

II Corinthians 5:11-6:2 My primary calling

Introduction

All of us are passionate about something. Some people wear their emotions ‘on their sleeves’; others by contrast look like blocks of granite and rarely show any emotions at all, like Ivan Lendl, the coach of Andy Murray. All of us have particular temperaments and display our feelings in distinctive ways. With family members and friends we can predict fairly easily how they will react in a variety of situations. The question we need to answer is this: what is it that you and I are most passionate about? What would you say would give you the greatest happiness if you could make a list of choices? In our world the range of choices would, I suspect, be limited to a relatively small number of predictable options. There would be some people who would put winning the national lottery at the top of the list; or some similar financial windfall. A further group would look to sporting achievements, such as an Olympic gold medal or the equivalent attainment in other sports. A proportion of people would look to academic or work-based success, with the aim of being recognised in their careers as contributing something of major significance through their endeavours. In our celebrity and multi-media age the lure of fame would be the primary appeal to others. Yet what would your answer be or mine? This is very hard at times because we can all say the right words about how Jesus comes first, but the living out of that claim in practice is very difficult. It is my conviction that if Jesus was truly Lord for every person that named the name of Christ in Scotland then our country would be transformed for good and for God; if every churchgoer was passionate about honouring our Lord and Saviour and relating as Jesus would have us do with our fellow attenders then there would be queues outside an increasing proportion of church premises on the Lord’s Day, not empty pews and merged congregations up and down the land. The dedication of men and women who have served in this church over recent decades has been honoured with the blessings we have experienced here in the twenty-first century, but if it is to continue then we too must show at least that same level of dedication and commitment in the coming months and years. In these verses in II Corinthians the apostle opens his heart to these Christians to reveal his motivation for mission; his zeal for the gospel and his love for Jesus Christ and lost people. When our heads and our hearts are united in commitment to a cause as our primary concern it will undoubtedly determine our priorities in terms of our time; our financial choices and the use of our gifts and abilities. Paul serves as a model New Testament Christian for us, an imperfect flawed person like you and me, yet one whose love for Jesus and whose dedication to the cause of the gospel was second to none.

1. Our Motivation for Mission (II Corinthians 5:11-15)

(a)The Fear of the Lord (5:11-13) *Since then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.¹³ If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.* This section begins: *Since, then* (NIV) (or *therefore* in the original Greek), on the basis of what I have just recorded says Paul, doing nothing is simply not an option. It is simply a question of what we should do and how we do it in the light of the fact of what Jesus has done for us and that we will one day stand in front of His nail-pierced hands and give an account of what we have done for Him. Our challenge is to live now in a way that will be credible when we stand before Him on that day. The apostle reminds us that there are two emotions the child of God will experience concerning this great task before us. The first is given in these three verses:

Since, then, we know what it is to **fear the Lord**, we try to persuade men. In the last hundred years of church history in this land the notion that Christians should fear the Lord would be deemed rather shocking not just amongst the wider population, but in an increasing proportion of churches as well. This is a huge concern because, for example, Proverbs 1:7 reminds us that: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.* In other words a person who dismisses this reality as unchristian or outdated has not even begun to grasp anything of the nature of God and of the seriousness of our calling as His children. By contrast Proverbs 29:25 states: *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.* Abraham while living in Philistine territory, expressed a deep concern about the probable behavioural choices of the local people because, he said: *There is surely no fear of God in this place* (Genesis 20:11). In that context he was speaking of people outside the community of faith who worshipped Yahweh. However, how much more profoundly sad it is when such words could be said of individual churches or families of churches when decisions are taken in meetings motivated by a greater fear of what unbelievers might think outside their ranks than by the God of heaven before whom they will one day stand on the Day of Judgement. John Knox, a timid soul, shrank from the limelight until he grasped something of what it means to fear the Lord more than Queens and Cardinals, or even death itself. Why is this important? Proverbs 14:26: *He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.* Whom do you fear most the Lord or the people around you? Christian people in our generation need afresh to grasp the challenge posed by the apostle Paul. Unless we have a right attitude towards God then we cannot expect people outside the church to do so. It is not simply something for believers, but a challenge for all people. The pagan sailors who threw Jonah overboard and saw the storm cease had this reaction: *At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him* (Jonah 1:16). Likewise the disciples of Jesus in John 4:35-41, in the midst of a terrible storm in which they thought they might drown, pleaded for Him to stop the tempest and when the winds ceased and the waters became calm at His command, Mark reported that: *They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!* (Mark 4:41). This is not a cringing fear, like that experienced by a medieval peasant about to be stretched out on the infamous torture instrument ‘The Rack’; nor that of an inhabitant of Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, about to be ‘water-boarded’, a torture method that simulates the experience of drowning. It is a profoundly healthy respect and reverence for someone that gives us such a commitment to them that we would do anything in the world than incur their displeasure or consciously go against their express decrees. I would hope that many of us had godly parents who lived a life that we would seek to emulate and would shrink from departing from the principles they laid down for us. How much more ought we to reverence our great God and Saviour and honour His standards in the face of the very real opposition from an increasingly hostile secular world. Yet this is not our only emotion, Paul reminds us that a second emotion is equally compelling to him, and hopefully to us:

