

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS FOR 11/15/09 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

In 2 Cor. 5:9-10, Paul introduces the subject of the judgment seat of Christ as the theological truth that underscores his motives toward the Corinthians. Before Christ all things are exposed and ultimately all believers will answer to Him and Him alone for their actions. There are those in Corinth who are judging Paul, and making accusations against him. Paul calls the Corinthians to evaluate their own behavior (in general and toward him) in light of the judgment seat of Christ and to hear his own confidence that his actions toward them are approved by God and pleasing to Him. Paul will ultimately answer to God for his behavior and if he has done anything with mixed motives toward the Corinthians, God will address it. The Corinthians are also called to examine their hearts and judge whether their own behavior is pleasing to God. Based on this sober thought, Paul now shifts back to a personal defense of his ministry in 2 Cor. 5:11-21.

This passage can be divided into three sections. In 2 Cor. 5:11-13 Paul returns again to the theme of boasting, pride, and confidence. He sets his ministry against that of the false teachers. Paul is motivated by true love for the Corinthians (which stems from Christ's love for humanity), whereas "the peddlers of God's word" have a ministry based on outward displays and boastful behavior. 2 Cor. 5:14-17 then takes a turn to further explain the scope of Christ's ministry as open to all and effective for those who believe. In 2 Cor. 5:18-21, Paul introduces the important concept of reconciliation. God reconciles Himself to sinful humanity, eradicating the barrier of sin through Christ's death on the cross. Paul then pleads for the Corinthians to live according to this truth and to carry this reconciled state into all areas of their lives.

2 Corinthians 5:11-13

Paul begins this passage with "therefore," which links this passage with the previous section. Paul writes, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord . . ." The concept of "fear of the Lord" stems from the previous discussion regarding the judgment seat of Christ and links the idea of Christ as judge with a very rich Old Testament concept. "The fear of the Lord" is a major component in Israel's wisdom literature and it is a major element in Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Regarding the phrase "fear of the Lord," Lawrence Richards writes, "Such fear is reverence for God. We who fear God recognize him as the ultimate reality, and we respond to Him. Fear of God is also called the beginning of knowledge" (Pr. 1:7) meaning that taking God into account is the foundation of a disciplined and holy life. To fear God means to reject every competing deity and to serve him only (Dt. 6:13). Fear of the Lord is expressed by walking in His ways, by loving Him, and by serving Him with all our heart and soul. While fear of God is closely linked with morality and with obedience to God's commands, it is also freeing. To fear God means to recognize Him as Creator and to know that His plans stand firm forever."¹

¹ Richards, Lawrence O, Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 272-3.

The fear of the Lord naturally flows from the concept of the judgment seat. Rather than being a response of terror or cringing fear (emotions that would reflect a misunderstanding of God's character), to fear the Lord reflects a healthy respect for the Judge of all creation. We know that we will be judged, we know that God loves us to the point that He gave His son on our behalf, and we know that God is not capricious or vindictive. We also know that God parents us, which may involve discipline and discomfort (Heb. 12:7-11). The fear of the Lord though is a relational term that is meant to motivate us because our actions and our responses toward life reflect our understanding of who we are in Christ. What we do here on earth has eternal implications, and it is God's desire for our hearts to be open to Him now so that our behavior can align with the reality of who we are in Christ. When Paul writes this letter, the Corinthians are at risk. Their behavior is beginning to reveal that they are disconnecting from this truth. Later in chapter 6 Paul will address specific behaviors that need to change, but unless the Corinthian believers know in their hearts that Christ is not only their judge, but the one who saved them for a new life in Him, they will have no anchor to keep them from drifting.

Paul opens with this weighty concept, claiming that it is his own personal knowledge of the fear of the Lord that drives him in his ministry. Paul writes that because he knows the fear of the Lord, "we persuade men," which likely has the dual meaning here of persuading men regarding Christ and His ministry, as well as persuading this Corinthian audience that Paul's own ministry is reflective of what he has received from Christ. Paul reiterates that he (and by implication, his ministry) is made manifest to God. The word for "made manifest" means "well known" or "clearly displayed." Paul is confident that his ministry is sanctioned by God and that he will one day stand before Him to give an account for his teaching and his actions. Paul's confidence issues forth in hope that the Corinthians will clearly see his intentions as well. In this verse Paul appeals to their consciences, stressing that each individual is responsible for their own decisions.

