

**An evangelist's motivation:
(2 Corinthians 5:11-21.)**

A. Paul: mastered by respect for God (11-12):

The opening words of this passage are very sobering. Paul writes of "*knowing ... the terror of the Lord*" (11). This is not a reference to the terror that unbelievers will experience on the Day of Judgement, but rather the reverential fear that a child should feel towards his father who is at one and the same time the judge of mankind and Lord of the Church. The very thought of God induced a sense of awe in the apostle. He had too much respect for God to want to let him down. Paul's use of the word "*therefore*" tells us that there is a connection with v.10 where we are taught that all Christians will "*appear before the judgement seat of Christ*". All believers are accountable and Paul did not feel that his life was exempt from God's scrutiny because he was an apostle. He too would have to answer for his words, his actions and even his thoughts. This is true of every believer, but how many are as conscious of it as Paul was? We need to remember that Paul had his detractors in Corinth, that some members of the Church were trying to undermine his influence. They accused him of being a self-publicist, of boosting his own image. Paul was at a disadvantage here. His work for God put him in the spotlight. It was his calling to be a communicator. He spoke; others listened. His business was to "*persuade men*", to convince people that the Gospel deserved a hearing. But although he could not avoid a public role, he was not like an unscrupulous market trader who used skill with words to sell shoddy goods. Paul spoke with integrity because he was supremely aware of God, believing that the Almighty took a deep and personal interest in all that he did and said. This is apparent in two respects:

- 1) Paul understood that he himself would "*appear before the judgement seat of Christ*". He could not afford to be careless about the message he preached or the methods he used. The first question that modern Christians often ask is, "will it work?" But surely another question is even more important, "will God approve?"
- 2) Paul had a tender appreciation of the solemn fact that everyone who listened to him would be weighed in the balances too. He could not bear the thought that they might be found wanting. Do we realise that many people in our circle might have to meet a holy God completely unprepared, with their sin unforgiven and their guilt still clinging to them?

These two verses also contain a measure of irony. Addressing the Corinthians, Paul expressed the hope that as well as being "*well-known to God*", he and his fellow apostles were "*well-known*" in their "*consciences*" (11). Because the believers in Corinth knew Paul very well, he should not have found it necessary to write in his own defence, to "*commend ourselves again*" to them (12). Instead, they already had "*an opportunity to boast*" on Paul's "*behalf*" (12) as a response to "*those who boast in appearance and not in heart*" (12). It is extremely sad that Paul's spiritual children should need him to provide them with arguments to use in his defence. Where was their love, where was their gratitude? Why had they not stood up for him without being prompted?

B. Paul: constrained by the love of God (13-17):

In v. 13 Paul made the point that the love of Jesus affected him in every part of his life, not one area was unaffected. When the apostle referred to his being beside himself (13), this was a response to accusations that he was a fanatic, an obsessive, driven man, a religious maniac. But if he was obsessed, he was certainly not obsessed with himself. On the one hand, in his intense moments, when he writes of being “*beside ourselves*”, this was “*for God*”, i.e. he was taken up with longing to serve the Almighty. On the other hand, in his cool and rational moments, when he was “*of sound mind*”, his concern was to use all his mental powers for the good of his friends.

Paul saw himself as a man under orders, accountable to God for all that he was and did. While people like that can be impressive, they can also be stern and forbidding. Paul was not like that. An austere and unattractive man would not have had the effect on people that Paul did. When he left his friends in Ephesus for the last time many of them were in floods of tears because they would not see his face again in this life (see Acts 20:37-38). What made all the difference is that Paul was “*compelled*” by “*the love of Christ*” (14). He was hemmed in by it, as though the compassion of Christ towered above him like the walls of a mighty canyon. He had no freedom of movement. There was only one way that he could go. The love of Jesus left him with no alternative but to stop putting himself first. What about us? Would we be less self-absorbed if our experience of Christ’s love had been more intense? Paul went on to develop his argument as follows. The death of Jesus (14) was no accident. It was intended to achieve a certain result, namely a radical change in the life of all believers. A person cannot become a Christian and remain just as he was. “*If one died for all, then all died.*” The son of God went to the Cross so that all his followers might die too in the sense that they would cease to be what they had been before, self-seeking, self-serving and self-worshipping.

