

“For the love of Christ controls us...” 2 Cor. 5:14

I cannot think of a more blessed state than the one Paul describes here: being continually and pervasively influenced by the love of Christ. The word translated “controls” is a very powerful one. It is the Greek word *sunecho* and it means “surround, hem in, encircle; control, rule; hold prisoner, guard” (cf. Lk 22:63). The “love of Christ” had seized Paul’s heart, taken him captive and now he lives under its powerful influence. This condition is seen not only in the decisions he made but in the values and desires behind and underneath them. All that he loved and did finds its explanation in the love of Christ. This is gospel living. This is what Paul calls “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (NLT). This is so different from “religious living” which is motivated by the possibility of gaining acceptance with God through our efforts. The fruit of this kind of life is revealed in Paul’s final recorded words in 2 Tim 4:6-8.

To have our hearts controlled by the love of Christ is the most excellent condition we could ever dream of. It is an absolute necessity for the “ministers of the New Covenant” (2Cor 3:6). Paul has explained the great difference between life under the old covenant (Mosaic or Sinaitic) and the new covenant (which we celebrate at the Lord’s table). In chapter 3 verse 6 and following Paul contrasts life under these two covenants. His description of life under the new covenant is foundational for understanding our role as Fathers in this new covenant era (see 2 Corinthians 3:6-18).

How can we come to live such a life? That is what Paul is describing in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. It is living in response to the most powerful motivating force in all human experience: the love of Christ.

What brought Paul and his companions into this glorious condition? He tells us: “having concluded this...” They came to a conclusion. The word “concluded” is the word *krino*. It describes what a judge does on the bench after he thoughtfully and thoroughly examines all the evidence. He comes to a conclusion. That conclusion becomes a binding decision that has consequences. Paul and his fellow New Covenant ministers have arrived at a conclusion, a conviction, after examining the evidence. But what was their conclusion? “That one died for all.” This is the evidence that convinced them of the love of Christ.

We should step back for a moment and consider this mighty act of divine love manifested by Christ. The writer of Hebrews described it as the most important event in the history of the world (Heb 9:26 “the high point of the ages”). In this glorious moment the eternal love of the Triune God was put on display in a most unlikely location: Golgatha, the place of the skull. A place where heaping shame upon the dregs and despised of humanity was a regular event. But here in this dark and depressing place, the glorious love of the Eternal Triune God broke into the darkness of human sinfulness like a mighty bolt of lightning. What had been mutually experienced from all eternity by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was suddenly put on display as the Father made the Son “who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5).

The Bible teaches that when no creation existed, no universe, no angels, no sun, moon or

stars, when there was only God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit. The Father decided to give a love gift to the Son: A redeemed humanity (A twist on Father’s Day: father’s giving gifts to their sons!) But, in response, after the Son has redeemed and sanctified this redeemed humanity He will present her to the Father as His bride.

This is why Jesus says in John 6, “all that the Father gives to me will come to me” and “no one comes to the Father but through me and no one comes to me unless the Father draws him.” The Father as an expression of perfect love gives to the Son a perfected humanity who will forever and ever praise the name of the Son.

Another component to the giving of this gift: 1Jn 3:2 “When we see him we shall be like Him.” Rom 8:29 “We were predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” You can sum up the doctrine of election this way: *Before the foundation of the world the Father determined to give a redeemed humanity to the Son to reflect His glory and to praise Him forever and ever and ever.*

But exactly how will we reflect His glory and bring praise to Him forever and ever and ever? Elsewhere Paul explained that God called you through the gospel so “*that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Thes 2:14) To “gain the glory” (*peripoesin*) means to fully experience that which has been acquired. It is God’s purpose that we fully experience the glory of His Son. What is that? His glory is most perfectly manifested in His being the object of the Father’s love. The most glorious thing about the Son is that He is loved by the Father. It was the Father’s will that His Son have a people who have experienced that same glory of being loved with the very same love that the Son has experienced from all eternity. The Cross is the great demonstration of this love. The Son demonstrated His love for His people in a way that exhausts all our capacities to describe. The Bible describes it with expressions like: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:25-26).

