

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 “The Ministry of Reconciliation” April 10, 2016
Isaiah 49
Psalm 71

In Isaiah 49, God promises to use his Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob,
and to be a light for the nations.

The LORD will comfort his people and have compassion on his afflicted ones.

And all this will happen “in a day of salvation”
when God restores the fortunes of Zion.

So that “my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Our psalm of response is Psalm 71 –
a song of refuge as the psalmist longs for that glorious day!

Sing Psalm 71
Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

In Psalm 71 there are different voices competing for my attention:

There are those who say,
“God has forsaken! Pursue him! None will save.”

It can be easy to listen to those voices.
“God has forsaken you – he forsook Jesus – it’s a regular pattern!”

And yes, that’s true.
Do you remember what happened to Jesus?
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”

The same word comes back later in Psalm 71,
“from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me.”

When you are bearing the cross – when you are following Jesus –
it can be really easy to forget the resurrection.
Sometimes, all you see is darkness,

At the beginning of chapter 5 Paul reminded us of the central dynamic of the Christian life:
“We walk by faith, not by sight.”
By sight, we often feel and appear to be forsaken –
but by faith we see Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father!
By faith we declare the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ!

1. Straight Talk about Jesus: Whose Opinion Really Matters? (v11-13)

Back in chapter 1, verses 12-14, Paul had said,

“For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience,
that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity,
not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God,
and supremely so toward you.

For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge
and I hope you will fully acknowledge –
just as you did partially acknowledge us –
that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.”

Now in chapter 5, verses 11-13, Paul brings back the same themes.

He has just spoken of the day of the Lord Jesus (the judgment seat of Christ, v10).
And now again we hear the language of conscience, and of boasting in one another,
as well as the contrast between worldly ways of knowing
and a godly way of knowing.

The difference is that in chapter one, the subject of the conscience
was Paul and his traveling presbytery (Silas, Timothy, Titus, and others).

Now Paul speaks of *your* conscience (and the you is plural).

In other words, Paul is putting into practice the pattern that he has been teaching.

Paul has been saying that the messenger must *embody* the message.
We (the preachers) comfort *you* (the hearers) with the same comfort
with which *we* (the preachers) have been comforted,
so that *you* (the hearers) might be comforted in the midst of your afflictions.

And just as Christ passed through affliction to glory,
so also this light momentary affliction
is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory (4:17).

a. “What We Are Is Known to God” – and Hopefully to You (v11)

¹¹ *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.*

Why does Paul say, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord...”

He hasn’t used the language of the “fear of the Lord” –
but if you think about it, that’s *exactly* what “walking by faith” is all about.

Proverbs 9 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

When you fear God, you make it your aim to please God.
When you fear man, you make it your aim to please man.

Whose voice matters to you?

Whose approval do you seek?

If you think about it, the themes of “fear” “judgment” and “pleasing”
are all bound up together!

When you are a student, you are very aware of “judgment day”
(otherwise known as final exams –or your dissertation defense).
And so because you “fear” the outcome of judgment day,
you make it your aim to please your teacher!
Just because you graduate doesn’t mean that you outgrow this!
A performance review – a major project –
even a change in management –
can provoke a “fear” that results in a hearty desire
to please man.

In Ephesians 6, Paul urges slaves to obey their earthly masters with fear and trembling,
with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by way of eye-service,
as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ,
doing the will of God from the heart...
and Paul even says that masters should *do the same* –
in other words, both masters and slaves – both managers and employees –
should not be “people-pleasers” – but should serve the Lord Christ.

And Paul appeals to the final judgment there as well:
“knowing that whatever good anyone does,
this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.” (6:8)

This is what it means to walk by faith, not by sight.
You may have a deadline next week.
But what drives you to meet the deadline is *not* your boss – or your teacher.
What drives you is the fear of the Lord.
What motivates you is your desire to please Christ.
His judgment is the one that matters to you!

And that’s why Paul says:

But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.