This verse is often quoted by those who like to make a case for the idea that Christ died to pay for all the sins of all people. But here, in this passage, the word “*all*” does not mean “*all without reservation*” but the “*all*” who die to sin and self. In any case, the apostle’s concern here is not the extent of the atonement but to insist that Jesus’ sacrifice of himself will produce results in the lives of his followers. This is expressed positively in v.15 where we are told that the Saviour died so that the “*all*” who benefit from his death “*should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again*”. We find the same idea in v.17. What is a Christian? What can we say about someone who is “*in Christ*”? Is he little more than an unbeliever with a kind of moral face-lift? Are the differences between saved and unsaved people merely cosmetic or do they go deeper? Surely Christians are not people with one or two superficial changes but new people altogether. Each one is a “*new creation*”. Everything about believers is different. The “*old things*”, those things which characterised the life they lived before they came to faith in Christ have “*gone*”. They have been dumped in the rubbish bin of the past. Now, by contrast, “*all things have become new*”. The word “*behold*” is intended to convey a delighted sense of surprise and pleasure: “*look at this, isn’t it amazing! Here is a person who has altered for the better in every way!*” Yet some people who claim to be Christians seem pretty much the same as they always were!

We find the same idea in the early verses of Romans 6. The Christian duplicates the experience of his Master. Just as the Lord Jesus died to sin and rose to a glorious new life, the believer ceases to be what he was and is now wonderfully new. This had been Paul's experience. The love of Christ changed him from a hate-filled persecutor to a passionate advocate of the faith he had once set out to destroy. To him, the love of God was not some sort of vague benevolence but the story of a Christ so full of compassion for wayward humanity that he endured the horror of Calvary. Paul was overwhelmed by it. His experience of the majestic love of Christ coloured all that he thought and did.

This meant that Paul now looked at other people in a completely different way (16). His estimation of Jesus had altered completely. In the past, he had thought of him "*according to the flesh*". "*Flesh*" here means not so much our physical bodies, but our fallen human nature. In other words, Paul had looked at Jesus from the perspective of an unconverted person, from a purely human point of view. In those days, he regarded the Son of God as a dangerous impostor, a threat to society, a man whose deluded followers ought to be suppressed. Now, all that had changed and Jesus had become the centre of his personal universe. In the late middle ages the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543) proved conclusively that the sun and planets do not in fact orbit around the earth but rather that the earth revolves around the sun. Paul had undergone a Copernican revolution of his own with respect to Jesus. Now he could say, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*". (Philippians 1:21). This is true not only of Paul but of every believer. Jesus is so much more than a great teacher, founder of one of the world's great religions, prophet of social justice and so on. That much can be said of others too but Jesus is unique, the everlasting God come to our world as one of us. So given that the apostle now looked at Jesus from a new standpoint, in the same way, he could no longer look at anyone at all "*according to the flesh*". People were no longer just bodies and faces. Nor did Paul define people's identities by external things, their social standing, educational qualifications, job or income. These things no longer mattered. Instead, Paul thought of their relationship with God and their eternal prospects. What about ourselves? What do we make of those people we see when we stand in a bus queue or wait in line at the check-outs in our local supermarket, when we see them in the dentist's waiting-room? "Oh, he must be rich! Isn't she pretty! That's a nice car he's driving!" Yet each face represents a soul made in the image of God and a person who will one day either endure the torments of Hell or bathe in the glory of Christ's presence in the world to come. Has the dying love of Jesus affected our perception of the human race?

