

JOY TO THE WORLD: OUR MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFE STYLE

By Doug Goins

In 2 Corinthians 5:11-17 (Discovery Paper 4642), Paul summarizes two powerful, motivating forces that help him “hang in” for the long haul of faithful and effective service to the Lord. The first force is the fear of the Lord, and the second is the love of Jesus Christ. Paul says about the first force, “Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord we persuade men” (verse 11). As we examined Paul’s words and the paragraph that flowed out of it, we saw that the calling for us is a lifestyle. We are called to live persuasively. The idea behind “persuade” is not preaching at people to convince them to change their minds, but it is living a life sold out to Jesus. It is a life that will be attractive to people. Paul says that it is the “fear of the Lord” which motivates him. It does not mean that Paul is scared to death of the Lord, but he has a healthy respect for him. Paul has learned to be realistic about God, not taking him for granted or lightly in any way. Paul serves and lives for the Lord because he knows that he is accountable to him.

It is this same fear that will protect us from a superficial ministry. If we have a healthy, realistic fear of the Lord we no longer have to be afraid of people or worry about what they think of us. The only audience that matters is the Father, and we strive to please him and not the people around us.

The second motivating factor is mentioned in 5:14, where Paul writes, “For the love of Christ controls us....” Paul is driven, compelled to pour out his life for other people because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. It is only the death of Jesus which enables us to die to selfishness and self-absorption. It frees us to give ourselves away without caring about the cost. Additionally, we look at people differently than we once did because the Holy Spirit allows us to view them with optimism and hope. Paul explains that in Jesus Christ we see all people, even those with whom we struggle, with eyes of love rather than judgment.

At Peninsula Bible Church, we have an annual event known as *Joy to the World*. A catalog is published with information on various ministries that PBC supports, and different booths are set up throughout the church so that representatives of the organizations can speak to those who are interested in learning more about the ministry. People are then given the opportunity to help meet the needs of the organizations through donations made on behalf of family members and friends at Christmas time. While looking at this year’s catalog, I was impressed with some of the vision statements and ministry summaries. The following are a few excerpts:

Advent Group Ministries: A team of Christians with a mission of bringing hope, healing and Christ’s love to hurting children and their families.

Bayshore Christian Ministry: Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ through leadership development, and disciple-making. Trying to meet practical needs of young people through bible clubs, academic enrichment, employment training, and life-skills programs.

Community Pregnancy Center: A counseling ministry offering truth, healing and hope to women facing unplanned pregnancies.

Green Pastures: A Christ-centered home for disabled children, demonstrating God's love for them and their families by functioning as a home away from home.

Habitat for Humanity: Putting the Christian faith into action, helping poor families by building new homes or renovating existing ones and selling them at cost.

Parakeleo Biblical Counseling Ministry: Taking the word of God with life-changing truth and helping people grow confident in their ability to communicate the word of God in friendship counseling.

Finally, I was struck by the statement from *Young Life*:

“...an incarnational, relational, outreach ministry to disinterested teenagers. Leaders dedicate hours to building relationships with teens and loving them unconditionally. In the process, teens encounter Jesus Christ through the lives of leaders.”

With these ministries in mind, let us consider 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2. Paul writes:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, And He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain--for He says,

**“AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU,
AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU”;
behold, now is “THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,” behold, now
is “THE DAY OF SALVATION”--**

It is significant that all of the mission organizations listed in the *Joy to the World* catalog say that they desire people hear and understand the life-changing implications of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. But we will see from this passage that the ministry of reconciliation is not given only to our missionaries and local mission organizations. Paul does not claim that this call is an exclusively apostolic obligation, or only for pastors and evangelists. Paul's language is amazingly inclusive. He folds the Corinthian Christians of the first century and all of us who have a relationship with Christ into this passage.

Consider the plural pronouns in verses 18-21. In verse 18, Paul says that God “reconciled *us* to himself” and “gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation.” The end of verse 19 says “he has committed to *us* the word of reconciliation.” And in verse 20, “*we* are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through *us*,” and “*we* beg on behalf of Christ.” Finally, in verse 21, “he made him who knew no sin to be sin on *our* behalf, that *we* might become the righteousness of God in him.” All of us should find ourselves in the middle of this passage.

Paul draws our attention to five important characteristics of the nature of our message of reconciliation.

