

AN AMBASSADOR

***SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH***



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2 Corinthians 5:11-21
6th Message
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Toward the end of the year 2000, I met Condoleeza Rice. The election that year had disputed results from Florida that had finally been resolved by the Supreme Court, and it was apparent that George W. Bush would be President of the United States. This meant that Dr. Rice was destined for an important role in government. When we met, she had left her position as provost at Stanford University, and had not yet taken up her new responsibilities in Washington.

It was a chance meeting in a gym where both of us were exercising. When she learned that I was a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church, she said that she knew of our church and appreciated it. We spoke for a bit about Christian ministry at Stanford and in the local area.

In President Bush's first term Dr. Rice served as the National Security Advisor, of course, and is now the Secretary of State. She is in effect the highest ambassador of our nation, dealing with terrible problems everywhere around the world, speaking as the chief representative of the country.

As I thought back to that conversation, I realized that in our discussion of the cause of Christ in our area, we were also speaking as ambassadors, as royal representatives. The text before us calls on all believers to serve the Lord as his ambassadors. We are called to bear a message from Jesus Christ to those who are estranged from him. It's a message of reconciliation and hope, offering others the gift of God that we ourselves have received.

This calling as an ambassador is the sixth and last metaphor of this series in 2 Corinthians 2-5. We have seen that Paul wrote this letter as a polemic. Enemies had come to Corinth who were speaking against him and promoting a false version of the Christian faith. Paul is writing to urge his readers away from what is false and to advocate authentic Christianity. We've considered Paul's arguments regarding the basis for lasting influence and real leadership, the nature of worship, purpose in suffering, and passion for heaven.

In our final text, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, verses 19b-20a declare,

He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ ...

There is no such thing as authentic Christianity that does not share the heart of Christ for the broken world he loves. Within Jesus' family, we experience his life together. Real fellowship and glorious worship are beautiful and honoring to him, but that is not enough. We name as Lord the One who is supremely concerned for those who do not yet know him.

It was Jesus, of course, who told the story of the father who looked down the road every day in anxious longing for his wayward son to come home (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus also described the shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep and went to find one sheep that was lost (Luke 15:1-10). Jesus was the friend of lepers (Matthew 26:6, Mark 14:3) and cared for those who were cut off and heartbroken. He described the mission of his descent from heaven to incarnation as a man in this way: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Old-covenant, manmade religion is very often about efforts to measure status, compete for prominence, showcase accomplishments. It's about us. It's not about having Jesus' heart for people who are in the dark, burdened with guilt, fearing death, chained to self-destruction, and cut off from God.

We'll begin with the concluding verses of our text.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21:

²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become

the righteousness of God in Him.

Verse 21 declares a staggering truth. On the cross, God the Father was willing to make his own Son bear sin, indeed become sin—degradation, horror, violence, unrighteousness, and evil—so that it could be put to death, so that we need not die ourselves. Therefore, Paul begged, “Be reconciled to the One who cares for you that much!”

That is what is behind the calling assigned to ambassadors. We have been given a message of reconciliation purchased at great cost: a remarkable privilege and grave responsibility.

Let’s go back now to the beginning of our text and consider some of the things that shape us for service as ambassadors.

The fear of the Lord

2 Corinthians 5:11-13:

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. ¹²We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.

The call is to persuade those who will listen. Persuasion surely includes not just language, but also who we are and how we conduct ourselves.

The reason for our persuasion is that we know the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord, of course, is not cringing terror. It’s not an awful concern of dire consequences or the imminence of terrible things. It’s really a profound respect for Jesus Christ. In 5:9 Paul said, “We have as our ambition, whether at home [in the body] or absent [in the life to come], to be pleasing to Him.” That’s the idea here. Because I fear—respect—my Lord and Savior, so much, I want more than anything else to please him.

Note also that in this short section the problem of Paul’s opposition surfaces again. He couldn’t let enemies continue to say his motives were evil, his words useless, and his insights false. But he didn’t want to appear to be a braggart. The false teachers were promoting themselves, but he didn’t want to fight fire with fire. That explains verse 12: “We are not again commending ourselves to you ...” That is, Paul was not trying to gain the Corinthians’ approval because he was desperate to be liked. But he wanted his friends to be able to answer those who were speaking falsehoods.

So he went on to say about himself that at times he looked foolish, as if he was beside himself and crazy. At other times he looked as if he was in his right mind. “Believe the best about us,” he said. “If we look like fools, we’re fools for God. If we look sane, we’re sane for love’s sake, for you.”

