

June 6, 2021

## MOTIVATIONS IN OUR MINISTRY

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

*(12 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

One of the things that the Bible makes clear is that our motivations matter, and it announces this in ways that are almost shocking. Paul actually says in 1 Corinthians 13 that someone can give away all that he has and even deliver his body up for death, but if those acts aren't driven by love, then they amount to nothing. Therefore, when you and I attempt to follow the commands of Christ, that obviously involves more (though not less) than our words and actions. It requires that we have right motivations. Or, to think of this as a church, when we are given our mission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that Christ commands, that teaching involves exhorting one another to live by the right motivations. Simply put, what drives us matters.

And if this has forced you to ask the question, "What then should my motivations be?" it's good that we're looking at 2 Corinthians 5:11-15 this morning because in this text that's the very thing that Paul dives into. In the next section (which we'll look at next week), we'll look into the essence of Paul's message, but in this text he exposes us to his motivations. But they're not only his motivations, but what the Scripture teaches should be our motivations in ministry as well. So what are some of the motivations that should drive us as believers? Let me name three.

### **The fear of God**

The first is the fear of God. Paul writes in the first half of verse 11, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others." By this, Paul is telling us that his ministry of gospel proclamation is rooted in the fear of the Lord. And this is natural, flowing out of verse 10, where Paul has just noted that everyone will one day stand before Christ in judgment. Christ as the judge of all men, rendering judgment against humanity for whether we've done good or evil, is a fearful sight. Indeed, the author of Hebrews reminds us that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). But my guess is that this declaration that we should be motivated by the fear of the Lord makes us as believers a bit uncomfortable, doesn't it? And I want to note that it makes us uncomfortable for reasons that are, well, *reasonable*.

Let's examine for a second all the thoughts in our hearts that push against this idea that you and I should fear the Lord. First, we read in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." And then we flesh out the logic. The greatest commandment is that we love God, and indeed we do. In fact, in 1 John 4:19—the following verse—we're reminded, "We love him because he first loved us." So if we love God, and perfect love casts out fear, then there would seem to be no place for fearing God, right? Moreover, we're reminded that fear has to do with punishment, and for the believer we do not live our lives in fear of the punishment of God because Christ paid our penalty for us on the cross, bearing the punishment that was due us. He

bore divine wrath against sinners so that we might say with Paul, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). And so applying 1 John 4:18, it seems there is no place for the believer to fear the Lord. We love him, and in Christ we do not fear the punishment of condemnation. So, it can feel straightforward. There really is no room for believers to fear God. But, not so fast. It’s actually a little more complex, isn’t it? Let’s consider others texts of Scripture.

First, we speak much about the glorious promises of the new covenant that the prophets spoke about and which have come about in Christ. Remember how Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant with us, give us new hearts, put his Spirit within us, and cause us to walk in his ways? Well, that’s not all they prophesied. In Jeremiah 32:38-40, the prophet words the new covenant promise from God in this terms. As a mouthpiece for God, he says, “They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, *that they may fear me forever*, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. *And I will put the fear of me in their hearts*, that they may not turn from me.” Did you see that? Two times the Lord words the promises of the new covenant involving God putting fear of him in our hearts. Now, we can say that fearing the Lord is such a good thing it’s one of the glorious new covenant promises, right alongside having new hearts and the Lord’s indwelling Spirit. And yet there’s more.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:28, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” This text is no doubt easier to understand in light of last week’s text. If the believer’s soul goes to be with the Lord at death, Jesus is saying that we shouldn’t fear those who can kill us. After all, they may be able to kill the body, but they can’t kill the soul. At death our souls will go to be with the Lord. But then Jesus says that we *should* fear the one who can destroy body and soul in hell, meaning, the Lord. Therefore, Jesus is commanding us to fear the Lord, and obviously what Jesus commands is good. Nor is this just isolated to a place or two in the New Testament. In fact, later in the very book we’re studying (2 Corinthians) Paul will again bring up this expectation that we fear the Lord, saying in 7:1, “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion *in the fear of the Lord*.” We might also add in Philippians 2:12-13 we’re told to work out our salvation “with fear and trembling” for God is working and willing in us. And finally—though we could note more—in Psalm 130 the psalmist writes to the Lord, “But with you there is forgiveness, *that you may be feared*” (v. 4). Here, then, forgiveness is mentioned as a means of bringing us to fear the Lord.

