

VIII. The Ministry of Reconciliation

December 16/17/18, 2014

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

Aim: To understand that through the double imputation of Christ, He has reconciled us to Himself and made us a new creation.

A. The Motivation for Ministry (2 Corinthians 5:11-15)

Paul here refers to two motives we might have thought to be mutually exclusive. In verse 11, he writes of the fear of the Lord and in verse 14 of the love of Christ. Both of these exercised motivation power in his service for Christ. How, though, we ask, can these two emotions or attitudes co-exist? If they do, this does not seem consistent with what John says in his First Epistle: ‘There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love’ (1 Jn. 4:18). When we encounter this kind of apparent contradiction, we usually find that a word or phrase is used in two different senses, so that the conflict is more apparent than real. The fear mentioned in our passage must be a different type from John has in mind.

How is it possible to be motivated by the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ? Are not fear and love irreconcilable? It all depends on a proper understanding of fear and love, which it should be noted, are not opposites. The opposite of love is hate. In the Bible ‘fear’ is not cringing terror but holy reverence, and ‘love’ is not romantic feelings but sacrificial care. The two words are consistent and reconcilable. Indeed, the fear of the Lord and awareness of the love of Christ fit perfectly together to provide the true motivation for Christian ministry.

1. The Fear of the Lord (5:11-13)

By these few words Paul gently reminds the Corinthians of his work as an evangelist and pastor so that they may indeed be proud of him and have something to say to his detractors.

a) *Reverence for the Lord (5:11)*

¹¹*Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.*

(1) Fear

It isn’t that Paul was terrified or afraid, as we commonly use the word ‘fear,’ but rather that he was awed by the thought of standing before a Being so holy, so morally superior, so removed from evil that in His presence all human boasting, all human pride, and all human arrogance would vanish as he stands in speechless humility before the One beyond human understand and with trembling lips gives full account of himself. This fear of the Lord drove Paul to ‘persuade others’—that is, to persuade the Corinthians of his gospel and the integrity of his person as an apostle. In theological terms, eschatological fear motivated Paul to carry out his calling.

The ‘fear’ Paul refers to is a reverential awe, the feeling you would have towards somebody you both love and respect and to whom you are accountable. In fact it suggests the kind of attitude a child would have to his or her father within a good family. In such a situation, it is not so much a child’s fear of punishment that is the dominant emotion, but a fear of hurting somebody he or she loves.

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The thought of judgment immediately creates a sense of awe and reverence. The judgment our Savior will execute is divine judgment, and we know that it is awesome and perfect. True knowledge therefore prompts us to behave seriously. Our highest wisdom is to live our life now with an eye to that future judgment, and that will make us aware of our responsibility for the souls of all those close to us and around us.

If the object of ‘persuading men’ was to be ‘reconciled to God’ (v. 20), his motive for doing so was ‘the fear of the Lord,’ the fear, as the previous verse stated, that ‘we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.’ While fear is not the highest motive for behavior, it is, nevertheless, a valid motive. That ‘we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ’ is also an objective reality. It is one that motivates us to exercise our ministries so that on the one hand we are commended, and, on the other, those to whom we speak are not condemned.

To ‘fear’ God is to have reverence, awe, and respect for Him resulting in worship, adoration, and service. Paul was deeply disturbed that someone might think he misrepresented the Lord whom he intensely loved and reverently served. He was appalled to be viewed by some as dishonoring the name of Jesus Christ (cp. Rom. 2:24). Nor could he remain silent while he was falsely accused of dishonoring Him, for such slander would render his ministry useless and unfruitful. Therefore, he was obligated to defend his integrity, though he did so with humble reluctance (cp. 10:12-18).

(2) Persuade - Evangelism

Paul’s choice of the word ‘persuade’ is revealing, because Paul was aware that it connoted the persuasive techniques of Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition that he outright rejected in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Nevertheless, he used the word ‘persuade’ in 2 Corinthians 5:11 to describe what he did in response to the tremulous prospect of the judgment seat of Christ. Thus we see that while Paul rejects the persuasive techniques of the rhetoricians, he does not reject the need to persuade.

Evangelism is not something to be engaged in without feeling and passion. In sharing the gospel, we deal with the basic issue of life or death, of eternal salvation or eternal condemnation. Evangelism inevitably contains therefore an important element of persuasion. Persuasion, however, must be done with integrity. We will not engage in the persuasion we may occasionally encounter of a crafty telephone or door-to-door sales person. Paul renounced such approaches (4:2).

