

SACRIFICE AND RECONCILIATION

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Today's reading is relatively short, just 11 verses, but Paul has packed so much meaning into these verses that I won't have time to do more than skim the surface of this passage today. But, do please listen carefully, for this text is full of meaning. So let's move on to our reading from 2 Corinthians 5 and you can find this on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's begin with verses 11-13:

“¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² 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, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” (verses 11-13)

In verse 11 Paul is continuing the theme of verse 10 which says: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (verse 10)

Paul connects verse 11 to verse 10 with the opening words “since then”. He's saying that he knows what it is to fear the Lord because he knows he will be judged before the judgement seat of Christ. Paul exercises his apostolic ministry knowing that all he does is completely open to our omniscient God. For Paul every day in the life of his ministry is judgement day. Paul's saying that the genuine nature of his ministry should also be readily apparent to the Corinthians if they examine their own consciences.

In verse 12 Paul speaks of *those who take pride in what is seen* rather than *what is in the heart*. Here he is clearly speaking of new

ministers in the Corinthian church who are apparently seeking recognition on the basis of bizarre religious trances or ecstatic speech – what is seen – rather than on the basis of their preaching of the true gospel – what is in the heart. Paul’s admission in verse 13 *if we are out of our mind* is no doubt designed to counter any objection by the Corinthians that he himself had spoken extensively in tongues. Paul is saying here that this was intended to be purely between him and God rather than to support his apostolic claims. Paul goes on to say that he is in his right mind, or self controlled, for the Corinthians.

But, what can the Corinthians say in defence or support of Paul? Verse 11 tells us that they can have confidence in the fact that he is merely trying to teach and persuade men of the truth of the gospel. Paul says in verse 12 that this allows the Corinthians to take pride in him. Paul is confident that he has been faithful to his apostolic ministry. Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians is clearly under criticism and threat and here Paul is defending both himself and his ministry. He’s saying that his faithful teaching and preaching of the gospel message legitimises his ministry. The threat and criticism seems to have been both internal amongst the Corinthians and also external, note the ‘you’ and ‘those’ of verse 12. Presumably the outsiders are the newly arrived preachers seeking recognition on the basis of their ecstatic behaviour that we already mentioned.

Let’s move on to look at verses 14 and 15:

“¹⁴ 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.” (verses 14-15)

Paul has mentioned that two legitimizing characteristics of his ministry are ‘persuasion’ and a ‘right mind’. In verse 14, he now adds a third: in all that he does he is controlled by the *love of Christ*. Paul is saying that he is so controlled by Christ’s love that there is no other course of action open to him but to pursue his ministry. Since Paul’s dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road, love has taken the place of hate at the very core of his being.

Paul was fully aware that he was the object of Christ's love because he knew that Christ had died for him and indeed for us all. He was *convinced* (verse 14) in that dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road. There is no power so great, no motivation as strong, as the knowledge that someone loves us. Paul's understanding that Jesus, in his death, loved *him*, was now the controlling force in the apostle's life. The association between Christ's love and Christ's death became central in Paul's exposition of the gospel. He wrote that 'the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself [suffered death on the cross] for me' (Galatians 2:20), and that 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5:8). Paul is able to speak of the love of Christ displayed in his death either in the staggering universal terms '*one died for all*' (verse 14) or in the deeply personal 'the Son of God ... loved *me* and gave himself for *me*' (Galatians 2:20). Christ's love is seen either in the immensity of the numbers loved or in the intensity of his love for each individual. The *all* for whom he died are the sum total of individuals, like Paul, whom he loved.

But, what does Paul mean when he says '*and therefore all died*' at the end of verse 14. I believe he's saying that because of Christ's sacrifice for us, because of Christ's death for our salvation, we must die to self centred living and take up our cross and follow Christ. We who receive reconciliation with God through the death of Christ now say 'No' to self and 'Yes' to Christ. We must obey our Lord. There is no room for cheap grace here. Further, Paul is not teaching universalism here. Yes, Christ died for all, but not all will enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice. We must each individually turn to Christ, believing in his death and resurrection and acknowledging him as our Lord and master (Romans 10:9-10), if we are to benefit from his salvific death on the cross.

Let's move on again to verses 16 and 17:

“¹⁶ 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, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (verses 16-17)

Here Paul twice uses the words *no longer*. He means that we who have turned to Christ no longer live for ourselves. Such behaviour belongs to the old self which has gone and is instead replaced by the new self, the new creation, which has now come (verse 17) .

Prior to his Damascus Road experience Paul had lived an egocentric life as the centre of his own universe. But *now* (verse 16) this is no longer (verse 15) true. He no longer lives for himself; now he lives to please the one who loved him, who *died ... and was raised again* for him. Christ, not Paul, is the new centre of Paul’s universe; Paul’s former egocentricity has given way to Christocentricity.

