

“The Gospel Message and Ministry of Reconciliation”

II Corinthians 5:11–21

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Prayer:

Father, we thank You for Your astounding truth that as we come to worship You today that You have taken care of our sins. You have provided access into Your presence, not because of anything we have done but because of the riches of Your mercy Christ Jesus and that glorious Gospel of grace. We honored to be in Your presence. Please teach us today and minister to us for Your glory and we pray this in Jesus' precious Name, Amen.

Our reading today is from II Corinthians 5. This is a wonderful, fantastic passage. Perhaps it's one of the great Gospel-centered passages in all of Scripture. I know you will enjoy it as we work through it. II Corinthians 5:11–21 says [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.

Here ends the reading of God's Word. The grass withers, the flower fades and the Word of our God lasts forever.

This passage in many follows up on Pastor Reeder's series in the book of Romans and especially his Sunday evening series on what happens when we die and it's a remarkable privilege to carry on that theme and see how it's connected with our everyday relationship with the world around us. Have you ever heard of the criticism sometimes leveled at Christians? In fact, there is a statement attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the father of the supreme court justice when he said, 'Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.' It was picked up in song by Johnny Cash back in 1977 when he sang; 'You're shining your light, shine it you should, but you're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good.' It's a catchy phrase but is it really true?

I'm sure it is for some Christians who were so wrapped up in their own little lives and their own circle of friends that they never seemed to have a positive impact for the Gospel in the world, but I would say for countless millions of Christians over the centuries, it's not a true

statement. I think of people like John Newton and William Wilberforce, both believers who helped abolish the slave trade in England. I think of missionaries like Amy Carmichael or philanthropist George Mueller or journalists like Robert Raikes who have such a passion for troubled children they started orphanages and schools and had a tremendous impact in their surroundings. In fact, C. S. Lewis said, ‘If you read history you will find that Christians who did most for the present world, were just those who thought most of the next.’ I think he is right.

The motivation for Christians isn’t just social reform or making our culture better, for Biblically and heavenly minded-Christians, the Gospel-centered ministry is about bringing the Kingdom on earth. We see a much bigger picture of God’s involvement of our surrounding. That is exactly the context of this II Corinthians 5 passage. Paul’s focus is on eternity, the after life and what happens after we die.

II Corinthians 5:8–10 says [8] *Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] 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.* It was precisely this heavenly reality, this heavenly promise that gave Paul such an earthly passion for getting out the Gospel. What unfolds in II Corinthians 5:11–21 is perhaps one of the most eloquent statements in the Scripture for sharing our faith, sharing the Gospel.

We can start with that very logical question of, why share my faith? Paul describes three very powerful motives for sharing your faith from this passage in II Corinthians 5. It emerges from his heavenly mindedness.

The first reason we share is “the fear of the Lord.” For believers this is not a fear of judgment but of deep reverence, a deep respect we have for the Lord. One day we’ll stand before Him and give an accounting of what we have done in the flesh, what we have done in this life. It is not meant to be a fearful thing in a sense that we daily tremble with fear but it is a deep respect that motivates us and guides us in our lives.

I Corinthians 5:11 says [11] *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.* The phrase that follows ‘knowing the fear of the Lord’ is to me, unexpected. I would have thought the Apostle Paul would have then started describing what we persuade others with, being the message but that’s not what he does here. We might anticipate he would give us the words of the Gospel presentation but rather what he does is, he focuses on his character in the job as a persuader. I think he did this because he knew the recipients of this letter, the Corinthians, were constantly being bombarded by itinerant preachers and philosophers of the day preaching and teaching all kinds of strange ideas. Paul is cautioning them to be careful about the character of those who are persuading them.

Indeed, Paul could not have imagined the number of people in my life or your life through the media, internet, through all manner of means who are trying to persuade us of their perspective, of their “truth” so to speak. It’s a constant battle for all of us to wade through all the information we have and in some ways that was true in Corinth. They had many people coming through speaking various ideas and Paul immediately jumps on this issue of character.

Paul was confident of two things. One was that God could see into his heart for what we are is known to God according to II Corinthians 5:11 for nothing could be hidden from God. Since God was looking Paul sought to be pure and sincere in his motives as he proclaimed the truth. Secondly, Paul was confident his readers, the Corinthians could boast about Him. This is not boastful in a prideful/arrogant way. They could be confident that Paul would deliver the

truth in love, be fair and just. Paul had a clear conscience before God. He didn't have an ulterior motive or an agenda to take advantage of others.

