

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Christ's Love Compels Us

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

With Valentine's Day drawing near, let's invoke the words of the late Barry White, from his song, "Love Ain't Easy": "Yeah we know love ain't easy / Something no one can deny / But we'll never know if we can make it / We won't know girl, not until we try / We won't know until we try." This Thursday, lots of people, in various kinds of loving relationships, will celebrate how it has all been worth the try, or will at least keep trying.

Paul certainly kept trying with the Corinthians. "It's complicated," would be a mild way of describing their relationship. Sometimes it felt like they were breaking up, and sometimes it felt like they were making up. In the letter we call 2 Corinthians, Paul spends a lot of time trying to reconcile with some of the folks in this congregation. Earlier in this letter, Paul references one of his previous visits with them, which he describes as "painful" (2:1). Though we don't know all the details, we do know that Paul left embarrassed and humiliated.

Although he had promised another visit to Corinth, Paul rethought that strategy and decided to send another letter, this one frank and harsh. Let's just say it was certainly nothing that Hallmark would ever print and put on the store display. And yet, it really was composed out of love. Paul even says, "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you" (2:4). But Paul's love was tough love. He chastised the Corinthians for what had happened during the "painful" visit, and called them back into a proper relationship with himself.

And now, as Paul packs his bags and prepares for another visit, he has no illusions about what awaits him. He realizes that he and the Corinthians still have a long way to go in healing some old wounds and making progress in their ministry together. Barry White was right. Love ain't easy.

In today's text, Paul offers the Corinthians a brief self-portrait, so they can understand what's behind the things he says and does in his relationship with them. "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" (v. 13). The phrase "out of our mind" probably refers to Paul's own ecstatic experiences in private worship, such as speaking in tongues or having visions. When it comes to his own inward, personal communion with God, Paul acknowledges that he may come across as a little "outrageous" or "beside himself." But when it comes to his more outward and visible ministry to the Corinthians, he assures them that he acts in a very sensible, right-minded way, for their benefit. He has their interests in mind. In other words, he acts out of love.

In fact, the word "love" appears in the very next verse. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (v. 14). That opening phrase, "Christ's love" or the "love of Christ" is crucial. It doesn't refer primarily to our love for Christ but to Christ's love for us. The initiative in our relationship with God rests with God, not with us. And Christ expressed this sovereign love by giving himself for us. That's what generates our faith and calls forth our love for Christ. Our love for God and for one another reflects and derives from God's love for us in Christ.

Christ “died for all, and therefore all died.” This means that Christ died for our sins, reconciling us to God and to one another. Christ died so that you could be forgiven and set free from the power of sin. This means you yourself dying to an old way of life under the power of sin and being made new. “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” (v. 15). A new life lived out for others. That’s love. Love for Christ and for others created by God’s love for us.

One pastor tells about a conversation he had while serving as associate minister in a church where the senior pastor was becoming increasingly embroiled in conflict. As he was rushing by between worship services, a member of the congregation pulled the associate pastor aside. “May I ask you a question?” the man said politely. “Certainly,” responded the minister, also being polite, though fidgeting at having been slowed down. “Do you love us?” came the unexpected question. “What kind of question is that?” the minister thought to himself. Then he stammered back, “Why, of course I do. Why do you ask?” “We can’t tell,” said the man. “We can’t tell with any of you pastors. You are so busy, it seems as if we are on our own.” Eventually, the associate minister became senior pastor of the church. Looking back to that day, he purposed that no one would ever have to ask him that question again. He renewed his commitment to loving the sheep that were placed in his care.¹

Paul wants the Corinthians to know that he loves them. He wants them to be assured that the love of Christ is what motivates and sustains his relationship with them. “Christ’s love compels us,” says Paul. He means that Christ’s love is what lies behind his work with them. Christ’s love is what drives his ministry to them. Christ’s love is what animates his efforts for them. Christ’s love is what shapes his way of life among them.

