



**Sunday School Lesson**  
**2 Cor. 5:16-21**  
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**Relating to Christ**



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**Quick Links to the Study**

I. [Context](#)

- a. [Historical](#)
- b. [Literary](#)
- c. [Greek Diagram](#)

II. [Message](#)

- a. [Knowing Christ spiritually, vv. 16-19](#)
- b. [Being Christ's ambassadors, vv. 20-21](#)

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The passage this week is the fourth and final lesson in the Smyth-Helwys series on "The Implications of Mission" and is entitled "The Human Response." This establishes some sort of context for the study, but Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5 flow out of another context only slightly related to the quarterly's context. Fortunately, the lesson writers in the Smyth-Helwys series pay little attention to the quarterly context, and focus mainly on the scriptural context. With the primacy of scripture as our starting point (scripture is divinely inspired; Sunday School quarterlies aren't.), we will concentrate on the scriptural context as the launch pad for studying the details of the scripture text.

**I Context**

In ancient letters, establishing the context for a passage often is of greater importance than with other types of scripture texts. This, mostly because a letter is comparable to listening to one side of a phone conversation (i.e., the letter writer). The more one knows about who's on the other end of the phone conversation (i.e., the letter recipient(s)) the easier it is to understand what the conversation is about, since the letter writer assumes many things are already understandable to those he originally was writing to.



**a. Historical**

The issue of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth raises both many aspects that are well understood, and a few that are less certain, based on the available information from both the letter itself, the Pauline letters in the NT, the book of Acts, and early church traditions.

Paul's [relationship with the Christian community at Corinth](#) began on the [second missionary journey](#) in the early 50s of the beginning Christian century, when his preaching of the gospel there led to the establishment of a number of house churches in this thriving town of several thousand people. Described in Acts 18:1-17; 1 Thess. 3:6-13; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1:13-17; 2 Thess. 3:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:5-10; 11:2, 23, 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7-9, the church had its beginnings in the home of two Christians, Aquila and Priscilla, who probably had initiated a Christian witness prior to Paul's arrival. Sometime afterward Paul wrote a letter to the Christians there, which precedes the letter in the NT known as First Corinthians. 1 Cor. 5:9 contains an allusion to it (NRSV):



“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons.” Exactly when and from where this letter was written is unknown. The next segment of contact [#s 3-7 in chart] by Paul with Corinth came on the [third missionary journey](#) in the middle 50s of the first century. When Paul came to Ephesus on this trip, he spent a lengthy period of time there in ministry. During that time several contacts with the Corinthians took place. When information reached him about the situation among the Corinthian believers from members of the household of Chloe and from a group from the church, the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians was written about 55 AD and sent to [Corinth](#) dealing with a variety of issues present in the church. Not long afterward Paul made a trip from Ephesus to Corinth that is not recorded by Luke in Acts to deal personally with some of the problems in the church, but he was unsuccessful in resolving the issues. 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1,2 allude to this visit. When he arrived back at Ephesus he penned a third letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8 for allusions to this letter), a part of which may possibly be contained in 2 Cor. 10-13 but most likely is lost. Titus was sent with this letter along with instructions to meet Paul somewhere in Macedonia to let him know whether the issues were resolved or not. After Paul left Ephesus, he went to Philippi etc. in Macedonia where he met Titus who had a positive report about the situation in Corinth. This provided the main reason for the writing of what we call 2 Corinthians. Titus then took the letter to Corinth ahead of Paul’s arrival there on a third visit to the church described briefly in Acts 20:1-3. This would be the final time that Paul would see the Corinthians. About 50 years later the Corinthians surface again as the recipients of another letter. This time it came from the spiritual leader of Christians at Rome and attempted to resolve a fist full of problems plaguing the Corinthians community still. The letter is [1 Clement](#) and was written about 96 A.D.

The congregation reflected the enormous diversity that characterized the ancient city of Corinth, and that meant a lot of the problems that were present in this diverse cultural, ethnic, and moral background. As a military retirement center as well as a busy commercial city with commerce from both sea and land, the



city had segments of people from virtually all over the Roman Empire living there. This played a role in the Christian community struggling with many severe problems that covered the full range of ethical to doctrinal issues. Not the least of which was a significant difficulty of at least a segment of the Christian community in getting along with the apostle Paul. Some of the most direct, bluntest expressions ever penned by Paul are found in his Corinthian correspondence, especially in 2 Corinthians 10-13. We have more of what Paul said to this group of believers than we have to another other community of faith that he served. This in part, because the Corinthian church had so many problems and issues needing attention.