Our message originates with God

The first characteristic of the message is that it originates with God (verse 18). We are privileged to communicate the message that God himself, our creator and redeemer, desires to reconcile sinful, hurting, isolated, and alienated people to himself. God in fact has created people to be in a love relationship with him. As I studied this passage and prayed, I was gripped by the incredible privilege that all of us have to communicate this word to our friends and family members who do not know our savior.

Our credibility as spokespersons comes from our own personal experience. God has restored each one of us to relationship with him, but what is truly amazing is that it was not even our idea. Paul writes to the Roman church, “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). In verse 8, he says, “But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And in verse 10, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” Our reconciliation, our personal salvation was initiated by God. We were *helpless, ungodly, sinners*, and *God’s enemies*, yet he still moved toward us because we were incapable of moving towards him. We could not save ourselves, so he initiated this loving, saving activity in Jesus.

John Chrysostom, a famous preacher of the third century asks,

Can you see how great God’s love is for us? Who was the offended party? He was. Who took the first steps toward reconciliation? He did. Some will say that he sent the Son in his place, but this is a misunderstanding. Christ did not come apart from the Father who sent him. They were both involved together in this loving work of reconciliation. (1)

As believers, we have personally experienced this reconciliation. When we share the message, we begin with the story of our own salvation, of how God broke down our stubborn defenses and kept pursuing us, even when we were running away. Each of our stories of conversion is unique and tremendously important to tell.

The second half of verse 18 makes it clear that we have a God-given responsibility to tell our stories of reconciliation in Christ. The passage says, “He gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” It is an overwhelming reality that God trusts us with ministry, and our stories are worth telling. If he did not think that we could do it, or that our stories could make a difference he would not ask us to tell them. That in itself should be powerfully motivating to us. The God of creation, the God of reconciliation, believes in us.

It does not matter what people might think of us or our abilities to communicate. We cannot allow people’s opinions to undermine our confidence as ambassadors of Christ. Our ultimate responsibility and accountability is to the one who saved us, commissioned us, and sent us out to tell the story of reconciliation. All of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the most introverted to the most gregarious have been entrusted with the ministry and the message. Our responsibility is as great as any religious leader we might admire because that famous leader does not live in our homes with our families, work where we work, play where we play, or walk around in the neighborhood in which we live. Those leaders do not come into contact with the people that we do on a personal level. Wherever we go, we have the tremendous privilege of speaking for Jesus.

I recently had dinner with a young couple I have known for several years who want their lives to count for Christ, and they are comfortable talking about Jesus wherever they go. They told me about an extended vacation they had taken traveling around the world and the variety of opportunities they had to share their faith. For example, because they shared Christ with a tour guide while on safari in East Africa, he asked them to speak in a primitive Masai village. The guide was taken with the winsomeness of their story and he asked them to teach a seminar on some of the practical issues of living the Christian life. The husband told me he was embarrassed by the offer. He said, “I’m just an engineer, how could I do that?” I told him, “You are gifted, you are called. It’s like Paul’s Macedonian call. How could you say ‘no’ to an offer like that?” Paul says in this passage that every one of us is privileged and called to live life like that.

Our message centers on God’s initiative in “Reconciling the World”

Secondly, our message centers on God’s initiative in reconciling the world (5:19). The message not only originates with God, but God is sovereign over the whole process. In the opening section of John’s gospel, Jesus is introduced as the Word of God, the light of the world. God was committed to sending Jesus into the world as the living Word from the very beginning of time. He was sent to bring reconciliation to a world lost in the darkness of sinful separation from God. Each of us was separated from God by our own sinful choices and rebellion against him.

Authentic Christianity is always interested in the nature of people’s relationship with God. There is more behind it than merely a humanitarian concern. Just as every child has some kind of a relationship with his or her parents, whether it is good or bad, every person has a relationship with God. From the beginning, it was God’s intention for people to live in a relationship of love, trust, and obedience to him. But sin entered the world and it created hostility between man and God, resulting in estrangement and isolation. To re-establish this broken relationship God reaches out in love to people through the saving activity in Jesus Christ.

In the middle of verse 19 Paul tells us that God does not condemn us. He sent Jesus not to condemn, but to forgive. The Bible tells us that we were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sin apart from Christ’s reconciling work in our lives (see Ephesians 2). This manifests itself as painful struggles with hurt, loneliness, insecurity, personal identity, self-worth, and acceptance in the “lost” people around us.

