

## The Constraining (Compelling) Love of Christ (5:11-15)

After making the point that our ministry is given by the mercy of God, Paul makes it clear that we perform this ministry in weakness. The reason is this. God is the doer of this ministry and we are participants in it. This last section of the chapter closes the argument so far as to why Paul continues in the ministry. There is an inward reality in this present life because of what God has done and is doing in his life. This is the result of the love of God that is so eminently displayed in the cross of Christ.

In this study we are getting close to the heart matter of ministry. Much of the public perception of ministry is performance, what we can see outwardly. This is the boasting about the outward appearance that Paul is speaking out against – ‘those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart’ (v. 12). We have seen in the third chapter that the real work is the work that ‘the Spirit of the living God (*writes*) on tablets of human hearts’ (3:3). Paul wants to put the motivation for ministry firmly back to where it should come from - the heart. After all, the new work of God is about giving to us a new heart where the Spirit dwells. We are working uphill from here because our culture is all about saying and doing the right thing. We have been conditioned by our culture. Once in a while the Chinese often preface what they say with these words, ‘I want to speak words from my heart’. We too have an expression - ‘heart felt thanks’. Without making it plain, cultures do recognise expressions that are outward and those that are from within.

Paul has made much of the matter of the heart in his appeal to the Corinthians. Here is a brief summary of what he has said so far.

<sup>22</sup> and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (1:22)

<sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (3:2, 3)

<sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. (3:15)

<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (4:6)

Here Paul puts forward the driving force behind his ability to continue in the ministry despite all the affliction and persecution that he faced. God works in our hearts and it is the love of Christ that compels him to keep going. The death of Christ has turned us inside out (or right around). We have died to self with Christ on the cross. We no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who died. This new force may make us ecstatic in which case others may not understand us. It is our service / worship to God. It is ‘from Him, through Him and to Him’ (Rom. 11:36). When our lives and actions make sense to others, then it is for them. In neither case is our lives lived for the self. The self is prepared by God for the future glory. This is the true self-fulfillment, that is only when the life is lived for God in His will. When we know that we are in Christ because of the redemption He offered to us, then this is ‘the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ’. There is no other way of understanding these things.

We have already noted in an earlier chapter that it is the Spirit of God that writes the laws of God in our hearts. Therefore, what is important in the Christian life is that which is in the heart and not what is displayed outwardly for the world to see. That is why it is the love of God that controls us in all that we do. Otherwise, it is only a matter of self-determination.

## A New Way of Seeing: The Ministry of Reconciliation – the New Creation (5:16-21)

The phrase, ‘even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh’ (v. 16), has sparked a search for the historical Jesus, pioneered by Albert Schweitzer, a musicologist, physician and theologian, over a hundred years ago. It seeks to differentiate between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, an interesting exercise, but what has Paul got to say to this?

Since what is written in the heart that matters, then we need a new way of seeing things. At one stage Paul could only see the man Jesus, the outward appearance of the new humanity. He could not see the Godward reality of the man Jesus. Paul no longer regards Jesus as simply a man. He knows that He is the God-man. This is not to say that we totally disregard His humanity. That Jesus had come in the flesh is a fact and cannot be changed. A new humanity has come into the world and ‘all this is from God’.

Paul goes on to introduce the new creation resulting from the ministry of reconciliation effected by God through Christ. Sin has been dealt with. The old has gone. Everything has become new. He who knew no sin has become sin for us. In this work on the cross, Christ takes us into Himself, ‘so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God’. ‘The righteousness of God’ is a relational expression of the reconciled state.

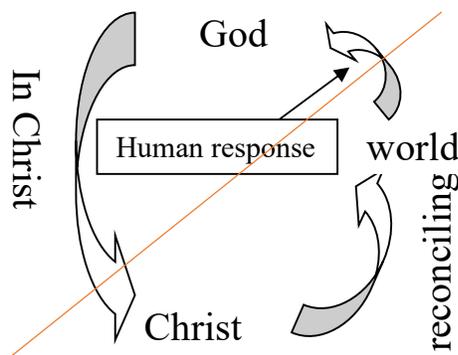
What is new is not brought about by human instrumentality or engineering. God is in it and He did it. That is what makes a thing new. Our ministry is the proclamation of this new thing, i.e. the message of reconciliation. This is clearly seen in the table below setting out the parallelism that Paul intended.

