

Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2

Turn to 2 Corinthians 5. Why do you obey God? Why do you serve Christ? Take a look at that part of you that wants to obey and serve God. There may be other wants in you as well, but for now ignore that. Just take a look at that place in your mind that wants to honour and please Christ. Why? Why do you want that?

I thought about this and I don't really know why. I know that I want to honour and please Christ, I love him, but I can't answer farther than that. But Paul could answer farther than that, and he gives us his answer.

He's got a reason for this. The Corinthian believers are not impressed with him, and don't entirely trust him. A big part of this is that the Cor'ns don't have any idea how to tell a genuine servant of Christ from a successful-looking fake. They think the real minister is a failure, and the fakes are the real thing, so in 2:14 – 7:1 Paul is educating them about ministry.

The Fear of the Lord guides us 2 Cor 5:10-11. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. ¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.*

Since we know what it is to fear the Lord. He applying the previous sentence to himself, that *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so each of us may receive what is due us for the things done in the body, good or bad.*

Unfortunately, this kind of Scripture can fill us with dread. I think the reason for that is this: we've been taught a dark lie by Satan himself, the accuser. The lie is that we are always on the brink of being God's enemies. Being God's enemy is huge problem, no mistake there.

But that we are on the edge of this is not even close to true. What God wants is to be bound to us, and us to him, he'll be our God, and we'll be his people. He sent Christ to make this possible. What God wants is for people to be at peace with him, to become his children. That's his pull.

But the Lord Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, and he has taught us how to live, and what we do in this body counts. This judgement seat of Christ is not something to dread, Paul has just said we all prefer to be absent from the body and present with the Lord, and knowing the fear of the Lord does not reduce that at all. It just means we know that what we do matters.

What we are is plain to God. At the end of chapter 2, Paul said *we speak from God, before God.* That is, we get our instructions from God, and we live them out in front of God.

The basic truth in all this is that a real servant of God gets his or her directions from God. We will answer to God. He is watching now, we are plain to him now, and when we see him, if we've been careless about his ways, he will take it up with us. And at the same time he will reward us for all our genuine service to him.

Jana told me about a woman named Eve Tushnett who was being interviewed about her faith. She grew up in an atheist home, and came to God as a young adult. Someone asked her, "Did you feel liberated when you came to Christ?"

She said, "No, I grew up in a pretty liberated home. I wanted someone to submit to." Her soul came alive when she met God and submitted to him. That's knowing the fear of the Lord.

We don't make our choices either to please people, or to benefit ourselves. We make our choices because of God, and as those who will stand before Christ. We live as we live out of reverence.

We Help you be Confident in Us 5:12-13 *We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.* ¹³ *If we are "out of our mind," as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*

We're still on motivation here, though this is a secondary topic. Why does Paul write these things? Is he looking for the Corinthians' respect? No. Is he trying to impress them? No. But he preached the gospel in Corinth. They believed what he said, and he has guided that congregation. He wants the Cor'n believers to be confident in their guide, for their sake!

He wants them to take pride that they heard about Christ from a real minister, someone who followed the Lord from the heart, rather than someone who just looked like a success. (Because there were leaders in Corinth who do not follow from the heart, just look successful.)

And no one except those Corinthians really knows what out of our mind and our right mind is actually about, so I shall leave that alone. If you are bored, check the commentaries yourself.

Christ's Love Compels us 5:14-15 *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.* ¹⁵ *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

The fear of the Lord guided Paul, and now the Christ's love for people compels Paul. Paul feels no contradiction between being shaped both by his fear of the Lord and by the Lord's great love for him and all people.

What he really wants the Corinthians to understand that his motivation comes from God through Christ, not from people and not from benefit to himself, like those who peddle the word of God for profit.

Paul preached the gospel relentlessly, but he never talks about a burden for the lost. Biblically, we should be a little suspicious of a motive for doing God's will that is centered even in genuine compassion or concern for people. That is not what motivated God's servants in the Bible.

They did love people, and had great concern for people. But their call came from God, and they did what they did because God had told them to do it, and they would answer to him.

Even people like Moses and Paul, who loved God's people and were bound to them, even people who loved like that did what they did because of God, not because they loved people. Paul's love for the troublesome Cor'n church fills this letter, but does not account for his ministry.