Persuasion implies using truth to move the will, and this is what real Christian preaching is. True preaching does not try to bombard the will by stirring emotion through psychological techniques. Instead it presents compelling truth and convincing arguments. It is truth that moves us most deeply to action, and depth is of supreme importance here, for without it there can be no real change of character.

(3) Persuade – Integrity

The key to understanding this passage lies in the meaning of the verb *peithō* (‘persuade’). Some commentators believe that it refers to persuading people of the truth of the gospel, as it does in Acts 17:4; 18:4; 19:8, 26; 26:28; and 28:23-24. But the gospel is not the issue in 2 Corinthians; this is not primarily an evangelistic epistle. Paul was not trying to persuade the Corinthian believers of the truth of the gospel, but rather of the truth of his integrity. Therefore, *peithō*

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could be better rendered ‘seek the favor of,’ as in Galatians 1:10. Paul sought a favorable judgment from the Corinthians on his integrity.

(4) Known

Though the Corinthians may have questioned it, Paul’s true spiritual condition was already ‘made manifest to God;’ his sincerity, honesty, and genuineness were perfectly evident to Him. It was Paul’s hope that his integrity would be ‘made manifest also in’ the Corinthians’ ‘consciences,’ as it was in his. The choice the Corinthians faced was simple: were they going to listen to the testimony of their consciences or to the lies of Paul’s critics? Their consciences were well informed; they knew of his godly life and impeccable moral character because he had ministered daily among them for at least eighteen months (Acts 18:11). That firsthand observation should have left no doubts regarding Paul’s integrity.

Paul knew, of course, that he didn’t have to persuade God, so he immediately says, ‘But what we are is known to God.’ Paul’s character has been and still is laid bare to God, and remains so. But Paul’s character was held in low regard by those Corinthians who had been poisoned by the slurs of Paul’s enemies regarding his integrity and qualifications. Hence Paul’s additional comment, ‘and I hope it is known also to your conscience.’ Deep down the Corinthians were aware of the character of Paul’s ministry from when he was with them and how he proclaimed not himself but Christ as Lord and himself their servant (cp. 4:5).

Whatever his readers or others thought, Paul knew that God knows the truth about us, and godliness concerns itself with His evaluation rather than human opinions. To fear God is to reverence Him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and to aim to please Him above all other goals. To know the fear of God is to be committed to the spread of the good news.

b) *Concern for the Church (5:12)*

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.*

Not only did Paul defend himself for God’s sake but also for the church’s sake. He knew that the false accusations against him, if left unchallenged, could devastate the church. If enough of the Corinthians believed the false teachers’ lies about him, the congregation could split into pro-Paul and anti-Paul factions. The assaults on Paul’s integrity threatened not only to split the church but also to stunt its spiritual growth. He was the channel through which God’s revelation came to them, and if the Corinthians lost their trust in him, that apostolic source would be rejected. Worse, it would be replaced by the demon doctrine of the false teachers. The result would be devastating evangelically.

Paul repeated the disclaimer he made earlier in this epistle (3:1). He was not trying to vindicate himself for his sake, but for theirs. Paul’s repeated declarations that he was not commending himself suggests, as noted earlier, that he had been accused of doing just that. The false apostles wrongly accused Paul of blowing his own horn, of boosting his own ego, of advancing his own selfish agenda. They were doing so in his absence and likely did so during his sorrowful or painful visit to Corinth (2:1).

Rather than commend himself to his enemies, Paul wisely chose instead to arm his friends to defend him. He knew that replying directly to his enemies was pointless; they would twist his words to fit their own evil purposes (cp. Prov. 26:4; 29:9). Therefore it was more effective for

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him to equip his supporters at Corinth so that they would ‘have an answer for his detractors (Prov. 27:2). By doing so, Paul also gave them ‘an occasion’ or opportunity ‘to be proud of’ him. *Kauchēma* (‘proud’) can refer to improper, sinful boasting (Rom. 4:2; 1 Cor. 5:6), but here it refers to their confidence in his spiritual integrity (1:14; 9:3; Gal. 6:4; Phil. 1:26; 2:16; Heb. 3:6).

