

# Controlled by Love

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One of the best pieces of advice I got from my training program at Dowlen Rd. came from David Banning. He told me, “Never preach a sermon without a take-home message.” I think that’s important, because the Bible is nothing if not relevant, and we do God’s word a disservice when we make it irrelevant. As a result, a lot of my sermons resemble spiritual recipes. If you want Spiritual Goal X, mix Actions A, B, and C together, bake, and serve!

Those spiritual recipes are important answers to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” However, they aren’t THE answer. Sure, the Bible tells us that we are supposed to be holy, loving, and so forth, but why I am I concerned about what the Bible says at all? Obedience to the gospel makes for a good fire insurance policy, but I suspect that few, if any people will make it to heaven because of their fear of hell. We need more than that, and one of the best explanations of that more centers around 2 Corinthians 5. Let’s look there at what it means to be controlled by love.

## The Things That Are Unseen

To me, at least, the context of 2 Corinthians 5 looks like it begins in 2 Corinthians 4, with a discussion of the things that are unseen. Paul begins this discussion by presenting **HEAVEN’S PERSPECTIVE**. Read with me from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. First of all, let’s note what this context reveals about Paul’s physical condition. He describes his outer self as wasting away (some translations say “decaying”), and I suspect this isn’t hyperbole. In addition to whatever ailments he accumulated as a result of growing older, he had to contend with the effects of all of the injuries that were inflicted on him during his various persecutions. Sometime when you’ve got a moment, read through the list of Paul’s trials in 2 Corinthians 11, and imagine what a toll all those beatings and stonings and shipwrecks would take on one frail human body. This wasn’t some video game where Paul’s health bar went back up to full as soon as they were done clobbering him. This was his real life, and he faced a level of abuse that would make ex-NFL players cringe in sympathy.

So, here Paul is. He’s got no money, he’s got no home, everybody hates him, and his body is falling apart right before his eyes. And yet, all of this misery is unimportant to him. He regards it as “momentary, light affliction”. Why? Because he’s not focused on the grim physical reality. He’s focused on the joyful spiritual reality. Even though he can’t see it, he knows that the eternal weight of glory that is waiting for him is more important than suffering can ever be.

How do we measure up to that? None of us have problems like Paul had, yet despite our better situations, we often struggle more with losing heart than he did. We have this problem because we don’t have Paul’s perspective. We aren’t willing to write this life off like he did because we believe, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, that this physical creation is able to satisfy our search for contentment. Then, when this life disappoints us, which it always does, we get upset. We get upset because we aren’t looking past the things that are seen to the things that are unseen.

Paul, by contrast, is so caught up in the unseen that he depicts himself as **GROANING FOR HEAVEN**. Let’s read together from 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. There’s a hymn that we sing sometimes that begins by saying, “I’d like to stay here longer than man’s allotted days.” That may well be an accurate representation of the way we think, but it shouldn’t be. Paul certainly didn’t want to stay here longer than man’s allotted days! He spent his allotted days getting kicked in the teeth. He was fed up with life in his frail tent of flesh, and he groaned for the day when he could be at home with his Savior forever. He knew that heaven was incomparably better than life on earth, so heaven was where he wanted to be.

What we must recognize from this passage is that heaven is incomparably better than our earthly lives too. Sure, we may have it better than Paul did in some ways, but heaven is so wonderful and so glorious that the differences between him and us pale by comparison. If Paul’s life was a 3 on a scale of 1 to 10, and our lives are at about 6, heaven weighs in at about 753 million! We ought to be groaning for heaven too. We ought to be so sick of this life and all of its frustrations and heartaches that our greatest desire is to see heaven, even if we have to die to get there. If we don’t have that desire, we’ve got one of two belief problems. Either we believe that heaven isn’t real, although it is, or we believe that **THIS TIME**, life is going to make us perfectly happy, even though it never will. For us, heaven should be everything.

