

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

The Ministry Of Reconciliation

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2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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Introduction:

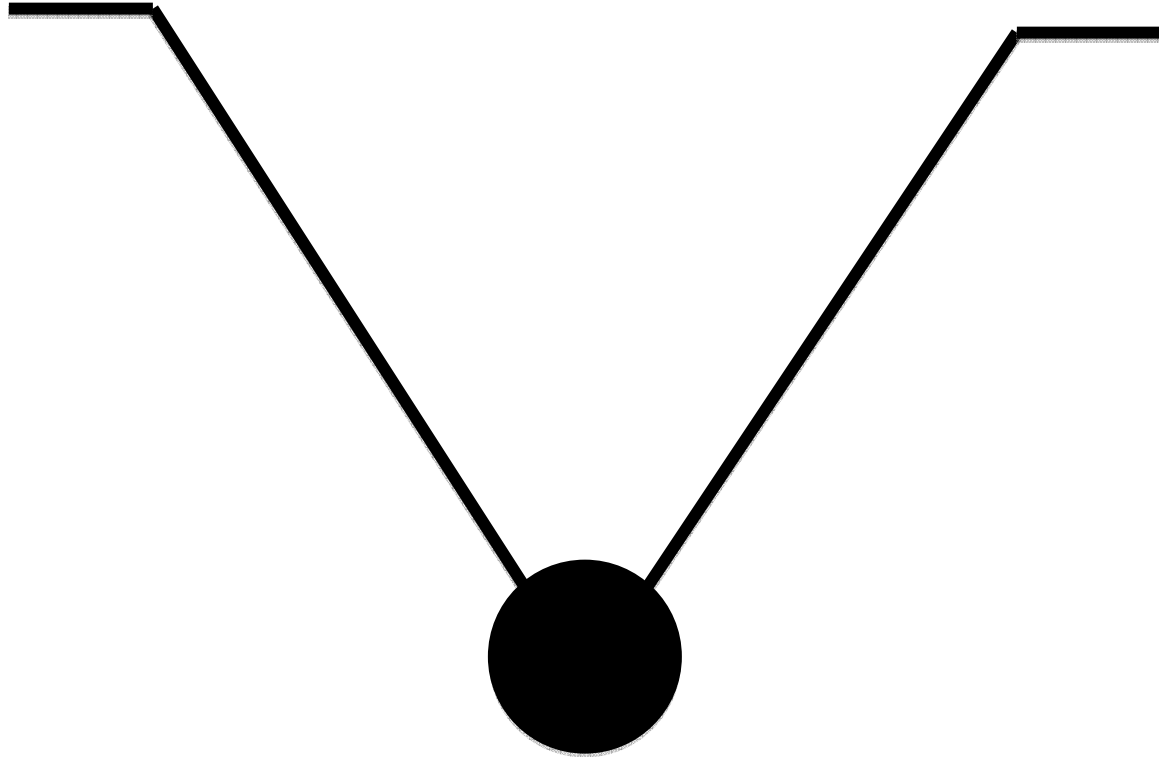
Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 5:11. What we're looking at this morning is really Paul's reaction to the things we talked about last week. Paul is reflecting on these eternal realities that we talked out in 5:1-10 and he is responding with a sense of urgency and mission. We read verse 11 last week as part of our move into application. Paul says:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

(Transition to chart – Note, the following “patter” is simply my estimation of what I will say to introduce the passage in relation to the little graphic I have prepared.)

(Chart Representation)

GOD



GRACE JUNCTION

If this is how things are (looking at previous chart) then this is what we need to do. We need to meet people in their fallenness at the point of God's plan of redemption. We need to meet them here and we need to tell them about the grace of God in Christ. We need to get them off the train that leads to death and ruin and onto the train that leads to life and blessing and ultimately back to God. This is urgent business, Paul says, because if this is really how things are – again flipping to previous chart) - if we have no idea when Christ will return and when the opportunity for conversion will be withdrawn then we need to get this message out, we need to have a plan for meeting people right here at the point of new creation. If that's the reality we're dealing with (chart 1) then this is the mission we need to engage.

