

GOD'S LOVE EXPERIENCED & EXTENDED**2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-15**

Have you ever associated God's love with being demanding? New York City pastor and author, Tim Keller, has had many fascinating conversations with people seeking God. One woman had to learn how the grace extended to us through Jesus' work on the cross can actually be more challenging than mere religion. She had always heard God accepts us only if we're good enough. She said this new message about being accepted by God because of what Jesus did for her was scary. Keller asked why it was scary. She said, "If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I'd be like a taxpayer with certain rights. I could claim I'd done my duty and now I deserved a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by God's grace alone, it's very different. Then there's nothing God cannot ask of me." That woman was exactly right. Grace has an edge to it. God's love makes demands. She knew if she was a sinner saved by God's grace alone, she was even more indebted to the Lordship of Jesus. If Jesus really had done everything the Bible said He had done for her, then she no longer belonged to herself. She joyfully and gratefully belonged to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to Himself.

Cruciform. Being cross-shaped. That's the overarching, mega theme we've assigned to our study of 2 Corinthians. Over and over again, the great Christian leader, Paul, demonstrated to the Corinthians what it meant to have a life shaped and molded by the cross of Jesus. Twenty centuries later we can still learn through Paul's example what it means to have a cruciform – a cross-shaped life – a life that resembles and reflects Jesus. Have you ever associated God's love with being demanding? Probably not. We tend to think of love in terms of acceptance and affirmation. We're apt to say, "He accepts me; therefore, he loves me" or "She affirms who I am; therefore, she loves me." Defining love in those terms isn't all wrong, but neither is it all right. I want you to think with me about God's love today. How we experience it and how we extend it. Yes, God's love for us accepts our innate value and affirms our priceless worth. You can't convey a deeper dignity or provide a higher appraisal of human beings than the one God gives in His Word. Made in His image. So valuable Jesus died as our substitute on the cross. But His love for us goes beyond acceptance and affirmation. That's revealed in our Scripture today. What do we find here? First...

JESUS' LOVE MAKES DEMANDS ON ME.

"Christ's love controls me." (2 Cor. 5:14 NLT) The Greek word Paul used there is a very interesting one. The English translations differ in their efforts to convey it's meaning. "For Christ's love compels us." (2 Cor. 5:14 NIV). "We are ruled by Christ's love for us." (2 Cor. 5:14 CEV). It's a strong word. It means to hem in, to hold on to or grip something on both sides, to take away options, to give no way out, or to back into a corner. Jesus used the same word when he said, "I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished." (Lk. 12:50 NLT) He was referring to the cross and all He would suffer on our behalf. It was the mission His Father had given to Him. It controlled, compelled, and ruled Jesus. It was the driving force of His life. It motivated Him every moment of every day. On the one hand,

as a human being, Jesus had no desire to suffer and die. On the other hand, He longed to fulfill His Father's will and mission because it was Jesus' destiny.

Here Paul said that Jesus' love for us controls or compels us. It rules us. It makes powerful demands on us. Paul knew that from personal experience. Once he realized the magnitude of God's grace channeled to him specifically in and through Jesus, he had no choice in how he was going to live out the rest of his life. The love of Jesus for Paul was so impactful it actually controlled – in a positive way – how Paul went about his life and ministry from the very first day of his conversion. It's the same for us. We're hemmed in by Jesus' love for us. Sometimes we think Jesus' love leaves us certain options. Paul would have none of that. He said Jesus' love actually takes away our options, backs us into a corner, grips and holds us firmly on both sides, and gives us no way out. The Holy Spirit who now lives within us gives us no rest or relief from the demands of Jesus' love upon our lives. Jesus' love for us is supposed to become the driving force of our lives. It's supposed to motivate us every moment of every day. And when we get motivated by Jesus' love, we become free to live a new life with new goals and new purposes. We become a means by which God brings glory to Himself and blesses the world. God's love for us is something beyond mere acceptance and affirmation. When we open up our lives to Jesus' love, it becomes something very demanding, controlling, and compelling. The Bible says...

