
Honor One Another

Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

5/5/2019

Main Idea: As ambassadors, we represent the King and kingdom in a foreign land so that people truly know what life with the King is like.

Lesson Objective: Seek to be identified in God's reconciling work.

Introduction

As your class time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What words or thoughts come to mind when you hear the word contagious?

Do those words have a positive or negative connotation to you? Why?

Can you think of someone whose positive attitude or influence made their actions extremely contagious in a good way? What qualities of theirs did you most want to “catch”?

As Christians, we should live lives that are contagious to others. In other words, we should live in such a way to make Christianity attractive. That’s part of what it means to be an ambassador for Christ. The problem is many people make Christianity unattractive in the way they live their lives. Many people find Christians to be boring, hypocritical, joyless, angry, or negative. However, our lives should be just the opposite. As ambassadors, we represent the King and kingdom in a foreign land so that people truly know what life with the King is like.

Contagious Christian

2 Corinthians 5:11-13

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. [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#).

The “Therefore” causes us to reflect on Paul’s confidence in his relationship with Jesus. From that relationship Paul revealed the attitude from which his ministry came; it was done through the “**fear of the Lord**.” There’s an old saying that said, “Whatever it is that one fears the most that is what one will serve the most.” Paul knew that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7); he also knew of the terrifying fear of an unrepentant sinner before God. However, because of his relationship with God in Christ, his fear did not immobilize him, but energized him. His supreme awe of God motivated him to act as he did and prevented him from vainly trying to rely on his own strength. He did not live in constant fear thinking that God would condemn him. We know this because he longed to be with the Lord (5:8).¹

Paul sought to **persuade others** through his preaching the gospel. He was willing to adapt his language and methods so that others could see and hear the message of God’s salvation. Some may have accused him of being deceptive, but Paul argued that he would never change the gospel in order to

¹ David E. Garland, [2 Corinthians](#), vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 268.

gain approval. Rather, pleasing God drove him to live every day on mission with God. What Paul is trying to say is that all his motivations, good and bad, all his desires, sins, and evil thoughts were known to God. Everything about him was visible, or better, “**known to God**”. Not only that, Paul believed that everything God knew about him could have been known by the Corinthian believers who sought the truth. “**I hope**” suggests that Paul was cautiously optimistic that his readers would in fact diligently search their consciences for the truth about his apostolic practices. So far in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul has consistently written in the first person plural (“we”), even when referring to himself. The shift to first person singular (“I”) at this point is noteworthy, probably indicating the gravity of the situation in his mind and perhaps his own intense emotional state surrounding this issue. As he sees it, the future of his continued ministry among the Corinthians was based on them seeking their conscience regarding his integrity.²

Paul was in a catch-22 as he sought to defend himself without coming off as self-seeking. He knew that there were believers in the Corinthian church that still believed in him and were actively seeking to defend his ministry. His purpose in speaking about his merits, then, was not for boasting. Rather, he realized the importance of providing evidence for those desiring to represent his cause to others. Paul did not boast of himself but saw nothing wrong with fellow Christians bragging about the work of God through his efforts.

On the other hand, his opponents were boasting of the wrong things. They were tooting their own horns in order to impress others and put him down. They were drawing attention to superficial activities which were unrelated to what was

² William R. Baker, [2 Corinthians](#), The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub., 1999), 219–225.

really vital, that which was “in the heart.” These inward, spiritual motivations should certainly be evidenced by one’s actions.

Only God can judge the heart, and those who wish truly to discern the spiritual integrity of others must look inside themselves, at their “**consciences**”, to discover what God knows. If they don’t do this, just like many of the Corinthians, they will continue to be fooled into being impressed by the superficial actions of those who are spiritually empty. Those who took pride in outward appearance criticized Paul as eccentric, imbalanced, or crazy. It is not hard to imagine the things that could have been behind their charge of Paul’s craziness. He saw visions. He dignified his frequent sufferings as revelatory. He was deeply and emotionally invested in his ministry, even to the point of tears. He was constantly trying to persuade people of the truth of the gospel, even earthly judges who had authority over him! On trial in Caesarea, Paul tried to persuade King Agrippa to become a Christian (Acts 26:24-29). He was told then, “You’re out of your mind, Paul!” Therefore, any number of things might have been used to claim that Paul was crazy. Paul would not, however, be put off by such a claim. Paul would not change his ways because some thought he was out of his mind. That kind of life is appealing and contagious because it shows the one living it values something more than the things of the world.

