

## Being Reconciled II Corinthians 5:11-21

Can anyone doubt that our world is in desperate need of reconciliation? Americans are increasingly politically polarized – according to Arthur Brooks, President of the American Enterprise Institute, 1 out of 6 of us have even stopped talking with close friends or family members because they disagree with our opinions. Instead, our TV choices and Facebook news feeds increasingly resemble echo chambers where we only hear things that reinforce our previously held beliefs.

Christians and unbelievers are also increasingly estranged from one another. Long gone are the days when we had a common culture that encouraged everyone to follow an ethical system derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today, Christians find the music, the fashions, the family structures and even the language of unbelievers to be increasingly offputting. And the unbelieving world returns the favor, accusing the Church of being just a bunch of hypocritical, repressed killjoys out to ruin everyone's fun.

So, in a culture that is increasingly fragmented, what does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ? At root, Paul tells us in verse 18, it means carrying out a ministry of reconciliation. And that necessarily involves building or repairing relationships with other people, reaching across all the cultural, racial, and political lines that divide us. After all, you can't carry a message to someone you aren't talking to. And why should anyone listen to someone who doesn't want to have anything to do with them?

No, if we are to be ambassadors for Christ, we can't go on pulling back from others, looking at them as verse 16 says according to the flesh, according to a human perspective. We can't go on dehumanizing those who disagree with us – that only leads to the kind of tragedy we saw in New Zealand last week. Instead, we must allow the love of Christ to compel us, as Paul says in verse 14, to be in conversation with those who differ from and perhaps even opposed to us.

So, what might such an intentional outreach involve? We might need to spend less time on ourselves or with long-time friends in order to welcome new believers, or even non-believers into our lives. It might mean softening our opinions about culturally or generationally specific clothes or music. It might involve putting up with different kinds of manners (which to some of us might seem like no manners at all). But the bottom line is this: just as an ambassador is sent to a foreign country to represent his government, if we want to be able to share the love and truth of Christ with those who need to know Him or know Him better, we must go to them, we must form relationships with them because we care about them.

But what is the message from God He calls us to share? It's not just that we are all called to love one another, that we should be reconciled to other human beings. No, the even better news, as Paul says in verse 19, is that God in Christ was reconciling the world to Himself. How can we help others understand this?

Well, to begin with, it requires being honest about the need for such reconciliation. The unpleasant fact we must all face is that none of us are anything more than sinners, rebels against God's righteous rule. That means that, no matter our outward appearance or habits, no matter how closely we may conform to any of our own cultural contexts, none of us human beings deserve to be treated any better than someone who has committed treason against any merely human government. That's the truth that Paul summarizes in verse 19 when he mentions our trespasses, all the ways that we have broken God's law.

And come to think of it, confessing our own sin is one of the best ways to break down the barriers that separate us even from those with whom we fundamentally disagree. For the truth is that, when you come right down to it, we oh-so-respectable church folks are no better than those who lie to the police about being attacked, or those who give or take bribes to get their kids into elite colleges, or even those pot-smoking pushers on the street with their pants at half-mast. No matter how socially acceptable any of us may be, according to God's standards, none of us deserve anything more than to be on death row.

But the good news is that God didn't leave us to die in our sins. No, as Paul says in verse 21, when Jesus went to the cross, the spotless Lamb of God who had never sinned became sin for us. That means He took the sins of all His people upon Himself, paying the death penalty for us, even though He didn't deserve it. And that means it doesn't matter how bad we've been. It doesn't matter how broken and messed up we are. The blood of Jesus can heal us. It can wash away all our guilty stains.

But the cleansing power of the blood of Christ goes further than that. In fact, Paul says that Christ's sacrifice makes all who trust in Him righteous in God's sight, pure and holy and able to stand before the judgment seat of Christ without fear. The good news, which all those in Christ can celebrate today, is that God no longer counts any of our sins against us. This is the word of reconciliation our God has committed to us – that we can not only be reconciled to one another, but that we can be reconciled to God.

