

Ambassadors for Christ

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[0 : 00] If you will, go with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. 2 Corinthians chapter 5. I'll read verses 16 through 21, and I'll be reading from the ESV.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

[1 : 05] For our sake, he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. I'd like to begin by using one of the most terrifying words in the church.

It's the kind of word that makes you slink low in the pew whenever you hear your pastor use it. It's a word that makes us uncomfortable because we understand the importance of the subject, but we so often neglect this aspect of our Christian service.

And that word is evangelism. I've been reminded of the challenges that come with evangelism over the last couple of years.

You see, for the better part of a decade, I was pastoring a church where I kind of lived in a Christian bubble, if you will. Most of the interactions I had with people from week to week were with fellow believers.

But that hasn't been the case for these last couple of years. Instead, I'm confronted daily with people who don't know Christ. I'm confronted daily with people who are utterly lost and desperately need the gospel.

[2 : 23] I see it every day. Hedonism, humanism, secularism, atheism, a blatant disregard for God and his law.

A flippant attitude toward Christ. Outright hostility sometimes toward Christianity. And perhaps more than anything else, I see a casual indifference to all things holy.

Sometimes I feel like Jesus when he stood outside of the city of Jerusalem, if you remember, near the end of his ministry in Luke's gospel, we read when he drew near and saw the city, and he's thinking about the rejection of him over the last three years, it says he wept over it, saying, Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

My heart breaks for those who don't know Christ. Even so, having compassion for people doesn't altogether eliminate the difficulties of evangelism.

It can still be very hard to do. It can be intimidating. It can often be discouraging. And it can certainly take many of us out of our comfort zones. I pray that I can encourage you and maybe offer a helpful perspective in the short time we have this afternoon by expounding upon this passage in Paul's second, which was more likely his fourth letter to the Corinthians.

[3 : 54] And this perspective begins with verse 16. From now on, Paul writes, We regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Some translations use the wording, We regard no one from a worldly point of view or a worldly perspective. Now, to understand what Paul means, we have to think back to the days prior to Christ's death and resurrection.

Most of the Jewish people, including the Lord's own disciples, had a very shallow view of the coming Messiah. They knew what the Old Testament prophesied about him, but I guess you can say they failed to make proper application of it.

For example, the Old Testament depicted a conquering king who had come. He would defeat all of God's enemies, and he would restore Israel, God's people, back to their proper place in the world. Jesus, however, he arrives on the scene. He claims to be God's Messiah. And then he begins telling his disciples how he must suffer and die.

[5 : 03] That does not compute in the Jewish mind. How can the conquering king die at the hands of God's enemies? That doesn't make sense. Well, they couldn't see past the flesh, you see.

They couldn't see past the worldly. In other words, they couldn't see past the physical, what was right in front of their natural eyes. They were not thinking in spiritual terms. They were not thinking about life and consequences beyond this natural world.

If Christ is to be a conquering king, they thought, then he must physically conquer right here, right now, on this physical earth. Well, the disciples' perspective dramatically changed, of course.

Once they saw the resurrected Christ, the pieces of the puzzle began to, you know, fall into place, and they began to see things beyond the flesh, beyond the physical, beyond the worldly.

That's the perspective Paul is sharing with us here. We regard no one according to the flesh. In other words, we don't care about people's status.

[6 : 09] We don't care about their annual income or net worths. We don't care whether they're Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. None of that matters.

Why? Because soon enough, all of those distinctions become meaningless. They won't mean a thing shortly. Life is a lot like a game of chess in that you may be a king, I may be a lowly pawn, but eventually the game comes to an end.

We all go back in the box, and the king is no more significant than the pawn, you see. Paul encourages us to look past those superficial things that we often see when we look at people around us.

No matter who we are in this life, what's really at stake is our souls. Rich or poor, powerful or weak, intelligent or not, the true and lasting distinction between us is between life and death, right?

Think back to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. If you remember, the disciples, they leave to go buy food. And when they return, they are stunned to see Jesus having an intense, intimate conversation with a Samaritan woman.

[7 : 35] In their minds, he might as well befriend a pagan Gentile. It would have made just as much sense. And while they're scratching their heads trying to figure out what exactly is going on here, the Samaritan woman, of course, runs into town, tells everyone she knows that she has just met the Christ, the Son of God.

And soon after, the disciples see a flood of people coming out of the town to find Jesus. And that's when Jesus says to his disciples, and I can imagine him pointing right toward that group of Samaritans coming at them, and says, Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see.