That's the basic flow of this passage. If you are one of those folks who can only handle a 5 minute message – there it is – that's what Paul is saying and that's the ground we will be covering this morning. I want you to see what Paul sees and to feel the urgency Paul feels for engaging the ministry of reconciliation. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹¹ 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. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ 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)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As I said already this message is pretty straight forward. Paul is saying that if this is true – that the Old Creation is dying and could come to an end at any time with the return of Christ – and if its true that because of Christ we can be born again into a New Creation that will never fade or die or pass away – if that's all true then obviously this is what we should do. We should engage the ministry of reconciliation. That's the message but if we listen to what Paul says over these 11 verses that we have read then we can hear some very useful counsel for those of us that eager to follow and to serve in his footsteps.

The Ministry Of Reconciliation:

The first thing we hear concerns our proper motivations in Gospel ministry.

1. The proper motivations for ministry

Paul says in verse 11:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

And then he says in verse 14:

For the love of Christ controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14 ESV)

Some of our Bibles will have that as ‘the love of Christ **compels us**’, that’s good too. Paul is responding to two kinds of pressure – there is the FEAR of judgment and there is the LOVE of Christ – BOTH are necessary in Gospel ministry.

We were talking about this the other night at T2. One of the ladies mentioned that we just almost never talk about the reality of hell anymore. We don’t deal with these eternal realities and as a result we often lack motivation in our Gospel ministry. Listen, I understand that hell is a difficult topic, I understand that as a Canadian it can be very difficult to speak to people about binary realities – you’re in or your out, you’re going to heaven or to hell – I understand that that isn’t very Canadian but it is true and people need to know that. Hell is forever. This is not a game. If this is all true then we need to think about that and we need to tell people that.

And we need to do that not just because we love people and we recoil from the thought that the people we love might spend eternity away from God – yes that’s true – but we also should do it because GOD IS WORTHY OF THEIR WORSHIP. Those motivations have to go together. If Jesus tells us the truth about who God is – that he is holy and loving, that he is good and generous that he would save his people at the cost of his own dear Son then that God is worthy of our worship. People shouldn’t get to be angry at God, people shouldn’t get to ignore his kindness or trample on his law – God is good and everyone should worship him. The Gospel isn’t just an invitation IT’S A COMMAND! Paul slips into that mode at the end of the passage he says:

on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20 ESV)

That’s a command! That’s an imperative verb. Paul says on the basis of what Christ has done for you – you **MUST** be reconciled to God.

My friends if you find that you lack urgency in evangelism then there are two things you need to think more about. You need to think about the terror of hell and you need to think about the

goodness of God in Jesus Christ. Thinking about those things will fuel us for Gospel mission.

The second thing we can hear Paul talking about in this passage is:

2. The essence of our reconciliation to God

Paul's says that we are all motivated; we know what we need to do because we have come to a certain conclusion. He says in verse 14:

¹⁴we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and 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. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15 ESV)

The essence of our reconciliation is a complete transformation in our fundamental orientation. I know that sounds complicated but its really not. Paul understands our estrangement from God to be directly connected to our identity as sinners. He says in verse 19:

in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19 ESV)

So sin is the problem that Christ came to fix. He fixed it by becoming it - in some incredible way, Paul says that in verse 21:

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 5:21 ESV)

Let me see if I can illustrate what Paul is saying. Paul is saying that sin is like a negative force within us – Paul regularly describes sin as a POWER. In Romans 7 for example Paul says that when he sinned,

⁹ sin came alive and I died. ... ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. (Romans 7:9–11 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Sin is an act; its something we do, but its also a power. It is a force that comes alive in us and drives us further away from God and deeper into death and ruin. Its like this – (bringing out my magnets). Theology sounds super complicated until you realize that you already know all of this you just don't know the terminology. Everybody knows about magnets.

Magnets exert force. Think of God as being like this magnet. He exerts force. He has a settled antagonism toward sin. He hates sin. He understands what sin does. It is a force of chaos and destruction and ruin and he will have nothing to do with it EVER. He hates sin. Now that's a problem because when Adam sinned sin came alive in us. And when you sin, sin comes alive in you. And so now there is a force – there is a power that pushes you away from God and that draws you constantly deeper into death and ruin.