Okay, so what does a life of reconciliation look like? How should knowing that we are in a right relationship with God change the way we live everyday? Well, in verse 14, Paul draws an amazing conclusion from the fact of the cross – if Christ died for all His people, then there is a very real sense in which all who trust in Him have already died with Him.

Now, this only makes sense in the light of what Paul said in our responsive reading this morning. By trusting in Christ, we not only become subjects of His Kingdom. We become part of His body, truly one with Him. In fact, Jesus Himself prayed that we would be one, not only with one another, but one with Him. So, if we are connected to Christ in such an intimate way, that means that when He died on the cross, we died too – we died to our sinful focus on ourselves. When Jesus died on the cross, we also died to our old fleshly perceptions of other people, our old habits of thinking that we are somehow better than others. As Paul says in verse 15, dying with Christ means we are no longer living for ourselves, but for the God Who has saved us.

But how is such a radical change in our lives possible? Because of what else Paul tells us in verse 15: Christ didn't just die for our sins – He rose again. That means that what Paul says in verse 17 has to be true – if we have died with Christ to the power of sin, we have also risen with Him. All our old ways of living have passed away, and everything has become new.

Let all that sink in for a moment. If we are in Christ, if we are joined to Him by faith, if we, along with all believers throughout space and time are part of His body, we have died with Christ to the power of sin. We have died with Him to the power of death. And we have also risen with Him to newness of life.

That's why Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, there is a whole new creation. The direction, the focus, the purpose of our lives have been so radically changed that everything has become new to us. For we have not only been forgiven by the blood of Christ – we have also been cleansed of sin, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Our sin has been laid on Christ, and we have been clothed with His righteousness. And because of this fundamental transformation, we have been freed to live lives of true reconciliation with one another, lives of true communion with God.

So, what does this new life, this whole new creation look like? Well, however immodest it might seem, in verse 12 Paul encourages his readers to commend him for his own example, thus using him as a model for living. But he wasn't talking about his outward appearance or behavior. After all, in verse 13, Paul admits that the depth of his devotion to God sometimes seemed a little extreme, like he was beside himself. But he did want the Corinthians to imitate the direction of his life, the intentions behind his actions. Yes, he may have seemed beside himself at times in worship, but this was only because he was so focused on God and His glory. Moreover, everything he wrote and preached was for the Corinthians, and the other Christians he spent so much time traveling around to be with. In short, a life reconciled to God and to others is a life focused on God's glory and the good of others.

And if we have that sort of focus, if our greatest desire is to see more and more people reconciled to God and to each other, won't that express itself in every facet of our lives as well?

Won't we change our spending priorities in order to support church planting and missions? Won't we spend more time building and nurturing relationships with new believers or those who have yet to place their faith in Christ? Won't we desire to know more of God's Word so we might be able to explain it to others? Won't we want more and more people to surrender their lives to Christ so that God would receive more glory and praise?

That's the way Paul lived his life. But come to think of it, wasn't he just following the example of Jesus? After all, Jesus could have chosen to keep to Himself, staying up in Heaven in perfect fellowship and communion with the Father. Jesus could have kept on judging all of us rebellious sinners by our outward appearance, condemning us for our selfishness and ignorance, letting us receive the just punishment our sins deserved.

But instead He initiated a ministry of reconciliation. He reached out to a sinful world, even though He knew that would cost Him His life. As verse 15 says, He died for all His people, giving Himself up completely to the will of the Father. He thus abandoned all self-interest for our good and for the glory of God. And He rose again, so that we might have newness of life, so that we might live as He lives and love as He loves.

So if we would be His ambassadors, if we would manifest, if we would reveal, if we would represent Christ to the world, we must not only say what He says, but do what He does. We must not only seek to be reconciled to God ourselves. We must not only beg others on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God. We must model the self-denying reconciliation of God, taking the initiative to reach out to others, even to those who have hurt us. We must give ourselves as completely to God and to others as Christ gave Himself to the Father and to us.

So, let's encourage one another to be ambassadors for Christ as we sing all the stanzas of our closing hymn.