We see this idea back in II Corinthians 1:12 which says *[12] For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.* Paul was very concerned up front for those who proclaim the Gospel to focus on one's character, godliness, sincerity and one's true love for those to whom we serve. He didn't want their money, their applause or their vote but he wanted their ear and attention. He had nothing to gain by this Gospel and outwardly the Apostle Paul probably wasn't a very impressive person physically to listen to, but in his heart he was sincere, genuine and wanted the best for these people. He never wished to stand in the way of them coming to Christ.

I sometimes wonder if we really do try to deal with a clear conscience before God and before me. The truth is that we as Christians are always persuading others – when they listen to us, when they watch what we do – and what we fear will determine how we persuade others. For instance, if we fear most what others think of us then we will persuade others that popularity and being liked is more important than Jesus Christ. If we fear declining health more than anything else we will persuade others that physical healing is more important than knowing Christ. If we fear most financial loss or political instability then we will persuade others that wealth and security is much more important than a relationship with Christ. You are persuading others all the time of the priority of the Gospel of grace. That's what Paul is saying when he says that knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others (II Corinthians 5:11).

The second motive for sharing the Gospel is the love of Christ for us. Paul says in II Corinthians 4:14, *[14] For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.* For the Apostle Paul the great compelling force was the love of Christ for him. In his missionary journeys Paul was relentless to share Christ at great personal cost and effort in the midst of withering opposition to the Gospel message. We see some of the hardships Paul went through in II Corinthians 11:24–27 which says *[24] Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [25] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; [26] on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; [27] in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.*

Why does a person do that and so inconvenience themselves to make sure the Gospel was being told? It was someone who was overwhelmed with the love of Christ for him. Paul had persecuted the church before he knew the Lord and rightly so he was a religious terrorist. He had killed and imprisoned Christians and God visited him on that road to Damascus and called him into service. Paul never got over the fact that 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' Therefore, he was overwhelmed with the privilege. The more Paul got to know Christ the more he was amazed. Jesus' love was manifested in His death, not just as a martyr or an example or a gesture of good will, but He died the death Paul should have died because of Paul's own sin. Jesus died the death we should have died but He became our substitute. He broke the power of sin and death so that we might be able to die to all that alienates us from Him.

That changes our whole perspective about the reality of life. I'm free from the bondage of living in fear to others, to comparing myself to others and determining my values by my

accomplishments, my wealth or social status. It freed me from viewing others the same way, according to the flesh (II Corinthians 5:16) – in other words, their outward attributes. I'm free from regarding others the way the world does. I'm free from seeing others through the lens of wealth, education, look, race, political preference or lifestyle. Like God, as it says in Romans 2:11; *God shows no partiality*. James hammers this home when he says in James 2:1, *[I] My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory*.

Paul says he is now able to view others in view of II Corinthians 5:17 which says *[17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*. Believers are not people who have just added a little morality to their life or who added a new religion to their life but they are a new creation in Christ and this means a lot of things. This means we have security in Him who alone bore the punishment for our sin. We have acceptance in Him in whom God is well-pleased. We have assurance for the future in Him who alone is the resurrection and life. We have the inheritance of glory in Him who alone is the only begotten Son and sole heir. We have the participation in the Divine nature in Him who is the everlasting Word. We have been invited into the fellowship of the Trinity of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We have life and knowledge of the truth in Him who alone is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6).

It is a remarkable thing that Paul could never shake. It was not only that Jesus died for him but all those blessings abundantly flowed forth and would decorate his life forever and ever. Paul knew as this new creation in Christ wasn't just a hobby or an extracurricular activity but a radical life changing relationship. Evangelism is witnessing to others, motivated by Christ's love for me and as I do this I'm helping to birth new creations.