In 5:12, the theme of commendation/boasting is addressed once again. Paul is not writing to defend his person as much as he writes to defend his ministry and his call. In so doing, Paul answers the charges brought against him and gives the Corinthians the opportunity to recognize the truth and to defend his ministry in his absence, rather than falling sway to the influence of Paul's opponents. In v. 12, Paul describes his opponents as those who boast in appearance and not in heart. He then writes in v. 13 that "if we are beside ourselves" it is for God and "if we are of sound mind" it is for the sake of the Corinthians. These two verses together give us insight into the problems that the false teachers were causing. The phrase "beside ourselves" means to be out of one's mind. Paul juxtaposes this with the phrase "to be of sound mind." The question is not one of sanity or insanity. Instead, to be out of one's mind refers to ecstatic experiences associated with the expression of spiritual gifts. The false teachers are taking pride in the outward appearance, which is likely the showy expression of spiritual gifts (which we know was already a problem addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians). In 1 Cor. 13-14 Paul defends his decision to focus on the gift of prophecy so as to edify others, rather than focusing on the gifts that have a more limited application. Paul does

not deny those gifts (particularly tongues and visions) but he does reiterate in 2 Cor. 5:13 that his desire is to speak intelligibly, with a sound mind (exhortation, prophecy), so as to instruct the entire church. Whatever ecstatic experiences Paul may have (to be out of his mind) it is between him and God. Paul's ministry to the Corinthians flows from his heart and is not dependent upon profligate displays of spiritual gifts or rhetoric.

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

Paul now reveals a very personal, heart warming statement; it is the love of Christ (Christ's love) that controls him. The word "to control" can also mean "to be taken prisoner." This is no light sentiment, but a strong expression that Christ's love has overtaken Paul and now restrains all that he does. The reason for the strength of this statement is that Paul has such enormous confidence in the work of Christ. In 5:14 Paul writes, "having concluded this, that one died for all. . . ." Paul now condenses the entire gospel in a few short sentences.

In 5:14-17 Paul tells us:

1) *One died for all.*

The reality of Christ's physical death was still very present. Those who personally walked with Christ could attest to His death. Rome could attest to His death. What Paul adds to this is that Christ's death was for all. The implication, which will be brought out later in the passage, is that his death was for the sins of all humanity. What Paul makes clear in this statement is that the one death of Jesus was on behalf of the many, all of humanity. In Rom. 5:12, Paul writes that through the one man, Adam, sin entered the world and death spread to all men because all sinned. Paul continues to explain in Romans 5 that the one man's transgression brought condemnation to all men, but the one man's obedience brought justification and righteousness to all men. The one man, Jesus, through His physical death, died for the sins of all mankind. This is the basis of the concept of reconciliation that will be further developed in the next section.

2) *All died.*

Because of Christ's death, all died (to sin). This one short statement displays the beauty and the love that God pours out upon us. On the cross, Christ took upon himself the punishment for the sins of all mankind. This opens up the possibility for sinful men and women to approach a Holy God who abhors sin. Because Christ bore the punishment for all sin, those who turn to Him and accept His sacrifice on their behalf, also die to sin. Unfortunately this does not mean that the power of sin no longer impacts our lives, but it does mean that God views those who trust in Him as sinless because of the death of His Son.

3) *He died for all so that those who live can live for Him.*

The purpose of Christ's death is so that those who trust in the effects of His death (that sin is taken care of) can now live for Him or His behalf. Out of this death to sin comes life and this life is now lived under Christ's reign and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Rom. 5:21, "sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." In our identification with Christ's death, we also die to our own motivations and selfish desires as we enter into a new life that is motivated by this great event. What is important to keep in mind is that Paul stresses that this is who we are in Christ. We are dead to sin so that we can be alive to God. Our job is to work with God and His Spirit to figure out what that means in our own lives. This is not meant to be an unrealistic standard, but the truth about how God views us. Once we understand this (which is a lifelong journey), then we can address our behaviors and accurately evaluate them before God.