Expressing himself like this, Paul was aware that his detractors would probably accuse him of boasting in the dubious manner of the Greek rhetoricians. So he covered himself (v. 12). Paul’s words here are tinged with irony. His enemies, he said, boasted ‘about outward appearance’ (literally, ‘in the face’ and not in the heart), a conscious reference to God’s advice to Samuel in choosing David over Saul: ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance [LXX, ‘face’], but the LORD looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Paul’s opponents *boasted in the face*—the sheer externalities of oratorical appearance, rhetorical eloquence, extravagant commendatory letters, rich honoraria, and impressive display. In contrast, Paul says, ‘I’ll give you cause to boast about me—the heart, not the face.’ For Paul, what was important is what is written in the heart by God’s Spirit, for in the heart are the distinctives of the new covenant (cp. 3:3, 6; Jer. 31:31-34; Ex. 36:26-27).

Paul’s allusion to ‘those who take pride’ brings the newcomers into focus once more. In what do they take pride? It ‘is in what is seen,’ their position (literally ‘face,’ *prosōpon*). Paul’s critics at Corinth were superficial in their judgments. They looked at the outward appearance (cp. 1 Sam. 16:7). This in itself suggests that there may have been a Pharisaic element in their outlook. Those who thoroughly accept Paul’s integrity, however, have answers to their criticisms, and Paul’s point is that to give these answers will actually support not only the messenger, but also the message.

Turning the tables on his accusers, Paul denounced them as ‘those who take pride in appearance and not in heart.’ Because their outward religious appearance did not match the corruption that was in their hearts, they, not Paul, were the hypocrites lacking integrity.

The whole point of this is not to establish the messengers as paragons of virtue. Rather, his concern is to undergird the credibility of the message by the reliability of its human vehicles. The Corinthians need to be able to say something in defense of Paul. It would be helpful if there were some quality or achievement about which they might express confidence in him. The ‘opportunity’ for which they should ‘take pride in’ Paul, he tells them, is that he ‘persuades men’ (v. 11), that is, he engages in evangelism (v. 20). It is the ‘ministry’ therefore, and his faithfulness of it, which are to be the basis of Corinthian confidence in Paul.

c) Devotion to the Truth (5:13)

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

(1) Mental Imbalance?

What does verse 13 mean? It is fairly obvious that Paul is still thinking of his critics in Corinth. For some reason or other, they had accused him of being mentally unbalanced. What he is saying is that his true motives are for the glory of God and for the salvation of people. If that is labeled ‘mad,’ perhaps the critics should look again at the criteria they use for judging madness and sanity.

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Existēmi, the root of the verb translated ‘we are beside ourselves,’ is used in Mark 3:21 to describe Jesus’ relatives’ mistaken belief that He had ‘lost His senses.’ The verb literally means ‘to stand outside of oneself,’ or ‘to be beside oneself’ in the sense of being ‘out of one’s mind.’ Such was Paul’s passionate devotion to the truth that his enemies deemed him fanatical to the point of being imbalanced mentally. Incredibly, instead of being rejected outright, those false and outrageous allegations generated a debate in the Corinthian church with those who insisted he was ‘of sound mind.’ That term means to be sane, sensible, and in control of one’s faculties.

(2) Spiritual Experience?

Whereas Paul’s critics gave great credence to ecstatic experience as validating ministry, Paul did not (cp. 1 Cor. 14:8-9). For Paul, the mark of authentic ministry was not ecstatic experience but public ministry in his ‘right mind’—in essence the passionate, sober, Biblical style with which he persuaded others.

Paul associates the newcomer’s pride in the seen as being ‘out of’ their ‘mind’ (v. 13), a reference to their ecstatic behavior. It seems that the new ministers were seeking recognition on the basis of bizarre religious trances or gibberish, doubtless as a sign of their inspiration by God.

Surely Paul too, by his tongues-speaking, was trying to legitimize his ministry by means of position or ‘appearance’ – the very thing he complains the newcomers are doing. Paul’s reply is that his glossolalia is something private; it is ‘for God’ alone, presumably as an expression of personal devotion. It is not done to support his apostolic claims. ‘For you,’ however, he tells the Corinthians, ‘we are in our right mind’ (or ‘self-controlled’).

Paul’s healthy fear of the judgment seat of Christ induced him to place the public persuasion of people far above the pursuit of personal ecstasies. Knowing the fear of the Lord, Paul’s consuming passion was to persuade others through the Scriptures about the truth of the gospel and the authenticity of his ministry, as they were inseparable. He did not need to persuade God, as God knew his heart and, likewise, the Corinthians would know it if they listened to their consciences. Paul argued his case so that the Corinthians would have a basis to boast about his apostolic heart.

