

The Book of 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Session 58: Paul's Full Approval, pt. 1

In verse 15, we talked about living unto God and not living unto ourselves. We are not searching for a life of meaning. We have a God-given purpose to our lives that supersedes everything else: living with purpose, not just meaning.

And now we take this issue of living unto God into verses 16-21, where we are going to get the details of what it means to live unto God. If you recall from the end of session 57, the word “wherefore” hearkens us back to verses 14-15, which means, “in view of what was said.”

2 Corinthians 5:16 Wherefore **henceforth** know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more.

Henceforth = “from this time forward.”

So, what do we have? In view of us no longer living unto ourselves, but living unto the One who died for us and rose from the dead, from this time forward we “know no man after the flesh.”

2 Corinthians 5:16 Wherefore **henceforth know we no man after the flesh:** yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more.

What does it mean to “know men after the flesh?” It means we recognize things about them that either make them different from us, or similar to us in some way. To know someone after the flesh would be to view them according to their economic status, or their educational status, or by what they do for a living, or by their race, or by their nationality, or by the things we have in common, or by our similar interests, or by any of a dozen other ways by which we identify and think about people in this world.

But those are not the measure of how we *know* anyone if we are living unto God.

Let's talk about this from the standpoint of salvation.

When you trust Christ as your Savior, something changes in you at the very deepest level; your actual identity changes. A transformation happens in your spirit, the very deepest part of you.

To put it in a nutshell, you become something you never were before: a child of God. And that change includes many aspects that impact who you are. For example, as a part of God's family, you have been made righteous and your standing before God is as that of His Son; you have a perfect, righteous standing in the eyes of God, no matter what you do.

We are who we are because of the work of Christ being applied to us. We are not who we are because of what we do. Do you realize what that means? It means you cannot lose your salvation because you sin. It means God does not break fellowship with you until you "get right with God." We have a permanent, non-changing righteous standing before God, which is not based in what we do, but is based on what Christ did.

When you trusted Christ, something transformative happened at the very deepest level of your being. It is deeper than your race, deeper than your nationality, it goes beyond your social standing; it transcends your education or what you do for a living. What happens to you at salvation goes deeper than any abuse you suffered as a child. It goes beyond the adversities you have encountered in life. It is deeper than any experience you can have in this life. We are, at the very core of our being, transformed in ways we cannot produce ourselves.

This happened to me when I trusted Christ. This happened to you when you trusted Christ. And this is the bond we share; this is how we are to "henceforth" think about each other. Nothing else matters. We are connected at the deepest possible place, at the very core of who we are in our spirit. Paul says all that other stuff by which we "knew" people is not the way we think any longer. Those things were "after the flesh." Now that we are living unto Him that died for us and rose again, we have a connection that cannot be emulated by anything that happens in this world by our experiences.

People form bonds with each other in a myriad of ways. People can go to war together, they can build businesses together, they can join the same clubs, they can play for the same teams, they can do all sorts of things, which build bonds between them, but none of those things affect who they are. The connections of the world can never run as deep as the connection we have in Christ. Why not? Because none of those earthy bonds affect who we are at our core.

Let's recap this just to make sure we have understood what Paul is saying to us.

2 Corinthians 5:16 Wherefore henceforth **know we no man after the flesh:** yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more.

What does Paul mean when he says that from now on we "know no man after the flesh?" To "know someone after the flesh" describes how we thought about people before we came to Christ, when we were living unto ourselves. In other words, once we begin to "live unto God" we will think about everyone differently than the way we used to think about them.

How are we supposed to think of men now? Although I have just talked to you about this, Paul is going to tell us in verse 20. But before we get there, we need to finish up verse 16.

2 Corinthians 5:16 Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: **yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more.**

How did we "know Christ after the flesh?" This is referring to knowing Him in connection with His earthly ministry. There were people alive at the time Paul wrote this epistle, people who were also alive when Jesus was carrying out His earthly ministry to Israel.

Paul says, "yet now" (that we are living unto God), from this time forward (henceforth) we no longer know Christ by His earthly ministry in the prophetic program, but we know Him by His ministry from Heaven in accordance with the Mystery. The Believing Remnant knew Him as Messiah; we know Him as the head of the Body.

Israel knew Him as their Messiah in connection with their prophetic program. We know Him in connection with the Mystery, which was not known until it was revealed to Paul. Unlike how it was for Israel during the days of the Messiah, they looked to the Law for how to live for God; but for us now, it is the life of Christ working in us by grace that matters.

