

Viewing People Properly
2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Paul, prior to his conversion, had judged Christ according to the flesh and had found Him lacking. To Paul, Christ was a pretender who pushed too far and had gotten what was coming to Him when He was condemned by the Sanhedrin and crucified by the Romans. In fact, to Paul, Christ's crucifixion confirmed that He was a pretender based on the teaching of **Deuteronomy 21:23** that stated that a man who had been hung on a tree was cursed by God. Therefore, to Paul, Christ's death on the cross appropriately and emphatically ended all of His Messianic pretensions; or in other words, His death on the cross of Calvary confirmed to Paul that Christ was a fraud.

But as we all know this earlier perception was dramatically reversed when Christ, in a glorious post-resurrection appearance, confronted Paul while he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. At that moment in time his view of Christ changed. Or in other words, at that moment Paul was able to view Christ not as a fraud but rather as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

So even though Paul had earlier judged Christ according to the flesh, he after this encounter no longer did so.

But very ironically, as Paul was writing the epistle of **2 Corinthians**, he was now the one being judged according to the flesh, or in other words according to the external misplaced standards of the world in the same manner as he himself had judged Christ earlier in his life. And who was doing this? His critics within the church of Corinth were doing this. And why were they doing this? They were doing this in order to disparage Paul and diminish his influence among the Corinthians.

And as a result of their onslaught against him, Paul, as an apostle of Christ, felt compelled to respond to these attacks strongly, which in turn launched further attacks against him by his critics.

And this brings us to **2 Corinthians 5:16-17**. So how do these verses fit into the flow of the text? Paul, in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**, in an attempt to explain

his strong response to his critics, especially as put forth in the so-called “severe letter,” a response that some in Corinth apparently deemed out of line, detailed for the church of Corinth two driving motivations that he hoped would not only explain his strong response to his critics but would also explain why he lived in the manner that he lived, or in other words why he lived a revolutionary lifestyle.

So, what were the two driving motivations that contributed not only to Paul’s passionate response to his critics but to the way he lived his life according to **2 Corinthians 5:11-15**?

Paul’s first driving motivation was the fear of the Lord. We saw this spelled out for us in **2 Corinthians 5:11-13**.

So let me read these verses for you. And this is what they say. **“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. (12) We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. (13) For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.”** And what was Paul’s second driving motivation?

Paul’s second driving motivation that contributed to his revolutionary lifestyle was the love of Christ. And we saw this spelled out for us by Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**.

So now let me read these verses for you. And what do they say? They say this. **“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; (15) 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.”**

The fear of the Lord and the love of Christ formed the basis of Paul’s revolutionary lifestyle, a lifestyle which was totally and completely dictated not by what served him but rather by what served Christ, the One who loved Him and who had given up His life for Him.

This revolutionary lifestyle, based on Paul's identification with Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit and motivated by his fear of the Lord and the Love Christ, left him standing apart from the world in many different ways. And one of the ways he was left standing apart from the world was in the way he viewed people.

This morning we are going to explore what Paul had to say about this in **2 Corinthians 5:16-17**. So in doing this we will be seeking to answer the following question: What do we learn about Paul and how he viewed people in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17?

I would hope as we seek to answer this question that it would truly impact us. Not only how we view others but also even how we view ourselves, which I would like to think by the grace of God would dramatically impact not only our thinking but every aspect of our lives.

So, what is my hope for this message as we seek to answer this question? My hope for this message is that after we examine these verses that we will better appreciate the importance of looking at people as God Himself would look at them and that this better appreciation would help us to live fuller, richer, and more fruitful lives.

So, what do we learn from **2 Corinthians 5:16-17** about how Paul viewed people? The first thing we learned about Paul and how he viewed people was this: Paul, after his conversion, no longer viewed people according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16).

Let us now take a look at **2 Corinthians 5:16** and see if this is not so. And what does it say? It says this. **“Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.”**

Paul began **verse 16** with the word **“therefore.”** The word “therefore” (HOSTE) points back to **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** and to the love of Christ that compelled Him as our substitute to die our death so that we might live through Him.

Now after pointing his readers back to this monumental event that is at the heart of the gospel message he then goes on to say, **“Therefore from now**

on [or in other words, since our conversion, made possible through Christ's death] **we recognize no one according to the flesh.**" So, what did that mean?

When Paul said that he recognized no one according to his flesh, he simply meant that after his conversion he no longer viewed people based on worldly distinctions or expectations.

The world constantly is making personal judgments based on nothing more than their own prejudiced distinctions in regard to race, social status, wealth, beauty, success, giftedness or title or on their own expectations rooted in nothing more than their very limited and corrupted understanding of what should or should not be. This is not the way of Christ and neither should this be our way as the followers of Christ.

And if there is any doubt about this all we have to do is to look at Paul and his own personal experience with Christ over the course of his life.