2. The Love of Christ (5:14-15)

a) *We Died in Christ (5:14)*

¹⁴*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;*

What does Paul mean by the expression ‘the love of Christ’? Does he mean Christ’s love for him or his for Christ? Either is a possible way of understanding the phrase he uses (cp. Rom. 5:5). We may argue from the parallel with ‘the fear of the Lord’ (v. 11) that it is our love for Christ which is in view here. On the other hand, the words in vv. 14-15 that follow the reference to the love of Christ are really all about Christ’s love for us, so that this is what we should probably emphasize. It is Christ’s love for us that evokes from us a responsive love (1 Jn. 4:19).

While Paul’s love for his Lord certainly compelled him, the phrase ‘the love of Christ’ is best seen in this context as Christ’s love for Paul—a love most clearly seen in His sacrificial death, which is the subsequent theme. It was that magnanimous, free, unmerited love that controlled, drove, and motivated Paul to defend himself.

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Fear of Christ had motivated Paul, and now Christ's love for Paul completes the motivation. Here Paul speaks of Christ's love as a controlling force. Love controls us—that is to say, it holds us within bounds or hems us in. Just as our fear of Christ controls us, so likewise the unspeakable love of Christ positively controls us. The overpowering love of Christ, demonstrated when He died on the cross for us, controls us and calls forth a mighty response. This is what so mightily drove Paul in his epic missionary endeavors.

Christ's incomprehensible, unbreakable, unconditional love overwhelmed Paul. More than that, it controlled him. *Sunechō* ('controls') describes pressure that produces action. The magnitude of Christ's love for believers like Paul compelled him to serve Him wholeheartedly, as an act of grateful worship.

Paul tells us he is so controlled by Christ's love that there is no other course of action open to him but to pursue his ministry. It is worth noting that prior to the Damascus Road event the compelling force in his life had been murderous bigotry (Acts 9:1; cp. Gal. 1:13). Now love has taken the place of hate at the center of his being.

No matter what the opposition or physical difficulties, the early missionaries found themselves driven to fulfill his commission by the power of their Savior's love. They were sure of His love for them and His love for those with whom they shared the good news. The love of the Lord Jesus Christ is a rich treasure we both know and yet recognize is beyond our knowledge because it is so vast and immeasurable.

Christ was the representative of all when He died. The death that He died on the cross was in itself the death of all. Since Christ was the representative of all, therefore all may have been said to have died there on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem when Christ died. Christ died our death, so we died! What unmitigated love!

How did Paul know that he was the object of Christ's love? It was, he continues, 'because ... one died for all.' His words, 'we are convinced,' indicate that a point was reached when he reverse his opinions. So far from viewing Christ as an object of hate because of his accursed heretic's death on a tree, Paul concluded, instead, that he, Paul, was the object of Christ's love. Why did Paul change his mind? Clearly it was the Damascus Road event, in which the despised crucified one, now enveloped in glory, spoke to the prostrate Paul.

Paul understood how widespread the effects and consequences of that single death of the Lord Jesus. He knew it was for the innumerable company of those who would enjoy the benefits of His eternal redemption.

b) We Live for Christ (5:15)

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.*

The marvelous miracle of salvation includes not only believers' union with Christ in His death, but also in His resurrection (cp. Rom. 6:4-11; Gal. 2:19-20; Col. 3:3). This, in Christ believers experience not only death to sin but also resurrection to righteousness. As a result, they are 'no longer' to 'live for themselves.'

Humbled by Christ's love, Paul and those who walk in his revolutionary footsteps 'no longer live for themselves.' The fact that Christ in love died *our* death keeps us from living for ourselves, just as it did Paul, so that we are graciously hemmed in by Christ's love. But gloriously, we're

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not hemmed in so that we can do nothing at all, but rather so we can do things that are more worthwhile. We are kept from doing evil things so that we might do good things. We are kept from doing things that bring death, so that we might do things that bring life. There is nothing constricted here. This is freedom. Indeed, it is the path to new freedoms and unfolding joys.

Because they died not literally but in a substitute, paradoxically they have life still, but the death of Christ makes all the difference in the world to the style of that life, for they now feel deep gratitude towards him, so that they want to live for him. Paul is rending his readers that God had shown His acceptance of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sins by raising Him out of death. This divine vindication is so important because without it the cross could be seriously misunderstood.