And so what Jesus does is that he comes down and he absorbs all of that sinful energy in his body on the cross. That's what Paul means when he says, he became sin who knew no sin so that we could become the righteousness of God – Jesus ABSORBS ALL OF THAT SINFUL ENERGY. He takes it into himself and he obliterates it through the power of his obedience and perfection. And so now, for anyone who is in Christ, for anyone who has hung their sin on Christ on the cross – as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sin from us. That sin is gone. The force is defeated and you are free.

Do you understand that? Do you understand that God does not have a “YOU” problem – he has a “SIN” problem. God doesn't hate you. God hates sin and so if sin is GONE; if you put your sin away and nailed it to Christ on the cross then you are free. There is nothing keeping you from God – nothing pushing you into death and ruin. You can stop. You can turn around and go home. You are forgiven, you are free and you are changed. Listen to what Paul says:

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. (2 Corinthians 5:15 ESV)

Did you hear that? More than just cancelling the sin force, more than just destroying your destructive orientation, Jesus saves you by putting in you a new orientation. No longer will you live for yourself. Now you will live for him. Do you understand that? Sin is essentially self worship. Sin is believing that you are god and able to decide right and wrong for yourself. That's how the force of sin and destruction gains entrance to your heart and soul – through the door of pride and self delusion. And so when Jesus saves you he takes away that destructive orientation and he replaces it with an orientation towards himself. Now he is your LOVE AND YOUR LORD. He is your SON and your STARS. That's how you find your way home. He puts his Spirit in your heart and that Spirit cries out:

“Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6 ESV)

The Holy Spirit turns us around, he changes our desires and orientations by one degree of glory to the next, he shows us the goodness of God in the face of Jesus Christ and he builds in us a longing to go home. That is salvation in a nutshell. That’s conversion. Conversion literally means “turning around”. That’s what happens when we come to Jesus. We put our sin behind us, we nail it to the cross, its power and hold over us is broken, we receive the Spirit, he lifts us up out of sin and darkness and he brings us all the way home. That’s the essence of our reconciliation to God – that’s the Gospel in all its glorious fullness. THANKS BE TO GOD.

The third and last thing that I want you to see in his passage has to do with:

3. Our particular role and identity

When you listen to Paul talk about the ministry of reconciliation the emphasis is always on what God has done in Christ. He always talks first about what Jesus has done for us that we could never do for ourselves. He lived the life we owe God. He died the death we owe God. He defeated sin and he gave the Holy Spirit – those are GOD SIZED JOBS and we can’t do that stuff. But that doesn’t mean we can’t do anything. There is a role for us in this story and some activities associated with that role. Paul says in verse 20:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:20 ESV)

God is not indifferent to the fate of the people who are on this train. (Pointing at the downward line in the graph). God cares about these people and so he sends us to the Grace Junction and our job is to appeal to people to get off this train that leads to death and to get IN CHRIST – the way that leads to life. That’s our job. We are God’s ambassadors. We are sent into the station with the urgent news that Jesus Christ has made a way home. You can get off this train, you get leave that all behind, you can be joined to Christ and live. This is urgent business because we don’t even know how long the train will stay in the station. This could all end at any time. When Christ returns the opportunity to repent and be born again into the new creation will be gone forever. The train will leave the station you might say and at some point it will run into a brick wall at full speed. That wall will be either death or the return of Christ, so while the opportunity

remains we need to get people off this train and onto Christ. That's the mission and that's what Paul was doing. Knowing the Lord we persuade others! Compelled by the love of Christ we are gathering a train of worshippers! That's why we do it and that's what we're doing. And we may not be Apostles but Paul told us to imitate him and to follow his example and so as we read about what Paul was doing I think we can learn some things about how we should go about our Gospel duty.

To keep this simple and accessible for you I want you to stick with this imagery – the Grace Junction, train station imagery. The train of Old Creation has come into the station and God has sent us as Ambassadors into the terminal in order to get as many people off that train and onto Christ. How are we going to do that? What exactly are we supposed to do?

i. Provide an open statement of the truth

Paul says that in verse 11:

knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

That word translated “persuade” means to convince by means of argument, evidence and analogy. This is what Paul called “the open statement of the truth” back in 4:2. This is just telling people the truth about who God is, and who we are and why that's a really serious problem and what God has done in Christ to save us for himself.