I was pastor for many years in Dalton, Georgia. We had sort of a circular seating arrangement and whenever I had the opportunity to baptize a child I loved walking back and from the platform and what a blessing it was to have a little child like this in our midst. That little child by God's grace will marry another Christian some day and they'll produce children who very likely have the opportunity to come to Christ and produce grandchildren. Some day this little infant will be a matriarch or patriarch of a clan of new creations, each having their own little impact in their sphere of influence. What an amazing opportunity we have as a church to send out the members or ourselves into the community because – Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

The third incentive for sharing our faith is the urgency of the message. All this birthing of new creations in God is of Christ in God and we see the Message that is so important that people understand. God didn't just forgive us just because He is compassionate and loves us, in fact, in our sin we're hostile to God and proper recipients to His judgment and wrath, because all of us have fallen short of the glory of God. Some argue that this judgment is contrary to God's love and will even go so far as to say the cross is cruel and unjust. I heard someone say on TV this past week that they referred to the cross as child abuse which could be nothing farther from the truth. It is God Himself who came down and submitted to the cross on our behalf.

In reality, the rebellion of man is matched by the love of God in Christ Jesus. One commentator, named Phillip Hughes made this remarkable comment on this; 'But when the cross is seen to be the place where God-become-man bears for man and as Man the sin of man, endures the just penalty of sin, and therefore exhausts the wrath of God against sin and all this because of God's surpassing love for man, then alone will it be seen that at the cross love and wrath meet in a common purpose that mercy combines with truth, and righteousness and peace

kiss each other.’ It’s the most dramatic thing that has happened for you and in you – when God’s wrath and God’s mercy meet in you and they kiss, then the power of sin is broken in you and you can begin to serve the Lord Jesus in His Kingdom.

So Paul would write in Romans 5:6–8 which says [6] *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] For one will scarcely die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— [8] but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* It is an idea he picks up in Colossians as well, Colossians 1:21–22 says [21] *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [22] He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.*

So the summary comes in II Corinthians 5:19 which says [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.* The astounding supernatural work of creation in us is summarized in that Gospel message in John 3:16 which says [16] *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

From our text in II Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul finally gets around to us, the messengers. At the end of verse 19 Paul says the message of reconciliation has been committed to us which here literally means it has been placed or deposited in us. That’s a pretty awesome concept for the Gospel has been deposited in you. It’s not just there to save you but there to flow through you into a watching world.

The takeaway is simple...those who have been made recipients of the grace of reconciliation are under obligation to proclaim that grace to the world. This applies to all of us. In fact, Paul calls us ambassadors. That’s actually a whole sermon in itself for we’re not just random Christians. We are carefully selected ambassadors. That is what governments do – they pick very carefully people who will be ambassadors in a particular country and send them out to represent the country and even to speak for the country. His duty is to proclaim faithfully and precisely the message entrusted to him.

Many years ago, when I was a youth pastor there was a young man who was very troubled but he was very faithful to come to the youth group and he seemed to really enjoy the fellowship. He came to me one time and said ‘Mark, I’m really in trouble. There are some people who have “captured” me (or persuaded him) to deliver drugs for them and this has been really scary. I have had to carry a lot of drugs to a lot of bad places and I want to get out. I don’t know what to do.’ We talked for awhile and then I said ‘What we need to do, if you’re pushing and running drugs, you need to go to the police.’ Reluctantly he agreed so we got in my car and drove downtown to speak to a detective and this was in Macon, Georgia.

The detective listened very patiently to the story this young man was telling and then he looked him in the eye and said ‘You’re lying.’ His eyes got big and the young man said ‘I am not.’ The detective said ‘You are absolutely lying because there is no way a group of drug dealers is going to entrust something so precious as their stash of drugs with a little 16-year-old like you.’ The young man said ‘No, I’m telling the truth.’ After going back and forth a little bit the detective said ‘No, you’re lying son, you need to go home.’ So, I took him home and while we were talking a little more about it, he finally confessed that he had made it all up. He just wanted the attention. I guess he had seen things on TV and wanted to be involved with something a little flashy but I never knew why.

I think about that story when I think about what God has done with me. God did entrust me with something very precious that is to be used in my circles for His glory. It's the message of the sacrifice of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We bear the precious message of reconciliation before a watching world and of course, God equips us. He gives us the Holy Spirit to speak through us. He gives us His Word to guide and direct us. He gives us the encouragement of other people to shepherd us, mentor us and train us. He gives us all kinds of assets – the joy of fellowship, the privilege of worship, etc. – so that we might be better ambassadors for Christ.

