

Gospel Reconciliation is Paul's Commendation

2 Corinthians 5:12–21
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The richness of doctrine in today's text is staggering. Paul mentioned Jesus' federal headship in verse 14: when he died, we all died. Then there's the new creation in verse 17: each believer becomes a new creature in Jesus Christ. We could also translate this as, 'there is a new creation,' to emphasize not just an inward change for each believer but a change in all our relations. Verses 18 and 19 highlight the importance of reconciliation. And finally, verse 21 affirms a double imputation: God imputed our sin to Jesus so that he bore it as if it were his own, and Jesus' righteousness to us so that we're made righteous in him.

Yet, none of these wonderful truths is the main point of our text. Different translations of the Bible sometimes give titles to passages, which are often wrong. Today's text is a good example of this because the translations offer titles like "Be Reconciled to God" or "The Ministry of Reconciliation." But Paul's main point isn't reconciliation. It's his commendation to the gospel ministry, which he introduced in chapter 3, reinforced in the following chapters, and continued in our text.

Just look at what Paul wrote. He wrote in verse 11, *And I trust also are made manifest in your consciences.* He appealed to the testimony of the Corinthians to commend him. He continued in verse 12: *For we commend not ourselves again unto you, but give you occasion to glory on our behalf, that ye may have somewhat to answer them which glory in appearance, and not in heart.* Then he wrote emphatically in verse 20, *Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us.*

So, Paul's commendation is what I want to highlight today. As I do, we'll see how naturally Paul incorporated all these other precious truths into his argument.

The Corinthians' Commendation

Paul was reluctant to commend himself, understandably so since most people who toot their own horns don't really have much of a horn to toot. Instead, he invited the Corinthians to glory or boast on his behalf. He knew that his ministry among them could bear the scrutiny. Why? Because it was exactly what he described in the verses that follow.

It's also important to note that Paul wanted the Corinthians to boast about the right thing. The false teachers who opposed him and said all kinds of bad things about him boasted *in appearance*, just as the ancient Israelites chose Saul to be their king because he was taller and more attractive than others (1 Sam. 9:2). Now, I doubt that Paul's adversaries promoted their outward beauty. They were more interested in representing the world's values — things like self-reliance, money, power and prestige — which naturally appeal to sinners. As Paul wrote later, *For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ* (ch. 11:13). He wanted the Corinthians to glory *in heart*, i.e., to consider his faith and sincerity and what the Lord Jesus had done through him. These things identified what kind of servant he was.

No matter how the Corinthians evaluated Paul's ministry, as long as their criterion was the heart and not appearance, he came out far ahead of his adversaries. Verse 13 says, *For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause.*

This is a fascinating statement. On the surface, it seems to suggest that some people thought Paul was insane. If he was crazy, it was for the Lord. After all, he wrote in chapter 12 that he had been to the third heaven. Who but a crazy man would say such a thing? But Paul's sanity wasn't the issue here. When he wrote, *We be beside ourselves*, he used a verb that occurs frequently in the gospels to describe the people's reaction to Jesus' miracles. It's usually translated as 'wonder' or 'amazement.' Paul meant that he never ceased to be amazed at the glory of our Savior's redemption. And this was all his enjoyment of the Lord and his mercies.

Just this week, one of our members said something along these lines. She had recently changed how she does her private devotions, and she spoke of her sweet enjoyment of fellowship with God. What a wonderful way to put it!

Yes, we all need to be overwhelmed with the greatness of God's power, love and grace. Like Jeremiah, we should reflect on how the Lord so graciously provides for us every single day. He wrote, *This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD* (Lam. 3:21–26).

Paul was especially moved by the love of Christ, as he wrote in verse 14, *For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.* Dying for someone else is a big deal. It's an even bigger deal when someone dies for us because we've sinned. But what makes the gospel so amazing is that the one who died for our sins is the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Doesn't this make us humble and, at the same time, fill us with great joy

and delight? How can it be? And the Lord had a purpose for us in it. According to verse 15, his purpose was to teach us to live to Jesus and thus show all the world what his precious death and resurrection accomplished for us. Verse 15 says, *And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.*

We don't need to see Jesus physically for this to be true. It's not his bodily presence that transforms us into what we need to be. Rather, it's the power of his work as the second Adam, undoing the curse and making all things new — not just us, but everything in our lives — to bring glory and honor to his holy name. Paul wrote, *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

Thus, in the fifth chapter of Revelation, the whole creation joins in the praise of Jesus Christ. It starts with the four living creatures and the elders saying, *Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing* (Rev. 5:12). Then every creature took part, saying, *Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever* (v. 13). And of course, the day is still coming in which every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11).

