

# A NEW CREATION

By Steve Zeisler

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The Bay Area has been visited in recent weeks by two extraordinary statesmen. Mikhail Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela are powerful, charismatic, persuasive ambassadors for their political viewpoints. Although large segments of popular opinion in this country take exception to the political philosophies which these leaders represent, these two visiting ambassadors have succeeded in capturing the admiration of many who never expected to see anything positive in them.

The role of an ambassador is the picture which the apostle Paul now brings before us in our studies in his second Corinthian letter. In the opening chapters of this book, Paul has already introduced several metaphors which help us understand the Christian life. He has described Christians as a "fragrance"-an invisible scent which influences others. He has urged them to remove their veils so as to truly become free men and women in Christ. He described them as "earthen vessels," clay pots which contain a great treasure-the Lord Jesus himself. Last week, the apostle referred to our bodies as "tents"-temporary dwellings in which we live as we look to our eternal dwelling, "not built by human hands."

Today, we come to the picture of an ambassador. In the first century, this word was used of imperial legates, spokesmen for Caesar whose job was to persuade antagonistic nations to give up resistance to Rome. Here is what Paul writes with reference to this word picture (2 Corinthians 5:19b, 20):

And [God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors...

If you are a Christian, Paul's words apply to you. The message of reconciliation has been committed to you, and you as an ambassador are to take it abroad. That is the responsibility that is committed to the Christian.

The second focus of our message this morning is people who do not yet know the Lord. Here is Paul's word to you (verse 20b):

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

**Christ's love so overwhelms us that we give away our lives in service of others**

If you are not reconciled to him, this passage is for you, too. We will give you an opportunity today, as the Spirit of God leads, to be reconciled to God.

We begin our study in verse 11 of chapter 5:

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

## **An ambassador's convictions**

There are a number of credentials which an ambassador for Christ needs. It is clear, however, that there is a degree of awkwardness about this role. Christians are often misunderstood as they exercise this function. Here Paul is saying, "I hope that what we are like is plain to you. I know it is plain to God, that he sees us for who we are, but you may very well misunderstand us. At times, you might even think we are out of our minds."

Clearly, this business of representing a king creates awkwardness at times. In fact, I would say that if representing Christ does not occasionally make you feel uncomfortable, you are probably not doing it right. If your conversations are always natural, with no struggle or tension, then you may very well be omitting some of the difficult parts.

A good ambassador always has one foot in each of two different worlds. If you are going to represent the Lord, you must know your neighbors, and understand why they act the way they do. You need to look honestly and deeply at the needs of people around. There is no room for an ambassador of Christ to be "other-worldly." We can't be good ambassadors if we hide out in Christian enclaves, using terms that only other believers understand. We must have one foot in this world. But, and this is equally important, we need to rightly represent the King--and this means that although we need to understand non-believers, we do not act like them. We have certain convictions and responsibilities, a heavenly citizenship they do not have. We must expect communication to be a struggle at times.

Secondly, says Paul, as ambassadors "we try to persuade men." We don't trick people into a false allegiance to Christ. We don't try to get them to change outwardly, ignoring any change in their hearts. This is just what the false teachers in Corinth were attempting to do as they sought to undermine Paul's ministry: they were trying to "take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart" (verse 12b). Certain religious leaders attempt to create a false agreement, either by browbeating their listeners or by watering down the message. We won't do that, says Paul. This may very well be why we are misunderstood. Nevertheless, our efforts are based on persuasion---"we try to persuade men." We long for people to see what God has done in Christ. We exalt the cross of Jesus, therefore, the death and resurrection of Jesus so that it might be clearly seen for what it is. And then, having been seen, believed, and having been believed, men and women are never the same.

## **An ambassador's motives**

The two great motivations for the ambassador for Christ, according to Paul, are fear and love. "We know what it is to fear the Lord" (verse 11), and, "Christ's love compels us" (verse 14). "Fear" here is not referring to terror. We do not fear that all could be lost, so we don't run scared. The apostle is referring to respect, awe, or reverence. In the verses immediately preceding, Paul says that it is his goal to please the Lord, "for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ," i.e. we must all appear to be evaluated by the Lord. We are awestruck and reverential because we are representing the living God, and he will evaluate our work one day. There is nothing silly or shallow about what we do.

As ambassadors, we have a grave responsibility. A friend of mine is learning to drive a big tractor-trailer rig. As he was telling me about the classes he had to take I found myself being thankful that people who drive big trucks must study how it's done before they go out on the highways. Truck drivers ought to have a sense of reverence about what they are doing. These machines are big, fast, and dangerous! How much more ought Christians feel a sense of reverence and awe as they consider their responsibility to be ambassadors for Christ. The issue concerns life and death.