Paul is not worried about what the Corinthians may think of him.
Sure, he *wants* them to think rightly about him!
But what controls us is *not* what others think of us!
What controls us is the love of Christ! (v14)

What we are is known to God.
His judgment is the judgment that matters!
I hope it is known also to your conscience.
It would be a good thing for you (Corinthians)

to know who we (Paul and his fellow-ministers) are.
And Paul has been straightforward and open –
so they have no excuse for *not* knowing!

If Paul and his fellow-ministers are *embodying* the message,
then their “outward actions, and [their] patterns of life and ministry,
bear witness to and manifest the truth,
and Paul hopes the Corinthians
will be spiritually discerning enough to recognize it.” (Guthrie, 297)

And so Paul returns to the theme of “commending ourselves” in verses 12-13:

b. Focus Not on the Outward Appearance, but What Is in the Heart (v12-13)

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.*

Back in chapter 3, verse 1, Paul had introduced the theme of “letters of recommendation.”
Paul says that it is absurd that he and Silas and Timothy would commend themselves –
after all, the Corinthians were themselves a letter of recommendation!
The church in Corinth was a testimony to their labors in the Lord.

And so Paul returns to the theme of “commending” and “boasting”
in order to show the Corinthians how the fear of the Lord
works its way out in the life of the church.

If we walk by faith, not by sight,
and if we make it our aim to please God –
since we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ –
then we are not controlled by what other people think of us!

And that means that Paul is not controlled by what the Corinthians think of him.

Then why is Paul writing 2 Corinthians?

If Paul and Silas and Timothy don’t care what the Corinthians think of them,
then why are writing this letter?
Paul seems to be going to *great lengths* to persuade the Corinthians to think better of him!

And Paul says that *we want* you to boast about us!

Why?

Because there is a problem.

There are some people in Corinth who are boasting in outward appearances.
They think that what matters is a big outward show.

But Paul says that what matters is what is in the heart –
what matters is what *God* says about you.

“What we are is known to God – and I hope it is known also to your conscience.”

So the reason why Paul is putting all this in writing
is so that the Corinthians will have extensive evidence to back up their conscience.

When you hear people boasting in their big outward show,
Paul says to use 2 Corinthians as your argument that what *matters*
is sharing in the sufferings of Christ.
Appearances can be deceiving.
Man looks on the outward appearance – but God looks at the heart.

And so Paul purpose for this self-recommendation
“is to offer an answer to those who have been openly critical of his ministry.” (299)

And his answer is simple:
look at the evidence –
do our life and teaching reflect the life and teaching of Jesus?
Do we boast in superficial matters?
Do we focus on numbers? ability? status?
Or “do we do whatever we do...for God and the church?”

And he realizes that some might think that he’s nuts for saying this!
Doesn’t Paul realize that it’s a little crazy to commend yourself?!

And so Paul anticipates the criticism in verse 13:

¹³ *For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*

Now I should point out that the two words used in verse 13 (beside ourselves and right mind)
were used in the rhetorical manuals of Paul’s day
to refer to improper versus proper oratorical style.

A speaker who is “beside himself” is going ‘over the top’ rhetorically –
but one who is in his right mind is working hard to connect with his hearers.

And Paul says that if we sometimes seem a little crazy,
that’s because everything we do is for God –
and so it’s going to look a little crazy to people who focus on outward appearance.

Okay –
so if we are supposed to fear God,
if we make it our aim to please *him*,
if we walk by faith, not by sight –

how do you do that?

How do you focus on what is in the heart rather than outward appearances?

This is the central point in verses 14-17.

2. How Do You Focus on What Is in the Heart? (v14-17)

a. The Pattern of This Is Christ's Death and Resurrection (v14-15)

¹⁴ *For the love of Christ controls us,*

Everything starts and ends with Jesus Christ.

First, the love of Christ controls us.

In Greek, as in English, the phrase "love of Christ" could mean 2 things.

It could mean Christ's love for me,

or it could mean my love for Christ.