Fundamental to the convictions that motivated the apostles and early missionaries was the substitutionary death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death was the reason for everything that they did. Their lives, like the lives of all Christians, were built upon the sold truth that Jesus died for us and was raised again. As a consequence they knew that they could no longer live for themselves, but rather had to live for His sake with a sense of profound indebtedness and gratitude. There is a 'no longer' element about every genuine Christian life. We can no longer live for ourselves, but we must live for Him – not grudgingly, but with a deep sense of privilege.

c) *Who Are 'All'?*

(1) Arminian View (Barnett)

The 'all' for whom He died are the sum total of individuals, like Paul, whom He loved. The universal scope of Christ's love and Christ's death is seen not only in the words 'one died for all' but also in the enigmatic corollary 'therefore all died.' The 'all' in both parts of the sentence is clearly to emphasize the universal, inclusive nature of Christ's death; none is excluded from the sphere of God's saving purposes in Christ. Paul ministered to 'all' because Christ loved all and died for all. Christ's death for 'all,' however, was for the definite purpose 'that those' to whom Paul spoke and who were still alive 'should no longer live for themselves but for' Christ. Christ's death, in other words, was intended to procure their 'death' – their 'death,' that is, to *self-centered* living. The words 'therefore all died' state the universal scope of His saving death, but also give expression to the strong purpose that the death of Jesus should procure death to self.

This way of explaining verses 14-15 will not please all Christians. Universalists, for instance, believe that Christ died 'for all' in the sense that all will be saved automatically and that none will be condemned. Paul, however, teaches that it is 'in Christ' that we become 'the righteousness of God' (v. 21). Reconciliation is available to all, but each must personally receive it.

'Particular redemptionists,' by contrast, believe that Christ died only for the elect, and that the saving benefits of the atonement are limited to them. To hold this view it is necessary to make the words 'all' and 'world' mean significantly less than they do at face reading. Moreover, it is to ignore Paul's way of referring to the death of Christ now inclusively, now exclusively. For example, on the one hand he wrote 'one died for *all*' (v. 14) and, on the other, 'God reconciled *us* to Himself through Christ' (v. 18). In response to the doctrine of particular redemption, we may say that although the death of Christ is sufficient for all people it is efficient only for those who believe Him. The *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) helpfully states that on the cross Jesus Christ made 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and sanctification for the sins of

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the whole world.’ To limit or qualify this statement is to diminish the person and the work of the Son of God.

(2) Reformed View (MacArthur)

The preposition *huper* (‘for’) could be translated ‘in behalf of,’ or ‘for the benefit of,’ but the best rendering seems to be ‘in the place of.’ It introduces the essential and irreplaceable truth of the substitutionary atonement; that is, that Christ died in the place of ‘all’ who put their faith in Him. The substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is the heart of Christian theology, but it is crucial to understand the identity of the ‘all’ for whom Christ died.

The phrase ‘one died for all,’ if it stood alone, could imply that Christ died for every person who ever lived. But Paul clarified his meaning by adding the phrase ‘therefore all died.’ He did not say, ‘all were dead,’ which would have described every sinner who ever lived, since all are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1). He was not talking about a condition, however, but an event—believers’ union with Christ in His death. Together, the two phrases define the ‘all’ for whom Christ died as the ‘all’ who ‘died’ in Him (cp. Rom. 6:1-4) through faith in Him (Rom. 3:24-26). Just as all who are in Adam (the whole race) became sinners because of his sin, so also all who are in Christ (those who believe savingly) become righteous because of His death (Rom 5:19; 1 Cor. 15:21-22). The atonement is only substitutionary for those who by grace through faith died in Christ. If Christ died as a substitute for the whole human race, then every person who ever lived would be saved, because their sins would be paid for and divine justice satisfied. But that clearly is not the case, since most people will reject God’s salvation and be sent by Him to pay for their sins for eternity in hell.