Entire books have been written to explain those words. Thousands and thousands of lines of poetry and songs have been written so that we can respond to this truth from the deepest part of our beings. When we sing, “Take heart, He will love you forever” it makes you want to dance and shout. When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes just a bit to the depth of this truth we are stunned by it. This is why Paul prays for the Ephesians as he does in his letter to them:

... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16-19)

Why didn't Paul simply pray that we would know the love of Christ more deeply? Because apart from the powerful enablement of the Triune God you could never contain

it. You would blow up! It would blow your mind... It would explode your brain and body. It is only through His divine empowerment that we can come to “gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Being the objects of Christ’s love is the most blessed condition. This is where Paul found himself. The greatness of this love is demonstrated by the massive benefits He purchased for us and the incalculable cost He was willing to pay to acquire them. He gave Himself for us (“He died for all”) so that He could give Himself to us (“all died”). How is that? Why do the words “all died” imply that we will receive the benefits of His death? The reality that “all died” means that all those for whom Christ died will receive the eternal benefits of Christ’s death which is Christ Himself. Sin separated us from God, for whom we were created. Christ’s death on the cross obliterates that separation. The barriers of condemnation and alienation that separated us from God are forever removed and we are brought into the community of the love of the Triune God through Christ. Elsewhere Paul announces that “he who has died is justified from sin” (Rom 6). This justification from sin is our full and complete freedom from all other gods that have held us captive and kept us in a state of enmity against God. It is through this death that we now can have acceptance through Christ.

But there is more. In the very next verse Paul exults, “and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (2 Cor 5:15). Here is the great joy of living as objects of Christ’s love. We are no longer stuck in the bondage of living for ourselves! This is a major deliverance.

But perhaps this does not sound like a benefit to you. Maybe It sounds like a curse instead. After all, isn’t one of the benefits of living in the free world being able to live for ourselves? Aren’t we constantly being coached on how to do this very thing? When was the last time you saw a commercial on TV about a program or a pill or a book for learning how to stop living for ourselves? This condition isn’t even listed on the APA Psychological Disorders list! To the contrary living for ourselves is portrayed as the very essence of “the good life.” In fact Psychological health is often described in terms of “self” - self-esteem, self-determination, self-love, self-fulfillment, etc. This is at the heart of the world’s wisdom. It is described in Rom 1:25 as “worshipping and serving the creature.” It is at the heart of the wisdom of this world. As the commercial said, “You only go around once, get all the gusto you can.” This is living for ourselves. In fact right now living for ourselves is being creatively marketed as a most valuable experience and you can have it by visiting a city in Nevada where “what happens here stays here.” According to the Las Vegas Mercury, these are “the five words that revitalized Las Vegas.” The article goes on to explain: “The seemingly unassuming phrase quickly became the bedrock for a series of television commercials that have since evolved into pop culture landmarks.” Why does this pitch strike a cord in the hearts of Americans? Because it is the opportunity to serve yourself without having to suffer any downside. You can enjoy the dance without every paying the piper. You can indulge yourself and only you will know the truth. But the fact is that "serving yourself" has a wretched downside.

I'd like you to imagine for a moment what it was like to have been a member of the household in which Jesus grew up. After the death of Joseph, Jesus being the eldest son would have functioned as the head of the household. What would it be like in a home where the head of the household did not serve himself but the other members of the household? Imagine a family led by the person with the mindset described in Philippians 2. Imagine a family who are taught by example to "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." (Phil 2:3-4). Paul says that this was the mindset that was in Christ Jesus. And he was the head of this household. It is ironic that a member of that household is the one who gives us the biblical description of a household where everyone is looking out for their own interests. In James 4 the brother of Jesus describes a church family that has drifted back into the bondage of "serving themselves." Read James 4:1-3 and you will see the ugly picture of such a family (in this case a church family). One of the clear evidences that we are living under the control of the love of Christ is that we will be experiencing the freedom of no longer serving ourselves.

Paul describes "no longer living for (our)selves" as a liberation because living for ourselves is the ultimate form of bondage. No other idol is as demanding as "ourselves." The self is the most demanding of all gods. Living for ourselves is what so often wreaks havoc in our lives. It is the greatest enemy of love, joy and peace in the church, the family, and society. It kills love for others and produces envy, quarrels, conflicts, infidelity, divorce and damaged relationships of every kind.

Back in 2 Cor 5 Paul describes one of the effects of the slavery of serving ourselves. It's found in verse 16. Recognizing others "according to the flesh." What does that mean? It means that when we are serving ourselves (that is the essence of what it means to be 'in the flesh') we see people as barriers or stepping stones. We learn to use them or lose them depending upon whether they are barriers or stepping stones for us. Philippians 2 describes it as acting out of selfishness and empty conceit, regarding ourselves as more important than others and looking out for our own personal interests. This is life in the flesh, the bondage of living for ourselves. It is the wisdom of God to deliver us from this bondage through the work of Him who did nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind He regarded His people as more important than Himself; Instead of looking out for His own personal interests, looked out for the interests of His people. In fact, as Paul put it, "although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to take advantage of for His own benefit, but poured Himself out for us." This is the kind of father that every family needs but we fathers do not measure up, do we.