Perhaps, after all that he and the Corinthians have been through together, Paul wants the Corinthians to know that they can trust him. They can trust both his motives and his mission. Perhaps Paul has been reading the results of a recent Gallup poll showing that people have a declining confidence in clergy. Fewer than half of American Christians—42 percent—believe that clergy have “high” or “very high” standards of honesty and ethics. Among Americans as a whole, trust in faith leaders fell to 37 percent. Clergy rank below multiple medical professions, teachers, police, and accountants, and slightly above journalists and building contractors. As for the least trusted professionals, that distinction goes to members of Congress.²

Trust me, says Paul. Christ’s love is what compels me. Christ’s love is what motivates me. Not personal popularity. Not public notoriety. Not financial gain. Not expanding programs and bigger budgets. Not speaking engagements. Not book deals or photo ops. The Corinthians should know better anyway. After all, some of them have said that though Paul comes across as forceful and persuasive in his letters, in person he’s a poor speaker and his physical presence is unimpressive (2 Cor. 10:10). But according to Paul, that just confirms how much the love of Christ controls him. It shapes him so much that there’s an unmistakable resemblance between Paul’s way and the self-emptying, self-giving way of Christ.

And in the end, isn’t that what he and the Corinthians will be judged on? How have he and they responded to the reconciling love of God in Christ, and been shaped by it, individually and together? Have they lived for themselves or for the one who died for them and was raised again? In our text, note that before Paul emphasizes how the love of Christ drives him, he has already stressed the reality of final judgment. He opens our passage by saying, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others” (v. 11a). This

comes right after he has reminded the Corinthians: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each of us may receive what is due us for things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (5:10).

So God holds us accountable for our lives, and for what we do with his reconciling and resurrecting love. What's more, the one who will make the final assessment of us is the one who died for us. As author and pastor Frederick Buechner has written:

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.³

As you live toward and wait actively for that day, what matters most is for you to know the one who is both Judge and Savior. The one in whom God's love reached out to you first. The one in whom God moved into action so that you could be forgiven and recreated. The one in whom God says to you, "Be reconciled to me." And live a life of reconciliation with God and others. A life driven and controlled by the love of Christ.

Journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner, a non-practicing Jew, once wrote a lengthy article for *GQ* magazine about Pastor Carl Lentz from Hillsong Church in New York City. As if still surprised by her encounter with a Christian pastor she actually liked, she wrote:

And here I have to say out loud how much I like Carl . . . I like him even though he is ideologically opposed to things that are important to me . . . He is so worried for my soul, and this should annoy me, but instead it touches me, because maybe I'm worried about my soul, too, and Carl wants so badly for me to enjoy heaven with him. How can I fault someone who is more sincere about this one thing than I have ever been about anything in my life? But on the other hand, if there's one thing that's true about Christianity, it's that no matter [its cultural expression], it's still afraid for your soul, it still thinks you're in for a reckoning. It's still Christianity. Christianity's whole jam is remaining Christian.⁴

Living toward the reality of the final reckoning is an essential part of being Christian. It always has been and it always will be. It's part of what it means to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. It's part of our assurance that God's redeeming purposes will prevail. It's part of our confidence that God's reign will overcome evil, sin, suffering, and death. It's part of our faith in a merciful God who can be counted on to complete the saving work he has begun through Christ.

And while we wait for God to finish what he has started, we, as Paul says, "don't lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1). We continue forward in our God-given ministry. Not because of our own determination but because of God's. Not because we are self-driven but because we are Christ-driven. Christ's love compels us. It compels us to love one another. It compels us to serve one another. It compels us to love others. It compels us to seek others. It compels us to welcome others. It compels us to tell others. It compels us win others. It compels us to sacrifice for others. It compels us to live, not for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again.

¹ "Pastor, Do You Love Us?" *Leadership* (Winter 1999). November 1, 2007 <<http://ctlibrary.com/3129>>.

² Griffin Paul Jackson, "The 7 People Christians Trust More Than Their Pastors." *Christianity Today* website. January 4, 2019. Accessed February 6, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/gallup-pastor-clergy-trust-professions-poll.html>>.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 58.

⁴ Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "What Would Cool Jesus Do?" *GQ* (January 2016).