

The Love of Christ Controls Us

2 Corinthians 5:11–21

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Today is Pentecost. The Spirit who came in fire fifty days after the resurrection is the same Spirit who, as Paul says elsewhere, has poured the love of God into our hearts. And it is that love we are going to hear about this morning.

Since Easter we have been in the book of 2 Corinthians — a letter that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth around AD 57. The context of the letter is a reconciliation between Paul and the church. Paul had planted the church in Corinth around AD 50 and remained there for roughly a year and a half to two years. After he left, false apostles came preaching a salvation of works-righteousness, and they did everything they could to discredit Paul — to the point that when Paul made a brief visit to Corinth around AD 55, things did not go well. The church shunned him. In response, Paul wrote a letter that we no longer have, and that letter caused the church to repent. Hearing of their repentance and their longing to see him, Paul then wrote the letter of comfort and reconciliation that we have and call 2 Corinthians — the book we are studying.

Due to the various criticisms and accusations leveled at Paul by the false apostles and by those in the church who had rejected him, from 2 Corinthians 1:12 through the end of chapter 5, Paul responds to each criticism in turn.

“For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.” (2 Corinthians 1:12)

To the criticism of his leadership style and his failure to come to them when he had said he would, Paul responds that his aim is to please God and to seek their good (1:12–2:4). To the criticism that he does not love them, he demonstrates that love by forgiving the very person who had wronged him and caused him great pain (2:5–17). To the criticism that he lacks the right credentials, he points to the Spirit of God at work in them and in him as his credentials (3:1–18). To the criticism that his ongoing suffering and persecution are evidence of God’s disfavor, he responds that it is precisely through his weakness — through his suffering and pain — that God makes His grace and power more visible. “I am a clay jar filled with His power,” Paul says, “and my sufferings are the cracks through which His glory becomes visible” (4:1–12). And finally, to the criticism of why he remains so faithful and courageous after what appear to be multiple failures — the most recent being his expulsion from Ephesus — Paul

responds that what this world calls suffering and pain, when compared to eternity, is only light and momentary. He is not seeking this world; he is living heaven-minded, and his aim is to please the eternal God. He will be judged not by how happy he made people in this world, but by whether he pleased Him. This is where we ended last week, at 2 Corinthians 5:10:

| *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...”*

The Foundation Under Everything

Our passage today begins with the bookend to this entire section of the letter.

| *“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” (2 Corinthians 5:11–13)*

In other words, Paul is telling them that everything he has said in responding to the various accusations and criticisms is true — that he is seeking their good according to the way of the Lord, his conscience is clear, and he hopes that someday they will see this too. And the defense he has given them is not an attempt to puff himself up or to boast or to show himself superior to those false apostles. It is simply his effort to help them understand why he does what he does.

And now, having responded to each of the accusations in turn, he gives us the foundation — the bedrock — beneath everything. When it comes down to it, here is the reason why he is willing to suffer, willing to be rejected, unwilling to be discouraged, and determined to go on proclaiming the gospel despite every hardship and obstacle:

| *“For the love of Christ controls us...” (2 Corinthians 5:14)*

That is the reason. The love of Christ controls us.

If you are reading from the KJV or the NIV, the verse reads, “For the love of Christ compels us.” The Greek word in question is *συνέχει*, and its most literal meaning is to constrain something, to hold it together, or to confine it. It is the same word used when the woman with the hemorrhage could not reach Jesus because the crowd was pressing in around him. It is the word used when a fever seized Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38). It is used when Jesus was being held and mocked and beaten during his trial (Luke 22:63). And it appears in Acts 18:5,

when Paul first came to Corinth to preach the gospel, where we are told he was gripped — occupied, seized — by the Word. For the Greek philosophers of the day, *συνέχω* was even the word used to describe the spirit or force that holds all things together.

So when Paul says the love of Christ *συνέχει* him, he means something rich and many-sided. It hems him in, so he cannot wander back to the old life. It seizes him, like a fever he cannot shake. It holds him in a hand that will not let go. It preoccupies him — he is so consumed with one thing that nothing else can take up space in his soul. And it holds him together when suffering and rejection and the sheer weight of the ministry should have torn him apart.