C. Paul's task: "*the ministry of reconciliation*" (18-21):

In the eleventh century, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, wrote a book entitled "*Cur Deus Homo?*" (Why did God become a man?) The answer to that question is found in these verses. It is all to do with reconciliation. God, we are told, "*has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ*". This only makes sense when we understand that mankind is alienated from God. When two friends are on good terms, the question of reconciliation does not arise. Why make up when there has been no quarrel? The Biblical data however takes it for granted that there is a rift between the Almighty and ourselves, a yawning chasm that needs to be bridged. This terrible abyss which

separates human beings from their maker is not something physical. If only it were! Talented engineers can span even quite large distances. The Italian government proposes to build a bridge between the island of Sicily and the Italian mainland. But how can you cross a ravine that is moral and spiritual, where the cleft came about in the first place through self-will and sin?

When a breach occurs in a human friendship, the person who is to blame should take the first steps to put things right. The one who acted badly should apologise. The Christian gospel is staggering because this normal order of things is turned on its head. As v.19 says, "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*". An offended God has taken the initiative and comes to mankind offering pardon. There is reconciliation for a sinful world because a holy God has come to us in the person of his son and provided a means of complete and full atonement. Those who are reconciled to God will never have their "*trespasses*" imputed to them (19), the Almighty will never approach them demanding satisfaction. That is because Jesus has been "*made sin*" for the sake of his people (21). That phrase should make us think hard. Here was a person with no guilt of his own, he "*knew no sin*". Nevertheless, the Almighty "*made him... to be sin for us*" (21), that is, he held him responsible for the sin of others, a world of others. All the guilt of believers was laid at his door, the whole blame was attributed to him, and all so that we might have God's perfect righteousness credited to us instead. This transaction is staggering: wrongdoing, shabbiness and guilt in return for moral wholeness, beauty for ashes.

Paul never lost his sense of amazement at such an astounding gospel. This explains his intensity in v.20. God had committed to him "*the ministry of reconciliation*", the task of spreading the message of reconciling love (18) and he could not go about this task in a half-hearted way. He saw himself as an "*ambassador*" on the king's business, a herald with a message to proclaim. There is deep passion here. Paul writes of "*imploring*" his readers, but his own sense of focused urgency was only a pale reflection of the great longing at the heart of the Almighty. Paul believed that when he was involved in communicating the gospel, it was as though "*God were pleading through us*" (20). Paul could not be passive or neutral about this subject. The thought that people might die with their sins unforgiven, that they might meet God with all the weight of a lifetime's guilt clinging to them was more than he could bear. And Paul's own heartfelt longing was as nothing compared to the attitude of God himself. When the apostle begged his readers to make sure that they stood in a right relationship with God, the Almighty was pleading through him. This is astounding on several levels. In the first place, it is we who should be pleading. We are the guilty parties; it is for us to beg for mercy. Nobody could complain if the Lord held back and waited for us to make the first move, yet he not only takes the initiative, but, as it were, goes down on his knees and begs for a hearing from those who offended him. Kings are often pestered by beggars, yet the greatest King of all, Lord of heaven and earth, pleads with his rebellious subjects. Is this perhaps why some of our evangelism is ineffective, that not only are we not moved by our own message but we are only dimly aware how much God himself is committed to seeing those who have offended him reconciled to his great heart of love? Do we know what it means to stand where Paul stood, to feel as he felt and to press our message home with his passionate intensity? Do we understand, as he did, the heartbeat of a pardoning God?

Conclusion:

This is a passage of rare tenderness. It has been our privilege to look at Paul's inner life and to consider what made him tick. So let us ask ourselves once more how far we can relate to the sense of compulsion that was such a part of the apostle's make-up. Do we share his sense of accountability (11), his awareness that God is so immeasurably great that we should dread the thought of failing him? In the same way, do we share Paul's understanding of the love of Christ (14), namely that our reaction to it should not merely be self-centred enjoyment of the fact that Jesus loves us but a realisation that this great love should effect the whole of our behaviour? Do we see other people as Paul saw them (16)? Do we assess the people that we meet purely on the basis of this-worldly considerations or do we look at them in the light of eternity? In this passage Paul emerges as a passionate spokesman for the cause of Christ. He saw his own inward longing as a feeble reflection of God's intense desire to be reconciled to this who have offended him. Are we as wholehearted as he was? How can we be at peace with the idea that people known to us might face an angry God?