

8. Paul pleads with the Corinthians

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- [0 : 00] Good evening, everybody. Two Corinthians tonight. So in our church Bibles, page 966, the Apostle Paul writing an appeal to the Corinthian church. I'm going to begin at verse 11. 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.
- But if we are beside ourselves, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us.
- Because we have concluded this. The one has died for all, therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.
- [1 : 34] 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.
- Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. 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.
- Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us. We implore you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
- For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. For our sake he made him to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
- [3 : 28] Our dear Father, we thank you so much that Paul was persuaded of the need to persuade, that he had a case to argue and a gospel to present.
- And as we seek, dear Lord, to engage with the Apostle's mind again this evening and his priorities, please be with us. Give us light and understanding and joy and a fresh resolve to love and follow you.
- We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, page 966, if you have the big church Bible, page 966.
- We were last here in 2 Corinthians, I think at the beginning of March, nearly a couple of months ago, but we're back with the Apostle Paul again.
- And the plan, God willing, is to spend, I think, five of the next six Sunday evenings back with 2 Corinthians, then to have a further break for a number of weeks, and then hopefully later in the summer to finish off the letter.

[4 : 31] But let me take a moment first to refresh our memories. Six or eight weeks is a long time, isn't it? But to refresh our memories of the situation that Paul finds himself embroiled in as he writes this wonderful but not easy letter.

Paul first went to Corinth to preach the gospel probably in the year 50 AD. And he spent upwards of 18 months in the city of Corinth, which for Paul was a very long stay.

But he stayed in Corinth for a long time because Corinth was a very significant city. It was very large. There was something like 750,000 inhabitants then in the first century, bigger than Glasgow would be today.

And strategically, it was also a very important city because it was a center of the confluence of trade routes. So traders would come from the east and go west and likewise from the west and go east.

And if they were converted, if they came to Christ, they would be taking the gospel wherever they were going to. So that's why Paul stayed a long time. But eventually he moved on. You can read the bare bones of the story in Acts chapters 18 and 19.

[5 : 40] But having left Corinth, he kept in touch with the vigorous young church there. However, after a year or so had passed, Paul became aware through visitors from Corinth who came to see him and perhaps letters that came from the church, he became aware that there were serious problems arising in the fellowship, bad behavior on a number of different levels.

So Paul first wrote them the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians. He visited them again. He sought to address the problems, but he had to go away again. But the problems rumbled on.

And after a further interchange of letters, of which we don't have copies today, Paul then wrote them this second letter, 2 Corinthians as we call it in our Bibles today. It was probably the fourth letter that he wrote to them.

And Paul addresses further problems that have arisen. And by now we're in about the year 56 AD. By the way, friends, let's not be sad that there were serious problems in the church at Corinth.

From our point of view, let's be grateful and glad, because we would never have had these two wonderful letters without the problems. And the kind of problems that arose in Corinth are just the kind of problems that arise regularly in churches all over the place and need to be addressed in every generation.

[7 : 03] So if we didn't have these two letters, we'd be far less well-equipped to address the problems. So while our hearts do go out to Paul, because he had to grasp some very difficult nettles, let's also be grateful to God for showing us both the nettles and the way that Paul dealt with them.

Because we have so much to learn from Paul for ourselves today. Now, the particular nettle that he's having to grasp in 2 Corinthians is the problem of a group of influential leaders whom Paul describes in chapter 11 as false apostles, deceitful workmen, who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, when in fact, says Paul, they are servants of Satan.

Now, these people seem to have come into the church from outside. They've come in Paul's absence. And their influence and teaching has been getting a grip on the Corinthians. So the main purpose of 2 Corinthians is to help the Corinthians to see how these false leaders are leading them up the garden path.

And to help the Corinthians to break free from their corrupting influence. Because their influence is at bottom, destructive and devilish. And if it's allowed to go on unchecked, the work at Corinth will be ruined.

There is, therefore, a great deal at stake. And Paul deeply loves these Corinthian Christians. And that's why he is so anguished in this letter. This is his most anguished letter.

[8 : 30] It's not a calm letter. This is the letter of a man who cares very deeply for his Christian friends and can't bear the thought that they're being pulled away from Christ. So this letter is a kind of rescue mission launched by Paul to bring the Corinthians back to a true understanding of the gospel.

Now, one of the painful features of this painful problem is that these false leaders are wanting to reduce Paul's influence on the Corinthians as they increase their own influence.

They know they're not singing from the same song sheet as Paul. And it's clear that they're wanting to turn the hearts of the Corinthians away from Paul. They have a different agenda from Paul.