I have been interested to read in the newspapers the reaction of people to the threat of excommunication from the Roman Catholic church of certain individuals who support abortion on demand. Although Roman Catholic church government depends more on tradition than scripture, and seems to me to be subject to legitimate questions about how such decisions are made, most public comments have expressed anger that any behavior be repudiated by any religious leaders for any reason. The idea that God could be upset about something, and that church leaders should challenge the behavior of church members, is repugnant to some. They seem to be saying, "Nobody has a right to say that what I'm doing is wrong. Nobody has the right to question my standing as a church member." Yet the warning being raised by Catholic church leaders accords with this word

of scripture. We must take the concerns of God seriously-especially when they are unpopular. "We know what it is to fear the Lord," says Paul. Someone needs to warn people who are involved in activities that run counter to what God has said in his word.

This then is the first motivation which the apostle sets before us. We respect and reverence God because some day "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."

### **The love of Christ**

Love is the second great motivation for ambassadors of Christ. "Christ's love compels us," says Paul. We are compelled, borne along as if we were in the midst of a rapid river, by the love of God. Do you remember your first experience of romantic love? I do. I recall doing silly things-waking up singing, gazing at my beloved's photograph, thinking about the sound of her voice, etc. But Paul is speaking about a much greater love-agape love-the love of God that is not based on circumstances, attractiveness, or feelings of being swept away. This is love, undeserved love, from the heart of God himself. Knowing this, says Paul, the infinite, unchanging love of Christ for us is what compels us in ministry.

This is one of the reasons we can offer for what at times seems to be strange behavior on the part of Christians. Today, people think you're crazy if you don't live for yourself. "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you," says the apostle. Self-interest has no place in the Christian life. We live for others because we ourselves are loved by Someone who has made us absolutely different people.

Ray Stedman writes of Paul, "His actions were the actions of love, directed to the glory of God and the service of men, never for the advancement of self. That is always highly suspicious behavior. The person who has no axe to grind, no angle for his own profit, is behaving singularly strange. Therefore, to find someone who, observed over a long period of time and under various circumstances, behaves consistently contrary to basic human selfishness, may cause some to be strangely troubled and perplexed. 'Love is the explanation,' says Paul." Christ's love so overwhelms us that we give our lives away in service of others.

Earlier, the apostle had shared his longing "to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." He would rather be done with the preliminaries and get on with the eternal things. But there remained the responsibility to represent the Lord to a world that does not know him. That was why he was still serving God. We, too, are ambassadors. We live in two worlds, having been called into service by God himself to make known the name of Christ. That is why we are still here, why the preliminaries are not yet completed. What a wonderful ministry this is! There is no greater honor than being representatives of the King. If you know the Lord, I hope your calling to represent him has been raised in your estimation, that you will look for ways to speak and live so that others are persuaded, attracted and challenged.

### **"Be reconciled to God"**

The second part of our study this morning gathers around Paul's exhortation to those who do not yet know the Lord, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." The very heart and center of this paragraph is the cross of Christ. This is one of the most remarkable descriptions in Scripture of what took place when Jesus died and was raised. We can see how this flows out of the love that Paul speaks of in verse 14: Christ's love compels us, and that love supremely made its case on the cross. We are overwhelmed by God's love for us precisely because of what occurred on the cross. There is no greater statement of love than the death of Jesus. Paul writes,

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's

ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"...one died for all, and therefore all died." The death of Christ somehow gathered up everyone who ever lived. In Christ, God offered himself to mankind, and Christ took upon himself the death we deserved to die. If we have received the benefits of his death, it is proper to say of ourselves that we have died and in him we are raised again so that we have newness of life. That is why Paul can make the announcement "if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come" (v. 17); why he can say so confidently that God does not hold our sins against us anymore (v. 19). The remarkable thing about the death of Jesus is that somehow he took all of us with him. Somehow in the infinity of God, our sin, rebellion and failure was transferred to him, so that when he died, our death took place as well.

**In the same way sin was transferred to Christ, righteousness was transferred to us**

### **Jesus died for us**

Verse 21 explains in a profound way what Paul means when he says Jesus died for us all: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..." Jesus had no sin, no failure of his own. There was nothing about his conduct that deserved death. At his trial, he asked, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" There was no answer from either the Romans or the Jews. He irritated them, frightened them and threatened them, but no one could convict him of sin. Yet it says, "he became sin" for our sake. God the Father placed upon him all of human sin. He became vile in the sight of his own Father. Unholiness, wickedness, rebellion-everything that human sin is was transferred to him on the cross, so much so that his own Father turned his back on him. "My God, my God, who have you forsaken me?" was Jesus' cry from the cross. "Why have you rejected me?" He was experiencing God's rejection of sin because he had become sin for our sake.