B. The Message of Ministry (2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2)

1. Regeneration (5:16-17)

Twice in verses 15-16 the apostle uses the words ‘no longer.’ This means that for the person who is now ‘in Christ’ through the ministry of reconciliation certain things are no longer true. Such a person no longer lives for self (v. 15), no longer regards Christ from a purely ‘worldly point of view’ (v. 16). These things, which are no longer true, belong to the *old* which has gone, replaced by the *new creation* which has now come.

a) Old Regard (5:16)

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.*

Verses 16-17 define when Paul’s burden for the lost began. The conjunction *hōste* (‘therefore’) points back to verses 14-15, which describe salvation. After his conversion, the way Paul viewed people changed radically. From then on, he did not ‘recognize’ (*oida*, lit. ‘know’ or ‘perceive’) anyone ‘according to the flesh;’ he no longer evaluated people based on external, worldly standards, as the false teachers did (cp. 5:12; Gal. 6:12). The proud Pharisee, who once scorned Gentiles, and even those Jews outside of his group (cp. Jn. 7:49), now looked beyond mere outward appearances. His prejudice and hatred gave way to a love for all.

Not only did Paul’s view of people change but also his view of Christ. He had once known him ‘according to the flesh;’ he had made a human assessment of Him, concluding that He was merely a man. Worse, he had decided Jesus was a false messiah; a heretic and a rebel against

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Judaism, one worthy of death. Yet, after his conversion Paul knew ‘Him in this way no longer.’ The assessment of Paul the apostle was radically different than that of Saul the Pharisee.

In writing ‘we once regarded Christ from a worldly point of view’ (literally, ‘according to the flesh’), Paul is, at the same time, referring both to the newcomers and to himself. The Christ proclaimed by the intruding ministers was, apparently, entirely circumscribed within the covenant of Moses – a Jewish, law-keeping Jesus. Their high view of Moses (3:12-15) necessitated a low view of Jesus. Before the Damascus Road event, Paul’s knowledge of Jesus had also been ‘according to the flesh,’ not in the sense of having known the historical Jesus, but of having a false and superficial view of him. Paul’s stern opposition to the new ministers arose out of his conviction that Christianity stood or fell depending on one’s view of the person and work of Jesus.

‘From a worldly point of view’ is literally, ‘according to the flesh,’ and Paul uses this expression both of people generally and of Christ in particular in verse 16. What does he mean? It can hardly have any other sense than ‘from a worldly point of view.’ So then Paul is saying that he had entirely misjudged Jesus prior to his conversion. There can be no doubt at all that before his conversion Paul would never have accepted the idea that somebody who claimed to be the Messiah was really who he claimed to be if that person had been crucified (cp. Dt. 21:22-23). Now, however, Paul could see clearly that this death was endured by Christ for others and not for himself, for, as Paul’s language in the preceding verses shows, he sees that it was the bearing of God’s penalty for sins. Christ could not have died because of His own sins, for He had none.

What is it to regard somebody from a worldly point of view? It may take a number of different forms. I may perhaps think about that person in terms of his or her status or bank balance or gifts or personality. These things are often treated as very important in the eyes of the world, but they are of little account when it comes to God’s estimate of a person.’

When we understand the new covenant, we do not assess people any more by what they look like or by what they possess. Paul mentions in passing that this was the reason he and his fellow Jews got it all wrong when they looked at Jesus, the Messiah, in a purely human way. When it comes to the new birth and entry into the new covenant, it does not matter whether we are Jews or Gentiles, black or white, rich or poor.

So we have Paul’s piercing declaration of *gospel disregard* (that is, the disregard of superficial evaluation that stems from our death in Christ on the cross). Because of the gospel, Paul and all believers are to be done with their shallow, external, carnal regard of Christ and others—and especially those who are of the household of faith. Paul’s declaration collides with the spirit of our age, a spirit that revels in superficial, fleshly regard. Looks, externals, dominate our existence. As Christians we must be done with carnal distinctions.

b) New Creation (5:17)

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

Paul has urged on us the proper disregard that flows from the gospel due to the Christian’s death in Christ. Now he declares how we ought to regard those who have died in Christ. Here is the biography of *every* Christian!

‘Therefore,’ in a conclusion also derived from verse 15, Paul wrote, ‘if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.’ God’s grace and mercy are wide enough to encompass anyone, even the most

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vile, wicked sinner—even the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15-16). The familiar Pauline expression ‘in Christ’ succinctly and profoundly summarizes all the rich blessings of salvation (cp. Rom. 8:1; 16:3, 7; 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; 4:21; Col. 1:2, 28; Phm. 23).

Becoming a Christian is here defined as being ‘in Christ.’ As God brings us to repentance and faith in His Son through the gospel, He performs the work of new birth in us by His Spirit. We are united spiritually to Jesus Christ, so that all that He accomplished by His death and resurrection becomes ours. We receive the forgiveness of our sins and a new start.