The love of Christ has him. He cannot escape it. He cannot outrun it. He cannot wriggle free of it. The cross has reached out and laid hold of him, and now wherever he goes, whatever he suffers, whoever rejects him, he goes as a man in the grip of a love stronger than death.

And notice — this grip is not Paul’s love for Christ. It is Christ’s love for him.

If you hear anything this morning, hear this: what makes Paul do what he does is not him trying harder to love God better. We all know the great commandment — to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. But the reason Paul gives for everything he does is not that he has mastered self-discipline or spiritual effort. The reason is that God’s love for him in Christ has gripped him and holds him together. Which means that if you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, if you want to be used by God and do great things for God, it begins not with trying harder to love God more, but with recognizing and receiving the love that God already has for you in Christ — and letting it take hold of you.

How the Love of Christ Lays Hold of Us

Now Paul tells us how this happened — how he came to be so gripped, so seized, so hemmed in by the love of Christ.

“...because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 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.” (2 Corinthians 5:14b–15)

This is the gospel. Paul is saying: I have become convinced of this. Jesus Christ died for you. Let that sink in. The Son of God — eternal, holy, radiant, perfectly good and perfectly just, perfectly full of mercy and grace, the glory of heaven, the one through whom all creation came to be and has its being — He died for you. He was humiliated and beaten. He stretched himself out upon a wooden cross and allowed Roman soldiers to drive nails through his hands and feet and to crucify him between two thieves. For you.

For you. Not the you you should be. Not the you who has worked it all out. Not the you who has proven yourself worthy. But the you that is filled with shame. The you that has sinned. The you that stands under condemnation — broken, bent, selfish, full of corruption. That is the you He died for. And the only thing that makes you worthy of the Son of God dying for you is His love for you.

The love of Christ controls us.

What the Love of Christ Does When It Lays Hold of You

Because of so great a love, Paul now tells us how he has been changed. When the love of Christ lays hold of a person, several things happen — and Paul walks through each of them here.

First, we stop living for ourselves and live for Christ. Notice again what Paul says in verse 15: *“that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”* The natural, sinful human condition is selfishness. Human beings live for themselves. It is all about me. But when a person is gripped by the love of Christ, something changes at the deepest level. I no longer live for me; I live for Him. Many people think that when they become a Christian, the change Christ brings is primarily behavioral modification — I used to do this evil thing, but now I do this good thing. And yes, our lives are changed toward good in Christ. But that change begins here, at the root: a total reorientation of the soul away from self and toward Him.

Second, we see other people differently. Paul writes in verse 16:

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.”

The old self views people according to the flesh — according to nationality, skin color, whether they are Jew or Gentile, what kind of work they do, how much money they have. Paul even admits he once looked at Jesus that way, as nothing more than a crucified pretender. But the new has come. If Christ died for all, then Paul can no longer judge people by these earthly measures. He must view them through the love of Christ. If He loved them enough to die for them, and if I now live for Him and not for myself, should I not love others as He does?

Third, we see Christ differently. Paul once saw Jesus as the crucified pretender, but when he met Him on the road to Damascus, he realized that Jesus was not dead — He had risen from the grave. Paul came to understand that Jesus was not merely a man, but, as he says in 4:4, the exact image of the invisible God.

Fourth, we become a new creation.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Paul is describing what has happened to him — and what happens to anyone in Christ. Being a new creation does not mean your old self with a little Jesus added on. You are a new creation. Underline that word: *creation*. In Genesis 1, God spoke light into darkness and called life into being. That is what God has done for you. You are new. You are made. You are formed by the hand of God for the glory of God.

The old has passed away. That sin that condemns you has been buried with Christ. That past that weighs upon you has been buried with Christ. That shame that dirties you has been buried with Christ.

The old has passed away.