If we want to get people off this train and onto that train then we need to make a clear announcement. We need to say: This train ends in death. Exit immediately and cling to Christ! We need to say that with words. Sometimes people say: “Preach the Gospel at all times if necessary use words” – that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. We're not sending mimes onto the doomsday train. Use words. In verse 19 Paul says that God has entrusted to us:

the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:19 ESV)

The Greek word translated as “message” there is *logos* which literally means “word”. We have a message of WORDS that we need to share with people if we are going to move them from here to

there.

Secondly we need to:

ii. Be willing to risk being thought a fool

In verse 13 Paul says:

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God (2 Corinthians 5:13 ESV)

Paul normally liked to talk in a sober and rational tone – he says that in the second part of verse 13, but sometimes if people weren't getting it he would go right to the edge of insanity in order to get their attention. He does that again in this letter in chapter 11. He delivers what scholars call "the fool's speech" where he is forced to almost brag about how many times he's been shipwrecked and beat up just to help them understand what life in the Gospel is really all about. Paul will do that – he will take it to the limit in order to penetrate apathy, ignorance and indifference. The Corinthians were not the only ones who thought that Paul could be a bit nutty at times. In Acts 26 when he was preaching the Gospel to Festus and Agrippa he was speaking so boldly that Festus stood up and said:

"Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind." (Acts 26:24 ESV)

Festus that Paul was going bananas. He was over the top; he was starting to lose it. Paul replied:

²⁵ "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. (Acts 26:25–26 ESV)

Listen to me friends – bold preaching about eternal realities will sound like madness to unbelievers. So what? Who promised you a good reputation? Who promised you a good reception? The Bible says that some people will ignore you, some people will despise you but some people will listen, some people will hear and some people will be saved. So you get on that train and you hop up and down like a crazy person if you need to. You blow your whistle, you sound the alarm, you stamp your feet if that's what it takes to wake up sleeping souls. Make an open statement of the truth, in season and out of season; when it seems to be going well and when

it seems like it couldn't be going any worse. Don't give up. Be the fool if you have to. Souls hang in the balance.

Thirdly and lastly we want to do this:

iii. Make your appeal with urgency, earnestness and civility

In verse 20 Paul says:

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20 ESV)

I mentioned already that the word “implore” is an imperative, meaning it's a command. Paul is going right up to the line of social decency here and he is basically demanding a positive response to the Gospel. He's being polite, but he is making an appeal. The actual word there, if you look it up in the dictionary it means “*to ask for something pleadingly; in direct discourse, ‘I beg of you’ or ‘please’*”.¹ I hear urgency in that and I hear a command to be civil. That's a hard note to maintain isn't it? Some of us are perceived as civil only because we completely urgency. Others of us are perceived as uncivil because we have not tempered our urgency with gentleness, tears and true concern. Paul hits the right note here. Peter nails it too, he says:

always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15 ESV)

So there is a tone associated with this ministry of reconciliation. It's a tone of urgency and respect. Earnestness and civility. We represent Jesus and so we must speak as the Master spoke.

Response:

I want to challenge you this morning. This passage challenged me on Tuesday and now I want to extend that challenge to you. I want to confess that I felt rebuked by this text. I think have erred on the side of patience with respect to my evangelistic strategy. I am often content just to “move the sticks” in terms of my conversations with friends and family members. Meaning if I say a good word about Christ or the life of faith then I consider that progress and I content myself to

¹ BDAG Third Edition, 218.

wait and pray for the next family gathering or opportune moment to take another crack at it. But this picture of reality (first graph) suggests a much more urgent approach. I don't even know if there will be another Thanksgiving or another opportune moment. I need to set forth the truth with greater urgency and immediacy – but still with civility and respect. I need to do that, I need to dial it up and I imagine you do too. So here is the challenge, a couple of weeks ago we wrote the names of unsaved loved ones on a slip of paper and we dropped them into a jar. We identified loved ones who were unsaved. We asked God to bring them the Gospel. Now its time for us to participate in the answer to that prayer. I want us to commit right now to the open statement of the truth through argument, evidence and analogy – risking even rejection and reviling – by having a conversation or writing a letter to the loved one whose name was on that paper within the next 28 days. I am going to do that. If you will do that with me I want to invite you to stand now. Let me pray for you.

Note to leader: We'll do a response for unbelievers as a lead in to communion.