## b. Literary

The literary setting for 2 Cor. 5:16-21 is fairly simple to determine. 2 Corinthians falls into the [middle period of Paul's writing ministry](#) along with 1 Corinthians and Romans. These documents were written during the third missionary journey during the mid 50s of the first Christian century. Our passage is a part of the Body proper of 2 Corinthians which divides itself roughly into three segments: chaps. 1-7, 8-9, and 10-13. This first segment, chaps 1-7, focus largely on a celebration of ministry with Paul recounting several previous episodes of ministry with the Corinthians.

J. Paul Sampley, in "2 Corinthians" in the *New Interpreter's Bible* (v. 9, iPreach), has a helpful summation:

Although interpreters of this extended section understandably often mine it for its profound and rich theological claims, every portion of it is aimed by Paul not only at enhancing the Corinthians' understanding of his ministry among and for them, but also especially at binding them more closely to himself as their apostle. Given his recent experiences with them and their umbrage over his changed plans, a direct request for increased affection from the Corinthians would be far too risky a rhetorical move at this point. Rather than hazard further alienation of the Corinthians, Paul avails himself of the rhetorical option called *insinuatio*, which features a subtle approach and seeks to lay the ground for an affirmative response to himself that will be sought explicitly and directly only later in the letter (6:12-13; 7:2-4).

The opening section (2:14-17) is rich with imagery that points to one end: Paul is the agent of God's powerful and triumphant gospel; Paul is part of a victory procession across the Mediterranean world that would make the Romans proud; and Paul is part of a vast sacrifice whose fragrance, though it is being offered up to God, is manifest to everyone around.

Then, in what amounts to a series of three complementary depictions that together make up the heart of this letter fragment, we see (1) Paul's as a ministry of a new covenant (3:1—4:6), (2) Paul's as a ministry sustained through affliction and mortality (4:7—5:10), and (3) Paul's as a ministry of reconciliation (5:11-21). The entire section closes with a primary appeal for the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain (6:1-2) and, once more, a defense of Paul's apostolic probity and an insistence, yet once again, that Paul is worthy of exemplification and honor (6:3-10). The integrity and rectitude of Paul's ministry is the issue that laces together everything from 2:14 to 6:10.

We will focus on part two of this third section of 5:11-21 for our study. Ernest Best, in "2 Corinthians," in the *Interpretation Commentary*, summarizes well the connection of 16-21 to 11-15:

This is one of Paul's greatest passages in which, after affirming what Christ means to him (vv. 11-15), he goes on to trace out the nature of his ministry. Seeing Christ in a new way has given him a new understanding of ministry. This passage is so packed with vital theology that every verse in it requires careful attention.

## II. Message

2 Cor. 5:16-21 naturally falls into two basic segments as can be seen from the [diagram of the Greek text](#) of these verses: vv. 16-19, and 20-21. We will study the passage based upon this internal structure.

### The Greek New Testament

5:16 Ὡστε ἡμεῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν οὐδένα οἶδαμεν κατὰ σάρκα· εἰ καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν κατὰ σάρκα Χριστόν, ἀλλὰ νῦν οὐκέτι γινώσκομεν. 5:17 ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν

### NRSV

16 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

### NLT

16 So we have stopped evaluating others by what the world thinks about them. Once I mistakenly thought of Christ that way, as though he were merely a human

Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινά· 5:18 τὰ δὲ πάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ καταλλάξαντος ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ διὰ Χριστοῦ καὶ δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς, 5:19 ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν καὶ θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς.

that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

being. How differently I think about him now! 17 What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! 18 All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him. 19 For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others.

### a. Knowing Christ spiritually, vv. 16-19

#### Comments:

The connection link at the beginning of verse sixteen “therefore” [“Ὡστε”] links verses 16-21 to verses 11-15 as an expression of the consequence of what was said in vv. 11-15. Thus, some awareness of the content of 11-15 is important to these verses that follow (NRSV):

11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. 12 We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. 13 For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15 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.

