

2 Corinthians 5:1-6:10

- 1) Paul says we “walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7). How is this popular verse typically used? Is Paul “walking” on the basis of evidence (the “guarantee” of 5:5 which inspires the confidence of 5:6?) or despite the lack of it? What is it that Paul can’t see?
- 2) In this dense passage, Paul defends the unconventional level of privation and suffering in his ministry, something which would be looked at askance, especially in the honor-shame culture of Paul’s day. Paul somehow links his defense to God’s judgment, ambassadors spreading the gospel of reconciliation, believers as new creatures, and seeing people with new eyes. Explain the “therefore” in 5:16 and the “so” in 5:17. How does the new creation (5:17) fit into Paul’s argument? In fact, what *is* Paul’s argument?
- 3) In 5:17 Paul founds his instructions to the Corinthians not to regard anyone from a human point of view on the breath-taking effects of Jesus’ death and resurrection: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”¹ Read the key passages related to our new creatureliness found in the attached handout. When Paul speaks of a “new creation” does he mean physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually or something else? Does this transformation happen now or later or both? In these passages, is God the sole actor or do we contribute to our metamorphosis?
- 4) We grow into our new nature as we reject the sinful ways of the world (Eph 4:22-24), as we suffer for the gospel (Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:11, 16-18), and as we renew our minds (Rom 12:2) by meditating on Christ (3:18) and on God’s love (Eph 3:18-19)--in short, when we “clothe ourselves with the new self” (Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-11).

In this passage we learn that a characteristic of the new creation, an attitude to “clothe” ourselves with, is one which “regards no one on from a human point of view” (5:16). This tells us that a further way to develop the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) and build the unity and reconciliation of the new creation (Eph 2:15-16) is by setting aside judgmentalism and looking with compassion on others.

What would it mean to look upon the following from a super-human point of view? Members of ISIS; nominal “pew-ballast” believers; Joe Unreligious; Florence Fundamentalist; annoying family members. Or, even, a young man who, after obtaining a Ph. D. from the University of Chicago chooses to leave behind his academic gifts to become a Pentecostal minister?

¹ A better translation is “there is a new creature” [Keener].

- 5) Paul's "putting no obstacle" before those who need to be reconciled; yet he behaves in counter-cultural ways which are in themselves a stumbling-block. How is this reconciled? Wouldn't he win more converts here by dressing up a little nicer and fitting in better? What happened to being "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22)? Does being a pleasing aroma to one group mean that you can't avoid smelling like a corpse to another (2:14-16)?
- 6) Paul lets us in on one of the things which gets him out of bed in the morning and keeps him laboring despite adversity and frustration when he says in 5:14, "For the love of Christ urges us on." The verb here is a strong one; other translations read "compels us" (NIV), "the very spring of our actions" (J.B. Phillips), "controls us" (NASB), "moved me" (Message). This is why Paul prays elsewhere for God to make his love known in the hearts of believers. The more we grasp God's love for us, we are not only freer to show God's love to others, we find we almost can't help it. It becomes not merely second nature, but first nature, our new nature.

We all know this. We do our best to embrace it. We sing hymns about it, we study it in Paul's letters, we mull it over in eloquent devotions, we listen to sermons about it, but all too often it fades when we face the frustrations of daily life (James 1:23-25).

When have you most grokked² God's love? What best keeps you in touch with this wellspring of living water?

- 7) Paul warns the Corinthians "not to accept the grace of God in vain" (6:1). The reason he gives is expressed by Isaiah 49:8 and quoted in 6:2. Read Isaiah 49:1-13. Who is the "you" in 2 Cor 6:2/Isa 49:4 and in Acts 13:47? Is Paul claiming to be the Servant? If so, what does he mean when he refers to his fellow ministers as "servants of God" (6:4)? Are *we* also meant to act as copies of the Suffering Servant? And if so, what does God say to the Servant – to you? – when the servant feels as if the work's been in vain (Isaiah 49:5-7)?



Fun fact: The idea of a new creation is not new with Paul; it is found in the OT and other ancient Jewish sources. For example, in Genesis Rabbah 39:4 we read, "Whoever brings a heathen near to God and converts him [or her] is as though he had created him [or her]." (Genesis Rabbah is a later text but may represent an earlier tradition; cf. *DPL*, "Creation and New Creation."). Also, Isaiah prophecies in 65:17-19; 66:22-23 about a new creation in the community of faith, including the Gentiles, and about the renewed cosmos in 55-66.

² Grok: to understand profoundly and intuitively (Merriam-Webster).

Key passages in Paul regarding the new creation

- **2 Cor 5:17-18:** “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation”
- **Gal 6:15:** “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”
- **Eph 2:15-16:** “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”
- **Eph 4:22-24:** “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”
- **Col 3:9-11:** “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”
- **Rom 8:19-21:** “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Leader's Introduction

In this passage Paul continues his defense of his ministry and his appeal to the Corinthians by describing the nature of his ministry. Accusations against Paul can be inferred from 5:12 (he's boasting), 13³ (they are mad), 6:8b-10 (he's an impostor, and unknown, and associated with violence, riots, etc.).

We are reconciled to God and redeemed, which makes us a new creation; being a new creation we no longer regard others using worldly standards—which means they are not to judge Paul negatively because of the abuse he's suffered, or his unwillingness to enter into the client-patron relationship, or for being apparently out of his mind (5:13).

Paul doesn't just plead for open-mindedness, however. While describing the poetry of God's redemptive plan he points out that he is ambassador for God—which means *he* has the authority to speak for God (5:20). Despite their being believers, Paul appeals to them to be reconciled to God (5:20), implying they are on shaky ground when they start to choose their leaders using worldly standards. And finally, he quotes a servant song from Isaiah, placing himself in the position of the servant as he reaches out in reconciliation to them. Paul may be open, transparent and vulnerable, but he does not demote himself in the process.

Here Paul again walks the tightrope imposed on him by the Corinthians: he needs to explain to them why *he's* the one to follow, but he can't be seen to boast. This is a problem addressed by rhetorical schools and especially in this type of letter, a forensic letter dedicated to responding to charges. Paul balances these needs as follows: [taken from Keener, 183]

- He denies he's commending himself (3:1) although he really is doing just that (4:2; 6:4)
- complaining it's necessary (12:1)
- complaining that they've forced him to do it (12:11)
- or explaining that he needs to do it to silence his opponents' arrogance (11:12)
- or is forced into it by his opponents' charges (10:10).
- In fact, he's not doing it but is really just giving his audience a chance to boast in their founder, as he boasts in them (1:14; 7:14; 9:2-3).
- Anyway, his boasting is for their own good (10:8) and within limits (10:13-17; 11:30; 12:5-6)

As we've moved through this letter in previous meetings we've encountered famous verses, and studied them in their context. Highlights so far have included

- "But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere." (2:14)

³ In 5:13 "beside ourselves" is *exestemen*: to be out of one's senses; to lose one's mind; unable to reason normally.

- “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (3:18)
- “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (4:4)
- “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” (4:16)

This week we tackle:

- “We walk by faith, not by sight.” (5:7)
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (5:17)
- “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (5:21)