The Message of Reconciliation

So, what is it that commended Paul's ministry? What commends the work of any faithful pastor? We can summarize the right answer with just one word: reconciliation. Sinners need to be reconciled to God. This is the gospel ministry.

What is reconciliation? Too many people define it as two estranged parties putting aside their differences and embracing peace. But this isn't the Biblical idea of reconciliation at all. In the Bible, God and man are not simply estranged over a difference of opinion. Man offended God by disobeying his commandments. In the garden, we walked away from his love and favor. We chose to rebel against him. We can't just set it aside, and neither will the Lord. Reconciliation is not putting aside our differences, but dealing with our sin through satisfaction. Sin must be punished; justice must be meted out. Reconciliation can occur only when this happens.

To see how this works, it's helpful to look at the exact wording of our text. Note the following:

- Verse 18 says that God *reconciled us*. The offended party reached out to the offending party. He dealt with our sins. Apart from his work, we would never have taken even the first step. Verse 19 says the same thing: *God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.*

- Verse 18 also says, *To himself*. I cannot overemphasize the importance of these words. We are always reconciled to God. The offender (us) must be reconciled to the one he offended (God). God is never reconciled to us. He never offended us.
- Reconciliation is so much at the heart of the gospel that verse 18 calls gospel ministry *the ministry of reconciliation*, and verse 19 identifies the gospel as *the word of reconciliation*. And our response to the message of God's reconciliation, according to verse 20, is to be reconciled to God. Yet, even here Paul didn't say, 'Reconcile yourselves to God.' He said, *Be ye reconciled to God*. Reconciliation is something God does to us and for us. We're completely passive.
- And most important of all, God reconciled us to himself at the expense of his Son Jesus Christ. Reconciliation without Jesus and his shed blood isn't reconciliation at all. It's just a myth, a fable, a vaguely familiar fantasy. That's why J. Gresham Machen, founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, insisted that liberalism, with its intense hatred of blood atonement, is a different religion than Biblical Christianity. Look at how Paul kept his attention on Jesus in our text. He wrote in verse 18 that God reconciled us to himself *by Jesus Christ*. Verse 19 says that he was *in Christ*, reconciling the world to himself. And in verse 20, he added, *We pray you in Christ's stead, be reconciled to God*.

Jesus' blood covered the offense, and his imputed righteousness restored us to God's favor. The Lord didn't impute our trespasses to us, as Paul wrote in verse 19. He doesn't hold our sins against us. But how can this be? How can a holy God not punish sinners? He can't overlook our sins as if they never happened, so he imputed them to Jesus instead. He held the eternal, spotless Lamb of God responsible for our transgressions, so that, when Jesus went to the cross, he died not only for us but in our place, as if he had done all the awful things we've done. And in place of our sin, he credits us with Jesus' perfect obedience. This is a gloriously divine transaction. Verse 21 says, *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*.

Some commentators find only one imputation here. They admit that the first half of verse 21 teaches that our sins were imputed to Jesus, but they deny that the second half teaches that Jesus' righteousness has been imputed to us. It's not about justification — the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to believers — but sanctification — our progressive growth in practical holiness. They prefer this because Paul says that we're *made* God's righteousness in him, not merely credited with God's righteousness.

I couldn't disagree more. The tense of the verb *made* doesn't suggest progressive development but an all-inclusive act. This is justification, not sanctification. And further, the word *made* doesn't have to denote what we become in ourselves; it can also designate what we are in

God's eyes. It's about what God sees when he looks at us. He doesn't see people who have lied, stolen and killed. He sees reconciled children, clothed in the perfect obedience of his only begotten Son.

Paul didn't need to commend himself. Letters of approval from powerful men weren't necessary. His message of gospel reconciliation said it all.

But what was Paul's message for you? As we continue our study of 2 Corinthians, we'll see that the same gospel that commended him as an apostle of Jesus Christ also commends the faith of God's people. We don't need the world's approval because we have God's approval in the gospel of his Son. The world may laugh at us when we don't buy its bogus science (things like evolution and transgender theory). It may persecute us because we don't embrace its twisted ideas of right and wrong. But it doesn't matter. We have the Word of God, who, as the creator of all things, knows what everything is. He knows what we are. We have a Savior, who reconciled us to his Father by the blood of the cross. We have real peace, while the world has only a weak and temporary substitute, a mere shadow.

Why would we want any other commendation than the one we already have? We shouldn't. We have everything we need from the God who loved us and gave us life in his Son. Amen.