

No one knows what the future will bring. The last couple of weeks we've been talking about how we have all lived through hard times recently. How should we live in times like these?

That brings me to my text: 2 Corinthians 5:11-13. *These three verses give us clear guidance for living in hard times.* They show us the right way to respond no matter what happens in the next twelve months.

2 Cor 5:11-14

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 12 We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is 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.

How should we live in times like these?

Here are three clear answers.

1: Live Urgently

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (v. 11).

Do you fear the Lord?

Most of us aren't sure how to answer that question. We would rather talk about loving the Lord, and there is always a place for that. 1 John 4:9 says we love him because he first loved us. If he had not loved us first, we would never have loved him at all. There is a high place in the Christian life for loving the Lord Jesus. How could we not love him after all he has done for us?

But Paul here puts his emphasis in a different place because he is thinking of that solemn day when we must all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (v. 10). *No one can escape it.* There we must answer for the things done in the body, whether they are useful or useless. Those "worthless" things, which in themselves may not have been wrong, will be burned up before our very eyes.

If that doesn't bother you, then you need a better conscience.

It's easy to justify ourselves and to cover our mistakes. We're good at making excuses and passing the buck. We know how to cover our tracks and make others look bad while we end up smelling like a rose. None of that will work when we stand before the Lord. His fiery gaze will strip away all our excuses.

The truth will come out.

No wonder Paul says, "We know the fear of the Lord." It's a combination of honor and respect. *If you know you must answer to the Lord, it will impact the way you live.*

When we come to Christ, we accept Him as our Lord and Savior. However, too many of us focus on the Savior part and forget the Lord part. In the Vineyard we say that we are a people of the Kingdom of God. If He is King, then we are vassals, serfs, everything that we have belongs to Him. He owns us and we live to please Him.

At the celebration of life for Bill Snyder, his children were all talking about the fact that they never wanted to do anything wrong and then have to face their father because they feared him.

But, that's only one part of the story. They knew their father loved them and was proud of his three kids who couldn't be more different from each other. The one thing they never wanted to see was that look of disapproval from their father.

OK, so you're probably not living a life of blatant, willful sin.

But, are you persuading others to fall in love with Jesus? Remember that when we stand before the Lord on that day, it is a judgment not onto punishment, but unto reward. How will you make an account before the Lord on that day?

2: Live Transparently

But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 12 We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. (vv. 11b-12).

Is your life an open book?

Most of us would hesitate to answer in the affirmative. *Live long enough, and you'll have plenty of things you prefer not to talk about in public.* Paul evidently wasn't worried about that. For one thing, he was open about his past. Before he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, he hated Christians and tried to wipe them out. That's why he was going to Damascus in the first place. He was a "missionary" sent to wipe out the growing Christian movement. Since Paul didn't try to hide his past, no one could spring it on him. Paul says God knows him through and through, and he hopes the Corinthians know him in the same way.

He wants them to "boast" about him, which sounds strange until you think about it. We talk about not putting people on a pedestal, but Paul didn't seem bothered about that. His attitude was, "Follow me, as I follow Christ." Can people around you say that you model Christ for them?

Sometimes we define ourselves by our role in life: husband, wife, brother, sister, doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc. *Those roles are true enough, but they don't go to the core of who we are.* Paul found his identity in Jesus Christ. That's why he comes back again and again to the little phrase "in Christ." *At the root of it all, he was a man "in Christ," and that changed everything.* To put it in modern terms, Paul didn't struggle with his "self-image" because he was grounded in Christ. It didn't matter whether he had a roof over his head or if he slept under the stars. Because he didn't look to others to determine worth, he was content wherever he was.

We all need heroes.

In many ways, we need them now more than ever.

That's why Paul could say, "I want you to be proud of me." He wanted to be their hero, which meant offering himself up as a man worthy of their trust.

I've read many warnings lately about not idolizing our pastors and other spiritual leaders. *But the fact some have fallen doesn't mean we shouldn't trust anyone.* Find a man you can trust, and then follow him. Don't give him your heart carelessly, and don't treat him as if he could do no wrong. We need heroes, not idols!

Don't let the failure of some sour you on trusting others.

Ruth Graham defined a saint as someone who makes it easy to believe in Jesus. *That's a worthy goal for all of us.* I have a sacred obligation to live so that my wife, children, grandchildren, friends, and those who follow my ministry find it easy to believe in Jesus.