So let us now continue to read **2 Corinthians 5:16** and see if this is not so. And what does it say? It says this. **"Therefore from now on (or in other words since our conversion) we recognize** [or in other words, "know" or "perceive"] **no one according to the flesh** [or in other words, according to various worldly distinctions or expectations as we had in the past, and then he says]; **even though we have known Christ according to the flesh.**"

So, what did Paul mean by this? What did he mean when he said, **"even though we have known Christ according to the flesh?"** It's pretty simple.

When Paul said that he had "known Christ according to the flesh," he was referring to a period of time prior to his conversion when he, based on worldly distinctions and expectations, had **rejected** Christ.

In other words, he had in the past, prior to his conversion, made a human assessment of Christ based on the distinctions and expectations of the world and had concluded He was just a man and therefore a false messiah, an enemy of Judaism, which as we of course know led to his persecution of Christians. What a tragedy.

But his perception of Christ changed very dramatically didn't it? Isn't that exactly what Paul told us at the end of **verse 16** when he said, "**Yet now we know Him** [referring to Christ] **in this way no longer?**"

In other words, Paul, prior to his conversion, having known Christ according to the flesh, had rejected Him, but after his conversion he no longer viewed Him as a fraud but as God incarnate, the **Savior** of the world. In other words, after his conversion he came to view Christ just as God viewed Christ; or in other words, after Paul's conversion he viewed Christ and people in general not according to the flesh but rather according to the Spirit.

And that is the only way that we as the followers of Christ should view people. We need to look at people through the eyes of Christ. May God give us the grace to do this so that we, in the name of Christ and in His strength, serve them to the glory of God.

But this was not the only way that Paul's view of people changed after his conversion. Paul, after his conversion, not only stopped viewing people according to the flesh, but more specifically he began to view Christians as new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). So let us now look at **2 Corinthians 5:17** and see if this is not so. And what does it say? It says this. "**Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.**" So, what exactly was Paul seeking to communicate by these words?

Let us begin by looking at the very first word, the word "therefore." The word "**therefore**" at the beginning of **verse 17** once again points us back to **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** and to the love of Christ that compelled Him as our substitute to die our death so that we might live through Him.

If Christ had not been willing to die our death so that we might live through Him, then we would have continued to view people as the world views people rather than as God views people, and we would never have had the opportunity to view ourselves as new creatures in Christ. And this is a truly exciting thing.

So why would it be so exciting for us to view ourselves in this way? We will not be able to appreciate this unless we are able to appreciate that very simple phrase "in Christ."

The phrase “in Christ” succinctly and profoundly summarizes all the rich blessings of **salvation** (cf. Romans 8:1; 16:3, 7; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 4:21; Colossians 1:2, 28; Philemon 23).

It speaks of our security in Him who has borne in His own body the judgment of God against our sin. It speaks of our acceptance in Him with whom God alone is well pleased. It speaks of our assurance in Him knowing that He is our Resurrection and Life. It speaks of our inheritance in Him who, as the only begotten Son, is the sole heir of God. It speaks of our participation in Him in the divine nature, who is the everlasting Word. It speaks of knowing the truth and being free in that truth, knowing that He, in fact, is the truth. All of this and much more is contained in this simple phrase “**in Christ,**” which speaks of our identification with Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit.

In light of this understanding it should not surprise us that Paul would go on to say, “**Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature**” or in other words a “**new creation.**” And why would he say this? He would say this because this is exactly what those who are in Christ have become.

And now Paul will go on to expand on this. So let us continue to read the verse. And what does it say? It says this, “**Therefore if anyone [no matter how vile they might have been] is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away.**”

When Paul declared that for Christian old things passed away, the tense of the verb (aorist) points back to a definite moment or event, namely, the experience of new **birth**. It was then that the old things—the distinctions, prejudices, misconceptions, and enslavements of our former unregenerate way of life—passed away.

And then what does Paul say? Let us continue to read verse. “**Therefore if anyone [no matter how vile they might have been] is in Christ, he is a new creature [or in other words, a totally new creation]; the old things passed away [or in other words, at the moment of our salvation have passed away, and then it says]; behold, new things have come.**”

The tense of the verb translated “have come” (GINOMAI) indicates a past act with **continuing** results in the present.

So now let us put these two thoughts together. The old has past away permanently. Praise God! And the new has come to stay and will continue to be new because the newness is not a newness that in the course of time grows old and outmoded rather it is a newness that is everlastingly new. Praise God!

The passing of the old and the coming of the new was most likely meant by Paul to call to mind the old and new **covenants** that Paul has already repeatedly contrasted earlier in the epistle (2 Corinthians 3:6).

An example of this contrast is **2 Corinthians 3:6** where he says that we have been made “**ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**” So therefore if Paul did in fact want his words in **2 Corinthians 5:17** to call to our minds what he earlier said about the old and new covenants then All that is the new things that have come to us “**in Christ**” flows out from the new covenant blessings of **Jeremiah 31**.

May God give us the grace to view people, whether they are saved or unsaved, as **God** views people, and may we respond accordingly.