

## **Constrained By Love**

Westview Church | 2 Corinthians 5:11-15 | Pastor Brett Toney | May 3, 2026

### **Because They Are Hard**

With Artemis II's recent flight to and around the moon, I've been reminded of President John F Kennedy's resolve to go to the moon. He said in 1962, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."<sup>1</sup> The challenge captured the national imagination and industry. That's what a clear mission does. It constrains and orients the energy to accomplish the goal. While that mission to go to the moon and do the hard things is remarkable, it is ultimately empty. It is constrained merely by the potential of human achievement. Brothers and sisters, we have a far greater endeavor, a more enduring objective. We are constrained by love. It's not the self-referential, self-focused, self-fulfilling love our culture esteems. No, it is the love of Christ himself. It is the love that compels us to live not for ourselves but for the One who died and was raised—for Christ and his cause.

### **Conduct for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:11-13)**

Being constrained by love shapes our conduct for Christ. That is what Paul returns to first in our passage this morning in v.11-13. He will go on to ground his conduct for Christ in the substance of being constrained by Christ in v.14-15. But he returns first to his conduct. He reminds the Corinthians in v.12 that he *still* is not commending himself to them. That's not his goal in highlighting his conduct. Instead, he wants to equip them with a reason for *them* to boast about *him*—to provide a response they can give to the deceiving critics present in Corinth. Paul has no felt need to rise to his own defense. His conscience is clear. And his confidence is high that he has done right by the ministry. The opinions and words of those who boast in outward appearance means little to him.

This is a master class display of not being governed by the fear and praise of man. Paul is a man who owns his weaknesses through a grounding of his identity in God. He doesn't fear what the "super apostles" and adversaries say about him. He knows the fear of the Lord, v.11. He knows we all will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (v.10), and his aim is ever and always to be pleasing to God (v.9). So, he can happily leave his reputation to the Lord—"what we are is known to God," he says. You can pray I would grow in this. I can't serve you as I am called to if I need your praise to validate myself. Pray the Lord would especially use my upcoming sabbatical to further root this out of me.

And grapple with your own conduct—is it for Christ or is it to commend yourself to others? "Knowing the fear of the Lord," Paul persuaded others. I don't think he was persuading them of his good conduct but of their need to repent and believe. Paul's single-minded devotion to the constraining mission of proclaiming Christ crucified is what provided a grounds for the Corinthians to boast about. They could answer the critiques of Paul from the "super apostles" by pointing to such clarity of purpose. Even if they would say that Paul was stark raving mad in his devotion to Christ, what of it? "It is for God," he writes. I think that's what Paul means in v.13. If he's thought loony, it is for God's sake. And if he is regarded as sober-minded, it is for the Corinthians' benefit. Brothers and sisters, is that how you conduct yourself? Do you have such a clear vision of the Judgment Seat that you know the fear of the Lord that constrains you to be pleasing to him? Do you persuade your coworkers to follow Christ unconcerned with what they may whisper about when you're not present? Do you pause to like, post, or share something on Instagram because you're nervous you'll be thought of as "*really* religious"?

Or what about your conduct within relationships in the church? It is one thing to conduct yourself with outsiders not governed by their evaluation of you. It can be another thing with

fellow believers. There is the temptation to put on an outward appearance of what you think you should do or be as a follower of Christ. Consider even your response to the pervasive greeting, “How are you?” Honestly, I have a love-hate relationship with the question. It can be so thoughtless and flippant. And we answer it the same. “Fine.” “Good.” More substantively, what about in Discipleship Group? Are you uncertain about being vulnerable for fear of what others might think? “She’s too much to handle.” “He really doesn’t have it together.” Brothers and sisters, we ought to be the most free to not commend ourselves to one another because we are so preeminently *for* one another in the Lord. We don’t need to be putting on a show in our conduct because we have been constrained by Christ.

### **Constrained by Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)**

This is where Paul goes in v.14. This is the kind of sentence that makes you love grammar. For starters, Paul can conduct himself for Christ—you and I can likewise conduct ourselves—“For” or “because the love of Christ controls us.” Love controls or constrains our conduct. But does Paul mean *our* love *for* Christ or *Christ’s* love for *us*? Grammar makes a difference. I think Paul first and foremost means *Christ’s* love controls us. He isn’t saying, “I just love Jesus so much I conduct myself how I have.” That is a right response. But it is not the grounding reason, not the bedrock foundation. Before any of us love Christ, he first loved us (1 John 4:19). And that display of Christ’s love is what he goes on to highlight in these two verses. The controlling influence of Christ’s love flows straight from his death for all. Christ’s love controls us like a flu virus taking over your body (Matthew 4:24), like a debilitating fear crowding out all other thoughts (Luke 8:37), like an encamped army laying siege against a city (Luke 19:43). Christ’s love controls us like UPS logistics—moving us like packages along belts, scanners, and trucks ever onward toward the destination he has for us.