Paul attempts to communicate to the Corinthians that they can take pride in him and his apostolic ministry. Evidently a group had come to Corinth claiming a superior witness and calling to that of Paul and some in the Corinthian congregation had come under their influence. Paul’s plan to come to Corinth had been altered and he instead wrote the so-called painful letter (cf. 1:23-2:11). This had been taken as a sign of weakness by some at Corinth and thus further diminished Paul’s leadership in their eyes. Thus a lot of what he does is to assert both his genuine interest in the Corinthians as well as the basics of his gospel preaching. We can clearly see that pattern in 5:11-13 and 14-15. Paul both commended himself to the Corinthians, and asserted his concern grew out of the love of Christ that had changed his life.

In light of this, verses 16-19 contrast two ways of relating to people, and also to Christ. One can see people from a ‘human point of view’ and thus relate to them on that basis. Before the Damascus road encounter with the risen Christ, this was the way Paul viewed even Christ. But in Christ believers must relate to others, and to Christ, differently. That is, on a spiritual level.

Again, Earnest Best in the *Interpretation Commentary* has a helpful summation:

The old way in which he saw people was “a human way.” Paul uses this phrase (in Greek *kata sarka*) frequently, but in other places it is regularly rendered “according to the flesh” (e.g., Rom. 8:4,5,12,13). In our verse it indicates, then, not just an inadequate or limited way of looking at others, as though if we knew them better we would understand them better. Human judgments are not merely inadequate. They are also tinged with prejudice and bias. We make them with our own interests in mind. Since Paul’s conversion and in the light of his conviction that Christ died for him, he thinks in a different kind of way, once “according to the flesh” but now “according to the Spirit.” His judgments are now controlled by God’s Spirit. We might hesitate to make such claims for ourselves, for prejudice and self-interest govern us too much. Probably Paul is not claiming that all his judgments are free of self but acknowledging that this is what they ought to be and in fact have been becoming increasingly since his conversion. Insofar as he takes seriously that he lives no longer for himself but for Christ (v. 15), a new spirit pervades all his judgments.

This new perspective is all encompassing as verse 17 asserts (NRSV): “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” With Christian conversion we begin looking at other people in a completely new light. For Paul the ramification of this was a calling, as verses 18 and 19 affirm (NRSV): “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” At the heart of the experiencing of Christ’s love has been reconciliation with Almighty God. Growing out of that came then the responsibility of seeking to help others be reconciled to God. Thus the new perspective of Paul is to see everyone from their spiritual need of reconciliation with God.

How does this connect to us? The implications of these verses are substantial. They challenge us first of all at the point of how we see other human beings. Do we just notice the exterior of another person? Maybe how well dressed he/she is? How attractive they may be physically? How well off they might possibly be from their appearance? These ways of looking at other people reflect the “human angle” the *κατὰ σάρκα* that Paul mentions in verses 16 and 17. These are normal and natural ways of human beings viewing one another. But Paul’s point is that once we’ve experienced the transforming love of Christ in our life, we can no longer content ourselves with viewing people merely this way. A deeper spiritual concern must always be a part of our looking at others.

This is the challenging aspect. Every human being stands in need of reconciliation with God. Every person is a sinner by nature and under God’s wrath. This is a major implication of the reconciliation picture. Our task is to communicate to them the message of reconciliation through Christ. In the context, this ascertain by Paul stands as a part of why he traveled to Corinth out of Palestine to preach the gospel to them. He, a strict Jew, otherwise would have felt nothing but contempt for the Corinthians and would not have been willing to expend an ounce of energy trying to bring them to God. In fact, he would have taken pride in their destruction as a sign of the superiority of the covenant Jews over the rest of humanity. But Christ changed all that for Paul. He as a Christian had devoted his life to preaching this gospel message to everyone who would listen, both Jew and Gentile. This was the basis of his relationship with the Corinthians.

And Christ changes all that for us as his followers today. We must see the spiritual aspect and need of every human being we come in contact with, if we claim to walk in obedience to Christ our Lord. But realizing their spiritual need and acting upon it are two different things. As Paul said in verse 15 (NRSV), “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.” We now live for Christ. The implication of this is a willingness to do whatever we can to help others find this reconciliation with the Living God before it’s too late.