Over the years I have had the God-given assignment on several occasions to try and help people whose marriage was in serious trouble. This kind of crisis never happens overnight. It is always because of a long-standing pattern of life that has created a complicated mess. Something like a bird's nest in a fishing reel. One thing that I have learned: selfishness and self-seeking is by far the most common underlying cause of dwindling love within a marriage bond. When a spouse explains that their spouse is no

longer capable of meeting their needs and that they are no longer “in love” with them it is usually accompanied by a total blindness to the cause that lies within their own heart. At the wedding ceremony they vowed to love their spouse above all others regardless of the circumstances they would face. They promised *“to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do us part.”* But now they have come to love themselves above all others.

More times than I can count on my fingers, I have heard professing Christians utter phrases like: “I know God loves me and doesn’t want me to be in a relationship that makes my life miserable.” “I know God doesn’t want me to be married to someone who cannot meet my needs.” Let me interpret for you: “I am god and I deserve to be worshipped.” Paul calls this “the lie” - that we should worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25).

If they pursue this course, sooner or later they come up against “The shocking truth.” What is “the shocking truth”? It is that no one else in the universe will worship you as you want to be worshipped. Why? Because you are not God and in fact when you put yourself on the throne you make a ruthless deity. And your life will end up being very lonely. In a family or community where everyone is serving themselves you have a community made up of gods with only one worshipper: yourself. It is religious chaos of the worst kind.

Living for ourselves is a horrible bondage and it is so very difficult for such a slave to recognize this form of bondage. Many marriages could be saved from destruction simply by the liberation that is promised in the Gospel.

I skipped over a very important statement found in verse 15. It is the essence of the freedom that the gospel promises. Look again at verse 15: "He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, ***but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.***"

Here is the key to the freedom that the gospel brings us. What God requires of fathers is what He Himself is. He is the Father that loves His Son with a perfect love. Every human father falls short of that kind of love. The harder I tried to be the father I should be the more aware I became that I was not. The more I discovered about what God required of me as the spiritual leader in my home the harder I would try to be that kind of spiritual leader. And the harder I tried the greater the frustration. I would swing between pride and fear. Pride in my knowledge of and commitment to the task. But then would come the fear because I would always fall so short of what I knew I was supposed to be. The pride would move me toward keeping up the appearance of perfection and fear would drive me to despair at my failure to be and do what I thought I was so committed to. I was supposed to be the spiritual leader who loved his family like God loves His family. I was supposed to be the kind of husband that loved his wife like Christ loved the church. I could articulate it more effectively than ever before but now I was much more aware of how self serving I really was. I was more aware of my fleshly desire to have my family serve my needs first of all. To be and do what was best for me. I would fall into the sin of

looking at them through the flesh; seeing them as stepping stones or barriers to fulfilling my desires. But I discovered that it is the gospel that provides the answer. God has given us His Son who has done what we have failed to do.

Not only has He perfectly fulfilled all righteousness, He fulfilled it in our stead and then He died in our place so that we "might no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again on our behalf." It is the death of Christ in our place that makes freedom from the slavery of the self-serving life possible. When we turn to Him in faith and trust Him as our substitute not only do we receive His righteousness and enter into a relationship with the Heavenly Father; we also are given the most powerful life motivation we could ever experience: Joyful gratitude for amazing grace. It is living out of this motivation that sets us free! It is tapping into the joy of our acceptance in Christ that brings the life of freedom. Living for "Him who died and rose again on our behalf" is freedom! Here again is the great exchange. We exchange the life of self-serving bondage for the life of joyful freedom in serving the one who Has given Himself so that He could give Himself to us.

The psychological effects are amazing. When I am living for Christ I am finally living for and worshipping the only one worthy of my worship and service. And it is life transforming. When I am living for Christ instead of myself I find it absolutely delightful to love others above myself and to put their needs before my own. For years I assumed that my wife loved me and served me the way she did because she found me worthy of her love and devotion. I was wrong. She knew me so much better than I suspected. She loved me sacrificially because she was not living for herself but for the One who died and rose again on her behalf. This kind of love cannot be diluted by the diminishing loveliness of the object. This love flows out a heart that is tapping into the joy of Christ's love demonstrated at the cross. Only the diminishing of that joy can diminish this love.

We are facing unprecedented increases in failed marriages within the church. It is obvious that many who profess faith in Christ have not learned to live out of the joy of Christ's love and their acceptance in Him. Nothing transforms the heart like eyes that can see and ears that can hear and hearts that can embrace the glory of the love of Christ for His own. This is why it is so important for a husband and father to become an expert at believing and communicating the gospel to himself and then to his family. If he wants a family intact he must drench it in the gospel rather than religion.

— Frank Griffith