Why do you think an enthusiastic believer is often perceived as crazy or out of his or her mind?

How did Paul’s willingness to be perceived as out of his mind demonstrate a contagious attitude?

What does it tell us about his motivation?

How is that kind of motivation contagious?

Love of Christ

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

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. [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#)

As the church, we are called to obey Jesus' command to go into the world and preach the gospel, but what is the motivation behind our obedience? The apostle Paul dealt with our motivation by taking us back to the reality of **the love of Christ**. The driving force behind God's messengers is Christ's love for the world He came to save. Christ's love is what holds, controls, and compels His followers forward in ministry—His love is the motivation. Christ expressed His love most fully in that **"He died for all."** Christ died to extend the offer of salvation to all people (Col. 1:20; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 2:2). His death was the sacrifice sufficient for the salvation of all, and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). Love motivated Jesus to die for others (John 15:13). His death is now our reference point for understanding love (1 John 4:9-10,16). The selfless love displayed by Jesus in His life and death is Paul's reference point for our love for others. The love of God compels us to live for Him and to pour ourselves out for others. This was Jesus' desire (John 12:50), and it now becomes our own. God is not the kind of father who is always

looking for his children to earn his affection, nor is he like the employer who constantly demands the bigger and better work. He has fully given His love and approval to us, not because of our merit, but based on the sacrifice of Jesus. When we stop believing the lie of performance, we move deeper into the great life of joy that God has for us. We live for a resurrected God and Savior, not for ourselves, and this should press us into action.

Paul focuses our attention upon the spiritual dilemma that is solved only through the gospel. We do not see others **“according to the flesh”** because we recognize the necessity of new life that comes at conversion. The new creation that we become in Christ first begins in the spiritual realm, not the physical realm. When a person enters into a relationship with Christ, he or she is changed, made new at a heart level, complete with new desires, new thoughts, and new feelings. Unfortunately this new identity does not manifest itself automatically because the new creature is still within the fallen world. The old habits of living as slaves to sin are dominant in the new believer’s life.

For example, when Paul calls the Christian a “saint” he has this permanent identity-level change in mind, not the works of the individual. From the moment of confession, repentance and receiving God’s forgiveness and Lordship over one’s life, there is a change in identity. We are no longer enemies of God but are found in Christ. When we become a new creation, our sin doesn’t simply disappear. Instead, it is transferred to the cross of Jesus. In this exchange, we get credit for His righteousness, and He paid for our sin. This happens once and completely in a single moment. As we recognize the true price for our sin, we should be more and more grateful for Jesus’ willing sacrifice on our behalf.

After this “conversion,” we spend the rest of our lives growing into the people God has already made us to be. Even though we have been set free from our old selves, sin, and pattern of living, we continue to struggle to believe what God has done in us. God knew that old habits would be hard to break, so He gave us the indwelling presence of His Spirit to remind us of the new identity found in Christ. As we continue to live out our days, God will reveal His truth to us through His word so that we can repent of our ways and live in communion with Him until He returns to restore all things. This is when our salvation will be complete. We will experience new glorified bodies at the resurrection. No longer will we have to suffer through the pains of this world. Christ’s victory will be magnified throughout all of His creation, and those who are in Christ will dwell with Him for eternity.

Why do you think that it’s the love of Christ that compels us into the world?

What happens when we are compelled by something other than love in our involvement in God’s mission?

What does it mean to regard no one from a fleshly point of view? How does this relate to the truth that we are a new creation?

Why is it significant that you are (present tense) a new creation? In what sense are you a new creation?

If the old things have passed away and the new things have come, why do you think we still struggle with sin?

How does it change your perspective of pursuing holiness and godliness to know that you already are a new creation in Christ instead of trying to become a new creation?

Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

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. [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#)

Paul moved from a focus on what God has done through Jesus on to an explanation of his role in God's redemptive plan of reconciling the world. If only the believers in Corinth could have seen Paul's ministry as a part of God's work to reconcile the world. They, too, could have rejoiced in self-sacrifice and suffering. Within these verses we can see three key assertions. (1) God is the driving force behind the redemption of humankind. Reconciliation comes solely at God's initiative. (2) God acted through Christ's death, and Christ alone is the means of reconciliation. (3) God continues to act through those who have been reconciled. They have the privilege and responsibility to share in this great divine enterprise and are to call others to be reconciled to God.

David Garland stated it beautifully, "Reconciliation assumes ruptured relationships, alienation, and disaffection. The problem, however, is not with God, as if God were some cruel taskmaster from whom humans rebelled. Human sinfulness created the problem, and this sinful condition had to be dealt with before there could be any reconciliation. Sin incurs God's holy wrath, so it could not be treated lightly or swept under the rug. God can never be reconciled

to sin, but God does not turn away from sinners in disgust and leave them to their just desserts. Instead, while humans were still in open revolt, God acted in love (Rom 5:8) to bring the hostility to an end and to bring about peace (see Rom 5:1; see Isa 32:17). This peace is not simply a cessation of hostilities or an uneasy truce. It refers to the mending of the broken relationship that results from God justifying us (making us right) through faith and changing us from enemies to friends (GNB).”³

Sadly many believers will want the reconciliation from God but refuse to be reconciled with one another. This rebellion undermines the ministry of reconciliation when they refuse to be reconciled with one another. Paul understood that he could not fulfill his vision of going to Spain to preach a gospel of reconciliation while leaving behind an unreconciled church where Jews refused to accept the Gentiles (see Rom 15:24). This not only plays out in racial division within the body of the church, but also in fractured relationships among members of the same local church body. When we as believers refuse to extend forgiveness to others, we are going against the very fabric that holds us together. There is a reason that Jesus mentioned numerous times that forgiveness will be given based on how we forgive.

Paul then moves to the role of an ambassador that all believers should be seeking to fulfill. An ambassador can be defined as an authorized representative or messenger appointed for a special task. Ambassadors are committed to representing the values of their home kingdom, even while living in a foreign land. They are first and foremost citizens of another country, and they live displaced specifically for the purpose of representing that other country.

³ Garland, 288-290.

Because we are new creations in Christ, we have a new home. While we are here on earth, we represent God and His kingdom wherever we go.

We must begin seeing the lost around us as people who need new life. Paul also makes clear that there is no Plan B for taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. God has chosen us for the task to be His ambassadors. We are ambassadors to the world with a message of reconciliation. God has made a way for sinful people to become His friends instead of His enemies. God has provided a pathway to peace in spite of the world's rebellion. The fact that God offers peace in spite of us, not because of us, is what makes this such good news!

So what do we do? We plead with others to be saved. All of this—reconciliation, ambassadorship, life, and new creation—comes because of what Jesus did in our place. Because Jesus took upon Himself our sin, shame, and punishment, we receive God's righteousness, friendship, and mission. And now we serve as ambassadors for King Jesus! When we look around at others, we may be filled with all kinds of viewpoints. We may have preconceived notions about others based on their race, income, or background. We can't view anyone in a purely human way anymore. Just as we were made a new creation when we became Christians, so God is willing and able to make new creations out of anyone else with whom we come in contact. We are His agents in this process as we actively seek to share the gospel with others.

Paul put into a few words the profound statement of how God made the way for our reconciliation to Him. He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us. Christ was so identified with us as sinners and with our sin that He fully assumed our guilt and fully bore our punishment in our place. All of this transpired on the cross. He took our sin upon Himself and died our death in our

place. Christ's death as the substitute for sinners was necessary for reconciliation between God and sinners. As our sin was assigned to Him, so now His righteousness is assigned to those who receive His offer of reconciliation.

Why do you think Paul chose the word “ambassador” to describe the role of the Christian in the world?

In what ways does your life reflect the priorities of ambassadorship for the kingdom of God?

Does your heart match Paul's heart in pleading with people to be saved?

How can you tell?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how conscious of God's purpose of reconciliation are you from day to day? How would being more aware of God's purpose make your life as a believer more contagious?

How would your life change if you saw yourself (first and foremost) as one sent by God on His mission?

Why is that attitude key if we are to be ambassadors for Christ?

To whom is God calling you to be an ambassador this week?