JESUS' LOVE DEMANDS I DIE TO MY OLD SELF

That's where Paul goes first. "Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life." (2 Cor. 5:14 NLT) What's Paul talking about? This isn't physical death, but the death of my old sinful nature and everything that's a part of "life" without God. Jesus' death must change the way we live here and now on Earth, not simply give us a ticket into Heaven. Dying to your old life or your old self. What does that mean? How can I die to my old self?

Well, first, I die to ignoring and disrespecting God. Paul wrote here, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others." (2 Cor. 5:11 NLT) When we fear the Lord, we take Him seriously every moment of every day. The Old Testament put it like this, "What does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul." (Dt. 10:12 NLT) Most people today ignore God. And when you do you disrespect Him. You don't have an appropriate fear of Him. When you choose to live your life according to your own standards rather than His standards, you disrespect Him. Or, when you turn God into an indulgent, permissive Santa Claus kind of caricature who winks at your ungodly actions and attitudes and could care less how you live your life, you disrespect Him. Jesus' love for you demands you die to every possible way you can ignore or disrespect God.

Dying to my old self demands I die to the myth I can make myself acceptable to God. "Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for

themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.” (2 Cor. 5:14-15 NLT) Most people believe in God, but they believe the persistent myth that somehow they can make themselves morally acceptable to an absolutely holy God who demands perfection from anyone wanting a relationship with Him. Although most will readily admit they aren’t perfect; nevertheless, they’re still hopeful God will be impressed with their sincerity and the fact they’re morally better than a lot of other people. Most people also admire and respect Jesus, but they balk at the idea Jesus’ death was necessary to make them acceptable to God. They refuse to believe Jesus died for us or that God asked Him to do that. They aren’t willing to give Jesus that kind of significance or exclusivity. Jesus’ love for you demands you die to thinking you can ever earn or deserve a relationship with God based on your own efforts or merits.

Paul touched on the fact dying to your old self means I die to wrong evaluations of other human beings. “Are we commending ourselves to you again? No, we are giving you a reason to be proud of us, so you can answer those who brag about having a spectacular ministry rather than having a sincere heart.” (2 Cor. 5:12 NLT) His point was even clearer in v. 16 (NLT), “So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view.” A group of false teachers had arrived at the church in Corinth who were trying to undermine Paul’s influence. They questioned his leadership role. They said he wasn’t charismatic enough. He lacked gravitas. He also lacked spiritual gifts top leaders should have. They thought all his sufferings and trials were proof he didn’t have God’s blessing. They were evaluating Paul from a merely human point of view.

I can’t recall a time in my own life where there is such open disrespect for fellow human beings. But that’s how our culture and even its leaders say we should act. Our old, sinful self refuses to place equal value on human beings. It believes some people matter and others don’t. It says only some people deserve to be treated with dignity, justice, or kindness. And, sadly, sometimes those attitudes seem to come from people who say they follow Jesus! If people’s beliefs or lifestyles are different than ours or even sinful, it’s easy to begin to believe they don’t matter to God and aren’t worthy of being treated with dignity. Christian, do we still evaluate other people from a merely human point of view? It’s so easy to do. But God’s Word says Jesus’ love for us takes away that option. Jesus’ love leads us to a uncomfortable conclusion: I am no longer free to look at people from a worldly point of view. Jesus’ love for you demands you die to the way this world evaluates and judges other human beings.

That leads to something Scripture teaches here and everywhere when it comes to my old self. I die to refusing spiritual change and growth. We all resist change – especially spiritual change. God is all about changing your heart and mine and giving us a wholly new perspective on living. But we often want to cling to the old stuff – be it pride, resentment, rage, lust, selfishness, or loving money and things. We deny it. We say, “I don’t have a problem in that area.” We ignore it. We say, “I’m not that bad. There are many people worse than me.” We justify it. We say, “That’s just the way I am. If you knew what’s happened in my life, you’d understand.” Most of us are quick to excuse and tolerate the ongoing presence of the old, sinful self inside of us. Jesus’ love for you demands you die to any stubborn refusal to change and grow spiritually.