When Paul writes that we once regarded Christ from a worldly point of view, I believe he’s referring both to himself and those who have come to minister to the Corinthians. He’s saying that they teach a Christ who is limited to being within Jewish Law. Before his conversion, Paul had a similarly superficial view of Jesus, but he no longer regards Christ in this way. At his conversion, Paul realised, in an instant, that the glorified, crucified Christ could only be the Son of God who in death received God’s curse. He realised that Christ was not a false Messiah, but the divinely appointed agent through whom forgiveness and reconciliation would be provided to sinful humanity. Paul’s earlier views of Jesus were shallow and erroneous compared with the new and profound appreciation of Christ as the unique figure who alone was qualified to ‘die for all’! Our forgiveness and reconciliation with God is only possible because of Christ’s death on the cross.

Paul’s opposition to the new ministers amongst the Corinthians arose out of his conviction that, in order to be qualified for ministry, it was necessary to have a correct view of the person, character and work of Christ.

Paul's reference to *a new creation* (verse 17) summarises the changes which occur within the life of any believer (anyone who turns to Christ). Love and denial of self are now the controlling motives.

The similarity of what Paul is saying to the creation narratives in Genesis is striking. It is implied that unbelievers (as Paul had been), are blind and live in a darkness analogous to the primal darkness of the first verses of the book of Genesis. Just as God spoke then, and there was light, so too God now speaks the gospel-word and once again there is light, though this gospel light is inward within the heart as we saw when we looked at chapter 4. By the word of God the world was made, and now, by the word of God, by the message of reconciliation, people are remade, recreated as new selves. In expressing the great and profound changes that occur in the life of *anyone* who is *in Christ* Paul not only affirms that there is a 'new covenant', there is also a *new creation; the old has gone, the new has come* (verse 17).

Let's now look at the concluding verses of our reading, verses 18-21: "18 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 men'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. 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." (verses 18-21)

Here Paul is telling us that our Almighty God has reconciled rebellious humankind to himself through Christ, the "one" of verse 14 whom he "made sin," on account of whom sins are no longer reckoned (verses 19 and 21). The "righteousness of God" imputed to those who are "in Christ" is the basis of their reconciliation to God.

God's "gift" of a "ministry of reconciliation," to whom he has entrusted his "word of reconciliation," must be seen as part of God's

gift to the world, along with reconciliation, righteousness, and the Spirit. God himself addresses the world through the mouths of his apostles, who speak the word of reconciliation, “Be reconciled to God.” So the apostle is God’s partner and fellow worker, empowered by God, through whom God speaks.

Paul implores us to be reconciled to God. This is only possible because of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Nothing could be clearer than that Christ – crucified and risen – is the locus, the centrality and the means of fulfilling God’s purposes for history, humanity, the world and creation.

So by the forgiveness of our sin in Christ God has reconciled us to himself. Here everything is from God. We did not ourselves placate God’s wrath against our sins. Indeed we were completely unable to do so. So, God sent his son, who was completely free from sin, to die for us, and the forgiveness of our sins that Christ’s death made possible made possible our reconciliation to God. I don’t have time to preach a complete doctrine of the atonement this morning, let’s just say that God was angry at the sins of mankind – God cannot tolerate sin – and Christ’s death was necessary to pay the penalty that our sins deserved and merited. If you want to know more about the atonement speak to Giles or myself later. God cannot look on sin and so could not be reconciled to us whilst we remained in our sins. Mankind had been alienated from God ever since the fall when we sinned by rebelling against God, but now there is a glorious reconciliation.

There is also a horizontal element here. Reconciliation with God implies reconciliation among God’s people (Ephesians 2:16) something Paul later calls “your perfection” (2 Corinthians 13:11). God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are his ambassadors who are to go out and evangelise the world so widening the reconciliation to God.

What have we learned this morning. We see that in order to be reconciled to God and enter into his kingdom we must turn to Christ, repent of our sins and, believing in Christ’s death and resurrection,

accept him as our Lord and Master. If you've never really done that wholeheartedly, please do it now this morning whilst there is still time. Like Paul I implore you to be reconciled to God. Having turned to Christ and so becoming reconciled to God we must act as God's ambassadors going out and evangelising, proclaiming the true gospel message to all that we come in contact with as the opportunity presents itself. Like Paul we need to be faithful to this apostolic ministry. We also need to remember that Christ died for you and for me, for each and every one of us. So let us all die to self. Let us bring to an end our self centred lifestyles and denying ourselves take up our crosses and follow him who died for our sins in order that we might be reconciled to God and take our place in His family as children of God.