We have some ability to change our motives, and to lead our minds into better motives. Instead of doing things because to please people, or because we feel guilty, we can do thing because we want to honour God, and be a servant of God. Christ loved us and died for us, to give us new life, for that reason we will live our lives for him. Try on better reasons to do the right thing.

Here is Christ's compelling love: *one died for all, and therefore all died.* ¹⁵ *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Here the Bible describes Christ as our representative. A few lines later he'll be our substitute. Here he represents us on the cross. We should all have died for our sins, but he went there to represent us, and died as our representative. Because he represented us there, in some sense we all died there. When we come to Christ, we come under his death, his death come to us.

And based on this, it is only right that those who live because of this (all believers) should live no longer for ourselves, but for the one who died for us. This is how Christ's love compels us. Not necessarily that we feel overwhelmed by his love for us, though that happens sometimes.

Christ's love for us compels us due to clear thinking, because it only makes sense that if he died there as our representative, we owe our lives to him, to serve him all the days of our lives.

In Romans 6 and other places Paul uses language like this. In John's Gospel we read about being "born again." That's getting at the same thing. When we come to Christ, we become part of a new human race.

The New Human Race 5:16-17 *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.* ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

Paul used to see Jesus as a messianic pretender, a great danger to the true people of God. But now he knows Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth, who loved and saved the true people of God. Christ said, "love your neighbour as yourself."

Christ said, “do to others what you would have them do for you.” So if we belong to Christ, it’s like creation happened again, and there was a new Adam, a second Adam, and our ancestor is now Christ more than Adam. Because Christ died for us, we look at Christ different, and we look at people differently.

The Ministry of Reconciliation 5:18-20a All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

God reconciled the world to himself. Reconcile is to make friends out of enemies. If I have attacked you in some way, and been miserable to you, and you want to stay away from me, then I need to be reconciled to you. You don’t need to be reconciled to me, because you’ve done nothing wrong to me, but I need to be reconciled to you, because I made myself your enemies.

In human relationships, often we’ve both been unkind, so we both need to be reconciled do each other. But with God it is not like that. God does not need to be reconciled to us, he’s done nothing that he should regret or take back. But we have rebelled against him, and made ourselves his enemies.

People sometimes do get angry at God, usually because of hard things God has allowed. Some of the lament psalms get close to that, and Job also gets close to that. God is generally kind and patient when people get angry at him, but he does not apologize for what’s done, or ask our forgiveness, ever. He shows compassion to us until we let it go, and just trust him again.

But we need to be reconciled to God. The basic human position is rebellion against God. That’s the normal way the Bible describes these things. *But God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people sins against him.* We were not able to get out of our rebellion against God. But he wanted us. So he sent Christ, and made a way for us to be reconciled to him.

This is why our fear that we are always on the brink of being God’s enemies is so silly, and unfounded. He does NOT want enemies, he’s gone out of his way to make peace with us.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

So Paul himself had been reconciled to God through Christ. God reconciles us to himself. That’s a surprising line. We want to say that when we come to Christ, we reconcile ourselves to God through Christ. But we don’t reconcile ourselves to God. God reconciled Paul to himself through Christ. God reconciles the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins.

Because of Christ, God goes around turning his enemies into his friends, not counting people's sins against them. This is Paul's story, and it is ours.

Christ's ambassadors. Paul is NOT telling the Corinthians that all Christians are Christ's ambassadors, appealing to others to be reconciled. In a few verses he will urge the Corinthians themselves to be reconciled to God. That's where this is going.

And ambassador represents a government in another country. For example, there will be a Canadian ambassador in France, who can explain to France the Canadian government's position on different things, and there will be a French ambassador to Canada, who will be in Ottawa and will explain to the Canadian gov't France's position on different things.

If Canada ignores the French ambassador, Canada ignores France. If France ignores the Canadian ambassador, France ignores Canada. The ambassador official represents their country, so he or she is not just another person. What others do to that person, they do to the country.

The apostles like Paul were ambassadors of Christ in a way we are not. And the Corinthians not treating Paul well. *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.* Paul is not speaking for himself. He officially speaks for Christ, and God is making his appeal through Paul.

We are not used to one person having that kind of special connection to Christ. We're democratic, all are equal, what makes Paul special. Well, Christ made Paul special, and that's just how it is. Christ made Paul and the apostles his official representatives. What we do to them we are doing Christ and to God.