When it comes to my old self, Jesus' love for me demands I die to the centrality of me. Ever since Adam, ordinary human beings live life for themselves. For their own benefit. "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves." (2 Cor. 5:15 NLT) Have you ever watched the NFL Pro Bowl game? At the end of the season, the best players from the league are chosen and play for their respective conference – either the National or American conference. Each conference team wears the same colored jersey. So one team wears red and other one wears blue like in the picture. But what's interesting is that that they all have different helmets. Each player wears the helmet of the team he really plays for. Those are the folk who pay him the big contract. A lot of people think the Pro Bowl ought to be abolished, because it's not a real game. The players don't really hit hard or run hard. They play very carefully because they don't want to get injured and put their contract in jeopardy. We Christians can resemble those NFL players at the Pro Bowl. We wear jerseys that say "Jesus," but we wear a helmet that says "Self." That's the real team we play for. That's the side we're really on. And that reality affects every area of our lives.

When you live for yourself, you are central. A self-dominated life is one where your primary goal every day is to please yourself. Campus Crusade for Christ - or Cru as it's called now - popularized a graphic that shows two circles that represent two kinds of lives. A life without Jesus has self at the center of it represented by the big S letter. The throne in the circle represents who's in charge of that life. The dots are just the stuff of everyday life. If this depicts your life, your old self sits on the throne at the center of your life. You're in charge. It's a self-centered, self-serving life. It's a life organized completely around self. Jesus, represented by the cross, is on the outside of your life. You can be a very nice person and still be self-centered. You can be very moral and upright and still be self-centered. What you can't be is who God wants you to be. Jesus' love for you demands you die to your own centrality. Now, dying to anything isn't easy or enjoyable, so I'm glad about what else our Scripture says....

JESUS' LOVE DEMANDS I LIVE A NEW KIND OF LIFE

I'm very glad for v. 15 in our passage (NLT), "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them." If I expect to be resurrected after I die and then live eternally, I must respond properly to Jesus' death and resurrection. We've reflected on what or how you die to your old self. But here's an even more important question to answer. How can I live out my new life? How do I define it? What does it look like?

Jesus' love demands I glorify God in all things. This is the exact opposite of ignoring or disrespecting God which is evidence of your old life. This is the New Testament version of fearing the Lord. Just a few verses before the ones we're considering today, Paul said, "For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body." (2 Cor. 5:10 NLT) Paul knew God was going to hold him accountable. Therefore, Paul's focus was glorifying God in everything he did, everything he said, every decision he made, and

every relationship he entered into. I think about the central verse in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31 NLT) There's also the verse we considered last week, "So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him." (2 Cor. 5:9 NLT) Jesus' love leaves me no choice but to glorify God in all things.

Jesus' love demands I trust in who and what Jesus did for me. If I can make myself acceptable before God, Jesus died for nothing. But the fact is Jesus is both unique and significant. Through Jesus, God became a human being, died on the cross in our place as our substitute, and through His resurrection both the penalty for my sin (death) and the power of it has been broken. In another letter, Paul put it like this, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.... God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood." (Rom. 3:22, 24-25 NLT) Jesus' love leaves me no choice but to trust in who He is and what He did for me.

Jesus' love demands I treat everyone as objects of God's gracious love. I mentioned earlier we live in such a polarizing, divisive period of time. I must be honest with you. Some days, I really struggle with treating everyone as a creature made in God's image and someone for whom Jesus died and rose again. I look at people who identify as LGBTQ. I want to dismiss them because of their unbiblical lifestyle choices. But, they're made in God's image and people for whom Jesus died and rose again. I hear transgender people talk about their issues. I want to dismiss them as being mentally ill. Made in God's image and people for whom Jesus died and rose again. I hear the arguments and rationale of people who support social issues and political leaders that make me both angry and nauseous – and some of them are fellow Christians. Made in God's image and people for whom Jesus died and rose again. I run into people whose approach to the pandemic leaves me incredulous. I want to lash out at them. Made in God's image and people for whom Jesus died and rose again.

Jesus' love forced Paul toward a striking conclusion. He was no longer free to treat people from a purely earthly, human perspective. If Jesus' love was made available to all people so that Jesus died for everyone, then it's perfectly obvious Jesus loved everyone enough to die for them. Therefore, I no longer have the freedom to look at anyone differently than the way Jesus looks at them. I must look at those whom Jesus loves through an entirely new set of glasses. I no longer have the freedom to treat people the way I did before. I must look at people through Jesus' eyes. Jesus' love leaves me no choice but to treat everyone as objects of God's gracious love.