If, indeed, heaven holds all for us, this will set our feet on a course of **WALKING BY FAITH**. Let’s examine Paul’s take on this in 2 Corinthians 5:5-7. Paul begins by noting that it’s reasonable for us to place our hopes on heaven because of the guarantee of the Holy Spirit. He had his guarantee in the form of miraculous spiritual gifts. We have ours in the form of the written word. In both cases, though, there’s more than enough evidence to reassure us that the path that leads to heaven is the right path to be on. This isn’t a path that we walk by assessing our lives according to the wisdom of the world and then acting accordingly. Instead, our feet are set on this path by our faith.

If indeed we are walking by faith and not by sight, that means that our walk is going to look different. Happiness on earth and happiness in heaven are two different goals. In a lot of ways, they’re as different as two goals can be, and if we pursue the one, it will inevitably pull us away from the other. We can’t have our cake and eat it too. We have to choose, and every day of our lives, we are making that choice. When we choose a family activity over assembling with the saints, is that walking by faith or walking by sight? When we spend hours every day in front of the computer or TV, but

we can't find the time to read our Bibles, is that walking by faith or walking by sight? When we spend far more on our recreations and our hobbies than we ever give to the Lord's work, is that walking by faith or walking by sight?

Sure, we can make excuses. We can point to one decision where we favored the world over the Lord and say, "That's not a big deal. I still put Christ first in my life." That reminds me of a personal-finance concept called "the latte factor." Here's the way the latte factor works: every day on the way to work, we stop in at Starbucks and buy ourselves a five-dollar latte. No big deal, right? Well, it doesn't sound like a big deal, until we realize that it adds up to five lattes a week, fifty weeks a year. That's more than a thousand dollars spent every year on morning coffee! I don't know about the rest of y'all, but I am quite certain that an extra \$1250 every year would be more than enough to wreck my budget.

There's a spiritual latte factor too. When we make all of those little decisions to put something else ahead of God, even if those decisions are insignificant in themselves, they add up to something that is significant. They reveal that our hearts aren't set on heaven, and they poison us against the hope of heaven. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also. When we seek things other than God, what are we doing but laying up treasure on earth? So, then, the next time we take a pass on a Friday night Bible study because of other commitments, or the next time we schedule a vacation that won't let us attend worship services, let's reconsider. Let's walk by faith, not sight.

All of this points to what **OUR AMBITION** should be. Let's consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8-10. A couple of verses up, he mentioned that the necessary consequence of being at home in the body—still alive on this earth—was being absent from the Lord. This is the real reason why he wants to go to heaven: because Jesus isn't here, and He is there. The presence of God is what makes heaven, heaven. Heaven is a reward only for people who love God because only people who love God would consider heaven a reward. It is this love for God, this love for Jesus, that should drive every decision in our lives. We do what we do because we want to please Him.

As Paul points out, this attitude, or lack thereof, will determine our eternal destination. God expects us to obey even the least of His commandments, but when we think about the day of judgment, we need to be careful not to overlook the forest for the trees. There's only one question that matters. Jesus will want to know whether the foremost goal of our lives was making Him happy. If that was what our lives were about, we get to live with Him in heaven forever. If our lives were about anything else, be it sinful pleasure, or hobbies, or work, or family, or even man-made religion, we will be spending eternity someplace else. We need to be honest about what our lives reveal.

## The Love of Christ

In the next context, Paul explains what the heavenly perspective has to do with the way he lives, and the way his life has been transformed by the love of Christ, and we'll look at this before the Lord's Supper. Instead of being centered on himself, his life is centered on **LIVING FOR OTHERS AND LIVING FOR GOD**. Let's examine 2 Corinthians 5:11-13. As with many of Paul's epistles, 2 Corinthians contains a lengthy defense of his apostleship. In this context, Paul reveals that the purpose of this defense is not to buff his reputation. Instead, it is to protect the Corinthians from false teachers who seek to gain entrance to the congregation by attacking Paul. Paul's overall point is that Christians have to live in the real world too. We can't be so focused on God and heaven that we forget about other human beings. In fact, one of the most important ways that our love for God ought to express itself is in our love for others.

