



LIFE

BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

To understand how the love of Christ reshapes and restores our relationships.

Read the Text:

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. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 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. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 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 Cor. 5:16-21)

Study the Text:

From Now On

In the 5th chapter of 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul articulates how the love of Jesus Christ fundamentally transforms the believer. In the verses just before our text, he writes: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 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.” We are controlled by the love of the Lord in two distinct ways: how we relate to other people and how we relate to God. Below is a breakdown of some of the key details in this passage.

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

Paul contends that the love of Christ controls Christians in such a way that it not only transforms our view of God but also of other people. The term “control” in the Greek language is *συνέχω* (*synechō*), and it means “to enclose or constrain.” Paul conveys the idea that the love of Jesus Christ “fences us in” and keeps us from going astray. Of course, that is not to say that we can’t make choices in our strength and make a mess of things! His point is that the love of Jesus Christ, when we yield to it, should prevent us from doing things “our way.” To do things His way means, at least in part, to see other people with new eyes.

First, he argues that “we regard no one according to the flesh” (2. Cor. 5:16a). What does that mean? Consider what follows for Paul: “Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.” Paul presents an elegant argument to support his contention. If Christ was once regarded “according to the flesh,” but now “no longer,” the same should apply to the way we regard everyone. But what does it mean to regard Christ “according to the flesh?” It means “according to human understanding.” Paul is saying: “We, at one time, thought about Jesus Christ according to our own human reason, but because we have been changed by Him and given the Spirit of God, we now think about Jesus according to the spiritual reason.”

Paul speaks of this change in mindset in his first letter to the Corinthians: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). The natural person reasons “according to the flesh” but the spiritual person discerns “according to the spirit.” Thus, we, in our natural state, thought about Jesus “according to the flesh,” but we no longer do because we are spiritual people. And it is this reality that Paul contends also shapes how we regard others. Simply stated, because the love of Jesus Christ has changed us, we no longer see people the same way.

To strengthen his point, Paul argues that we are not only controlled by the love of Jesus Christ, but that we have been made into an entirely new creation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Coming to faith in Christ is not equivalent to “doing things differently” or “turning over a new leaf.” Faith in Jesus Christ means life, but only after death. You are born again only because the previous version of you has died and no longer exists.

And as a new creation, we are to relate to the world in the same way God relates to the world: “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 Cor. 5:18-19). In the same way God has gone through great lengths to reconcile sinners who have wronged Him to Himself through Christ (Col. 1:20-22), so too are we to meet people with “the ministry of reconciliation” as “ambassadors for Christ” through whom “God makes his appeal” (2 Cor. 5:20).

Understand the picture Paul is painting: God has reconciled us to Himself by covering our sins through Christ’s gracious act of love to die in our place, and this love has a powerful effect on us. It controls us by requiring us to love others as God loved us, which means we no longer see people in the same way. We see them as the very people God desires to reach. We can do this because God has not only loved us but also made us into entirely new creatures. And thus, as new creations, controlled by the love of Jesus Christ, we view people differently, and we share this ministry of reconciliation with them.

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

Paul closes this passage out by reiterating the saving work of God in Christ with a powerful reminder: “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 Cor. 5:21). Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christ received our penalty of sin (death) though He Himself was not guilty in order to give us His reward (perfect righteousness). In other words, the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ not only reshapes our relationships with other people but also restores our relationship with God. We could not stand before the LORD before the salvation we received in Christ. His death, burial, and resurrection have changed the way we relate to everything and everyone. And “from now on,” we should walk accordingly.

What About Now?

One takeaway is more of a diagnostic question: *Do I see other people the way God sees them?* If the answer to that question is *no*, we ought to consider why. Salvation is a transformative act of God in our lives; Christ makes us a “new creation.” Often, Christians don’t seem different after coming to faith in Christ because they weren’t really born again. Perhaps they intellectually believed that Jesus is the Son of God, but unless they submitted their lives to Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit, they will likely not act any differently, because, in a very real sense, *they aren’t any different*. How you love other people powerfully reveals how Jesus Christ has loved you. That isn’t to say you won’t make mistakes or love people poorly from time to time, but there should be some discernible difference. Another takeaway is the importance of reconciliation. God has gone through great lengths to reconcile sinners (like you and me) to Himself. We ought to be about the same thing, “not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16. What does “from now on” refer to? What are we no longer to do?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 2:14. What can the natural person not do? What does this mean?

Day Two

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17. If anyone is in Christ, what are they now? What has happened to their previous self?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:18. What has God given us in Christ? What are we to do with this ministry?

Day Three

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:19. What was God doing to the world through Christ? Did he hold their trespasses against them? What did he entrust them with?

2. Read Colossians 1:20-22. How has Christ reconciled sinners back to Himself? What did it cost Him? What is the effect of the cross on us?

Day Four

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:20. What have we become for Christ? What does this mean?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. In your own words, summarize verse 21.

Discuss the Text!

Weekly Discussion: Ministry of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a central aspect of the Christian experience, both with God and with other people. Talk as a group about how you carry (or fail to carry) the ministry of reconciliation you've been given in Christ.

1. Icebreaker: What is the first thing you think of when you hear the word "reconciliation?"
2. Are there any Christians with whom you need to be reconciled?
3. Does reconciliation require one or both parties? Why?
4. How does reconciliation (or the lack thereof) affect the community of faith?
5. How does reconciliation set Christians apart from the rest of the world?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Talk to your kids about someone at school who is mean to them or doesn't like them. Ask them to imagine not holding a grudge against them and doing everything they can do to restore their friendship with that person. Then explain that this is what God does with us through Christ, and what He asks us to do with other people in Christ.

Takeaways:

1. The love of Jesus Christ has reshaped how we relate to other people.
2. The love of Jesus Christ has reshaped how we relate to God.