

2 Corinthians 5:11-21 PM

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, open our ears to listen, open our eyes to see, plant your word deep in our hearts and make it to bear good fruit in our lives.

! We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. Amen. So friends, one of the many things that I find remarkable about God's word is that it's both incredibly simple and deeply profound.

A pastor and theologian in the early church named St. Jerome said this about the gospel. He said, it's like a pool that is shallow enough for the youngest child to come and drink without fear of drowning.

And an ocean deep enough for us to swim in for eternity without ever nearing the bottom. I'm not trying to say that everything in scripture is easy to understand.

It's not. But its central message, the gospel, is simple without being simplistic. A small child can hear about the cross of Jesus Christ and understand its basic logic.

[1 : 1 2] This basic message of this great exchange. That Jesus died for me in my place so that I can live with him. And yet, we will spend eternity contemplating and praising God for the depths of that short statement.

And perhaps more than anywhere else in scripture, 2 Corinthians 5, which Linda has just read for us, displays the cross of Christ in all of this simplicity and majesty.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul reveals the heart of the Christian faith. That we are saved by Jesus Christ trading places with us.

He takes our sin and dies our death so that through him we can receive his perfect life and righteousness. The last words in the reading are remarkable.

That we might become the righteousness of God. Not that we just receive righteousness. Not just that we receive life. We become the righteousness of God. This is remarkable.

[2 : 1 9] And Paul also shows the deep and profound effect of this gift in our lives. By saying that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.

The old has passed away. The new has come. Notice that Paul says, anyone. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. And this means this impossibly good news that we're going to spend the next few minutes reflecting on together is for you.

It's for all of us. It's for anyone. And so, let's dive in together. I think there's two main sections in our reading today.

Verses 11 to 15 are about how we are gripped by the gospel. And verses 16 to 21 are about how we are changed by the gospel.

So how we're gripped by the gospel and then how we're changed by the gospel. And so, first, how are we gripped by the gospel? Now, if you're new to church visiting tonight, our passage that we've read from tonight comes from a letter that was written by a man named Paul to the church in a city called Corinth, which is in what's now modern-day Turkey or Asia Minor.

[3 : 3 7] And this man, Paul, had a dramatic encounter with Jesus that completely changed his life. I mean, it was like a 180. He was a Pharisee, so he grew up with the highest Jewish training.

He was educated, brilliant, zealous for the traditions of his people. So much so that Paul was actually one of the great persecutors of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem.

In the book of Acts, we see that he oversees and approves of the murder of Stephen, who's the first Christian martyr, and then goes city to city, imprisoning and intimidating Christians.

And this all changed completely when Paul met Jesus. Jesus not only saved Paul, he made Paul an apostle. That word apostle literally means a person who is sent.

And so Jesus saves Paul, and then he sends him with a mission to be his messenger to the Gentile, non-Jewish world.

[4 : 41] And so Paul was actually the one who planted this church in Corinth, and we know that he wrote them multiple letters. And in this one, which we know as 2 Corinthians, Paul was defending his ministry as a genuine apostle of Christ, over and against these flashy teachers and preachers who had won over the Corinthians with their gifts of rhetoric and impressive outward appearances.

And so when we pick up in verse 11, Paul has just been talking about courage and living to please the Lord in all circumstances. If you're following along, bump your eyes up one verse to verse 10. Paul says, We all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body. So this is the immediate context of our reading, and it makes sense of what Paul then says in verse 11.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, that is this truth that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we the apostles persuade others, but what we are is known to God.

So Paul is saying that he has given his life to teaching and persuading others because he knows that every person will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. And he knows this is a fearful thing because none of us are righteous, not one, not apart from God's grace.

[6 : 14] So this is why Paul and the other apostles were sent to preach the gospel, because they know what we confess every week in the creed, that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

They also knew that we cannot hide from God in this holiness. Notice what he says in verse 11, What we are is known to God. So as I said, there were these other teachers and preachers in Corinth.

Later in the letter, Paul ironically calls them the super apostles, these people who thought of themselves as being better than Paul and the other apostles, almost like apostolic superheroes. And these people were trained in the art of rhetoric and loved to boast about outward appearances. We talked a lot about this when we went through our series on 1 Corinthians.

And Paul knows that this is a sign of immaturity in Christ, because posturing and boasting and skill may gain a person praise and acclaim in the world, but it does nothing for our standing before God.

[7 : 22] Again, Paul knows we will all come before the judgment seat of Christ. And when that happens, Paul knows that he will see and know and judge what is in our hearts.

To use contemporary examples, he won't look at our social media profiles or our net worth. He won't ask for references or resumes or public approval ratings.