What God did	The role given to us
<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself	and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;
<sup>19</sup> 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.
<sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.	<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

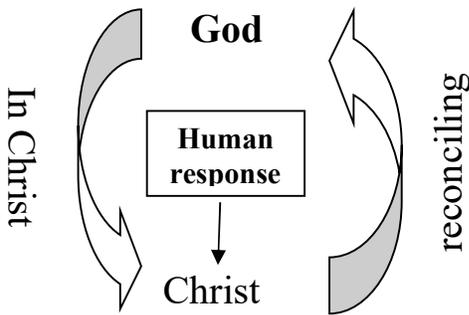
While we say, ‘all is from God’ and that God has done it all, it does not mean that there is no part for us at all. We are called into a ministry of participation though it does not follow that there is a part missing in God’s ministry. The work of Christ on the cross is complete in effecting the reconciliation. Our primary task is the proclamation of this message. All other ministries are subsidiaries to this primary task.

We have often regarded reconciliation is a work that we can affect, like getting both parties to come together and shake hands before the camera. Well, that might be true if the matter is resolved in the heart. Reconciliation is the work of God in Christ and through Christ.

I have included two diagrams to make this clear. The first is the way most people think of reconciliation. This is not correct as we see our response completes the process like this.



The second diagram is the way in which reconciliation is achieved in Christ. The human response is the response to Christ. The human response does not complete the process.



**The Boundaries of the Heart of Love**  
(6:1-13)

‘Working together with him’ (6:1) was the theme above. God having done the work of reconciliation now gives to us to proclaim what He has done. From this Paul moves on.

This section is a high point in the epistle. What does Paul mean when he urges them ‘not to accept the grace of God in vain’ (v. 1)? This is a difficult one to explain. It is to reject the grace of God, but how can one reject something that one has received? The phrase is tantamount to exhorting the Corinthians not to reject the salvation that is offered in Christ. There is an urgency in Paul’s tone. ‘Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation’ as he quotes from Isaiah’s second servant song (Isa. 49:8). Don’t delay anymore.

In vv. 4-10, Paul spells out what is involved in his ministry. He does not want to be an obstacle to the ministry of the gospel. What can these obstacles be? Paul puts it simply that he has not put his self-interest above that of the gospel. This section sums up his selfless attitude to ministry. He gave his all. The hardships and the obstacles are not factors for him to do otherwise or to turn elsewhere. Circumstantial factors, favourable or unfavourable, are not the determinants of ministry. Paul expresses that in pairs of opposites and we should read it this way.

<sup>4</sup> ... by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;	<sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; <sup>7</sup> by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;
<sup>8</sup> through dishonor	and honor,
through slander	and praise.
We are treated as impostors,	and yet are true;
<sup>9</sup> as unknown,	and yet well known;
as dying, as punished,	and yet not killed; and behold, we live;
<sup>10</sup> as sorrowful,	yet always rejoicing;
as poor,	yet making many rich;
as having nothing,	yet possessing everything.

What he is trying to say is that to every obstacle or unfavourable factor, there is a corresponding uplift, the plus side. Ministry will be characterised by these paradoxical cognates. We need to be able to see that. That is the grace of God to us. What counts in ministry is the call of God and the compelling love in the heart put there by the Spirit of God. Those are the determinants of ministry. The heart that is led by the Spirit overrides the logic of circumstantial factors and expediency. Having given his all, Paul pleads with the Corinthians to do likewise and respond to the gospel. These closing words of Paul are full of passion and meaning.

Paul has been teaching them to observe the laws of the heart and that is not to restrict them in the things they do. On the contrary what Paul was teaching them is to accord to them the freedom in Christ. They are only restricted by their own inward looking. I want to quote again R Martin beautiful comment here. ‘... a heart full of love and affection expands, while one filled with selfishness and suspicion has a strong tendency to

shrink.’<sup>1</sup> All that Paul was saying is to exhort them and not to restrict them. On the contrary, it is to free them. They are restricted by the narrowness of their attitude and thinking. In accepting Paul’s teaching, they would know the freedom that is in Christ and hence widen their hearts to others.

It seems that Paul is again reflecting on Isaiah 54 when he wrote that.

<sup>2</sup>“Enlarge the place of your tent,  
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;  
do not hold back; lengthen your cords  
and strengthen your stakes.

<sup>3</sup>For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,  
and your offspring will possess the nations  
and will people the desolate cities. (Isa. 54:2-3)

The victory of the servant will bring the people back to God. In that case then there will be hordes of people coming into Jerusalem and we need to widen our hearts to accommodate them. The heart that is touched by the Spirit will respond in love.

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<sup>1</sup> R Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Texas, Word Books: 1986), 186.