Behold, the new has come. The new is not coming. The new is not on the way. The new is not waiting on you to get your life in order. The new has come — right now, in you, if you are in Christ. This is why Paul cannot be moved. This is why the love of Christ holds him. Because he has died, and he has been made new. And nothing in this world — no critic in Corinth, no thorn in the flesh, no peril or sword — can undo what God has done for him in Christ.

Fifth, we are reconciled to God.

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)

Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are reconciled to God. To be reconciled means there was once enmity. You were hostile — dead in trespasses, an enemy of God by both nature and choice, standing under a wrath so holy and so just that if the veil were lifted you would not survive the sight of His face. But God, through Christ, because of His great love, reconciled you to Himself.

Notice how every verb that does the work belongs to God’s action. He reconciled. He made him to be sin. He gave us the ministry. He came. He crossed the chasm you could not cross. He bore the cross you could not bear. And now, through Jesus Christ who died and rose again, He does not see you the sinner, or you the enemy, or you the offender. He sees you as a son. He sees you as a daughter. He sees one for whom His own Son died, and He will not look upon you any other way. The face that once would have consumed you now shines upon you in favor. The Judge has become your Father, and the door of the Father’s house stands open. When He

looks at you, He sees you as He sees Christ — beloved, accepted, brought near, brought home, and righteous.

Sixth, and finally, we are given a mission.

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Because God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, He has entrusted us with the message of bringing others into that same peace. We are ambassadors for Christ. Think about what that means. You are not a bystander. You are not a spectator. You are not a private citizen of the kingdom, free to keep your faith quiet and your mouth shut. You are an ambassador — a commissioned representative of the King of kings, sent into the territory of His enemies with a message from His throne.

Your citizenship is in heaven. Your King is Christ. Your message is not your own. And the message you carry is not a suggestion, not a philosophy, not one option among many. It is the appeal of God Himself, spoken through your lips: be reconciled to God.

Hear the weight of that verb — *we implore*. Paul does not say we inform. He does not say we discuss. He does not say we offer. He says we implore. We plead. We beg. Because the people we are speaking to are not standing in neutral territory — they are in rebellion. They are at war with God, whether they know it or not, and the wrath they stand under is real. And so the ambassador goes to them, not with arrogance, not with condescension, but with urgency: drop your weapons. Lay down your rebellion. The King has made a way. Be reconciled to God.

This Is the Gospel

And what is the message the ambassador carries? What does he implore them to believe? Here it is:

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This is the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the love of Christ that has gripped Paul.

He made him to be sin. The Father took the Son — the holy, spotless, eternal Son who knew no sin, who had never had a sinful thought, never spoken a sinful word, never committed a sinful act — and made Him to be sin. He did not merely bear our sins; He became a sin offering for sin. He carried in His body on the cross every lie ever told, every lust ever

entertained, every word spoken in anger, every act of pride, every betrayal, every failure, every dark thing you have ever done. He became sin. And the wrath that sin deserved fell upon Him.

Christ, who knew no sin, became sin — bearing our guilt, drinking our cup, standing under our wrath — so that we, who are sinners, could be treated as if we were perfectly righteous. He took what was ours. He gave us what was His. He received the verdict we deserved so that we could receive the verdict He deserved: life and righteousness.

And so when God looks at the believer, He does not see your record. He sees the flawless record of His Son. He does not see your sin. He sees the righteousness of Christ. He does not see what you have done. He sees what Christ has done for you. *In him we might become the righteousness of God.* Not righteous in ourselves. Not righteous because we have earned it. Righteous in Him — clothed in Him, hidden in Him, counted righteous because He is righteous and we are in Him.

This is the gospel. This is what holds Paul together when the world is falling apart around him. This is why he does not lose heart. This is why the love of Christ controls him. And nothing — not affliction, not persecution, not the critics in Corinth, not death itself — can undo what God has done for him in Christ.

And so this morning, I end by imploring you. Be reconciled to God. Drop your weapons. Lay down your striving. Come to the Christ who was made sin for you, and be made the righteousness of God in Him.