4) *He died and rose on their behalf.*

Not only did Christ die on our behalf, accepting the punishment for the sins of all humanity, but He rose again to new life, offering new life to us as well. Although Paul does not spend much time on the resurrection in this passage, he does remind the Corinthians of its utmost importance. Christ's death on the cross was validated by His resurrection. We cannot focus on His death without also focusing on the fact that God the Father raised Him from the dead and now He reigns with the Father. Christ's resurrection prefigures our own bodily resurrection, as Paul has meticulously discussed in 1 Corinthians 15. As Christ's death took care of our sin, so His resurrected life offers to us the promise of a new life.

5) *We have a new perspective.*

Paul writes that from this point on (the historical marker of Christ's death and resurrection), we no longer recognize (understand or perceive) one another according to the flesh (in their humanity), which is how they once understood Christ, we now know (intimately know) Christ in a new way. The word "to know" Christ, has echoes of Gen. 4:1, where Adam "knows" Eve and she conceives. It reflects a very intimate knowledge as opposed to simple cognitive understanding. We now have an intimate knowledge of who Christ is. This knowledge transforms our understanding of ourselves and others. We are no longer fleshly creatures, but we are spiritual beings for whom Christ died and rose again.

6) *Those who are in Christ are a new creature.*

Paul describes this state as "the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." This is true in many ways. As a new creature, we no longer stand under condemnation, although sin is still a part of our lives, we are no longer fundamentally sinful beings. Paul writes in Romans 6 that we are no longer slaves to sin. We are dead to sin and alive to Christ. Although we are not able to perfectly live our lives, we

are now able to access the power of God who enables us to live on Christ's behalf. God is no longer preoccupied with our sin, but instead He is preoccupied with His Son. His desire is that we become preoccupied with His Son as well and allow that preoccupation to transform our lives. So, not only did Jesus' death usher in new way of life for believers (we have forgiveness for sin, we have the Holy Spirit, and we have the promises of a future inheritance), but we also belong to a new age. This new age is characterized by the reign of Christ and although Satan is considered by Paul to be the god of this age, there is a certainty procured by the resurrection that ultimately God is in control and that the beginning of the end of Satan's rule has begun.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

The previous verses list a number of Paul's conclusions. In 2 Cor. 5:18-21, he now summarizes with the statement that "all things are of God" (everything that he listed in 5:14-17) who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ (5:18). Paul Barnett writes that this verse is the crux of the exposition of the apostolic office and of the entire letter.² With this verse, Paul accomplishes two things: 1) he affirms God the Father as the source of all things and 2) he introduces the critical theme of reconciliation. Whereas the previous section focused on Christ's work, Paul now addresses God the Father's role in reconciling humanity to Himself and in giving the ministry of reconciliation to Paul (the verse says "us" but throughout the letter Paul has used this plural pronoun to refer to the apostolic ministry. It is more likely Paul means that God gives the ministry of reconciliation to him on the Corinthians' behalf.) Although the concept of reconciliation is extremely important in this letter and to Christian theology as a whole, the term "reconciliation" occurs seldom in the New Testament. The idea however, is woven throughout Scripture, and specifically noted in Romans 5. The first item of importance is that God initiates reconciliation. Why is there a need? Since the time of Adam, sin entered the human race and drastically impacted the quality of relationship that man could have with God. The relationship that was once open and unashamed became broken and marred by sin. Since the beginning, God set in motion the plan for sin to be dealt with through the sinless, perfect life and the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus. God exists in relationship (Father, Son, and Spirit) and He desires relationship with His creation. The only way to breach the chasm carved out by Adam's representative sin was for Jesus to die in our place, taking the punishment rightfully belonging to us, upon Himself. In doing so, He enabled us to enter directly into God's presence. This is the act of reconciliation, a word that means "a change of relation from enmity to peace." Reconciliation is initiated by God the Father in Christ, and is granted to us as a gift. The enmity that exists between man and God could only be eradicated by God. The means of reconciliation is Christ's death which was enacted for all (5:14). The offer of a restored relationship to God the Father then stands open and available to all who accept His offer of peace.