Now, we'll see a little bit of that agenda in a moment. And we'll see a lot more of it as we read the later chapters of the letter. But the result of their influence is that the Corinthians are beginning to look askance at Paul, to look down on him, and to close their hearts against him.

And Paul knows this. This is why he says in chapter 6, just look ahead of our passage, in chapter 6, verse 11, we have spoken freely to you, Corinthians.

[9 : 41] Our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you're restricted in your own affections. You're closing down your own hearts, he's saying. In return, I speak as to children, widen your hearts also.

You're closing your hearts to us. Us, being Paul and Timothy. You'll see Timothy's name appears with Paul's in the opening verse of the letter, as the letter's co-author.

And just look on to chapter 7, verse 2. It's the same plea. Make room in your hearts for us. It's the same note of appeal. So they're closing their hearts to Paul and Timothy, while at the same time they're opening their hearts to the false teachers at Corinth.

Now, Paul is not wanting them to open their hearts to him simply because he values their friendship. There's something much more important at stake than that.

He knows that if they reopen their hearts to him, they'll be reopening their hearts to Christ and the gospel. Whereas if they close off their hearts to him, they'll be closing their hearts to the truth.

[10 : 48] So what Paul is doing in our passage for tonight, chapter 5, verses 11 to 21, is opening his heart to them so that they can understand what is really going on inside him, what motivates him and drives him and shapes his work.

Because if they can understand that, they'll begin to see through the false values of the false teachers. If they can come to see what real gospel work is like, they may begin to say to each other, we've been getting things badly wrong, haven't we, brothers?

We've been duped by a false agenda. Let's get back to Paul as soon as we can, because Paul is our true teacher, and these others are leading us astray. Now, that's really what I want us to do in our sermon tonight, to see how Paul, in this section of chapter 5, is opening up his heart to the Corinthians so as to enable them to distinguish the values of a false Christianity from the aims and purposes of true gospel work.

So let's first have a look at the false before we look at the true. Now, there's not much about the false in these verses, but there's one verse that opens up a vista for us on the false values of the false apostles, and it's verse 12, chapter 5, verse 12, which I'll now paraphrase.

We are not commending ourselves to you again. In other words, I'm not concerned to write myself a glowing testimonial to you. I'm not wanting to paint myself in bright colors for your applause.

[12 : 25] But I do want to give you cause to boast about us. In other words, to be warmly on our side, so that you will have ammunition to answer these false teachers.

I want you to be committed to the true agenda of the gospel and to know how to argue for that agenda. Because then, second half of verse 12, you will be able to answer these wretched people who, and here's the telltale phrase, who boast about outward appearance and are not interested in what is in the heart.

And you see what Paul is saying? Real gospel work is heart work. But these false teachers are only interested in outward appearances. Now, we don't know exactly how their concern for outward appearances showed itself in Corinth, but Paul gives us some pretty clear clues.

They were obviously people who were concerned to appear powerful and rather splendid. In fact, Paul nicknames them super apostles in chapter 12, in the way that we might talk of superstars who are singers or actors or sportsmen.

They wanted to cut a high profile. They wanted to be noticed and praised because they looked so good and splendid on the outside. And this is why Paul, throughout this letter, but especially in the later chapters, keeps talking about his weaknesses.

[13 : 53] He doesn't mind being thought of as a not very impressive speaker. He doesn't mind everybody knowing how much he has been insulted and ill-treated and generally kicked about.

Now, we'll look at all that in greater detail in the coming weeks. But let me just say this. This temptation for a church to make itself look outwardly impressive, this is a temptation that any church is going to face.

I remember feeling this pressure when I was a parish minister myself some years ago in England. I would sometimes meet an old friend, perhaps another minister at a conference, and ministers who meet each other at conferences when they haven't seen each other for a while inevitably ask, now tell us, how are things going in your parish?

How are things going with your church? And when an old friend said to me, how are things going in your church? I would want to say, I would want to say, oh, everything's quite wonderful. We have 2,000 people coming every Sunday.

We have a youth group of 400. We have 80 home groups meeting. We have a praise band, a gospel choir, an orchestra of 50 pieces. 15 of our young adults are in training for gospel ministry.

[15 : 03] We're opening a cafe next week and a bookshop next year. That's what I wanted to be able to say, because there's a kind of human pride there, isn't there? But I couldn't say that because it wouldn't have been true.

So I had to tell my old friend about the small and rather unimpressive show that I was responsible for. 53 people, 2 elderly cats, and a church building that needed at least £100,000 spending on it to stop the roof leaking.

That was much more the reality. Wanting to cut a fine figure. That's the problem that Paul is putting his finger on here in verse 12.