(b) **The Love of Christ** (5:14-15) *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.* The highest motivation of all is love –yet here Paul is careful to state that it is Christ’s love for His people that motivates us to love other people in return. He is making the same point as John did in I John 4:10: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Would any of us be willing to sacrifice our only son for the benefit of a neighbour, or a person living in the next street? The likely answer is no! For another family member it is much more likely, but it is still an extraordinary action; the love of Christ had been his highest motivation since he had been arrested by Christ on the Damascus Road some years

earlier. In the familiar passage in Romans 8:35-39 Paul's passionate grasp of this matter is plain for all to see: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.* ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through **Him who loved us.*** ³⁸ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,* ³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us **from the love of God** that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Does this divine love tug at your heart-strings and give you the highest and most noble motivation to live for God and serve other people? It is no surprise that Paul's life motto: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain* (Philippians 1:21) was a fair reflection of his life choices. A person consumed with genuine love for God will influence others for God. The great Reformation preacher George Wishart, whose ministry transformed Dundee, but who died a martyr's death in St Andrews, was such a person, whose witness affected a young man that day in the crowd. According to one story, Wishart's executioner asked forgiveness before the act, and Wishart kissed him saying, "Do thy duty." It is also reported that Wishart's former body guard, watching at a distance, prayed, "Lord, make me like that man." The claymore wielding guard was none other than John Knox, who was later captured by Mary de Guise and sentenced to row as a galley slave aboard a British ship. Knox rowed for nineteen months praying: "God give me Scotland or I'll die." Two thousand years ago the greatest evangelist of the Early Church, Stephen, was murdered (Acts 7-8), but a witness of that event was so moved by what he saw of his love for the Lord Jesus that he too would come to faith and become the person who would take Stephen's place as the apostle to the Gentiles. Why was Paul so moved by the love of Christ? it was because His voluntary sacrifice on the cross, sufficient for all, efficient for His Church, once for all time brought reconciliation between God and sinful humanity. The first Adam's sin as our representative brought the curse of sin to our race; the second 'Adam' brought redemption. Paul in Romans 5:17 put it this way: *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.* The love of Christ in offering Himself as the substitute for sinners on the cross, taking the punishment that we deserved was the most extraordinary act in history. Philip Hughes (*II Corinthians*, pp. 195-6), explained its significance so clearly: On His dying for me, His meeting the demands of God's justice in my stead, depends the reality of my justification; and on my dying with Him depends the whole possibility of my sanctification. The One who loved us so much to redeem us from the penalty of sin has given us the Holy Spirit to help us overcome the power of sin. Will your testimony and mine be in line with that of Paul, as expressed in Galatians 2:20? *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, **who loved me** and gave Himself for me.*

2. Our Perspective on Mission (II Corinthians 5:16-19)

(a) **How we view people outside of Christ** (5:16) *So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.* In the wider world your social class and relative wealth or poverty is significant. You may be valued or ignored depending on whether you can 'tick certain boxes'. A number of years ago at a castle in the south of England, one of the younger members of the Royal family was having a birthday party. A smooth-talking individual fooled the people on the door concerning his background. He convinced them that he had come from the same privileged circles as the other guests. He could certainly talk the talk but was found out when he chose the wrong glass to drink champagne and under pressure then made a wrong choice with an unexpected item of cutlery. A person reared in those circles would have never made that kind of mistake!