How do we square all of this? How can we obey the Bible and fear the Lord when perfect love casts out fear because “fear has to do with punishment,” as 1 John 4:18 says? Well, we certainly don’t live our lives in fear of being punished under the Lord’s wrath. Again, one of the glories of resting in the gospel is that we do not live in dread of condemnation. But knowing that the Lord loves us, has justified us, and will bring us to himself shouldn’t do anything to diminish our awe, reverence, and, indeed, fear of him. Let’s see if we can illustrate it by thinking through biblical examples of God’s judgment. First, consider the wrath of God. The imagery Revelation 14 uses

is to picture Christ's enemies as grapes that are trampled in a winepress so that "blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle" (v. 20). That's a horrifying scene. Revelation 16:19 speaks of the "fury of [God's] wrath." Or imagine the Lord's judgment on the night of the Passover when there were blood-curdling screams throughout Egypt as parents woke up to find out that their firstborn had died. Doesn't that cause your heart to sober up and fear? Or if you'd been Noah, listening as men and women beat on the ark as the flood water's rose. Wouldn't you feel the fear of the Lord in that moment? Or maybe in a non-biblical illustration. Imagine that you were surrounded by enemies seeking to kill you when someone much greater than you ran onto the scene, grab you and put you behind him for protection so that he might be your refuge, and then went and furiously poured out his wrath on these enemies, slaughtering each of them mercilessly. In that illustration, he's protecting you. He's being a refuge for you from danger. But you'd half to be crazy not to feel the fear of that one and think, "I better not dare wander away from his protection and refuge."

That's the awe and reverence and fear of God that should accompany believers. We know he loves us. We know he delights in us. We know he sings over us. But we also know that our Lord is not to be trifled with. He is a consuming fire. We must know and feel that he is to be feared. And because of that we don't treat sin lightly, and (as Paul says here) in light of the coming judgment, we persuade others to bow the knee to Christ—in *the fear of the Lord*. Our message is that of Psalm 2:12, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." As believers, let's not lose sight of the fear of God, which the Lord graciously gives his people by his Spirit.

So that's one motivation we must have as believers, but we've just gotten into one verse of this text, so we must say more. Second, Paul notes an eagerness to exalt our brothers and sisters.

### **An eagerness to exalt our brothers and sisters**

We are motivated not only by fear of God in all that we do but also by an eagerness to see our brothers and sisters exalted or lifted up. Let me show you why I say that. After Paul explains why he persuades others, motivated by the fear of the Lord, he realizes that it sounds like he's defending himself again, and he doesn't want to be heard that way. Therefore, he writes, "But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience" (v. 11). In other words, Paul is saying that the things he's claiming about himself he hopes are answered by the Corinthians saying, "Paul, of course we know this about you. We know you're sincere." But he continues, clarifying why he is sounding like he's defending himself. He writes, "We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart" (v. 12).

Now, do you catch the subtle gracious note that shows what Paul assumes about the Corinthians? Perhaps we should draw it out by asking ourselves a question. Is there someone with whom you want to share your accomplishments with? If something great happens in your life, is there someone (or maybe even a few individuals) with whom you want to share that?

Okay, now that you have that answer in your head, ask this question: Why wouldn't you share it with everyone? My guess is because we would say that we don't want to come across arrogant and self-consumed, right? And I think that's reasonable. My guess is that we're all turned off by the individual who must announce to the world his every accomplishment. Well, now let's answer this question: What makes those two individuals or two groups different? In other words, what is it about someone that makes you eager to share your accomplishments with that person but unwilling to share your accomplishments with another, lest that other person think you're arrogant? Isn't it love? That is, isn't it that you understand that the person with whom you share your accomplishments loves you. Those with whom you share your accomplishments aren't out to get you. They don't want you to fail. In fact, you know that their love for you is such that they'll genuinely feel joy at *your* accomplishments, much like a parent takes pride or joy in the accomplishments of a child.

Now, consider verse 12 again. Paul is saying to the Corinthians that the reason he's been noting his good motivations is because he wants to give them ammunition to be able to boast about him when others speak ill of him. In other words, Paul is assuming that the Corinthians are eager to see him exalted. Or, we might say, Paul is assuming that the Corinthians genuinely love him. And this should be a safe assumption. After all, John tells us in 1 John 4:20, "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." If we say we love God, then we should be able to affirm that we also genuinely love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and that should entail an eagerness to see them exalted before others. That should be one of our motivations as believers.