But by contrast, he is saying real gospel work is about what goes on in the heart. So let's look at our passage and we'll see how Paul opens his heart to the Corinthians so that they should understand where he's coming from and be willing to change their agenda and bring it in line with his agenda by abandoning the values of the false teachers.

Now it's interesting to see in verse 11 how Paul says, you really know my agenda already. Look at the second half of that verse.

[16 : 17] What we are, in other words, our real motives and values, what we are, all that is known to God. And he says, I have a strong hope and inkling that it's known also to your conscience.

Not just known in your understanding, but in your conscience. In other words, you know what is right and wrong, and I know you know it. Your conscience surely will testify to you that what I'm about to say to you is right.

All right, well, let's look at how Paul opens his heart as he pleads with the Corinthian Christians. And I want to express his thought under three headings. First, he says, I am controlled by the love of Christ.

In verse 14, you'll see that great phrase. This is the controlling factor. For the love of Christ controls us. I'm not controlled by a desire to cut an impressive figure like your super apostles.

It's the love of Christ by which Paul means not his love for Christ, but Christ's love for him and for his people. It's that wonderful love that Christ has shown which gives Paul's life its direction and drive.

[17 : 33] Now, as soon as we read on, we realize, as Paul talks of the love of Christ, that the love of Christ has been supremely expressed in his willingness to go to the cross for us.

The New Testament consistently teaches that the love of Christ, and indeed the love of God the Father as well, has been demonstrated first and foremost at the cross.

So, for example, the Apostle John writes in 1 John, 1st letter of John, chapter 3, verse 16, By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.

And remember, Jesus himself said, Greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends. Now, in verses 14 and 15 of our chapter, Paul tells us how he has come to the position of being controlled by the love of Christ.

He says, I've come to two conclusions about the love of Christ expressed in his death. First, verse 14, One has died for all, therefore all have died.

[18 : 43] When Jesus died on the cross, he died our death for us. He went to the cross as our substitute. He died the death that we deserved.

The wages of sin is death, and Jesus accepted those wages for us. He took the payment that we deserve to take. Now, you might say, I understand that, and I'm very grateful to him.

I'm truly and deeply grateful to him for dying in my place as my substitute. But I still don't understand what Paul means when he says at the end of verse 14, Therefore, all have died.

After all, here I am, still living and breathing. I'm not a deceased human being. I got up this morning, I had my breakfast, I've got through the day, and here I am tonight. Now, Paul is clearly not referring to physical death here.

It's a different kind of death that he's talking about. I think the way to understand it is like this. When Jesus went to the cross, he bore the penalty of your sins and mine.

[19 : 52] He absorbed the death-dealing power of sin for us so that we should never have to absorb it ourselves. We, therefore, if we are Christians, have been set free from the condemning power of sin.

Sin has completely lost its power over us to bring us to hell. Christ has sorted all that out for us. Now, this is not to say that we never sin in word or thought or deed, because we know that we do.

But Christ has completely broken sin's power to bring us to condemnation. He has received its wages, death, on our behalf, and we shall never have to receive them.

So the death that he died is a death whose benefits we share in. Paul's teaching, which he develops elsewhere in his letters, is that Christians have both died with Christ and have been raised with Christ, which is why we're able now to live a genuinely new life as part of the new creation, even while we're still living in the old creation.

And Paul is going to talk about this in verse 17, as we'll see. But in verse 14, his death, Christ's death, means that all Christians have died to the old way of life.

[21 : 10] His death, in other words, has a profound effect on the way that we look at ourselves. It means that Satan is no longer our master. He was, though we might not have known it or recognized it, but he was, however, he is no longer.

And sin, sin tempts us, and we have to do battle with it every day, but it no longer has the power to bring us down. Because Christ has died for us, we no longer have any allegiance to the old powers.

The old triple rule of sin, self, and Satan has been abolished as far as Christian people are concerned. So that's Paul's first conclusion.

One has died for all, therefore, all have died. His second conclusion is there in verse 15. 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.

Now, friends, that verse is one of the most challenging verses that you will read anywhere between Genesis chapter 1 and Revelation chapter 22. It forces the question on us.

[22 : 29] Well, let me put this in terms of myself. I have to look at this question. Edward, who are you living for? Are you living for yourself or for the Lord Jesus?

Now, any honest Christian will admit there's a drift in my heart, there's a tug, which is often pulling me back to live for self and not for Jesus.

How can I counter that drift in my heart? Well, Paul's answer is here in these two verses. Think often, not only of Jesus, but of his death.

Think of the cross. Think of what it cost him. According to verse 15, the driving power behind a life lived for Jesus is his death, not primarily his birth or his teaching or his miracles, but his death.