Jesus' love demands I pursue spiritual change and growth. Not run from it. Not avoid it. Instead, pursue it. Chase after it. Surrender to it. In the name of being loving, tolerant, and forgiving, some churches today seem to suggest we should ask Jesus to overlook and excuse attitudes and actions He died to free us from. All the rotten fruit of our old self – our sinful nature. All the junk we want to indulge. Paul would have none

of it. No, if Jesus died for all, then when you become His follower, you die, too. You no longer have the freedom to indulge attitudes and actions it was necessary for Jesus to die for. When you put your faith in Jesus, it's in order that you might pursue a new, changed life. In Jesus the new has come, the old is gone. God sent His Son to die on the cross so you and I could be transformed, not accommodated. We're called to walk away from the old life and live into this new life. I don't have any freedom to live like I used to live. Instead, I have been given the freedom to be a new creation in Jesus Christ. Jesus' love leaves me no choice but to pursue spiritual transformation.

I like the story of a family staying at a hotel in Nigeria. The man heard a knock on the door. He opened it and found a young, smiling Nigerian gentleman ready to clean their room. He was so embarrassed by the state of the room. Suitcases, clothes, and stuff were sprawled out all over unmade beds. Wet towels were all over the bathroom floor. The man apologized profusely, but the young man replied graciously, "No problem, sir. For this reason I have come, to put your things in order." The Bible says this is exactly what Jesus came to do for us. To put our lives in order! He doesn't demand that we first straighten up our mess. Instead, He offers to clean up for us. We dare not refuse His gracious offer. Instead, we invite Him to do His job in us.

Jesus' love demands I make and keep Jesus central. Why did Jesus die? It wasn't just to reveal His power. It wasn't just to demonstrate His love. It wasn't just to give us an example of selflessness. I can't think of a more straightforward explanation than the one Scripture provides. "He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them." (2 Cor. 5:15 NLT) Yes, by nature, you and I are hopelessly self-centered. But when we receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, our focus and orientation changes from self to Jesus. We make Him and His mission central and most important in our lives. We move from egocentricity to Christocentricity. Earlier, I mentioned that Cru graphic showing two circles that represent two kinds of lives. Here's the one showing a self-directed or a self-centered life again. Here is the one showing a Christ-directed or a Christ-centered life. Jesus sits on the throne of such a life. Self is submitted and surrendered to Jesus. All the different issues of life are in their proper place. Which circle most accurately represents your life today? It's only too obvious which graphic represents what it means to be cruciform – to have a cross-shaped life.

Do you remember the day when you gave your teenager the keys to your car for the first time? It's a big moment – and often an anxious moment - when you hand someone else the keys. Up until now, I've been driving. I choose the destination. I choose the route. I choose the speed. Your teenager was in the drive-along seat. But if you change seats, you have to trust him or her. It's all about control. Whoever is in this seat is the person in control. A lot of people find Jesus handy to have in the car as long as He's in the ride-along seat. After all, something may come up where I require His services. "Jesus, I have a health problem. Help! Jesus, I have a big decision to make. Help! Jesus, I have a money problem. Help! Jesus, I have a relationship problem. Help! Jesus, You can be in my car, but I'm not so sure I want You driving."

But if Jesus is driving, I'm not in charge of my life anymore. If He's driving, for example, I'm not in charge of my wallet anymore. If He's in control then it's no longer a matter of giving some money when I'm feeling generous or when more of it's coming into my life. Now, it's His wallet. If Jesus is driving, I'm not even in charge of my own self anymore. I no longer have the right to satisfy every self-centered ambition. No, it's His agenda. It's His life. I'm not in charge of my mouth anymore. I don't get to gossip, deceive, tell people off, or exaggerate. I get out of the driver's seat and hand the keys over to Him. I'm still fully there and involved. I'm just no longer in charge. It's no longer just my life anymore. It's His life. "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 NLT)

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you are experiencing and extending God's love. It controls, compels, and rules your life. Jesus' love demands you glorify God, you trust in who and what Jesus did for you, you treat everyone as objects of God's gracious love, you pursue spiritual change and growth, and you make and keep Jesus central.