In this world, this isn't natural. We do not find this. The commonality among us in our unbelieving state is to gossip and tear down, envy and covet, and even delight in the failures of another because we get a sense that it makes us look better. But when we come to Christ, we get new hearts and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that should cause us to see a reverse of that. The church should be a picture to the world that feels so contrary to what they know. *We* should be a picture of those who love each other and seek to exalt one another before others.

Now, I know we've seen this in Philippians as well (which we went through recently), but don't let the familiarity with this reality numb you. Let's live out what Paul assumed of the Corinthians and should be able to be assumed of all believers: that we love one another and are eager to exalt and lift up one another. Can you imagine the joy and beauty of gathering with people who are listening to you and watching you carefully because they're eager to find something that they can speak about to others behind your back so that you're exalted before them? All of the sudden, instead of being paranoid or concerned that people are nitpicking you to tear you down, you can trust that people are listening and looking at everything you do eager to find opportunities to boast about you to others—especially if they hear others attacking you. When we are saved, this should characterize us. It should be a motivation for our actions. Paul sees it as so basic that he builds his writing on the assumption that the Corinthians are motivated to exalt him before others. But Paul gives us one more motivation in verses 13-15, namely, the love of Christ.

## The love of Christ

Now Paul realizes that all that he's having to write in order to defend himself sounds foolish, as if he's out of his mind, so he wants to add one more motivation that's driving him. He writes in verse 13, "For if we are besides ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." If he's doing something that sounds like he's out of his mind or—on the other hand—something in his right mind, they can know he's driven by fear of God and an eagerness to lift up the Corinthians. But then he adds in verse 14, "For the love of Christ controls us."

When we hear that phrase, we could take it that Paul is saying that our love for Christ controls us or that Christ's love for us controls us. But I think we're better off not trying to divide these as too sharply because as Paul continues, he seems to suggest that Christ's love for us results in us loving him. Let me show you what I mean. Paul writes, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died" (v. 14). In other words, it's Christ's love for us that is the engine here. Everything starts with that, and the chief way that's demonstrated is by considering his death for us. And this isn't just some general statement about Christ dying for everyone. Paul is saying this to believers. We know that because after saying that Christ died for all, he adds, "therefore all have died."

Now, when he writes that all have died, he means that the group he's talking about (the "all") have died with Christ. And this is how Paul speaks of salvation. For example, in Romans 6:6-8, Paul writes, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him."

Do you see then why it would be a problem to read Paul's statement that Christ died for all as simply a general statement about humanity? If true, then every person in the world can be said to have died with Christ so that they're no longer enslaved to sin, have been set free from sin, and will live with Christ in eternity. That's not what Paul is saying. Paul isn't teaching universalism (i.e. universal salvation). Rather, he's focusing on Christ's love for *his people*, demonstrated in his dying for them. As Paul says in Romans 5:8, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And so we see God's love for us. But there's more.

Paul notes that Christ died for us so that "those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (v. 15). Christ showed his love for us in dying for us so that we might live for him. In other words, knowing his love for us produces in us love for him. And so Paul doesn't allow us to lose sight of the love of Christ—both his love for us and our love for him—being basic to Christian obedience. We revere and are in awe of and fear the one we know loves us so deeply and whom we love so dearly, and this motivates our obedience.

Now, this specific motivation has rich implications for how we live our lives day to day. If we're to love the Lord as a motivating factor in our obedience, and if we love him because he first

loved us, then it becomes imperative that we are aware of Christ's love for us daily. This is one reason to rehearse the gospel and all that it means for us on a daily basis. Remind yourself daily that though you deserved God's wrath because of sin, Christ lived for you, died to pay for your sins, and rose from the dead so that his perfect righteousness is credited to you by faith. You are approved of by God, and he delights in you. You can start every day knowing that Jesus is who Revelation 1:5 tells us he is, namely, the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. And this is also why we orient every service around who he is and what he has done for us, culminating in an opportunity to come to the table and remember how he gave his body and shed his blood for us. We remember his love for us so that we might love him as well and, in love, obey his commandments.

Our motivations matter. We are to fear God, love God, and seek to exalt our brothers and sisters in Christ. And under God's Word, if you allow these motivations to be your guide, you'll find yourself obeying the two greatest commandments. Therefore, let's pray for grace and pursue obedience to our Lord. Amen.