He will judge us according to the state of our hearts and the fruit of our lives. And that's what we see in verses 11 and 12. And this revelation caused Paul to fear Jesus with the same respect and reverence that he gave to God himself.

But if we look down to verse 14, we see that something other than just fear grips Paul's heart. Look with me at verse 14.

He says, For the love of Christ controls us. Because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

[8 : 28] And he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised. For the love of Christ controls us.

Isn't that a striking image and phrase? This word that Paul uses for control means to urge or direct or even to compel someone to do something.

And so Paul's saying that his life and actions are now controlled, directed, even compelled by the love of Jesus Christ. And the knowledge that Christ died not just for him, but for all.

And the result of this, Paul says, is that he no longer lives for himself, but he lives for Christ.

Elsewhere, in another letter, Galatians, he said it like this.

He said, I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. In this life, I now live in the flesh.

[9 : 37] I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. So Paul says, he no longer lives for himself, but for Christ.

And before we go into the second section, which is phenomenal, I think we need to just pause and ask the question, what controls or compels you?

Is it the love of Christ? Or is it something else? I'll tell you one thing. It's not nothing. It's not nothing. We were made to love and worship.

This is just another way of saying that we are made, human beings are made to be controlled and directed and motivated by some ultimate desire and goal.

It's a hardwired impulse that we can't simply turn off. The problem is, though, is that there's a lot of things in the world that fight to control and compel us.

[10:40] You may have even come here tonight feeling weary, battered, and bruised because you feel that you are mastered by something that you cannot shake.

You might be compulsively consuming things like alcohol, drugs, sex, or pornography because you feel controlled by the pain of loneliness or anxiety or loss.

You might compulsively curate your social media profile and online presence because you're controlled by the love of what other people think of you.

You might even compulsively work because you're controlled by the love of money and the sense of security and status that that brings. We could list more examples, but I hope you see what's going on here.

In each of these cases, you are not the master. We are not the master. We are being mastered by something that is actually enslaving and destroying us.

[11:45] This is sometimes what the Bible calls idolatry, false worship. Now, again, you might have come here tonight already knowing this, already feeling the weight of this, and just simply not knowing a way out.

And hear me, I think the only true way out is to be mastered by something better. You won't stop watching pornography or checking your social media profiles or take a regular Sabbath with your family simply by gritting your teeth and resolving to do better.

You might do it for a little while, but for that change to become a lasting transformation, the perfect love of God in Jesus Christ needs to actually conquer your heart.

He needs to throw down your idols and become your greatest treasure. This is what it means to be gripped by the gospel. This is something that's in our vision statement as a church, that we want to be people who are gripped by the gospel of grace.

The love of Christ has to become our controlling, compelling narrative and motivation so that, like Paul, we no longer live for ourselves, our desires, our goals, but for Christ, his beauty, his glory, his goodness.

[13:09] This was Paul's experience. He doesn't say it, but I think this is autobiographical. This happened in his life, and it can happen in ours as well.

And this brings us to the second half of the passage, which is all about how we are changed through the gospel. So it's not just that we are gripped by the good news of Christ's love.

It's that when we are gripped by the gospel in this way, we are actually radically changed. It's such a radical change that it's actually a recreation.

God recreates us in his image and gives us new life. So look with me at verse 17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away, and behold, the new has come. Friends, this is the full scope and breadth and depth of salvation in Jesus.

[14:15] Again, if you're new or visiting church this evening, you need to know this. The message of Christianity isn't self-help, and the goal isn't simply self-improvement.

Jesus didn't come and die to show us how to live our best life now, although you can buy Christian books with that title. Jesus came and died to recreate you.

He came to make you a new creation. When we trust in Christ, we are spiritually united to him. We actually become one with him. The image the New Testament uses the most to describe this as marriage, the two becoming one.

And when we are united with Christ, what is rightfully ours becomes his, and what is rightfully his becomes ours. Do you see that?

What is rightfully ours becomes his, and what is rightfully his becomes ours. So our old lives, our lives ruled by sin and death, are crucified and buried with Christ.

[15:24] And we are raised to new life in him, with new hearts, new desires, and even a new vocation, which we'll get into shortly. And this profound change touches on every part of our life.

In verse 16, Paul says that they regard no one according to the flesh. And this is because they've seen a man, Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead, and buried, rise from the dead in a transformed body and ascend into heaven.

It was the same man, the same Jesus, who the disciples knew and walked with, but they could no longer regard him in the same way that they did before. He had been changed.

He had been transformed. He was no longer simply of the flesh, but of the spirit. He was the man of heaven, and his resurrected body reflected that glory.