In Galatians 1:10 we read, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? ... If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” You can’t faithfully speak the truth to someone whose approval you desperately want.

Codependency and love are sometimes mistaken for each other. Love thrives when you’re drawing on a source outside yourself. You will care for somebody, serve them, lay down your life for them, or give up your rights for them. You do this not because you need what they can give, but because you want the best for them. Ultimately that’s what Paul argued here. “Because I fear God, I’ll persuade those who don’t know him yet, and I’ll be able to give them more than I could if I longed to be approved by them.”

New things have come

2 Corinthians 5:14-17:

¹⁴For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; ¹⁵and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

¹⁶Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh,

yet now we know Him in this way no longer.
¹⁷Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

Let me make some observations. We noted that Paul's insights on the nature of the cross of Christ in these verses are profound. But he didn't reflect on the cross for its own sake—he reflected on the cross to persuade outsiders. Our Lord Jesus died in the place of all so that we need not die; in fact, so that our death with him will result in resurrection and life for us. It says in verse 15 that we may live for Christ as a result of his death and resurrection, and in verse 17 we are described as living in Christ. The goal is re-creation, an entirely new way of life. In Jesus' words, we can have life with abundance (John 10:10).

Look at how the old life is described in verse 15: people lived for themselves. This is not a prepositional phrase in Greek, it's the dative case of the word translated "themselves." It means they lived in the sphere of themselves, circumscribed by themselves, about themselves, promoting themselves, attentive to themselves, and having themselves at the center of everything. We don't have to live in the sphere of ourselves anymore. We can live for Christ and in Christ. We can live as those who are new in Christ.

Paul said, "From now on we recognize no one according to the flesh ..." That is, we don't see people the way they see themselves, the way their resumé describes them, or the way others gossip about them. We see the outcome of new life. They may not even be believers yet, having no idea what's possible for them, but we can see it for them. Our persuasion, in large measure, consists of describing a beautiful future that seems impossible for people who are fenced around by a broken version of themselves.

Finally, Paul spoke in personal terms, and perhaps this is even the heart of his argument. "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him in this way no longer." Think about the history of Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the apostle. He once "knew" Jesus to be a failed, dead carpenter from Nazareth who made blasphemous claims that he was the Son of God. He "knew" that Jesus had led astray the people of God, and Saul hated him for it and did everything he could to destroy those who believed those things.

His point is this: "I once knew Christ wrongly, and hurt terribly the people who loved him, but I don't know him that way any longer. The old things have passed away, and new things have come. I testify to the transforming power of the gospel because I have been transformed."

This is the crucial word that ambassadors have to speak to others: "I've been there." We urge others to be reconciled because we are the grateful beneficiaries of the same invitation to leave the darkness and live in the light.

Recall the evening when Jesus was at the house of Simon the Pharisee, and a woman of the streets came in and began to cry and wipe his feet with her hair. Simon was disturbed, and Jesus told him a very pointed story about debtors. At the end Jesus turned to the woman and said, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much." What did Simon hear when he continued, "But he who is forgiven little, loves little"? (Luke 7:36-50)

How much we are grateful for forgiveness, and aware of our need for it, is indicated not only by our worship of the Lord, but also by our love for the people he loves. If concern for outsiders is distant or decreasing, if unwashed unbelievers make us angry and we want them silenced, if there's little love, perhaps we are not very much aware of the great gift that has been given to us.

The word of reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18-19:

¹⁸Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹namely, 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.

Consider a common caricature: The stern God of the Old Testament hates people and is anxious to judge them; only the loving Jesus of the New Testament intervenes and saves them from this vengeful God. This version of events could not be more wrong. From the beginning God loved his failed creation and sought a way to save it. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting

their trespasses against them ...” He sent his Son to redeem us. It was his initiative, with the agreement of the Son, that the plan of salvation should go forward.

Now, he has every right to withdraw from us. The distance between any person caught in sin and the living God is the fault of the one caught in sin. But the only one who can take the initiative is God—and he has taken the initiative. He has not counted our trespasses against us, not a single one. We are forgiven at every point, absolutely, in total. There is not a single mark against us. Not a single accusation has voice.

He has given us, as ambassadors, the message of reconciliation! He will speak through us. He’s given us the responsibility and the opportunity to say these things. We can say them, as we’ve already noted, as part of our own story. We can speak to those in need because we’ve been in need. We can speak to the fearful because we are no longer terrified. We can speak well as ambassadors because we once lived in the far country, and we can represent the new country because we know what it’s like. He has called us to do so, to have his heart for those who are lost.

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