So, for instance, if I said that I am controlled by the love of broccoli –
no one would hear that as a statement that broccoli loves me!

But that's because broccoli is impersonal.

When you use a personal noun (the name, Christ, for instance)

then "the love of Christ" ordinarily means "Christ's love for 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.

Some have wondered what is meant by "one has died for all."

If you look at verse 15, Paul says that Christ "died for all,

that all those who live might no longer live for themselves

but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

Who are the "all"?

Notice that Paul distinguishes between the "all" for whom Christ died,

and those "for whose sake he died and was raised."

Reformed theology has generally said it this way:

Christ's death was *sufficient* for all, but *efficient* only for the elect.

In other words, Christ died for Adam's race.

He died for humanity.

But Paul clearly says in the second part of verse 15

that those who live are those for whose sake Christ died and was raised.

Paul is probably not thinking about the question of "limited atonement"!

But his teaching here sets up a distinction
between the “cosmic” sense in which Christ died for “all,”
and the life-giving sense – the efficient sense –
in which Christ died (and was raised) for a more limited group.

Let me try to say this a little more clearly:
Christ died for “all” in the sense that with the death of Jesus
everything changes.

For everyone.

The gospel of Jesus is not just true for Christians.
It is true truth – for everyone.

With the death of Jesus, all of human history is forever altered.
From now on, everyone is going to have to give an account *to Jesus*.
One day *you* will stand at the judgment seat of *Christ*.

The death of Jesus has a profound impact on *all* humanity!
Your life ended in the death of Jesus.
And if you want to go on living a fleshly life –
a life oriented towards yourself and your own interests –
then you will have to answer for that to Jesus.

The love of Christ controls us.
The love of Christ constrains us –
the love of Christ takes hold of us and reorients us to him –
because we have been united to the one who died and was raised
for our sake.

The Christian no longer seeks his own advantage –
no longer pursues his own agenda –
but seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...

Walking by faith – not by sight –
means that you have a different standard for figuring out what matters in life.

I once knew a man who was preoccupied with “excellence.”
He wanted to be the best in whatever he did –
the best student, the best athlete, the best at his work – the best husband and father.
Then the gospel got a hold of him.
He realized that his pursuit of excellence was destroying his family.

God does not call you to be excellent at your work.
He calls you to *love him* in your work –
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

When my friend realized that his quest for excellence was a fleshly quest,
he went to his boss and asked to be demoted –
transferred to a different department,
where he could love God and neighbor more effectively.

This is really what Paul is getting at in verses 16-17.
We simply cannot look at the world in the way we once did.

b. So We Regard No One According to the Flesh (v16)

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.*

Yes, Saul of Tarsus had once regarded Christ according to the flesh –
Saul of Tarsus was Paul’s former name.
Saul had been there when Stephen was martyred by the Jews.
Saul had approved of Stephen’s death,
and went on to persecute Christians.

But on the road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul.
And never again would Paul regard Jesus “according to the flesh.”

But notice the implication of the work of Christ:
“we regard no one according to the flesh.”

“we don’t understand anyone from a worldly perspective” (Guthrie, 307)

For Paul the phrase “according to the flesh” often signals a contrast
between the old man and the new man –
between who we were in Adam, and who we are in Christ.

And, sure enough, in verse 17, Paul uses that new creation image:

c. But We See (by Faith) the New Creation in Christ (v17)

¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.^[b] The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

Do you see why I distinguished between the “all” of verse 14 and the “those who live” in v15?
Because Paul is not just talking about “me and my individual salvation.”

Verse 17 reads,
“If anyone is in Christ – new creation.”

It might be better to translate it, “there is a new creation”
(rather than “he is a new creation”)

Paul's point here is cosmic.

What Jesus has done is completely remake the universe!

"The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Jesus' death has fundamentally altered everything.

And so, if anyone is in Christ, *new creation* has come.

Of course, we only see this *by faith* – not by sight.

By sight, it looks like not much has changed.

By sight, we still live in the middle of the mess.

And that's why Paul says that the gospel requires the same pattern of ministry.

