

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17 | Sermon 'The Love of Christ Urges Us On'

Ezekiel 17:22-24 / Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15 / 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17 / Mark 4:26-34

Preached on 16 June 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, give us confidence in your promises, so that we may make it our aim to please you, and be urged on by the love of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A Singular Objective

In the world of the military, it is common to hear that for a mission to succeed, it has to have clarity on its core objective. Any project, any undertaking can easily be side-tracked by losing sight of the one goal or purpose that should be in view. In fact, two different missions can be dealing with the same things, but be completely different according to their goal.

Of course it's not just the military for which this is true. It's wise advice for life. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle begins his work of ethics by asking "What is the ultimate purpose of human existence?" Aristotle wisely intuited that by asking this question, and by settling on a response, the whole of our lives can be ordered well, ordered towards this one goal.

Coming now to today's reading from 2 Corinthians, I want to draw attention to St Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, and so God's instruction to us, that "*we make it our aim to please him*". To please God. Our core objective, on which all the other things we do in life hang. Of course we have other objectives in our family, our work, our church, our clubs, our spiritual life. But they all find their home, their right place, in service to the greater goal of pleasing God.

Now St Paul is explicitly talking to baptized Christians, people who have been saved by grace through faith, just as you have been. For someone who is outside of the life of faith, the Scriptures give a kind of core objective as being to repent and believe in the Gospel, to be born again of water and the Spirit, and have their sins washed away. For God wills all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. And so of course, being saved is God-pleasing.

But Paul is speaking to us, who have received God's mercy, regarding how we are to order our lives now as holy people. He makes this explicit a bit further on in our reading:

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

Christ died and rose again for you, so that now you who live in him “might live no longer for yourselves, but for him”, for Christ, for God. *“We make it our aim to please him.”* (See also Romans 12:1)

Home or Away

The full verse that St Paul says is: *“So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.”*

St Paul is saying that whether we live or whether we die, our objective remains the same. We have been bought with a price, brought into God’s kingdom, and now for eternity we live to please God, to praise his name, to adore him, to trust his Word of forgiveness, to trust also his Word of good counsel and good order, not leaning on our own understanding, but pleasing Him by loving Him and what He says. And St Paul says that we now have great confidence, in life and in death, that God has prepared a home for us:

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

It’s best here to think of St Paul’s words not as an encouragement to be confident, to be a positive person. Rather, St Paul is proclaiming to you, telling you, that we have confidence. Whether you know it or not. Today is a time to be renewed in the confidence that we truly have. That as we walk by faith, and not by sight, we are putting our trust in what endures, in God who does not disappoint.

St Paul begins by saying we are at home in body, so away from the Lord, but then says that we would rather be away from the body and home with the Lord. That in one sense we are at home in the body, but that in the truer sense we are at home through death, living with the Lord. That like the birds of the air that Jesus spoke about in today’s Gospel, we will find our lasting home in the boughs, the branches of the kingdom of God. So that when it comes to the matter of judgement, we can have confidence also in Christ.

For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

St Paul here is not teaching that we earn our way into righteousness. The death and resurrection of Christ has granted us the victory over sin, death, and the devil, given to us by grace through faith. But Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead, and will take into account what has been done in the body, including the way in which God is at work in us and through us. In this vein, we can remember also Jesus’ teaching

about rewards in heaven. We don't earn our way in, but given that God's grace has secured the promise for us, our life in the body will lead to different rewards.

The Love of Christ Urges us On

For we now live for God. He has gathered you here again this Sunday, to renew you in your life of faith, to forgive you, to instruct you, to encourage you. And do you know that just by being here this morning, you are pleasing him? By simply being in God's holy presence, you are fulfilling the goal of life, to please God, just as He is well-pleased in You, and delights in You, and blesses You, and forgives you, as Your loving heavenly Father.

That's why St Paul can now say that the love of Christ "urges us on". The Greek word could also be translated as "controls us" or "constrains us". The love of Christ now sets the agenda. It's what we live by, and what we live for. And God is telling us, through St Paul, that this now changes everything. That when we establish our objective as loving God, as He has first loved us, everything around us is different.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

As I was addressing this text in Bible studies in the parish during the week, one imperfect analogy I used was that often we can see everyone as orbiting around ourselves, as if we were the sun, and everyone else, including God, were planets that come in and out of our view. We only see the world through our own eyes. We are the only subject, and it can appear as if everyone else is an object in our world, even a means for us to use for our own ends.

But in Christ, in the new creation, we can see all people, including ourselves, as orbiting around God. That Christ has died for all, and we find our freedom in seeing ourselves and other people in their relation to the gracious God, with God at the centre of all things, and each other as fellow people loved by God. No longer regarding people from a human point of view, but from God's point of view.

CS Lewis once wrote a profound sermon on 2 Corinthians, called 'The Weight of Glory'. I can recommend you digging it up if you can find it. In that sermon, he drew out the ramifications of seeing all life in God's eyes. And I want to close today's sermon by sharing a part of what he said there:

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations [glory greater than we can imagine or corruption greater than we can imagine]. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the

awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat* [is truly hidden]—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.

So God grant you this vision, as you are urged on by the love of Christ, with great confidence and purpose of mind, as we seek to please Him who is well-pleased with us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.