For Israel, their doctrine was found in those Old Testament books, but we concern ourselves with the sound doctrine, which was given to our apostle Paul. All of these dispensational things are why we do not “know Christ after the flesh.”

In a nutshell, as those who are living unto God, we no longer view the people in the world the way we used to; a view that came from our flesh (which took many forms of error in our minds). And, we do not view the Lord Jesus after His earthly ministry; He is someone different to us.

There is a dispensational element to “living unto God.” By the doctrine in verse 16, God is getting rid of the old way we used to think of people. In verse 17, He is giving us a new way to perceive things.

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore **if any man *be* in Christ, *he is a new creature***: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

The first new way of perception is how we view ourselves. This has to do with the truth of our identity, our standing before God.

The key phrase here is “in Christ.” If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. In what way are we a new creature? We know this has nothing to do with our physical appearance, but it has everything to do with our position in Christ. I am talking about our standing before God. In Christ, we are righteous in our standing before God.

This does not mean that there is no work left to do. Our mind still needs renewing according to Romans 12:2, and our body awaits redemption according to Romans 8:23. But “in Christ,” everything about our standing before God is new and complete. We are no longer in Adam with the accompanying penalty that goes with that position. Our standing before God in His Son is as complete today as it will ever be which is why Paul says we are “complete in Christ.”

Think of your standing in Christ as the blueprint. Everything on that blueprint is exactly how God wants us to be. The blueprint tells us what the house (we) are supposed to look like when His workmanship is finished. Without a blueprint, there is no telling what kind of house you might wind up with. In the same way, our standing in Christ is the blueprint for how we are supposed to live our functional life every day. In other words, our function is supposed to match our standing, just as the house is supposed to match the blueprint.

This is why it is important to know who we have been made to be in Christ. If you don't know what the blueprint says, how will you know what to build? Our inner man is being built so that when the construction of our inner man is over, we will, in every way, look just like (function as) who we were made to be in Christ.

The old things that are passed away are the old things of our standing before God in Adam, our old identity. The things, which are become new, are the things pertaining to our new standing before God; a standing, which is in His Son.

2 Corinthians 5:18 And all things *are* of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
¹⁹To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰ Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

Because we are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, part of our new standing is that we have been made to be His ambassadors. This is not something we volunteer for: this is something that is assigned to every one of us who believe. As ambassadors, we are given a purpose. That purpose is called, the ministry of reconciliation, which is making known the gospel of Christ so that others can likewise be reconciled to God.

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is laying the groundwork to explain why he is so committed to giving the gospel everywhere he goes. He is not "beside himself," he is being a faithful ambassador! Every person who believes the gospel of Christ has been reconciled to God. Everyone who has been reconciled has been

made to be an ambassador for Christ. Every ambassador has been given the ministry of reconciliation.

Therefore, the “normal Christian life” is not the one which Paul’s critics live, but it is Paul’s, where he understands who he is (an ambassador) and what his purpose in relation to that is (to carry out the ministry of reconciliation).

2 Corinthians 5:19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, **not imputing their trespasses unto them**; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

Now, this phrase “not imputing their trespasses unto them” needs some comment. Previously, I said this was describing the fact that God is no longer dealing with us as under the Law, by dishing out physical punishments as He did under the Law. And this is true, and this would be the meaning of the verse for those who are not saved in the assembly.

In verse 19, Paul is talking about the sins of those who have been reconciled to God not being imputed to them once this life is over; they are forgiven, completely forgiven.

There is an idea out there that uses this verse to say that when Jesus died on the cross, God forgave the sins of the world, therefore, no one goes to Hell because of their sin, for their sins are all forgiven; they go to Hell because they are not righteous. But when we run the references, we will see that this cannot be the meaning.

What is happening in verse 19 by the phrase “not imputing their trespasses unto them” is not saying God has forgiven everyone’s sins; it is describing what happens at reconciliation. Romans 4, when talking about this issue, is not talking about the whole world being forgiven, but those who have been reconciled to God. And how are people reconciled to God? By putting their faith in the finished work of Christ.

Romans 4:1 What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? ² For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath *whereof* to glory; but not before God. ³ For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

⁴Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.

⁵ But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. ⁶ Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, ⁷ *Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.* ⁸ *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*

According to Paul, the blessedness of not having one's sins imputed to them is on the basis of their "believing." Paul goes on in chapter 4 of Romans to say that this "blessedness" is not just for Jews only, but for "all" who believe. This is what made Abraham the "faith father" of all who believe.

