

**“In Christ”: True or False?**

**Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17**

**10.1.17**



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**Reflection questions...** [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

*“What do you think that Paul is trying to convey to us when he uses language like, “new creation”? Why do you think it’s important for such a conversation to be rooted in the biblical narrative? Are there other places in the scripture that seem to reinforce/support the notion of ‘being made new’?”*

*“When someone asks, ‘Do you love me?’, what does that seem to imply? Why do you think it’s important to experience both ‘words of love’ and ‘deeds (actions) of love’?” (1 John 3:18)*

*“From my own experience, we seem more comfortable fearing God (by ‘fear’, I mean, not a healthy sense of reverence, but a fear that causes us to keep our distance) that we do loving him. In what way(s) do you think that fear and love are incompatible?”*

*“Do you find it challenging to accept that you are the beloved of God?”*

*“When do you find yourself question God’s love for you the most? Can you think of a time when you doubted God’s care for you? Would you be willing to share it with the group?”*

*“Is there something that you didn’t know about God then, that you know now, which has helped to re-shape your perception of the disturbing life-circumstance? Of God?”*

*“Whose voice reinforced your chosen-ness? What voice(s) seemed to mute the voice of God and interrupt your pursuit of beloved-ness?”*

*“Are there things that you do which seem to flow out of an ease of God’s love for you? Are there places where you seem to function out of fear of not being loved?”*

*“If I really knew God’s love, perhaps I could stop trying to find love in \_\_\_\_\_.”*

Perhaps near the conclusion of your group gathering, you could read 1 John 4:7-21, and use it as a prayer for a better understanding of God's love for you.

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## Teaching Notes...

"... until Christ is fully formed in your lives..." (Galatians 4:19) This is Paul's self-proclaimed determination. He likens his strenuous to the sensations that a mother gets when she's having contractions.

Through a variety of expressions, images, and metaphors, Paul is determined to see us function in such a way that what is actually true of us, "*in Christ*", becomes normative in our experience.

When we say that we are, "*in Christ*", we are speaking of a way of identifying ourselves that possesses both an *objective* truth and an *experiential* truth.

In one sense, there's something "**definitive**" and "**decisive**" (conclusive) to it [Ephesians]: '*dead to alive*'; '*you were darkness... now light*'; '*separated... brought close*'; '*without God... united in peace*'. Paul says of all these God-movements, "... you can't take credit for it" (2:8)

Admittedly, most of what happens in salvation is 'beyond' us. It is inaccessible and unmanageable so that our only reasonable posture is receptivity: accepting it, welcoming it, instead of trying to manufacture it.

**We call it grace.**

In another sense, it is "**incremental**" and "**experiential**". It is to *actuate*, through the presence of the Spirit, and through our commitment to some communal expression of confession and repentance, and the adoption of practices which allow us to accommodate our new life--- what is already true of us, "*in Christ*".

It is to surrender--- to trust another way, another's will--- before you are able to define it. To experience something as true before you are able to explain it. **We call it grace.**

I think we run the risk of passing, too quickly, over Paul's language. He is, in the text, utilizing language ("*new creation*") which is integral to the Story. The dilemma of creation necessitated the hope of new creation: a world set right. Order and functionality restored. Shalom. They called it "*the life of the ages*"--- eternal life.

Just as life was initiated, by God, in Genesis as the infusion of his 'breath' into us, so new creation--- new life--- is depicted as Jesus breathing his breath into his followers (John 20)... participants in God's new world. Paul insists that, with the resurrection of Jesus, we don't have to 'die' to experience resurrection life.

**"God loves me because \_\_\_\_\_."**

I would suggest that how you complete that sentence offers a fairly telling expression of how you understand God, how you view yourself, and your present level of angst or ease.

It is to either humbly, '*draw a blank*', or confidently *fill in that blank*; to either be '*redeemed*', or offer a list of your '*redeeming*' qualities.

In contrast to the cultural myths being told where the world is essentially the unwanted by-product of some violent, cosmic family-feud, or some twisted sexual encounter between the gods, our Story declares that creation is just that, "*creation*"--- the thoughtful, intentional action of a good and benevolent God.

That premise provides both a "**centering**" and a "**circumference**". It would offer not only the significance we desire, but the security (boundaries) for which we long. It says that we are coming to understand both "*who we are*" and "*why we are*", in Christ; that those conclusions are too substantial to be left to our own determinations.

**I'm certain that there is nothing more theologically central than the conviction that "God is love" (1 John 4). I'm also certain that there is nothing more theologically controversial than "God is love".**

Humanity has, historically, had this "love-hate" relationship with God. We wanted to be close to him, but we were afraid. We assumed that it's best to 'keep our distance'. We desire his love, but we feel that we have to earn it, which causes us to resent him, and just as there is "no fear in love", there is "no love in fear" (1 John 4).

**Nothing in our world prepares us for 'grace'. All of our cultural ways of being together and organizing ourselves seem to defy dependence and mock the notion of humility.**

I wonder why we exchanged the pure pleasure and deep-heart satisfaction of being loved and chosen for a more 'sophisticated approach' to God? It's one that is certainly more methodical and predictable, but that has 'sucked the life' out of us and made both God us less appealing and less approachable.

**"Beloved" (well-loved one; favorite; worthy of love): a descriptor that Paul uses some (54) times as a way of helping to describe, first and foremost, what God does IN and FOR us, and not something we do to secure the label.**

If, early and often in our development, we are identified *with* and *by* that love, it helps prevent us from demanding it or performing for it, or anguishing over the void.

I've noticed a certain ease which characterizes people who have been loved well. They seem wonderfully aware of God and remarkably unaware of themselves (no self-importance), which causes them to be pleasantly attentive to others.

**We learn how to love by being loved.**

Ephesians 5:1 *"Imitate God in everything you do because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love [as Christ loved us]..."*

Love is not a propensity we have like being "athletic" or "having rhythm". We need to be exposed to it until it begins to inform and form "who" we are and "why" we are.

Deuteronomy 33:12 *"Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders."*

Psalms 62:1 *"My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him."*

1 John 4:18 *"...perfect love dispels all fear".*

**Not being loved completely, perfectly... it's the one rational fear.**

In a world without God--- without a Creator to confer upon us our dignity and worth--- *fear* is the primal motivator. When you lose God, you lose the source of love, but not the desire for it.

When we factor out God, we are diminished and our souls get smaller. We are simply "*sperm and eggs*"; "*tissue and skeletal structure*". It doesn't sound quite as glorious, huh?

Without attempting to psycho-analyze anyone, but in rehearsing my experience...

Anywhere in our life where there is a breach (abuse/misuse) of love, we begin to develop a personality that is shaped by fear, shame, and a firm commitment to self-protection.

Any place in our lives where we don't trust love, we will default back to strategies which attempt to re-gain control, over our relationships, over our circumstances.

**If we can't learn to be-loved, we'll settle for being competent.**

It is the assumption that if you won't affirm me (simply for who I am), then I must get really good at something in order for you to notice me. That driven-ness inadvertently sabotages every other relationship.

**When you lose this identity (being loved; being chosen), you become susceptible to other labels, each meant to “de-value” you and “desensitize” you to love.**

*“No other gods...”* (Exodus 20)

What we needed (what we were created for) was a singular, authoritative voice which would establish our value and worth. One that was *“predisposed to us”*, and whose guilty pleasure was in loving us (Ephesians 1:4-5) carried weight and could be distinguished from the other competing voices.

If your identity is not settled in this beloved-ness, then your sense of worth will always be fragile and ‘up for grabs’; to convince you that something other than love, someone other than God, is central to who you are.