If we think often of his death for us, we will be spurred to live for him and not for ourselves. So just looking back over verses 14 and 15, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, the thing that controls me, the thing that governs me, is the love of Christ for me and for all of us.

[23 : 40] That love is supremely demonstrated at the cross. And once we see the implications of the cross, the tectonic plates of our existence will be shifted and will learn to live no longer for ourselves but for the Lord Jesus.

Your false apostles, they're not going to understand this as they strut about putting on a fine appearance and lapping up people's compliments. But this is the true gospel and I want you to put it back in your hearts where it ought to be.

So there's the first thing. Paul is controlled by the love of Christ expressed in his death. Now secondly, Paul views people through new eyes.

And here we turn to verses 16 and 17 which I'll read again. 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.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. Now these verses clearly contain a criticism of the false teachers at Corinth.

[24 : 55] Regarding somebody according to the flesh is much the same as paying attention to outward appearances. It means looking at a person and appraising a person only by superficial standards.

Now friends, we all know very well how to regard another person according to the flesh. We're all very well practiced at it. And the sort of thing that happens is you meet a man that you've never met before and you begin to weigh him up.

And you wonder, how old is he? What is his work? Is he rich or poor? What sport is he interested in? What is his handicap at golf? Does he support Celtic or Stenhouse Muir?

Does he take his holidays in the Caribbean or in Millport? That's the sort of question we ask, isn't it? Some of those questions. Now Paul is saying in verse 16, that's the way we used to regard people, only interested in the externals of their lives.

In fact, Paul says, that's the way we used to regard Christ. I used to think of him, he's saying, as an imposter and a blasphemer. I used to think, how could a man born in such obscurity, living in such poverty and dying on a Roman cross, how could such a man possibly be the Messiah, promised in the Old Testament.

[26 : 13] I dismissed him harshly and I saw it as my duty to persecute his deluded followers. But when he stopped me in my tracks on the road to Damascus, I not only saw his glory, I was blinded by it and I had to alter my view of him.

And I began to see him for who he really is, the glorious son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. And just as I have fundamentally altered my view of Christ, I've also altered my view of others.

And I don't look at anyone anymore in that superficial way. And the thing that I've come to see, verse 17, is that if anyone, anyone from whatever human background is in Christ, he has become a Christian and now belongs to Christ, that person is now a new creation.

So the former aspects of his life count for nothing now. What's important is not those human external things, not whether he's a road sweeper or a managing director, whether he's rich or poor, whether he's sick or healthy.

What's important is that he is a new creation. Just look back for a moment to chapter 4, verse 6. Chapter 4, verse 6. This is old creation language.

[27 : 39] For God who said, let light shine out of darkness, that's Genesis 1, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So that's what happens when we're born again and we become part of the new creation. We begin to understand that the glory of God is shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

So back to chapter 5, verse 17. Paul's new vision, his vision which he wants the Corinthian church to share with him, is that every person who has put their trust in Christ, quite regardless of their human attributes or their personal history, every Christian is a new creation, not will be in the end part of the new creation, but is now a new creation.

Now, I'm not assuming that every person here tonight is a Christian. And if you're not a Christian at the moment, let me say this, the only place to turn to, the only person to turn to, is the Lord Jesus.

There is no one else. There is no savior other than him. That's part of the great message of the Bible. He's the only savior. But if you are a Christian, you are now, whether you've been a Christian five minutes or 55 years, you are now a new creation.

[29 : 09] Your identity belongs to the world to come, even while you're still grappling with life in this old world. I can think of times, many times, when I've met a person whose experience of life on the human level in this world has been gruesome.

somebody who's been mangled by the brutality and unfairness of people and circumstances. And yet, that person has become a Christian.

And there they are, scarred, wounded, battered, and yet the power of new life is beginning to take hold of them. And they are beginning to understand the reason why they were created.

Now, you've seen that, haven't you? And it is simply a miracle when we see it happening. It's wonderful. And Paul is saying to the Corinthians, this is what you need to be interested in, the power of the gospel which transforms a person's heart, which transforms a person from something weak and withered and mortal into something eternal and ultimately glorious.

So there's the second way in which Paul is opening his heart to the Corinthians and asking them to be like him and not like the false apostles who can only boast of outward appearances.

[30 : 27] Paul says, I see people through new eyes and wherever somebody comes to Christ, there is a new creation. Then thirdly, Paul says, my work is to preach the message of reconciliation.

Look at verse 18. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

And then look at the final phrase of verse 19. Entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Gave us the ministry and trusted to us the message of reconciliation.