Paul spoke about this in 1 Timothy 3:2 when he said an overseer must be “above reproach.” The Greek word describes a garment without any folds. When applied to personal character, it means the leader must be free from any secret pockets of sin. Leaders are often attacked, their motives questioned, their actions criticized. A leader who is above reproach weathers the storm because there is nothing about him about which a person could say, “Aha! I gotcha.” This means no questionable conduct, no secret sins, no deliberately unresolved conflicts.

There should be nothing hidden because there is nothing to hide.

3: Live Unapologetically

For if we are beside (out of our minds) ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. (v. 13).

If this verse troubles us, it may say more about us than about the Apostle Paul. Evidently there was a zeal about his life that made others think he was out of his mind. Acts 25 records the reaction of a man named Festus, the Roman governor of Judea when Paul was on trial for his life. When Festus heard Paul’s story, he was perplexed, because it involved matters of the Jewish law and Paul’s testimony about **“a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive”** (Acts 25:19). The very next day, Paul gave his public testimony before King Agrippa. He asked a question that hangs in the air 2000 years later: **“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”** (Acts 26:8).

After listening to Paul give his testimony, Festus interrupted him by saying, **“Your great learning is driving you insane”** (Acts 26:24).

- Insane!
- Crazy!
- Nuts!
- Certifiable!
- Mad as a hatter!
- Touched in the head!
- He’s a few fries short of a Happy Meal.

We say things like that because it’s easier to dismiss a man as crazy when we don’t want to take him seriously. Suppose Festus can write Paul off as a highly educated lunatic. In that case, he doesn’t have to consider the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

Paul knew what his critics thought, and it didn’t bother him. “If you think I’m nuts, that’s okay because I’m not doing this for your approval.” He didn’t apologize for his zeal, he didn’t try to explain it, and he certainly didn’t ask forgiveness or promise to be less crazy in the future.

I wonder how Paul would fare in most 21st-century churches. We are so concerned about fitting in and not offending people that we hardly ever make a splash or cause a scene. *No one would think to call us crazy.*

Let’s face it. Christians *are* narrow-minded about God’s truth. We believe something the chattering classes find incredible. *We believe God has spoken in his Word, and his Word is to be obeyed.*

We don’t debate “Do not murder” or “Salvation is found in no one else” or “Abstain from sexual immorality.” We believe Jesus meant it when he said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6).

We believe the Bible is the Word of God.
We believe Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life.
We believe Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.
We believe Jesus is the only way to heaven.
We believe Jesus is coming again.
We believe his kingdom will last forever.
We believe Jesus will judge the living and the dead.
We believe in heaven and hell.

That's just the beginning. *We believe God has set the boundaries of acceptable conduct, and that his Word is final.* To be more explicit, we believe marriage is between one man and one woman. We believe killing the unborn through abortion is evil.

These are not popular positions in the 21st-century. They run against the cultural tide of our times. It's never been easy to be a Christian, but it is getting harder as Western Civilization moves away from its Judeo-Christian heritage.

Some people want to silence us completely. They would shut us out of the public arena and deny us a "seat at the table" of public discourse. These days you must be careful what you say. If you are open about your Christian faith, some people will "troll" you on social media and make you a victim of "cancel culture." You may be called ugly names.

That's nothing new.

If we take Paul seriously, then we must do what he did and refuse to apologize for our beliefs. It is better to be thought insane if that is the price of faithfulness to God.

Never apologize for God's Word.
Never be ashamed of the gospel.
Never keep quiet just to get along.

Christians don't fit in, and we never will. We are fools if we make conformity the goal of our lives. I ran across a fascinating quote from legendary shock rocker Alice Cooper. Though you may not have heard the news, he became a Christian some years ago. Here's the quote I found:

Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy.
But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's rebellion.

He's right on all counts. *It's a lot easier to get drunk and fool around than it is to follow Jesus Christ.* Do you want to be a true rebel against the status quo? Become a disciple of Christ. Make him the Lord of your life. You'll be going against the flow every single day.

I began by commenting on how some of us have gone through difficult times this past year, *but God's Word shows us the way forward.* How can we live for Christ in times like these?

Live Urgently.
Live Transparently.
Live Unapologetically.

Do that, and we can impact the world no matter who is in the White House, or when the vaccine arrives, or whether the stock market goes up or down.