thing, the fourth thing. Ephesians 3:17: "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all saints..." "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Now here you have an advance upon all the rest. You may not recognize it, but it is an advance. This is not saying, that Christ may take up residence in your heart. This is not saying, that Christ may come into your heart. And this is not saying, that Christ may find a lodgment in your heart. This is saying: "That Christ may dwell in your heart" and the Greek word there is, "make His home" or "settle down" in your heart. "That Christ may make His home in your heart." That is something more than a lodging, that is something more than just coming in and being there. Every house is not a home.

Some of you will be going back to our thoughts about "Bethany," and you will remember how at the outset of our meditation upon Bethany, we showed that Bethany represented the contrast that when He came - He who created all things - came to His own and they that were His own received Him not, so that He said as to His presence here on earth: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head": that was His place in the world: but He came to Bethany, and He came again, and He came again - and in the face of greatest stress, when things were pressing more and more heavily upon Him towards the end, His constant retreat was to Bethany. The only home He seems to have had here on this earth was Bethany. It was because He found heart satisfaction in Bethany. There was one there who "kept on listening." As we pointed out, the literal translation of Mary's listening is: "she kept on listening to His word." He wanted someone, He wanted some heart into which to pour that what was in Himself and find appreciation and response, and He found it at Bethany - the better part. It was His own heart satisfaction there because He was listened to, responded to, and made to feel that it was the greatest of all privileges to have Him there. "That Christ may make his home in your hearts."

We are so often like Martha before she got right (thank God she did get right, and the last picture of Bethany is Martha still serving, but things are right now, the activities outwardly have not outweighed the spiritual activities inwardly; things have been put right) like Martha before the correction, we are doing a multitude of things for the Lord when the Lord is just craving an opportunity to be listened to. The Lord would often say to us: "Yes, I know you mean to be very busy for me, I know you mean it all for Me, I know your motive is right, I quite appreciate all that, but oh, that you would give Me a chance to say a few things to you; oh, that you would give Me an opportunity just to speak into your heart, to show you things which you do not know, which would make such a lot of difference." And this is the explanation of our being called aside at times. He would draw us from the feverish activities of the "many dishes" to a place where He is listened to. But how much better if we gave Him the chance, than He having to make it. We have got to run the risk of being misunderstood for seemingly doing nothing, as Mary was misunderstood. Sometimes we are afraid that people will think that we are slacking because we get away with the Lord a little more. All right, the Lord knows. But mark you, He will come and make His home where He finds that. It is something more than having Christ as a lodger. (Forgive that way of putting it.) It is Christ being at home in the heart, making His home there. You ask the Lord to apply that to you just as it needs applying. You busyworkers, remember that all your work, in the Lord's mind, can never take the place of an opportunity which He craves of being able to speak fuller things into your heart. Your activities will be without vitality unless you are giving Him time to speak and He is having response to new unveilings.

5. CHRIST GLORIFIED IN THE BELIEVER

Now finally, in II Thessalonians 1:10. "When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe." "And to be marvelled at in all them that believe" (A.R.V.). It is the consummation of Christ within. Don't you think that that is a wonderful statement, a wonderful thing that is said there? Yes, we expect to see Him coming in glory, we expect to see the glorified Christ, but He is working something in the meantime which means that when He appears His glory will be in the saints. It is not only the objective Christ in glory coming, it is the subjective Christ manifested in glory. "If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." He has prayed that we might behold His glory, and He is going to be glorified IN the saints and marvelled at IN them that believe.

It was - from the world's point of view - an ordinary Palestinian peasant who one day went up the slope of a mountain. There may have been things striking about Him, impressive, but for the most part He was like other men. He reached the summit of that mountain and suddenly that One became ablaze and aflame

with heavenly glory, His raiment changed, white and glistening; glorified, changed suddenly from an ordinary man - as the world would say - to the glory of God; suddenly, bewildering those who were there so that they began to talk and did not know what they said. Utterly taken off their feet, as we say. Now beloved, that Christ is in us. We are very ordinary folk amongst men, there is nothing very striking, outstanding, distinguishing about us, but there is a moment coming when that which happened in the mount of transfiguration is going to happen to us; Christ in us is going to blaze out in glory through us, and as those on that mount of transfiguration marvelled at Him, so He is going to be marvelled at in all them that believe. That is the end of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The hope of that glory is Christ in you; in other words, Christ central and supreme. From the initiation to the consummation of the believer's life it all hangs upon that.

We ought to go back over the whole five stages and what each one of them represents as a demand. Do it for yourself. You will see that Christ as revealed in the believer means a captured vessel. Saul of Tarsus was taken prisoner on that day when God's Son was revealed in him. He was a captured man from that day. He called himself "the prisoner of Jesus Christ." You and I have got to be captured.

WHAT "CHRIST IN YOU" DEMANDS

Christ living within as our life, means a crucified vessel. "I have been crucified" - captured; crucified. Christ formed within means a vessel that is going on with the Lord, not standing where the Galatians were, but going on. Christ making His home in the heart is connected with being "rooted and grounded in love" and then there follows the phrase "with all saints." Thus fellowship in the Body of Christ, and the mutual love one for the other is a "Bethany" principle, leading to Christ's settling down. And so each one represents its own peculiar responsibility and demand, until you come to the consummation; and you find the context of each shows you what the demand is. In the consummation that letter to the Thessalonians speaks about their suffering, their joyful suffering for the Saviour's sake. They were suffering indeed because they had turned from idols to serve the living God and to wait for His Son from the glory, and they suffered, but suffered joyfully. And the consummation of glory is related to faithfulness through suffering. You see there is a demand for each thing. You can look at it more closely.

The Lord find in us that which responds to His purpose and makes possible the realization of His heart secret: "Christ in you," central, supreme, "the hope of glory."

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