However, this love for others ought to be informed by our love for God. If we are truly focused on the things that are unseen, when we encounter others who appear to care only about this life, that will be a big source of concern for us. Worldliness and false religion aren't some acceptable alternative lifestyle. They're not a matter of opinion. They're deadly, and people who pursue those dead ends will destroy themselves. When we see others make those disastrous decisions, we should be afraid, not for ourselves, but for them, and we should act on that fear by telling them how to rescue themselves. Living for others has to be done God's way. Otherwise, it won't help them at all.

Why do this? Why was Paul so concerned about the souls of others that he endured years of suffering to warn people who generally didn't listen? He found his motivation in **THE LOVE OF CHRIST**. He explains in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. A lot of people out there in the denominational world like to talk about the love of Christ, but I'm not at all sure that they really get it, because this is what the love of Christ means. Once we really grasp what it means that Jesus died for us, we also grasp that we must die to ourselves too. His sacrifice is so overwhelming that complete surrender of ourselves to Him is the only appropriate response. We want to do the things that please Jesus, but what's more, we want to start becoming like Him, so that He can live through us the life that He surrendered for us. We say the things that Jesus would have said; we pursue the goals that Jesus sought. Just like Jesus lived to save others, we have the same goal in mind, so that from us, they can learn to die to self and live for Jesus too.

Paul explores the implications of this decision when he discusses becoming **A NEW CREATION**. Let's consider this in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17. One of the more interesting ideas in this section is the concept of regarding Christ according to the flesh. I think this boils down to regarding Christ in any way other than the one we just looked at. Before he became a Christian, Paul regarded Jesus as a false prophet who deserved his hostility. However, it's just as much a fleshly regard when we think of Jesus as nonexistent, as a first-century self-help guru, or even as King of our lives on

Sunday morning and an afterthought the rest of the time. All of those are signs that we are looking at Jesus through the eyes of the world. In fact, any time Jesus becomes less than all-important to us, any time we start putting other priorities on our list ahead of Him, that means that we are considering Him according to the flesh. A proper spiritual appreciation of who Jesus truly was and what He has done for us will not allow us to take Him so lightly.

This is where the new-creation part comes in. Once we have come to know Jesus, our lives have to be transformed, because it is impossible for a human being to confront the cross and stay the same. If we have managed to stay basically the same people we were before we obeyed the gospel, that's a sign that we haven't really had that meeting with Jesus. Once we do have it, though, we become different people, obviously different people. We don't care about the things that people in the world care about anymore. We care about loving God and loving others, and everything else is important to us only as it relates to those two goals. This means that we will make different decisions. We won't spend our time on the things the world spends its time on, we won't spend our money on the things the world spends its money on, and we won't focus our lives on the things of the world. The new people we become don't care about those things.

This isn't a spiritual goal that any of us have attained completely. All of us are somewhere on the road to being completely re-created in the image of Christ. This morning, let's pause to evaluate our progress. Jesus has done nothing less for us than rescue us from eternal destruction. We owe Him everything. How are we honoring that obligation? Can we honestly say that His love controls us, that we are driven to make the decisions that we make because of Him? Are we completely different people than we would be if we weren't Christians? Or, instead, are we motivated by the petty joys and pleasures and concerns that motivate the world? Instead of being a new creation, are we still the same old us? These are central spiritual questions. Let's ponder them now as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

### **Ambassadors for Christ**

If indeed we have been controlled by the love of Jesus, if indeed we are a new creation, we will be more than merely silent servants. We will become ambassadors for Christ. In the first place, we must acknowledge that God has entrusted to us **THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION**. Paul elaborates on this in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. First of all, note that our own reconciliation wasn't our idea. It was God's idea. We had alienated ourselves from Him through our sin, but He reached out to us through Jesus, requiring His own Son to take the death that we had earned, so that once our trespasses had been forgiven, we could have fellowship with Him again. However, God doesn't only want to have fellowship with us. He wants to have fellowship with everyone, and the least part of what we owe Him is to tell them about it. The Biblical case that Christians should be evangelistic really couldn't be clearer.