His love has such a constraining force on us because we have made a decisive conclusion. We aren't thoughtless. There is no "blind faith." If you are waffling and uncertain in your faith, land the plane. Make a conclusion. What was the significance of the death of Jesus of Nazareth? For Paul, for me, what I pray is your conclusion: "that one has died for all." This is Christ's love that compels. Jesus died for all. And here again is the significance of grammar. Do you have a favorite preposition? I sure do. Here it is translated as "for," but better is "on behalf of." Jesus died on behalf of all. One ancient pastor captured it writing, "The [Immortal] Word, since it was not possible for Him to die, assumed a body that was capable of dying, so that He might offer it as His own in place of all."<sup>2</sup> We all deserve death yet Jesus died on behalf of all. The sinless Son of God was the substitute for sinners like me. God's judgment against sin that requires death—Jesus paid it all. Church, don't grow bored or familiar with the grammar of the gospel!

Through your faith in Jesus, by being united with Jesus, being found in Jesus—when he died, you died. It's not only that he died in your place. But being a Christian means you are in Christ. His death *was* your death. The due penalty for sin: paid in full! You are likely to think this is common and not constraining if you don't realize just how deserving you are of capital punishment. If you minimize your sin, dismiss it, and disregard the eternal holiness of God, Jesus dying on your behalf is just commonplace "Christianese." But if you have caught a vision of the glory and splendor of Christ, like Isaiah did in his vision in the temple, then you readily say with him, "Woe is me!"

And here's where we see what Paul means by being controlled or constrained by the love of Christ, v.15. Why did Jesus die on your behalf, Christian? "*So that* those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake"—for *your* sake—"died and was

raised.” Being constrained by Christ, constrained by love is to no longer live for yourself but for Christ. The governing principle of your life is no longer your own satisfaction, wants, desires, pleasures, but what would Christ want, Christ desire, Christ be pleased by, Christ be satisfied by. There is a reorientation of your life such that you are concerned only to be known by God. You do what you do for Christ’s sake and the gospel, and people say you are beside yourself.

So, you start or acquire businesses not merely to maximize profit and extract as much productivity from employees as possible, but you run it as explicitly Christian. You regard the lowest-level employee with all the dignity of an image bearer, not as a cog in a machine. You don’t cut corners and deliver the minimum viable product but do what genuinely serves your customers’ good. You do it that way not because it is easy but because it is hard, because the love of Christ compels you. Or you mother your children not for your own reputation or satisfaction but so that the death of Jesus on your unworthy and unable behalf is put on display only for your child to see. You do it that way not because it is easy but because it is hard, because the love of Christ constrains you. Or you start a Community Group even though you are introverted and people wear you out. You aren’t bent on hosting ten, fifteen, thirty people in your home—but you do the hard thing because the love of Christ controls you. Or you pursue development as a Christian, disciple-maker, churchmen, or counselor through our Anselm Institute not because it is comfortable and puffs you up, but because Christ has commissioned you in the Greatest Cause and his love hems you in.

### **Surrender to the Cause**

Church, we choose to persuade others and live not for ourselves not because it is easy, but because we are constrained by love. What love Christ has demonstrated when he died and was raised for our sake! Is the love of Christ the constraining force on your life? As we come to

the Table this morning, grapple with that question. Are you constrained by the love of Christ that compels you onward to live not for yourself but for Christ? Are there areas of your life that you need to surrender to the cause? Areas that you have clung to that are a hinderance or a distraction from the love of Christ? Or you, friend, visiting this morning. Perhaps you have for years said that you are a Christian but have known nothing of surrender. Instead, your life has looked as self-oriented as any of your unbelieving neighbors or coworkers. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for all that you might not live for yourself but for him. Turn. Surrender. Lay down your striving. Give up your efforts of earning. May we all be constrained by love having concluded that yes, indeed, Jesus died for all, and he died for me.

<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort," Houston, Texas, September 12, 1962, accessed via the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/rice-university-19620912>.

<sup>2</sup> Athanasius in Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 194-5