How do we view people that enter our churches as visitors? Would we treat a disadvantaged person off the street as well as someone else who was economically advantaged? Racism, though it has been a problem in the past, sadly, even in Christian Churches, is not to the best of my knowledge a major problem in the UK. However, the social class divide is very real, even in Evangelical Churches, unless active steps are taken to ensure that all people are genuinely included. James chapter two is a solemn warning to churches that fail to address this issue. In Paul's day the issue that he hints at here was a battle amongst Jewish followers of Jesus. There were some Jews who because they had seen or heard Jesus during the time of His earthly ministry viewed themselves as superior to other believers. In Corinth, amongst the various cliques described in I Corinthians 1:12-17, was a faction that claimed *to follow Christ* (v12). It is likely that the so-called 'super apostles' who made life so difficult for Paul belonged to this group. They had failed to grasp that Jesus does not belong exclusively to any one branch of His followers; by contrast, we belong to Him –if our faith is real, and that makes a world of difference. Over the course of history a willingness to address this issue had been one of most significant factors in the spread of Christianity all over the world. A passion for saving souls has been proclaimed alongside one for social justice, as two sides of the same coin. The tragedy of Western Christianity in the twentieth century had been that the majority of conservative and liberal Christians (in theological terms) decided that evangelism and social action were choices of which you picked only one at the expense of the other. A biblical gospel is a holistic one.

(b) **How we view fellow-Christians** (5:17) *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, behold [omitted in NIV] the new has come!* In verses 16 onwards the apostle is dealing with the consequences of a right view of Jesus. From our attitude to the wider population, he turns to how we view other followers of Jesus. A person identified with the dead-and-resurrected Jesus cannot be other than a transformed person when they are *in Christ*, to use Paul's favourite theological expression. Such a person has security *in Christ* because He in His own body bore the judgement of God against your sin and mine; it indicates acceptance *in Christ*, the One with whom uniquely God is well-pleased; it provides assurance for our future in this life and beyond the grave, *in Christ* who is the resurrection and the life; it points to our future glorious inheritance, *in Christ*, who has gone to prepare a place for us in His eternal home; it speaks of participation in the divine nature *in Christ* who is the everlasting Word; it declares a revelation of the truth, and being set free by it, *in Christ*, who is the truth; in essence, *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, behold the new has come, hallelujah!* What a note of triumph! But does the life we lead for the Lord reflect the reality of the victorious life-changing gospel Jesus has provided for us? Do we value the people for whom Christ died –as He does? Do we want to work together with them, for His glory, as He desires? Yet recognising that all of our lives are like a building site where the divine builder is at work and none of us are yet the finished article. If you come across a perfect church don't join it unless you are already like them! However, let us never rest content that the quality of relations within our congregations are as good as they can be, for Jesus' sake.

(c) **How we view our missionary God** (5:18-19) ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:* ¹⁹ *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. God's people are called to share God's heart for His world. John 3:16 states: For God so loved **the world** that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* God's love here is not just for the people but the whole created order that is why looking after our planet as good stewards of the resources entrusted to us is so important. God took great delight in planning a beautiful world in which Adam and

Eve and their successors would live. Human beings have trashed the planet and the health, climate and other environmental implications of our actions are now coming home to us. His love was never exclusive to humans but for all creation. Although we, uniquely, are created in His image to glorify Him and enjoy Him for ever (to use the language of the 17th century catechisms); is the church a force for reconciliation in the world? The answer should be an unequivocal 'yes', but where churches are tied to states and associated with the respective politicians the reality has been an unequivocal 'no'; take the Balkans, for example, where Roman Catholic leaders in Croatia and Orthodox clerics in Serbia have been complicit in justifying state violence against neighbouring civilians in the last couple of decades and especially in Croatia in World War II. A far better witness came from the Moral Rearmament movement that engaged with German political leaders after World War II, to enable them to re-enter the political mainstream; or people like Joao Matwawana (biography by (John. F. Keith, *War is never enough*), who led reconciliation initiatives between Hutus and Tutsis in refugee camps after the horrific slaughter in Rwanda some years ago. Yet we must never apologise that our greatest mission on earth is to proclaim the good news to sinners that in Jesus alone can they be certain of eternal life. God, in the person of Jesus, left the glory of heaven coming down to this world to save us; we have a calling to go wherever it takes from our local community to the ends of the earth to proclaim the glorious gospel of God. In a world of hopeless despair we have a message that can transform both individual lives and communities. May we never cease to proclaim it all the days of our lives.