And yet, if there is any command that Christians struggle with, it is the command to tell others about the gospel. As we've seen, sharing the message of God's reconciliation follows logically from everything else Paul has already explained in the chapter. Our greatest obstacles to evangelism don't lie in our hostile audiences or our lack of opportunities. After all, Paul's audiences could not have been more hostile, and he had to travel all over the Mediterranean seeking opportunities, yet he succeeded in converting great numbers regardless. Instead, our greatest obstacles to evangelism lie between our ears. There is some part of Paul's reasoning that we don't accept. Either we don't believe that the unseen things are what truly matter, we aren't controlled by the love of Jesus, or we haven't become a new creation in Him. If we don't tell others about our Lord, one of those three things must be true of us.

Conversely, when we seek to bring others to Christ, we must recognize that we are promoting nothing less than **THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD**. Consider with me Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21. In this section, Paul describes himself and his fellow workers as ambassadors for Christ, the sinless Christ who became sin for all of us. This is an extremely meaningful description. It tells us first of all that we must think of ourselves as ambassadors. When we go out into the world, whether we are at home, on the job, or associating with our friends, we aren't doing any of those things on our own behalf. Instead, we're representing Jesus. That means first that everybody we interact with should know that we represent Jesus. After all, an ambassador doesn't do much good if he spends all day locked in his embassy and never interacts with any foreigners. Second, once we acknowledge our ambassadorship, we need to live up to it. If we make our faith known and then lie or swear or tell dirty jokes, others will regard us as hypocrites, and rightfully so. When we are open about being disciples, we put a bull's-eye on our backs. We need to own that bull's-eye.

In addition, we must remember whose ambassadors we are. When we reach out to the lost, we are not trying to persuade them to join up with the Church of Christ denomination. If there is such a thing, we'd better not be part of it. We're not trying to get them to come join in our singing and listen to our preacher, because our singing is so lovely and our preacher is so eloquent. Those are worldly appeals, and if we resort to appeals like that, nobody is going to listen, because the world does worldly a whole lot better than we do. We can't offer worldly satisfaction. The only thing that we can offer, and what we must offer, is a Savior. We can sit down with them and show them from God's word that Jesus loves them and died for them, and that there are things they must do to accept the gift of His grace. We can teach them from the word what Christ's expectations are for His people, both individually and when we come together. In other

words, we can go and make disciples. That's all that genuine evangelism is. That's all it can be. When we get sidetracked into talking about us instead of talking about Jesus, we have already failed.

We're going to conclude our study this morning by examining what Paul says about **THE ACCEPTABLE TIME**. Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 for this information. The message of this passage is quite simple. Paul tells us that if we must change, the time to change is now. This applies first of all to Christians. In 2 Corinthians 5, God is holding a mirror up for us that we can look into and examine ourselves. We can compare ourselves to Paul's words and determine whether we are all that we should be, whether indeed the love of Christ controls us, whether indeed our eyes are focused on the things that are unseen. If we fall short in that, God expects us to change today. If we aren't willing to do that, if we want to go on living a lukewarm, half-hearted version of Christianity, we have received His grace in vain.

Likewise, for those who are here who aren't Christians, everything we've considered this morning offers you a choice too. If you're old enough, you, like all the rest of us, have chosen to knowingly violate the law of God. You have sinned, and that sin has separated you from God. If you continue in sin, on the day of judgment you will be accused and condemned on the basis of that sin. On that day, the only possible answer you can make is the only answer any of us can make. It is the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus is who this is all about. It's not about your history, or your family, or this church, or any of those other things. It's about you, your soul, and your Savior. If you want to be found in Christ, the answer is simple. Be baptized into Him and walk faithfully with Him thereafter, and you will be. Don't listen to men and all the things they say. Listen to God's word, and the simple things it says. Make today the day of your salvation.