

## Transformation and Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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*<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

- 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, ESV

What could be the most meaningful work someone could ever do, and what would make it so meaningful? Teachers educate children, leading them into knowledge and understanding of the truth. It's meaningful work because leading people from ignorance to knowledge is good and noble, and I would propose that it's only possible because real truth actually exists. If everything is purely subjective and there is no objective truth, then education becomes just opinion-spreading, propagandizing or worse.

Doctors do meaningful work, as they apply medicine to people and see them cured. They save lives, and the work is meaningful because life is worth saving. Police officers and firefighters do meaningful work for similar reasons; they serve people and save lives. So, too, people who serve in the military – they risk their lives to protect others and secure freedom. If you take a poll and ask people which jobs are the most respected or most valuable, these are the ones they name – first responders, medical personnel, the military, and teachers. And that's good.

But what about the ministry of the Gospel? And here, I'm not just talking about pastors or professional ministers – although it is worth noting that pastors and ministers used to be held universally in very high regard and are not anymore, which says something about our culture as well as, sadly, about the conduct of some ministers. However, what I mean is not the calling of

being an ordained minister but rather the calling to the work of Gospel ministry, the ministry of reconciliation, as Paul puts it in this passage, which is something given to every Christian.

Education is only meaningful and valuable if objective truth – knowledge and understanding – exists and can be imparted to students through teaching. The other honorable professions named are only meaningful if human life is worth saving and protecting. And Gospel ministry is only meaningful if the Gospel is true. Or, to put it another way, the ministry of reconciliation is only worth doing – especially at the cost of social rejection or worse – if people are, in fact, alienated from God and in need of reconciliation, and if Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection is, in fact, the only way of reconciliation.

We will talk more about what this reconciliation is and how Jesus accomplished it later, but for now, we need to see this: For us to see the true value of Gospel ministry and to embrace the ministry of reconciliation, we must see what God sees and think as God thinks. In other words:

- We must know the fear of the Lord (v. 11)
- We must have the love of Christ control us (v. 14), and
- We must no longer regard anyone according to the flesh (v. 16).

### **I. Knowing the Fear of the Lord, We Persuade Others**

The first word of our passage today is “Therefore,” which means it is directly connected to what comes immediately before it. It is what follows logically from the previous statement. So, since it’s been two months since we were last in 2 Corinthians, let’s look at the previous verse to get the context and make the connection Paul is making here:

*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*

*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. - 2 Corinthians 5:9-11, ESV*

So, Paul connects these statements:

1. We want to please God in whatever we do.
2. Because we know we will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due for what we have done in the body.
3. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord (in the coming judgment), we persuade others.

From these verses being connected in this way, we can see that it pleases God for us to share the Gospel with others using persuasion. God wants us to tell others of their need to be

reconciled to God and of what God has done through Christ Jesus to make reconciliation with Him a reality.

What could be our motivation for wanting to share the Gospel with others? It certainly can't be our desire to be liked and accepted by people, because sharing the Gospel with others will more likely lead to us being rejected and judged than accepted and praised. It can't even just be our love for them, because that is temporary and fleeting and unreliable.

Rather, it must be in the fear of the Lord – not a cowering, trembling fear that God will send us to hell if we don't share the Gospel with enough people. That's not what Paul means. But, rather, knowing how holy and powerful and just God is and knowing how much He has forgiven us of our sins through Jesus Christ, and wanting to please Him in love for all He has given to us, we fear the Lord with a holy, humble, and loving fear and we seek to persuade others of God's goodness and love through the Gospel.

If we operate out of the right, Biblical fear of the LORD, then two things will be true of us in our Gospel ministry: We will not commend ourselves, trying to impress other people with ourselves, and we will instead be controlled or compelled or ruled by the love of Christ.

#### **A. We Do Not Commend Ourselves**

In verse 12, Paul tells the Corinthians, "*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.*" In ministry, in life, we can either be striving hard to commend ourselves or we can be focused clearly on commending Christ. The so-called super-apostles and rhetorically-gifted preachers-for-hire excelled at commending themselves with their letters of recommendation and their obvious skills and gifts for rhetorical flourishes.

Paul wants to make it clear that when he says they are persuading men in the fear of the Lord, they are not commending themselves. They're not saying, in a self-righteous way, "We are the true God-fearers and not mere man-pleasers." No, they are just honestly sharing their true motivation as those who preach the true Gospel of Jesus Christ in the right fear of the Lord, not to commend themselves, but to draw a distinction between those who boast about outward appearances versus those who focus on what's truly in the heart.