3. Our Focus in Mission (II Corinthians 5:20-6:2)

The last part of this section of the letter, 5:20-6:2, concludes with a challenge both to believers and unbelievers, those already *in Christ* together with those yet to come to faith in Jesus. First of all: (a) **The message to those outside of Christ** (5:20) ²⁰ *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* Have you ever stopped to think that as a Christian you are an ambassador for Jesus Christ? It is a great honour to represent your country overseas, especially if your words are the pronouncement of Her Majesty's Government. Yet we have an even greater honour as representatives of King Jesus. Nearly two hundred years ago the great Baptist missionary to India, William Carey, heard that his son Felix, also a serving missionary in Asia, had been offered the post of British Ambassador to Burma. This was almost unheard of for a Nonconformist Christian in that era. However, Carey was distressed that his son had accepted the new post. He wrote a letter to his son expressing his regret that Felix had accepted a demotion from the service of the King of Kings to that of the King of the United Kingdom! We, I trust understand the point being made. Our primary calling is this, to people outside the faith: *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* Do the people you and I know how important it is for them to put their faith in Christ? Do they know that they face an eternity separated from all that is good and God if they leave this life unsaved? This is not a popular message today in the wider community. What is worse is that there are even churches that find the exclusive claims of the Gospel of Jesus offensive! What such professing Christians have failed to grasp is this: if there was another way to be saved then the cross must be seen in a different light. It was either the greatest act of love in history or the most brutal act of violent betrayal and cruelty, in which God the Father comes across in the most unflattering light –if Jesus is not the way of salvation. This was certainly how the Early Church saw it, despite the offence taken in their day. Acts 4:12 states: *Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.* There was also a challenge from the apostle to Christians, containing some of the

most extraordinarily precious words in the whole of the Bible. (b) **The message to believers** (5:21-6:2) ²¹*God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* ¹*As God's fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.* ²*For He says, In the time of My favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.* II Corinthians 5:21 is one of the most extraordinary verses in the Bible. Read it and re-read it again and again and marvel at what God has done. The perfect Son of God, while on the cross, was treated for those dark hours as if He had committed our sins and punished accordingly. Yet at the very same time God the Father loved His Son, not one jot less than before, because this was the only way to bring reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful humanity. In addition, Jesus *committed no sin* (I Peter 2:22) and *has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin* (Hebrews 4:15). This action was not an arbitrary or impulsive one, but a plan agreed between the Father and the Son, out of love for guilty sinners such as you and me, so that instead of facing hell we can be certain of heaven. Instead of God the Father looking at us and seeing our imperfections and sin, *in Him* (Jesus), we are viewed as perfectly righteous covered with the righteousness of Jesus. This is a not a game of divine 'peek-a-boo'; Amazingly, God the Father is treating His children on earth, in principle, as if we had become already what we will be like in heaven. Therefore, granting us free access in prayer into His presence and blessing us with all kind of blessings *in Christ*. If God has blessed you and me to this extent and gone to these lengths to give us His grace, then may He enable us, in Paul's words to the Church at Ephesus, to *grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,* ¹⁹ *and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God* (Ephesians 3:18-19). The more we ourselves understand His amazing love the more we will want others to know it too, and evangelism will not be a programme we fit onto the church schedule, but a lifestyle that flows naturally from the heart of a person committed to following Jesus Christ –may that be you and me, for His name's sake, Amen.

II Corinthians 5:11-6:2 My primary calling Questions

- Q1. What are you most passionate about in life and why? – time to be really honest!
- Q2. What is that motives you to engage in mission? What two things motivated Paul? (5:11-15)
- Q3. Is 'the fear of the Lord' a motivating factor amongst Christians today? (Proverbs 1:7)
What does 'the fear of the Lord' mean to you?
- Q4. What difference does Christ's love make to you? (Romans 8:35-39; Galatians 2:20)
- Q5. What is the ministry given to us? (5:18-20)