The pattern that Jesus established in his own life and death and resurrection,
is the pattern that *we* must follow in our ministry.

And so, once again, Paul runs through this very familiar pattern –
from Jesus

through the ministers of the word

to the people of God – and thus to the world.

3. The Gospel Requires This Pattern of Ministry (5:18-6:2)

a. What God Has Done in Christ: Reconcile the World (v18-19)

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^[c] the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

Verse 19 is the reason why I keep calling the work of Christ *cosmic*.

The greek word "cosmos" means "world."

And what God has done in Christ is reconcile the *world* (cosmos) to himself.

The word "cosmos" can be used in at least two senses in the NT.

John speaks of how the world is opposed to God and is passing away (1 John 2:16-17)

James 4:4 says that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

But here, Paul says that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.

Think of it this way:

from God's perspective, God is reconciling the world to himself –

which will entail removing all that is hostile toward God;

and that means that from a worldly perspective (from a fleshly perspective)

God is coming in judgment *against* the world.

But God's purpose in Christ is to reconcile the world to himself –

Christ's death is nothing less than *cosmic* in its significance,

as God does not count their trespasses against them,

and entrusts to us the message of reconciliation.

b. What God Has Done through Us: The Ministry of Reconciliation (v19-20)

²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

The minister of the gospel is an ambassador from the heavenly court.

King Jesus has triumphed over the powers of this age –
he has won his cosmic victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil.
And King Jesus has sent ambassadors to every nation –
to every city –
with this message:

“Be reconciled to God.

Notice the difference between verse 19 and verse 20.

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

But God makes his appeal *through* us.

Jesus is God.

We are not.

God was in Christ – and he makes his appeal through us.

Too many preachers have forgotten that they are ambassadors of the King.

Our calling is to proclaim the message of King Jesus.

Our task is to teach the whole counsel of God –
to preach the gospel of the kingdom.

Jesus says that this is what you need to hear.

We’ll come back to this message next week –

since this forms the foundation for what Paul is doing in chapter 6 –
but the message of reconciliation begins with *Jesus* and what he did:

c. What You Need to Hear: The Message of Reconciliation (5:21-6:2)

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.*

Jesus entered our world – our cosmos.

God was in Christ – reconciling the world to himself.

How did he do this?

Well, when the word became flesh and tabernacled among us
he entered a world corrupted by sin.

And so God made Jesus to be sin.

Jesus was sinless – he “who knew no sin” was *made* sin.

Our sin was placed on Jesus.

This is why darkness fell at the cross –
as the sins of the world were not just “placed” on Jesus –
but God made him to be sin.

Gregory of Nazianzus put it this way:

“as for my sake he was called a curse who destroyed my curse,
and sin who takes away the sin of the world,
and became a new Adam to take the place of the old,
just so he makes my disobedience his own as head of the whole body” (in Guthrie, 314)

God imputed our sin to Jesus.

God judged Jesus guilty for our sin.

Why?

For our sake – so that in him we might become the righteousness of God!
Those two little words “in him” are so important!

In Christ we become the righteousness of God –
as God judges us righteous for Christ’s righteousness.

And we *implore* you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God!

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

*“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Remember that Paul is speaking to the church!

He’s not talking to unbelievers!

Why does he say “be reconciled to God”?

Why does he say “now is the day of salvation”?

Aren’t they already saved?

The message of the gospel never changes.

The message that you need to hear never changes.

Our salvation has a past tense, a present tense, and a future tense!

We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved!

The Corinthians were alienated from Paul and his colleagues.

And so Paul urges them to be reconciled to God – and thus to each other.

If you are alienated from your brothers in Christ,

and particularly, if you are alienated from your elders – from your pastors –
then it will not go well.
All you have to do is look at verses 3ff
and you can see that this is precisely where Paul goes next.

This is why we need to make sure that there is good communication between us.
It's one reason why I really enjoy our practice of regular elder visits.
It's why I like getting together with people throughout the week.