Now ministry simply means service. So Paul sees him himself as a servant who is delivering a message. He's a messenger. Now this message of reconciliation, it's not about reconciling, shall we say, Jews with Arabs or black people with white people or governments with insurgents.

It's not that kind of reconciliation. It is in Paul's words in verse 19 about God reconciling the world to himself. God and the human race that he has created have become estranged, alienated from each other.

[31 : 47] The estrangement has come not because God cast us away but because we rebelled against him and against his lordship and made a bid for self-rule. It all started, of course, back with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the rebellion has been reasserted and deepened with every succeeding generation.

You and I are born rebels. But God, magnificent in his kindness and mercy, was not content to leave the world in that state.

He took steps, unbelievably costly steps, to bring us back to himself. He sent Christ as the uniquely qualified mediator who as God represented God to man and who as man represented man to God.

See how Paul expresses it there in verse 19. In Christ, in the person of Christ and the work of Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.

And how did Christ's intervention bring about the reconciliation? Well, verse 19 tells us, because of Christ's work, our trespasses were not counted against us because they were counted against him.

[33 : 07] That's why he died, because he was submitting to the anger of God expressed against human sin. And then look on to verse 21, which is perhaps the New Testament's classic statement of the great exchange that took place at the cross.

For our sake, he, that's God the Father, made him, Jesus, to be sin, who knew no sin. Isn't that an awesome and heartbreaking thing to think about?

That the perfect, sinless, son of God became, not simply a sinner or a great sinner, but he became sin. His dying body on the cross became, by the will of his Father, to whom he willingly submitted.

It became a tangled, horrifying, accumulation and gathering together of the world's wickedness and hatred of God and of man. And God punished that accumulated wickedness there in the only way that was just, by death.

God had said to the first man, Adam, long ago, you will surely die. and finally, the second man, Christ, accepted the sentence and bore the penalty.

- [34 : 28] Why? Why did God put his son through this? Well, the second half of verse 21 tells us, so that in him, in Christ, and because of his intervention, we might become the righteousness of God, righteous in his sight and therefore acceptable and beloved and forgiven.

So do you see the great exchange that verse 21 is describing? The sinless Christ became sin so that we sinful people should become righteousness.

Our sin was placed to his account so that his righteousness should be placed to our account. And that, friends, is the gospel. So it's no wonder that Paul, when he comes to understand these things, should want to announce them to the world.

And when you think about it, the apostle Paul is still announcing this message of reconciliation all over the world today. Because every time his letters are read and studied and taught, this glorious good news goes forth.

I would imagine at this very moment in time, in tens of thousands of places all over the world, Paul is preaching to needy human hearts. And many people are putting their trust in the sinless Savior who bore their sin.

- [35 : 53] Now, to return to Corinth as we close, let me read verse 20. Therefore, he says, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now, at first sight, doesn't that seem a little bit odd? Aren't the Corinthians already Christians?

How can Paul be imploring or begging people who are already reconciled to God to be reconciled to God? I think the best way to understand it is to see first that Paul does indeed think of his Corinthian readers as Christians.

He does know them. He knows them very well. He knows their history. He was there in Corinth when many of them first put their trust in Christ. So he's not doubting that they are Christians. In fact, in the very first verse of this letter, he identifies them as belonging amongst all the saints in Achaia, the southern part of Greece.

But secondly, he sees that they have been so damagingly influenced by their false apostles, so corrupted in their grasp of the gospel, that they're now drifting far from a true knowledge of God and they need to be brought back.

- [37 : 12] You'll see that he goes on to say in the first verse of chapter 6, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. He's saying, don't make shipwreck of your faith. Come back to a true appreciation of the gospel of grace.

Well, friends, how can we learn from the Apostle Paul? The answer is by following his thoughts, by drinking in his values and making them our own.

There are always going to be pressures on us, either from outside or from within our own hearts, to follow the false leaders at Corinth, to take pride in the outward appearances of a church or indeed of ourselves.

But let us tenaciously resist the pressures to look good. Paul teaches us how to live, to be controlled by the love of Christ expressed in his death on the cross, to look with joy and wonder at all Christians because they are a new creation, and to support the broadcasting of the message of reconciliation between God and man.

Now, a church that takes those values to heart and lives by them is a church worth belonging to. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

- [38 : 34] 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.

Dear God, our Father, we realize what a fundamental revolution this teaching involves us in. And yet we know that it is the true teaching of your beloved apostle.

And we pray, therefore, dear Father, that you will enable us to take this to heart and that our lives increasingly might be conformed to what Paul teaches here, that we learn to live no longer for ourselves, but for the Lord Jesus who for our sake died and was raised.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.