I believe that people know intuitively that they live under judgment and condemnation. 2 Corinthians 5:18 tells us that God’s grace does not mean that he takes the problem of sin and evil lightly. God responds in love to our hurt, struggles, and isolation, and fulfills our desire to be something more. The apostle John wrote, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him” (John 3:16-18). God offers forgiveness, not condemnation, and it is our privilege to communicate that to the people around us.

In the last phrase of verse 19 Paul says that there is a strong personal element to the message. Paul says that God has “committed to us the word of reconciliation.” It means literally that it is lodged, or placed inside the core of our being. This is not merely theological content, devoid of personal investment. We are peacemakers, reconcilers; we have internalized the truth. The statement I read about *Young Life* indicates that they understand the reality that this is an incarnational work. We are able to enter people’s lives without fear of offense and without intimidation because we know that apart from Christ we are no different.

On a recent trip to Pakistan Ed Woodhall and I were seated on the plane next to a man about our age who is a very successful attorney. As we talked, the man mentioned a couple of times how he struggled with work, ethical issues, the pain of a divorce, and the desire to be a good person. Even though the conversation was relatively personal, we were not able to break through his defenses until Ed and I began to talk about the prices we have paid for sinful choices in our own lives. Ed talked about making bad choices in business, and I talked about my struggles with the failure of my first marriage many years ago. We were both amazed at how this man wanted to talk about these very real issues, but only after we were able to identify with him in sin.

Our message requires voluntary acceptance

The third characteristic of this life-changing message is voluntary acceptance (5:20). We have a tremendous amount of authority when we talk about our relationship with Christ because we are ambassadors for him. Paul defines his

ministry and ours by a title from the political world of his day. Just as the Corinthians imagined that they were representing Christ to the Roman world as ambassadors, we are official representatives in ours. Wherever we go, whatever we do, and with whomever we connect we cannot shake the title and responsibility of being ambassadors for Jesus.

Ambassadors in our modern world are trusted to represent their country accurately, with faithfulness and cultural sensitivity. I read recently that our ambassador to Indonesia is currently in trouble because he has been terribly insensitive to the Indonesian culture. The best ambassadors do not make up their own rules. They are not swash-bucklers who draw attention to themselves, but they reflect the issues and concerns of their government. So if we are to be ambassadors of Jesus we must be controlled by him, his mission, and his message. When we represent him well, we can speak clearly and confidently in his authority.

Do you ever feel embarrassed representing the claims of Christ to people? Is it sometimes difficult to talk about your faith? I certainly have been embarrassed at times, but the reality is that we are a privileged people, official representatives of the King of Kings. Through the authority given to us in Christ as ambassadors we can invite people to turn to God in response to his love. Paul says, “We do not throw out our message half-heartedly. We beg people, we implore, we entreat!” Incidentally, where it says, “We beg *you* on behalf of Christ” the “you” should be omitted. There is no pronoun in the Greek text. In other words, Paul says, “That is how I live. Every place I go I ask myself how I can engage people in what Jesus represents to them. How can I convince them?”

Since the message is directed toward the will we ask people to make a choice as to whether or not they want to be reconciled to God. If they receive and accept the truth, they can enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul’s vocabulary suggests passionate concern. He cares about the people with whom he comes in contact. Do you really care about the people around you who do not know Jesus? Can anyone in your Christian circle recognize how burdened you are for your non-Christian friends and family members?

How we communicate our concern is very important. We should not condemn people for their sin. That is not why Jesus came, and we will not be good representatives if we act otherwise. As I said, I believe people intuitively know they are condemned, so it is not helpful to reinforce it. We also should not give orders or command people to accept new life in Jesus Christ. That is why we plead with them, in Paul’s language. We urge them in every creative way possible to respond to God’s love and be reconciled.

The last afternoon we were in Pakistan I had the privilege of touring a spectacular Muslim cultural center. In the art gallery we met the artist of the paintings, who was delighted to show us around. He was a gracious man in his early sixties, famous in certain circles for interpreting the Koran and other Islamic writings into paintings. I was immediately struck by the number of motifs and symbols in the paintings that were biblical, both from the Old and New Testaments, and one in particular caught my attention. It was a modern painting of a leafy grapevine, with a large bunch of grapes on the vine, and a chalice underneath. I asked him, “Do you know that the grapevine is a symbol central to the Christian faith?” He had a vague idea that it was. At that moment, God gave me a boldness that I do not normally possess to quickly explain that the grapes being crushed represents the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for our salvation. I explained that salvation is a gift to us and is not dependent on our behavior or performance. Our host was gracious, and even though I do not know if my words had any impact on him, I pray that the Lord used that conversation to plant a seed. Our calling is to be sensitive and ask, “Lord, how can I drop a seed? How can I say the words appropriate for the moment?”