The fields are white for harvest. Open your eyes, he says. I know you see a bunch of worthless Samaritans who have historically perverted the worship of God, but I'm telling you, open your eyes. Look and see. There's more to these people than what you're seeing on the surface. Stop looking at them according to the flesh. These people are souls who are not beyond God's redemptive power. Consider also what Jesus said next to them in that chapter. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

[8 : 59] If God wills, that's the fruit of evangelism. That's the fruit of evangelism. It's a harvest of eternal life. I know how frustrating it can be.

You know, to work with that guy who's always profaning God with his nasty sense of humor. I know what a lost cause that woman seems to be, who seems to think that she can only find happiness at the bottom of a bottle, but I encourage you, please lift up your eyes and see that the fields are ripe for harvest.

Earlier, when Paul was in the city of Corinth, he faced hostile opposition against him, and I suspect he was tempted to leave because the Lord comes to him and says, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking.

Do not be silent, for I am with you, and I have many in this city who are my people. You don't see them, Paul. Not yet, anyhow.

You don't see them, but bring them the gospel, and you will see. I realize that even after we have this deeper spiritual perspective and concern for those around us, we all still face internal struggles when it comes to the prospect of trying to evangelize.

[10:23] We think to ourselves, I'm just not capable. I'm no apostle Paul. I don't have his ability to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ.

That was, by the way, the commission Jesus gave Paul. We think, I don't have that ability. That's not me. And you're right.

You don't have that ability. Not in and of yourself. Those who are born again are born not of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God.

You can no more bring someone to life than Ezekiel could a valley of dry bones. To borrow an illustration from Paul Washer, he once described a man being late to a meeting.

And when he finally arrived to the meeting, he tells everyone, I'm sorry I'm late, but I got a flat tire on my way here. And when I got out to change it, one of the lug nuts rolled onto the highway.

[11:31] And when I went out to get the lug nut, I got hit by a logging truck. And that's why I'm late. Well, of course, everyone in the meeting is thinking the exact same thing.

Either this man is a liar or he's a lunatic. You cannot have an encounter with something as big as a logging truck and walk away unscathed. And Paul Washer, after giving this example, he then asked, what's bigger?

A logging truck or almighty God? We don't walk away from an encounter with almighty God unscathed or unaffected.

When God chooses to rip from our chest that heart of stone and put in its place a heart of flesh, our very nature has changed. Our worldview changes.

Our perspectives change. Our affections change. Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give them eternal life and they will never perish.

[12:35] In short, verse 17, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to himself.

Now this is important so don't miss it. Though we are instrumental in bringing people to Christ, we are merely instruments in the hand of God.

Do you understand that? Merely instruments in the hand of God. We do not possess the power to convert people to Christ more than a surgeon's knife has the ability to perform a surgery.

We are merely a tool in the hand of the surgeon. One of the last commandments Jesus gave the church before ascending into heaven was go and make disciples of all nations but he didn't stop there.

He goes on to say, I am with you always to the end of the age. He is with us if for no other reason because we can't accomplish anything without him.

[13:44] Even so, we have a responsibility here. Paul says, God gave us the ministry of reconciliation entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. But before we talk about our responsibility here, perhaps we should consider what he means by ministry or message of reconciliation.

In short, he is talking about the gospel. In Romans 5, Paul writes, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.

Here in 2 Corinthians 5, he says, God, through Christ, reconciled us to himself. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

You know, sometimes we mistakenly think that the unredeemed sinner's biggest problem is that he won't get into heaven when he dies. But you'll notice that Paul doesn't say anything about heaven here.

He doesn't say anything in Romans 5 about heaven. For him, the heart of the sinner's problem is a massive chasm between him and God.

[14:54] Never mind his locality. The issue is an utterly broken, seemingly irreconcilable relationship with God the Father because of sin.

No, the unredeemed person will not get into heaven, but more importantly, he will never enter into or enjoy the presence of God.

That's the issue. The gospel, then, is the incredible news that Jesus' atoning work on the cross is sufficient to bring reconciliation to holy God and his sinful enemies.

Christ assuaged God's wrath by suffering it in our place, restoring this once broken relationship between God and sinners.

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son. Let's skip down for a moment to verse 21. By the way, this happens to be my favorite verse in the Bible because in only 15 words, 15 words in the original Greek that is, Paul captures the very essence of the gospel.

[16:09] He says, for our sake, he, that is God, made him, that is Christ, to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Now, for the sake of time, I've been told I have a hard cap at 25 minutes. I'm going to give you the extremely abridged commentary on this verse. First, Paul makes it clear that redemption is the sovereign work of God.