One of the great themes of Scripture is reconciliation, and it is especially prominent in Paul's writings. Speaking to Believers, Paul states that God has already reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ. Reconciliation speaks of the restoration of a former relationship. Reconciliation is used of the restoration of the marriage relationship in 1 Corinthians 7:11. In our present context, reconciliation is used of the restoration of the relationship between God and man, which was lost when Adam fell into sin in the Garden of Eden.

Our mission as Ambassadors of Christ is to expedite the restoration of this broken relationship between God and man. Paul takes this seriously, which is why he is being accused of being overzealous when it comes to evangelism.

But before we move on, let's make the connection back to verse 16. In what way do we view men differently? We see them as needing our ministry of reconciliation. When we come across the lost of this world, we do see them according to the flesh, but we see them as souls for whom Christ died. Everyone we meet needs this ministry.

How do we see ourselves differently? As new creatures in Christ who have a totally new standing before God, and whereby we are made ambassadors for Christ. And how do we see Christ differently? Not as the Messiah functioning as part of Israel's prophetic program, but as a part of what God is doing today in this dispensation of grace in connection with the Mystery – that both Jews and

Gentiles have been made members of the same Body. This is how we are called to think about each other and interact with each other.

2 Corinthians 5:20 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

Evidently, Paul is writing to two groups within the assembly, those who are saved (and are Ambassadors for Christ) and those who are not saved (whom Paul beseeches to be reconciled to God).

2 Corinthians 5:21 For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

This is what it cost God to provide for our righteous standing in Christ; Christ had to take on our sin. In exchange, we get the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Cross was the work that the Lord Jesus accomplished so that we might be reconciled to God, so that we could be new creatures in Christ, so that we could be ambassadors of Christ carrying forth that word of reconciliation.

Homework: Read 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, and see if you can find the pattern of what we have been covering in 2 Corinthians 4:7-6:2. This pattern will demonstrate whether or not we have been looking at the main themes correctly and whether or not we have divided up the categories of the sufferings correctly.

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The Most Important Decision

Doctrinal Summary: Session 58

Session 58 magnifies the value and responsibility of the Believer's ambassadorship. An ambassador for Christ represents the Lord's concerns, authority, dignity, and message on the Earth. This office is not reserved for ministers alone, but belongs to all who have been made new creatures and have been reconciled to God. The faithful Ambassador does not invent a message, negotiate new terms, or follow personal devices, but proclaims the reconciliation God has made available through Christ.

The session emphasizes that God Himself beseeches men through His ambassadors. The plea to "be ye reconciled to God" reveals the mercy and condescension of God, who has completed the work of reconciliation on His side and now sends Believers to announce the pardon, forgiveness, and justifying righteousness available by faith in Christ's finished work. The gospel message is therefore the word of reconciliation: man is a sinner, sin brings judgment, Christ died for sins, and reconciliation is received by faith.

The closing doctrine warns Believers not to receive the grace of God in vain by shrinking from the ministry committed to them. Paul's answer to criticism, suffering, and accusations was not retreat, but faithfulness to his ambassadorship.

The Believer must therefore recognize the policy of evil's effort to silence evangelism and respond by laboring, pleading, praying, and enduring reproach for the sake of persuading the Lost to be reconciled to God.

Pastor's Exhortation

Beloved, do not let this doctrine remain only on the page or in the classroom. Let it search your heart, renew your mind, and correct the way you think about yourself, about Christ, and about the people around you. If you are in Christ, you are not what you were in Adam. You are a new creature, reconciled to God, complete in your standing before Him, and entrusted with a ministry that reaches into eternity.

Therefore, give yourself to the doctrine. Learn it, believe it, rejoice in it, and allow it to govern your purpose. Refuse to live merely for earthly meaning when God has

given you a heavenly mission. Look upon the Lost not according to the flesh, but according to their need for reconciliation. Speak the gospel with clarity, humility, compassion, and conviction, knowing that when you plead with men to be reconciled to God, you stand in Christ's stead as His ambassador.

Be faithful, then, even if zeal for souls is misunderstood. Be alert to open doors, prepare your words, bear reproach with patience, and seek the honor of the One who sent you. Christ died and rose again that you should no longer live unto yourself, but unto Him. May that truth move you from passivity to purpose, from fear to faithfulness, and from silence to a loving, urgent ministry of reconciliation.