Corinthians, Be Reconciled to God! 5:20b – 6:2 *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* ²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* 6:1 *As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.* ² *For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*

The Corinthians are in trouble with God for two reasons. One, they thought Paul a failure because of all his troubles, and they were choosing to be led by other ministers who looked better. And two, there were serious ongoing sins in that church. See 2 Cor 12:20-21; 13:5.

2 Cor 12:20-21 - *For I am afraid that when I come [on my third visit, when I will not spare you] I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.* ²¹ *I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.*

2 Cor 13:5 *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*

We plead with you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. In v20a, God makes his appeal through us. Paul speaks as God's official ambassador. In v20b, he speaks as Christ's ambassador: Christ pleads with you: be reconciled to God. In 6:1, Paul adds his own voice to this, as God's co-workers we also urge you: be reconciled to God.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so we in him could be the righteousness of God. Here Christ is our substitute, he took our sin, so we could receive his righteousness. Paul wants them to see that God will forgive them, and receive them, they just need to turn away from their rebellion and toward him.

Receiving the grace of God in vain. Paul had preached the gospel in Corinth the first time he was there, and these people had believed and come to Christ. They received his message, and put their trust in Christ. They had received the grace of God, they had been reconciled to God.

But in two deep ways they were turning away from this. One, they were in the process of rejecting the apostle that Christ sent them, and turning to other ministers whom Christ did NOT send. And two, *many [Corinthian believers] had sinned earlier and had not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.*

They were rejecting Christ's ambassador, and they were leaving behind Christ's ways. So Paul writes: *As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.* ² *For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.* God will help them return to him, NOW is the time. To summarize:

1 Motivation: God centered. Let's do what we do as God's servants, let's do what we do because Christ loved us died for us, and it only makes sense that we would live for him.

2. Service. God had called Paul to try to persuade other, he'd given Paul the ministry of reconciliation. That was not the Corns' service. But all of us have ways to serve the Lord, and these will involve other people. Our service is our way of being good to other people. We are all Christ's servants, his ministers, and our service is the ways he gives us to serve other people.

3. Be reconciled. God's people can leave his path, and we can need to be reconciled to him again. He is concerned, because our choices will bring disaster to us. God urges us, pleads, appeals to us, "Be reconciled to me. Christ became sin so you could become righteous. Don't receive my grace in vain, don't turn away from me now."

4. Thanks to God for a remarkable salvation. *God reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Amen.

Note on the structure of 2 Corinthians. From 2:14 to 7:1 (or 7:4), Paul describes ministry. He's speaking mostly about being an apostle of Christ. But he usually says "we" not "me," and the "we" are "ministers/servants" rather than "apostles." Nevertheless all agree that he's speaking mostly about himself, and mostly about being an apostle. He's doing this because the Corinthians don't trust him, or think much of his ministry, and there are some very impressive "super apostles" in Corinth who think they are better than Paul. So Paul has this long parenthesis on real ministers and real ministry. In 7:5 he will pick up quite directly where he left off in 2:13.

5:11 – 6:2 is a rich and packed, not that easy to understand. It helps to realize that underneath it all he's defending himself as a true servant of God.

Commentators vary considerably in how they outline 2:14 – 7:1, especially from 5:10 on. It seems to me that 2:14 – 7:1 contain two roughly parallel descriptions of ministers/ministry (i.e. servants/service). The first begins in 2:14, and speaks of new covenant ministry and its glory, the second begins in 5:11 and speaks of reconciliation ministry.

Each section begins with what the minister offers (new covenant, reconciliation), it includes affirmation that Paul is not commending himself (3:1-3, 5:12), and he claims transparency and sincerity (2:17; 5:11). Each section includes a striking description of the minister's life of enduring trouble (4:7-12; 6:3-10).

My outline in general terms follows Barnett, who sees 5:11 to 7:1 as a single unit, which seems best to me. He considers reconciliation ministry a further explanation of new covenant ministry, whereas they seem to me more parallel, two ways of describing Paul's service.

New covenant ministry, and reconciliation with God. What's the real offer? The real offer is God himself. He's offering himself to us. New covenant – we can be in covenant relationship with God, he's bound to us and we are bound to him, and we can see his glory on Christ. Reconciliation – we are God's enemies, but he has made a way for us to be reconciled to him. Both images describe God offering deep, stable relationship with himself through Christ.