Response to our message results in an incredible exchange

The fourth characteristic, found in verse 21, is that the results are mysterious and life-changing when there is a response to our message. An early church father, Theodorit of Cyrus, wrote, “Christ was called what we are, in order to call us to be what he is.”(2) Jesus took our sins upon himself so that we can be transformed. We become holy and

without blemish in his sight, and we are free from accusation. The unfathomable mystery of the cross is that Jesus, the one without sin, was our substitute. Scripture tells us that God both planned and executed this substitution (see Colossians 1:13-20; 1 Peter 2:24; Romans 5:10). God was pleased with the work of the cross, despite the fact that on the cross Jesus was separated from him. The intimacy that Jesus had with his Father turned into abandonment and isolation. That is why Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus is able to relate to our predicament because he too has experienced alienation.

Martin Luther struggled to understand Jesus’ words when he was preparing a sermon on Psalm 22, the psalm from which Jesus quoted. Martin Luther’s wife, Cathryn, said that she listened to him pace back and forth for an entire day, repeating, “The beloved of the Father forsaken. It is beyond human understanding!” After a full day of wrestling with the text, Luther gave up and, in fact, never preached on Psalm 22. He said that the mystery was too deep. How could Jesus become sin, and be abandoned by the Father? But it is Jesus’ willingness to suffer abandonment and die sacrificially, which results in the miracle of each one of us being given the righteousness of Christ himself. Through Christ we are forgiven, accepted, and restored. In Christ we can become everything that God requires us to be. And in Christ we can be everything that we have always wanted to be. That is the good news of the gospel!

We can confidently communicate our message with a sense of immediacy and urgency

The fifth and final characteristic of our message of reconciliation is a strong exhortation to speak the powerful word of reconciliation (6:1-2). Paul says that we can and will communicate this message of reconciliation with confidence, immediacy, and urgency:

And working together with him [Jesus], we also urge you [the Corinthians, as well as all of us] not to receive the grace of God in vain--for He [God speaking through the prophet Isaiah (49:8)] says,

**“AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU,
AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU”;**

And then Paul adds a final line,

**“...behold, now is “THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,”
behold, now is “THE DAY OF SALVATION.”**

Paul makes a passionate appeal to us not to squander the opportunities we are given to speak. Failing to speak about Jesus after accepting God’s saving grace makes that grace hollow. Refusing to speak on his behalf makes it null and void. The challenge here is not a negative one, but a positive one. Paul tells us to allow God’s grace to be full and forceful in our lives; we must allow it be what it really is. Not only did grace save us, but it will sustain us. All of God’s resources have been poured into our lives and are available to us constantly. His character, wisdom, power, and confidence are given to us so that we can speak the message of reconciliation. If we do not speak, Paul says that we are causing God’s grace to become an empty thing in our lives, and we become a walking contradiction. So we must hear the urging, the pleading, and the passion of this great apostle as he challenges us.

Paul intensifies the appeal in reminding the Corinthians of God’s resources by way of God’s words to the nation of Israel (6:2a). God spoke these words to a nation that had both a loving and fearful relationship with him. He says, “I am a God who listens. I pay attention, and I know what your needs are. I am the God who delivered you. I saved you from the hands of your enemies who held you captive. I am that kind of God. All of the resources you need for life are available to you.” Paul then adds his own challenging commentary, “Now is the time” (6:2b). It is an existential statement because it is always the time. It was the time then, and it is the time now. Now is the time to tell

the story of our own reconciliation to God in Christ. Now is the time for people to hear the word of salvation and the word of grace, the liberating message of reconciliation.

We have the incredible privilege to communicate the good news of salvation because God entrusts us with the ministry of reconciliation. The message is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” God has committed to us the word of reconciliation. I hope and pray that we can all see ourselves right in the middle of this passage, committed to being God’s voice, God’s ambassador, and God’s spokesperson for this great word of reconciliation.

NOTES:

(1) Chrysostom, John, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture—Vol. VII. Edited by Gerald Bray. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL © 1999, P. 251.

(2) Theodorit of Cyrus, *Commentary on The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture—Vol. VII. Edited by Gerald Bray. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL © 1999, P. 252.

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