### The Greek New Testament

5:20 ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ οὖν πρεσβεύομεν ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ παρακαλοῦντος δι’ ἡμῶν· δεόμεθα ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ. 5:21 τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ.

### NRSV

20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### NLT

20 We are Christ’s ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, “Be reconciled to God!” 21 For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

### b. Being Christ’s ambassadors, vv. 20-21

#### Comments:

The connecting link in verse twenty “So” [οὖν] underscores these two verses as an implication of the



preceding statements in verses 16 - 19. What is the clear implication of this new way of seeing people: it is to serve God as an ambassador with a message to be delivered. The image of ambassador sets up a vivid picture of ministry. The ambassador doesn't determine the content of the message; the one he represents does. The ambassador is a messenger who carries the message to its designated recipients. For Paul the essence of that message authorized by God was clear: "be reconciled to God." This message must be delivered.

But how can sinful humanity be reconciled to a perfectly righteous and holy God? The second part of Paul's message of reconciliation in verse 21 makes that clear (NRSV): "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Restoration of relationship with Almighty God is only possible through the redeeming work of Christ who became sin so that we might become righteous. No human logic can explain how this works adequately. Christ in his death took on the guilt of our sinfulness and paid the penalty for it. Somehow in the mystery of God that sacrifice of the pure Son of God satisfied the demands of God's holiness for judgment upon human sinfulness. But the issue is much more than losing our guiltiness before God. It is also a becoming righteous before God. Literally, the Greek text declares that we become God's righteousness in Christ: ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ. There is something so profound in this dying of Christ in which he became sin for us. So profound, that the impact of it is to produce God's righteousness in the life of the believer.

Rom. 5:6-11 sheds some additional light on Paul's thought here (NRSV): "6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9 Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11 But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Try as we might, our limited understanding can never fully comprehend the spiritual depths of what Christ did on Calvary for sinful humanity. We can celebrate it, however, and rejoice that something profoundly wonderful happened that day outside Jerusalem. And as Paul earlier had declared to the Galatian Christians in 2:19-20 (NRSV): "19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." When in our conversion we climbed on that cross outside Jerusalem with Jesus, we also died. Our old sinful self was crucified. But out of the ashes of death came new life -- a life lived through faith in Jesus as God's Son. At the heart of that new life is a righteousness before God that is nothing less than God's own character taking root in our life and becoming the foundation of our living both now and in eternity.

This new spiritual way of seeing others opens up limitless possibilities of seeing and experiencing God's grace in transforming ways. Both in our own life, and in the lives of those who respond to the message of reconciliation that we have brought to them.

And as the further context of [2 Cor. 6:1-13](#) makes clear, 5:16-21 has implications for interpersonal relations among believers (NRSV): "1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. 11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. 12 There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. 13 In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also."

When we see others spiritually we naturally seek to build bridges of positive relationships with them. We are in this ministry of reconciliation together as partners, each working with one another to carry this message to everyone who will listen.

5:16

ὥστε

ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν

1 **ἡμεῖς...οὐδένα οἶδαμεν**

κατὰ σάρκα·

κατὰ σάρκα

εἰ καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν...Χριστόν,

ἀλλὰ

νῦν

οὐκέτι

2 **γινώσκομεν.**

5:17

ὥστε

εἴ τις (ἐστίν)

ἐν Χριστῷ,

3 **(ἐστίν) καινὴ κτίσις**

4 **τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν,**

ἰδοὺ

5 **γένονεν καινά·**

5:18

δὲ

6 **τὰ πάντα (ἐστίν)**

ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ

τοῦ καταλλάξαντος ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ

διὰ Χριστοῦ

καὶ

δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν

τῆς καταλλαγῆς,

5:19

ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν

ἐν Χριστῷ

κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ,

μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα

αὐτῶν

καὶ

θέμενος... τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς.

ἐν ἡμῖν

5:20

οὖν

ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ

7 **πρεσβεύομεν**

ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ παρακαλοῦντος

δι' ἡμῶν·

8 **δεόμεθα**

ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ,

9 **καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ.**

ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν

10 5:21 **τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν...ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν,**

/-----|

ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ

ἐν αὐτῷ.