When I was fifteen years old, I heard this truth explained at a Young Life camp outside Prescott, Arizona, and I became a Christian. The speaker talked about the nails, the blood, the physical suffering of Jesus on the cross, and I was moved. Then he went on to make the point that Paul is making here. More than physical pain, he said, for the first time in his life Jesus was rejected by God because he had become sin. When I heard that, everything about me that I knew was wrong descended upon me. Jesus had become sin for my sake. He was utterly forsaken by his Father; he was consigned to hell. I had never understood that before.

I went outside, my head spinning. I knew that what I had heard was true, and that all my rationalizations and grand plans for myself were being totally challenged. One of the leaders sat next to me and discussed with me what I had heard and its implications. After a while, he asked, "Do you want to pray a simple prayer to tell God you believe him and thank him for what he has done?" I said, "Yes, I do." It was the explanation that I had heard of what Jesus endured on the cross, even beyond the physical, that had such a powerful effect on me that night. Jesus did not deserve to die, I did. During those hours on the cross his own Father hated him, and deservedly so, because of what he had become.

### **Becoming righteous**

But the result of his becoming sin for us follows in verse 21: "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus paid this extraordinary price so that we might benefit. No longer are we the ones who deserve to die for our own sins. In the same way that sin was transferred to Christ, righteousness was transferred to us, and we become in him the righteousness of God.

This word, "righteousness," is a magnificent term. Every desire you have for beauty, wholeness, value, purity; every time your heart calls to you to be something worth being, you are longing for the righteousness of God. "Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Our bodies were made for physical sustenance and call out for it when deprived even for a short time. Our souls were made to know righteousness, and a sensitive conscience implores us to be made right with God. "Be all that you can be," says the Army recruiting slogan, referring, of course, to this life. In some ways (on a much more profound level) this is the message of the Bible: "Be all that you can be." Be the righteousness of

God himself in Christ. Jesus became sin so that we might become in him the righteousness of God. What a wonderful truth!

In Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge, that wizened, hardened, embittered, greedy old man, encounters death in a dream on Christmas Eve. His late partner, Jacob Marley, appears to him, dragging his chains, to tell Scrooge that death awaits him. All his life long, Marley had worked on forging every link in his chain through hatred, greed and unrighteousness. He takes Scrooge on a tour of Christmases past, present, and future. Scrooge even sees his own name carved on a gravestone. The awful proximity of death finally had the effect of changing him. He awoke on Christmas morning a different man.

Dickens does not make any reference to the gospel in his story, but it contains a wonderful picture of what takes place in us when we contemplate the death of Jesus and truly see it for what it is. If we allow new creation to take place because we enter into the death of Jesus on the cross, and his resurrection from the grave so that we have new life, everything changes for us. When Scrooge awoke next day, everything looked different to him—the weather, the light, the people, his relationships, his lightness of step—everything! Awareness of his impending death, and the possibility of being different, had made his outlook on life new and vital.

In a much more profound sense, the death of Christ on the cross makes each of us a new creation. We are utterly new, and freed from all the baggage that held us down in the past. Paul is not talking about reincarnation. That is the best that non-Christians can hope for—that people get another shot at this life. But I would not do any better if I had another shot at it. I would make just as bad a mess of it the second time around. Paul is talking about a new creation, a life filled with the presence of God.

### **Now is the time**

If you are not reconciled to God, hear the apostle's words in the opening verses of chapter 6:

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says,

"In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you."  
I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

If you have been considering the claims of Christ, you have an opportunity today to make a decision for him. There may not be another opportunity. If you are persuaded that what the Bible says is true, that the death of Jesus in some extraordinary way took place for you, and that you are allowed life because of it, then I urge you to pray with me. Be reconciled to God. He has already acted. He has already made the appeal. In the cross of Christ, he has done all that he can. What he is saying is, "Please receive the gift that is offered." If you are persuaded that "today is the day of salvation," please echo the words that I will pray now.

*Lord Jesus, we realize that what you did on the cross was for us. You died for all "that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised again." For the first time, I embrace that truth. I believe it and thank you for it. I deserved to die, and you died in my place. I ask now that you allow me to live my life for the One who died for me, that you will take control. Lord, I give myself to you that I might walk in newness of life.*

No condemnation now I dread,  
Jesus and all in him is mine.  
Alive in him, my living head.

2 Cor. 5:11-21  
Ninth Message  
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