In 5:19, Paul restates the idea of 5:18, elaborating on the effect of reconciliation, which is that God did not count (or reckon) our trespasses against us. In 5:19 and 5:21,

² Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 300.

there are two different words for the concept of sin. 5:19 refers to *our trespasses*, a word which is used to express the idea of missing the mark or failing to live up to a particular standard. Humanity has failed to meet God's standards, yet the guilt that rightfully belongs to us has been transferred to the Son. God no longer counts our trespasses against us. By contrast He declares us as righteous, just as Abraham believed God and it was counted, or reckoned, to him as righteousness (Gal. 3:6). How this can be is explained in 5:21. Paul writes, "He made Him who knew (experientially, personally) no sin," referring to Jesus in His full humanity, who was tempted beyond anything we could ever comprehend yet did not yield to the temptation to turn away from God the Father. The word for "sin" reflects the Old Testament concept of a sin-offering. Although Christ did not sin, and so fulfilled all the demands of the Law, Paul writes that He (God the Father) made Him who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf. The entire sacrificial system instituted by the Mosaic Law was designed to transfer the guilt of the sinner to the innocence of the sacrificial offering. The sacrifice never became the actual sins of the people, rather it accepted the punishment due the person and declared the person to be in a right standing with God. This is the definition of justification—to be declared righteous by God the Father in light of the sacrifice of His Son. So, in the case of Jesus, He does not actually become sin but he accepts the punishment for our sins and acts as our substitute. The book of Hebrews spends a great deal of time explaining the finality, the completion, and the magnitude of this once-for-all sacrifice on the cross.

Embedded in this exposition on reconciliation is Paul's appeal, once again, to his apostolic authority. In 5:20, Paul calls himself an ambassador who in both Judaism and the Roman world is one sent on behalf of another to deliver a message. To reject the messenger is to reject the one sending the message. Here, Paul makes the strong claim that to reject his message is to reject God Himself and the means to have a restored relationship with Him. The false teachers have distorted this truth and the Corinthians are in grave danger of going down a path that will lead them away from Christ. Paul reveals his love for them in his plea for the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. In this verse, Paul issues a direct command, "be reconciled to God!" He fully expects this group of believers to accept his authority which is representative of God. In this passage, Paul begs for restored relationships—first and foremost between God and the Corinthians, and then allowing their reconciled state to spill over into their earthly relationships—primarily between the Corinthian church and the beloved apostle.

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS
2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-13

2 Corinthians 5:11-13

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade (have confidence) men, but we are made manifest (clearly displayed) to God; and I hope that we are made manifest (clearly displayed) also in your consciences. ¹² We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves (out of our minds), it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.

- 1. How do you understand “the fear of the Lord”?**

- 2. Has this been a motivating factor in your own life?**

- 3. What do you think about Paul’s decision to focus on the spiritual gifts that are more intelligible? How is this for the Corinthians?**

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-17

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us (holds us prisoner), having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; ¹⁵ and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. ¹⁶ Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

- 4. Do you feel like Christ’s love controls your life? Why or why not?**

- 5. Do you understand what Paul means in v. 15? If you have any questions about the importance of Christ’s death on the cross and what that means for you, please discuss this in your small group. Romans 5-8 greatly expands upon this.**

6. Do you feel like you are a new creature? How have you seen your life transformed since you have come to Christ?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

¹⁸ Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Read Colossians 1:22

Colossians 1:22

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--

7. According to these verses, what is the end goal of reconciliation?

8. Have you been reconciled to God?

9. Do you see this act of reconciliation spilling over into your relationships? How so?

10. How would you explain 2 Cor. 5:21 in your own words?