To be a Christian was, for Paul, to be ‘in Christ,’ in vital spiritual union with Him. The vividness of this passage makes it seem that Paul is standing once more, in his imagination, on the road to Damascus. Here again then he is probably recalling that his eyes had been temporarily blinded but new light had come into his soul. The old world had gone, a new world had come. It is not really the world that has changed, of course, but Paul himself. He is a new person with a new outlook.

The apostle’s use of the vocabulary of the creation narratives of Genesis is striking. It is implied that unbelievers (as Paul had been), are blind (4:4) and live in a darkness analogous to the primal darkness of the first verses of the book of Genesis. Just as God spoke then, and there was light (Gen. 1:3), so too God now speaks the gospel-word and once again there is light, though it is inward within the heart (4:6). As by the agency of the word of God the world was made (2 Pe. 3:5), so now, by the word of God, the message of reconciliation, people are remade. Paul not only affirms that there is a ‘new covenant’ (3:6), there is also a ‘new creation.’

Kainos (‘new’) means new in quality, not just in sequence. The transformation wrought by the new birth is not only an instantaneous miracle, but also a lifelong process of sanctification. Old values, ideas, plans, loves, desires, and beliefs vanish, replaced by the ‘new things’ that accompany salvation. The perfect tense of the verb *ginomai* (‘have come’) indicates a past act with continuing results in the present. God plants new desires, loves, inclinations, and truths in the redeemed, so that they live in the midst of the old creation with a new creation perspective (cp. Gal. 6:14).

The jubilation flows from that fact that the old has passed away permanently and that the new has come to stay and will continue to be new. The passing of the *old* and the coming of the *new* is meant by Paul to call to mind the old and new covenants that Paul described earlier in 3:6. The new that has come therefore rides on the new-covenant blessings of Jeremiah 31—namely, a new *obedience*, the Law written on their hearts; a new *relationship*, God would be their God and they His people; a new *knowledge* they would all know Him; and a new *forgiveness*, for God would remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

We should note what is not said about the new creation. It does not mean ‘living happily ever after’ or a trouble-free existence. The new creation in no way immunizes people from life’s problems or pain. For both mankind at large and individuals in particular, the full force of the ‘new creation’ will not be experienced or seen until the end of history, at the return of Jesus in glory. Meanwhile, since sin and its outworkings have not yet been abolished, everyone will continue to undergo, in varying degrees, difficulty and hardship – including those in whom the new creation has begun.

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2. Reconciliation (5:18-21)

a) Ministry of Reconciliation (5:18)

¹⁸*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;*

‘All this,’ writes Paul – referring to his now love-controlled life, his service of the crucified and risen Christ, his radical insight into his identity – ‘all this,’ summed up as a new creation, ‘is from God.’ These things, the subjective or conscious results of being reconciled to God, flow from the being of God into our hearts and minds through the word of reconciliation. There can be no possible doubt that the Source of this great change was God Himself. Only God could bring the original creation into being, and only God can effect a new creation.

The phrase ‘all these things’ points back to the immediately preceding section of this epistle, which described the total transformation taking place at conversion (vv. 14-17). ‘All these things,’ that is, those related to the transformation, come ‘from God;’ sinners cannot be reconciled to Him on their own terms. Unregenerate people have no ability to appease God’s anger against sin, satisfy His holy justice, or conform to His standard of righteousness. The deadly, deceptive premise of all false religion is that sinners, based on their own moral and religious efforts and achievements, can reconcile themselves to God. But God alone designed the way of reconciliation, and only He can initiate the recognition of sinners; that ‘God...reconciled us to Himself’ is precisely the good news of the gospel.

The whole movement towards man in his need is ‘from God.’ Certainly God works through human emotions and the circumstances of life as well as by means of human agents. Yet the initiative, the momentum, and the purpose are all ‘from God.’ Reconciliation is God’s unassisted work.

Both the verb *katallassō* (‘reconciled’) and the noun *katallagē* (‘reconciliation’) appear in the New Testament only in Paul’s writings (cp. Rom. 5:11; Eph. 2:13-16; Col. 1:20-22). The terms always portray God as the reconciler and sinners as the ones being reconciled. It was human sin that ruptured the relationship between God and man. Thus, reconciliation is not something man does but what he receives; it is not what he accomplishes but what he embraces. Reconciliation does not happen when man decides to stop rejecting God but when God’s holy displeasure against alienated sinners is appeased, His hostility against them removed, and a harmonious relationship between Him and them established. Reconciliation occurs because God was graciously willing to design a way to have all the sins of those who are His removed from them.