Ministry faithfulness and even ministry effectiveness cannot be measured by how many followers you gather on social media or how many conferences invite you to speak at them or how many books you've sold. You don't need to have expert training or be skilled in giving all the right answers in just the right way. Knowing and loving Jesus and being prepared to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ from your heart in a sincere desire to please God and not commend yourself – that's what matters.

John Piper has famously said, “We cannot commend what we do not cherish.” The reason why some people are so skilled at commending themselves is that they truly cherish themselves. The more we cherish Christ and His forgiveness and our peace with God through Him, the more readily we will be prepared to commend Him to others.

## **B. The Love of Christ Controls Us**

Then, in verses 13-15, Paul explains how and why the love of Christ controls him: “*For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*” (ESV)

Paul was regularly accused of being out of his mind when he shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul was sharing the Gospel with King Agrippa in Acts 26, Festus interrupted him:

*To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”*

*And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.” – Acts 26:22-25, ESV*

Being accused if being out of his mind did not deter Paul from preaching the Gospel. He did not let the critics and cynics derail him.

Why? He says it’s because the love of Christ controls him – not his love for Christ but Christ’s love for him and for all of those who belong to Christ. Paul is saying here that Christ died for all of His own, for all those who will trust in Him for salvation and will be reconciled to God through Christ. And all of those for whom Christ died are united to Christ and so we all died in Christ, so that we might no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died and was raised again for us and for our salvation.

In Acts 26, Paul is pleading with King Agrippa because he knows that King Agrippa knows the Scriptures and believes the words of the prophets. Paul goes on to plead:

*King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I*

*would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.” – Acts 26:27-29, ESV*

Paul doesn't know who God's elect are – none of us do. He doesn't know whether or not King Agrippa is one of those for whom Christ died and rose again, and so he is pressing the truth of Christ with urgency and hoping Agrippa might respond with God-given faith.

If we are controlled by the love of Christ, then we are compelled to love what He loves, and we are compelled to live not for ourselves but for His sake. Jesus tells us that the angels in heaven rejoice over one thing: when a sinner repents. That is, heaven rejoices when someone comes out of the darkness of sin and condemnation and comes into the light of God's love, from the dominion of Satan to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And so, to be controlled by the love of Jesus and to not commend ourselves, we should be wholeheartedly concerned with seeing men and women, boys and girls come to know Jesus, to have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God through Him, and not to worry about what people might call us or think of us – because we are not the source of anyone's salvation, and we are not the ones we are commending to the world – Jesus is!

If this is true, then what matters most about anyone is whether or not they are in Christ. And Paul says that if the love of Christ controls us, something happens to the way we see people: *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.*” To regard someone “*according to the flesh*” is to think about them in ways that matter to the world, in ways that matter in this life only and in the warped view of fallen human society only: What's their ethnicity or nationality? What's their education level? What do they do for a living? How much money do they make? What political party do they support? What sports team do they support?

But what matters most is this: Are they at enmity with God or have they been reconciled to God? Are they still in their sins or are they in Christ? Again, we'll clarify what we mean by these terms later. But for now, we need to see that being controlled by the love of Christ should deeply and profoundly transform how we see people.

## **II. New Creation in Christ**

One of the things we should see is that a glorious thing happens whenever anyone trusts in Jesus and is united to Him by faith: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. – v. 17*

The prophet Ezekiel was given the word of the Lord that foretold this new creation change God would bring for His people:

*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. – Ezekiel 36:25-27, ESV*

*And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God.” – Ezekiel 11:19-21, ESV*

There is a new creation transformation that God alone can bring to someone’s heart and life. This is not religion. Man-made religion is all about what man might do to change himself and reach God. The Gospel is all about what God has done to reach to men and women and how He changes us from the inside out. Religion might help someone reform their lifestyle, but God alone can transform the heart.

And the “*new creation*” of 2 Corinthians 5:17 has a double reference. It refers to the reality of what God works in the hearts of His people – taking out our heart of stone and giving us a heart of flesh – and also to the new creation that has come in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, as Jesus rose as the firstborn from the dead, the firstfruits of the new creation. These two things are connected, because it is by being joined to the resurrected Christ Jesus – the firstfruits of the new creation – that our hearts are made into new creations. That is, our hearts share in the new creation that has begun in Christ and in His resurrection. Because Jesus has won the victory over sin and death and is alive forevermore, our hearts pass from death to eternal life when they are joined to Him, no longer stone-cold dead but warm and living in Christ.