The words he made tells us that much. He made. We do not make salvation happen. That's an impossibility.

According to Ephesians, God chose us before the foundation of the world. According to 1 Peter 1, Christ and his saving work was foreknown and predetermined by God before the foundation of the world.

According to Ephesians 2, the regenerated person is his workmanship. He made. Second, Christ became sin though he knew no sin.

[17:27] Now, how does an innocent man become sin? Well, once again, God made. God imputed our sinfulness to Christ.

In other words, he judged and he punished Christ as though he were us. And third, this was done so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So now the question is reversed. How does a sinner become righteous? Similarly, God imputes Christ righteousness to us. He judges and he rewards us based on Christ's work, his life, his obedience.

So that's the gospel in only 15 words. It's the summary of a divine transaction between Christ and sinners which was sovereignly planned and providentially carried out by God the Father ultimately resulting in reconciliation between us and God.

Now this does prompt us to ask a vital question regarding the timing of this divine transaction. We know exactly when Jesus became sin for us. The question is when does the sinner become the righteousness of God?

[18:44] For the answer we could turn to many places in the Bible Romans 3, John 3, Galatians 2 just to name a few but I'd like to read from Philippians chapter 3. There Paul says, for Christ's sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law or from keeping the law but that which comes through faith in Christ.

The righteousness from God depends on faith. Elsewhere he says for by grace have you been saved through faith.

And what does Paul say in Romans 3? The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Therefore, Paul can say in that same chapter, Christ is the justifier of the one who has faith in him. In short, God imputes his righteousness to the sinner when the sinner trusts in Christ alone to justify him before God.

[20:00] In other words, he becomes the righteousness of God when he believes, which according to Ephesians 2 is not his own doing, even his faith is the gift of God.

All glory be to God. God. Now, this, of course, leads us back to our responsibility here. In Romans 10, Paul rhetorically asks, how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?

And how can they hear without someone preaching? How can someone believe if no one has ever shared the gospel with him?

according to this passage, God gave us the ministry of reconciliation entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Therefore, Paul says in verse 20, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. Have you ever paid any attention to the introduction to the book of Acts?

[21:03] It's easy to miss, but in the introduction, Luke, the author of Acts, he refers back to his account of the gospel and he describes it as all that Jesus began to do and teach.

All that Jesus began to do and teach. Jesus, however, ascends into heaven in the middle of the first chapter of Acts, all while Luke implies that Jesus continues to do and teach throughout the book of Acts.

Acts. How did Jesus continue to do and teach if he wasn't even here? Well, the answer is Christ continues to work and teach through his church.

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. He calls us into the ministry or service of reconciliation. He entrusts us with the message of reconciliation, that is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He lays on us the responsibility to share his word with the world around us as his ambassadors, his loyal and thankful spokesmen.

[22 : 20] Though I could easily spend another 30 minutes on this text, I won't. Instead, let me attempt to summarize things in closing here. As difficult and uncomfortable as evangelism can often be in the moment, there's too much at stake to neglect this part of our Christian service.

My prayer is that our eyes are open to the spiritual realities of our friends and our neighbors. Countless people all around us every day need to hear about their devastating separation from God.

They need to hear the message of reconciliation. They need to put their trust in Christ and in Christ alone. If God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, the least we can do, the least we can do, is tell others about it.

Just share that message. As Paul does here, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

And as we do, we don't want to forget that we are not alone in this mission. You are an instrument in the hand of God.

[23 : 42] Jesus says, I am with you always. More than that, Paul says God is making his appeal through us. Through us, that's profound.

if we are faithfully and accurately declaring the message of reconciliation, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is as though God himself is speaking through us.

And if that is the case, what fear or reservation could we possibly have? the words are from him and the outcome is in his hand, not ours.

What fear or reservation could we possibly have? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

I pray earnestly that you will send out laborers into this harvest. I pray that you will grant this church the courage and boldness to declare the message of reconciliation whenever the opportunity presents itself.

[24 : 55] May you open our eyes to see the fields are ripe for harvest. Lord, I'm tempted to ask you to be with us in this area of our Christian duty, but I know it isn't necessary.

You already promised to be with us always. You promised to never leave us. Even so, Lord, we need your spirit to remind us of that truth. Lead us in being your faithful witnesses and ambassadors to the lost, to this broken world around us.

Lord, may you bless us so that our light so shines before others that they may give you glory. In Christ's name I pray.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.