In our congregation we have a distinguished convocation of ambassadors. You probably didn't think about that – when you go to church you are going to join a group of distinguished ambassadors. Then you are sent out to high schools, colleges, places of employment, to homes in the community, places of enjoyment, places of vacation, to the grocery store, etc. to be ambassadors for Christ. We are called as ambassadors to represent the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and our appeal isn't something that is just emotionless. We don't do it with detachment.

Paul says in II Corinthians 5:20, *[20] Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. **We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*** We are to give the most important message ever to people and their response to this message will determine their destiny for all eternity. This message has been entrusted to you and me. That is the greatest privilege for us, to be ambassadors called to be on the frontlines of the Kingdom of God. Those who serve Christ are part of the greatest enterprise the world has ever seen and you won't hear that on TV or radio. You will hear that other jobs are much better, pay more and more influential but no job is more important than what you have been given as an ambassador for Christ.

Listen to what Jesus told a bunch of relatively poor, unimportant perhaps uneducated peasants in the small backward country of Israel far from the cultural centers of Rome, Athens and Alexandria. He tells them they are the salt of the earth but He also tells them in Matthew 5:14–16, *[14] You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Paul then concludes with the Gospel in II Corinthians 5:21 which says *[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.* My daughter and son-in-law are missionaries in the Ukraine. The city they are in have about a million people and they work with college students. One day at one of their student gatherings my son-in-law Kirk was talking with a young woman named Era. She was a college co-ed who had started coming to their Bible studies and was actually showing a real interest in the Gospel.

At one of the meetings, she said quite unexpectedly to Kirk, 'Why are you here?' She was intrigued as to why this American from the most affluent country in the world, a land of opportunity, of promise and where all her friends would love to go and live in. She then said 'Who is paying your way?' Kirk replied 'I raised my own support so I could come and be with you.' He could tell it didn't compute with her. I don't remember exactly what else he said but I can tell you what Paul would have told her – "I came to you because of the fear of God, because of the love of Christ for me and because of the urgency of the message we're bearing."

That is why we go because in the end, when we stand before God that is all that is ever going to really matter. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You so much for the privilege to carry this Gospel message. Lord, on behalf of my friend here, I'll admit we feel so incompetent, weak and unable at times to take on such a responsibility, but You smile because You have given us Your Holy Spirit and Your Word. You have also given us many different abilities for Lord we're not all going to serve the same way and You know that. We're not all going to preach. We will work in a variety of different locations and circumstances but I pray Father for each one of us that we will have a passion for this Gospel. Lord, give us opportunities to share it, to talk about You and to ask questions, poke people's minds and have them consider You. This is not an easy task for there will be much opposition as You well know and as Paul illustrated again and again, but Lord, what a blessing it is to be an ambassador for Christ. I pray You will use us wherever we live and in whatever we do for the brief time we have here on planet earth before we do step into Your presence in heaven. Lord, make us so heavenly minded with excitement about what is to come that we are of great earthly good in this world. I thank You and ask this in Jesus' Name and for His sake, Amen.

Power Point

Why share my faith?

1st Reason: "the fear of the Lord."

Paul was confident of two things...

1. God could see his heart;
2. His readers could boast of Him.

II Cor. 1:12 *"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you."*

2nd Reason: "the love of Christ for us."

James 2:1 *"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."*

- security in Him – who alone bore the punishment for our sin;
- acceptance in Him – in whom God is well-pleased;
- assurance for the future in Him – who alone is the resurrection and the life;
- inheritance of glory in Him – who alone is the only begotten Son and sole heir;
- participation in the divine nature in Him – who is the everlasting Word;
- life and knowledge of truth in Him – who alone is the way, truth and life.

3rd Reason: "the urgency of the message."

1. The Message.

"But when the Cross is seen to be the place where God-become-man bears for man and as Man the sin of man, endures the just penalty of sin, and therefore exhausts the wrath of God against sin and all this because of God's surpassing love for man, then alone will it be seen that at the

Cross love and wrath meet in a common purpose, that mercy combines with truth and righteousness and peace kiss each other.” *Phillip Hughes*

Romans 5:6–8 *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person... but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

Colossians 1:21–22 *“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him....”*

John 3:16 *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

2. The Messenger –

The takeaway is simple... *Those who have been made recipients of the grace of reconciliation are under obligation to proclaim that grace to the world.*