### **III. Reconciliation to God Through Christ**

And then Paul tells us how this is possible and what this means for us:

*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

#### **A. The Ministry of Reconciliation**

The only one who can do this work of heart-transformation is God. Just as He is the Creator of the first creation, so He is the creator of the New Creation. Thus, “All this is from God.” The ministry of heart-transformation is the ministry of reconciliation; they are two aspects of the same work, work which can only be done by God.

Paul tells us three things about this ministry of reconciliation:

1. In Christ, God reconciled us to Himself.
2. In Christ, God is reconciling the world to Himself.
3. In Christ, we are given the ministry of reconciliation, which is the ministry of being ambassadors for Christ, as if Christ is pleading through us, “*Be reconciled to God.*”

Now, the most obvious place we need to start in more deeply considering this work of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation is with the fact that the world and all people in it are alienated from God by our sin and are naturally born in need of being reconciled to Him.

The Bible tells us in Ephesians 2 that we are born dead in sins and trespasses in which we naturally walk – so, we’re born as walking dead, spiritually dead, stone-cold hearts toward God, breaking His good and holy law by leaving undone the good that He’s called us to do – loving Him with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves – and instead doing what He’s told us not to do – lying, cheating, stealing, hating, lusting, coveting. We’re all guilty all the time of both types of offenses – failing to live up the right and good standard of the law of love and instead doing selfish, sinful, rotten things. That’s who we are by nature and that’s why, by nature, everyone in the world stands in need of being reconciled to God. It does not matter if you’re rich or poor, white or black, educated or not, Republican or Democrat or Independent, a faithful churchgoer or someone whose never darkened the doorway of a church in your life.

No matter what we may look like and boast of on the outside, we are all the same from birth inside – stone-cold hard and dead toward God and in desperate need of both transformation and reconciliation. We need our hearts of stone replaced with hearts flesh capable of love, and we need to be reconciled to God. And this transformation and reconciliation is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ.

So, the ministry of reconciliation is really Christ’s ministry. He’s the only Savior. And so verse 20 says, “*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*” What is an ambassador? An ambassador is someone who is a citizen of another country, living abroad and representing the interests and mission of the country that has sent them. So, if you belong to Jesus Christ, you are a new creation in Him and are a citizen of His heavenly kingdom. You live here, in foreign territory, in the kingdom of darkness ruled by the god of this age, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who works

in the sons of disobedience, to use the language of Ephesians 2. While we are here, we are to represent the interests and mission of our heavenly king, who has sent us to proclaim to the world that they can be reconciled to God and have all of their sins forgiven through Jesus Christ and Him alone. That's our ministry and our life mission.

## **B. The Accomplishment of Reconciliation**

But some might ask, "Why does it have to be through Jesus Christ alone?" Verse 21 gives us that answer: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

The only One who can reconcile us to God has to be One who Himself is not alienated from God by sin. It must be "*Him who knew no sin*" and that's only true of one person who ever lived: the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only was Jesus completely sinless, but He is also both God and man. In the words of Job, from the Old Testament, He alone is "someone who could lay a hand on us both" – on both God and man, because He is both God and man. So, Jesus is uniquely qualified by who He is – the sinless Son of God and Son of Man.

But He's also uniquely qualified because of what God did through Him on the cross – "*he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" God made Christ to be sin for us. That is, although Jesus was sinless and absolutely holy, pleasing the Father in all He did, God treated Him as if He were sin itself. God imputed to Him – that is, counted as belonging to Him – all of our sin and trespasses. Then, in a great exchange, God counted as ours all the righteousness He had earned by a life of perfect, sinless obedience. He took what we deserve, and He gives us what He deserves in its place. No one else has ever done that or ever could do that.

If we treat the Gospel of Jesus Christ like any other human religion, we will proclaim ourselves as models for a program of moralistic self-improvement. But that IS not good news! The Good News of the Gospel is that God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. By faith in Him, we have all of our sins removed and all of His righteousness given to us instead. We have our stony, selfish hearts removed and replaced by tender hearts of love for God for all He has done for us and love for others, desiring them to see and receive the same forgiveness and transformation we have in Christ.