Now in Romans 8, Paul writes that the same spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is living in us. That is all those who believe and trust in Jesus.

[16:38] And that that same spirit will give life to our mortal bodies. In other words, he's saying that when we are united to Christ by faith, when we become one with him, we undergo this same radical change that he did when he was raised to life.

And that is why, if you are a Christian, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come.

Now, I wouldn't blame anyone for thinking that this sounds a bit mystical, a bit far-fetched, a bit too good to be true, perhaps. But Paul clarifies that this isn't magic, this isn't superstition.

It's not just simply a metaphor or wishful thinking. Paul goes on to show very clearly that this transformation comes directly from God and is accomplished by Christ.

So look at verse 18. He says, all this, that is everything he said about new creation and new life, all this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[18:01] Now, this word reconciliation is clearly very important to Paul. He repeats it five times in this short passage.

I wonder if you remember last week when we considered how we are all enemies of God, how even while we were enemies of God, God shows his love for us by Christ dying while we were his enemies.

Now, the cross is central to the Christian faith because it's the place where God actually reaches out to us in love, deals with our sin, and makes it possible for us, his enemies, to be reconciled as his friends.

This is the reconciliation that Paul is going on about here. It's God taking his enemies and making them his friends. It's God taking exiled orphans and making them his children.

It's God taking us who are citizens of the world and making us citizens of his kingdom. And he does this through the cross. Look with me again at verse 19.

[19:09] God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself. And how does he do this? By not counting their trespasses against them.

And this begs the question, at least it did for me, what happens to our sin if it's not counted against us? Have you ever thought about this question before?

When God takes away our sin, what happens to it? Where does it go? It doesn't just disappear. God doesn't simply sweep it under the rug and pretend like it never happened.

That would be unjust and would only allow sin and wickedness to flourish in our life. Does God change his standard for what's righteous and just? No, he can't.

God never changes. So what happens to our sin if it's not counted against us? What we see in this passage is that it's counted against Jesus.

[20:10] All of sin, every evil, wicked, unjust thing that's ever happened in the history of the world will be accounted for. Either as we stand before God in judgment or as Christ stood in our place on the cross.

We see this in verse 21. For our sake, he, that's God, made him to be sin who knew no sin, that's Jesus, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

At the morning service, David Short said that as he reads this, he feels like we're standing on sacred ground as we read these words. This is the simple gospel that we began with.

This is the great exchange, which is the beating heart of Christian faith. Jesus takes our place so that what is rightfully ours becomes his, and what is rightfully his becomes ours.

On the cross, Jesus, who never sinned, took our sin and judgment upon himself to the extent that he became sin. I wonder if you remember on the cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 21, and he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[21:41] And he says this because on the cross, Christ was forsaken because we should have been forsaken. He was condemned and judged because we are guilty.

He was cast out because we are exiles. He died because our sin merits death. And so by faith, we give Christ our sin, our judgment, our exile, and death, and what do we get in return?

The righteousness of God, adoption into God's family, the inheritance of God's kingdom, and eternal life with him in his new creation as new creations.

It's a pretty good deal. It's a pretty good deal. And finally, along with all of these benefits, we also receive a new job.

This isn't just something that's about the future when we're with Christ in glory. This is something that changes our life in the here and now. Perhaps one of the most amazing things about this passage is Paul says that we are actually entrusted with this ministry of reconciliation.

[23 : 03] He says that we are ambassadors for Christ. He goes so far as to say that God is making his appeal to the world through us. So as reconciled children of God, you could say that we're put to work in the family business of reconciliation.

reconciliation. We become representatives of Christ wherever God puts us. And so our homes, our communities, our places of work become like embassies of heaven in the world.

Places where God has put you intentionally as his representative. And he is making this life-changing appeal to the world through you and me.

This is amazing. And for Paul, the appeal was simple. Simple and profound as we started with. Be reconciled to God. Be reconciled to God.

Notice the verb here is passive. Did you notice that? He's not saying reconcile yourself to God. He says be reconciled to God because there's no more work to be done.

[24 : 13] Jesus said on the cross, it is finished. So Paul is saying simply come. Come and receive. Receive God's gift of reconciliation and new creation and righteousness by trusting in Jesus.

By being gripped by his love and changed by his love which was poured out for you at the cross.

And then join in the chorus of people throughout the world and throughout all ages who are praising God for this mercy and making the same appeal to others.

Be reconciled to God. The God who for your sake bore our sin, our death, and our judgment in Christ so that in him you might become nothing less than the righteousness of God.

Amen. Amen.