That God ‘reconciled us to Himself’ implies that we were alienated from Him. But what is alienation? Alienation may be defined as the absence of trust and respect between persons. Alienation implies enmity, division, and the loss of communication. In writing that God ‘reconciled us to Himself,’ Paul is teaching that it is God who is the aggrieved party and that man is the cause of the alienation. The reference in context to ‘sins’ (v. 19) and to ‘sin’ (v. 21) make it clear that these are the source of the estrangement between man and God (cp. Is. 59:2). We may say that God takes man’s sin personally (cp. Gen. 6:5-6).

Moreover, it is God who personally takes the initiative to reconcile man to Himself. In the world of human alienation it is usually a third party who seeks to reconcile the alienated – a marriage counselor where husband and wife are estranged or an impartial conciliator in the event of an industrial dispute. But in this case, it is the wronged party, God, who initiates the action.

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In the most magnanimous expression of sacrificial love the universe will ever know, God reconciled believers to Himself ‘through Christ;’ that is, at His expense. God the Son’s perfect sacrifice is the only one that could satisfy the demands of God the Father’s holy justice. And it is to all reconciled people that God gives ‘the ministry of reconciliation.’ This is equal to the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) and all calls to proclaim the gospel. *Diakonia* (‘ministry’) denotes humble service, such as serving meals (cp. Lk. 10:40; Acts 6:1). But though the messengers may be humble, the message they proclaim to the lost world is the most exalted one ever proclaimed.

b) *Message of Reconciliation (5:19)*

¹⁹...*that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

The phrase ‘*hōs hoti* (‘namely’) introduces Paul’s explanation of how ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.’ The phrase ‘in Christ,’ along with the phrase ‘through Christ’ in verse 18, identifies the Son of God as the agent of reconciliation. The phrase ‘in Christ’ identifies the way that agency operates—by union between the believer and the Savior. The phrase ‘not counting their trespasses against them’ reveals the means of reconciliation—the forgiveness of sins. Only by having the guilt of sin forgiven can sinners be reconciled to God, sin it is sin that separates them eternally from Him.

Reconciliation, in essence, means that God, through Christ, does not impute our trespasses any longer to us. The opposite of His counting our sins to us, as we deserve, is His blotting out our sins. Reconciliation is not something we do—it is something God has accomplished. The ministry of reconciliation is not telling people to make peace with God, but telling them that God has made peace with the world (cp. Rom. 5:10-11). We are not called to make peace with God—that is God’s work! The method of reconciliation is reckoning, God ‘not counting their trespasses against them.’ There is a reckoning of sins. But they are reckoned not to the sinner, but to Christ.

While God’s reconciling of man to Himself is expressed in the forgiveness of which this verse speaks, there is, in fact, more that must be said. While God is merciful and forgiving by nature, He is, at the same time, the Holy One who cannot simply say of evil, ‘It doesn’t matter; let’s forgive and forget.’ Because we humans are compromised by our own sins, we may say that. But God, because He is God, cannot. Therefore the statement that God does not count our sins against us is incomplete. Atonement, a means of removing sin from God’s sight, is necessary as a prerequisite to forgiveness. That is why the waiting father’s forgiveness of the wayward son in the famous parable (Lk. 15:11-32) is only part of the gospel. What must be added is what Paul now adds, that God’s reconciliation of the world to himself is made possible by the sacrifice of His son.

The phrase ‘reconciling the world’ must not be understood as teaching universalism, the false doctrine that all people will be saved. If God has reconciled the world, universalists simplistically argue, then the barrier between God and man has been removed for all, and everyone will be saved. However, the Bible teaches that most people will suffer eternal punishment in hell (Mt. 25:41, 46; 2 Th. 1:9; Rev. 14:9-11; 20:11-15; etc.). If Christ paid the penalty for everyone’s sin, how could God sentence people to hell for the sins that Christ bore the punishment for? And if He did not pay for the sins of those who are eternally lost, then in what sense was ‘God...in Christ reconciling the world to Himself’?

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The answer to that apparent dilemma is that the universal language (e.g., ‘world,’ ‘all,’ ‘everyone’) in the above mentioned passages must be understood as referring to mankind in general. Christ did not die for all men without exception, but for all men without distinction. ‘World,’ in this context, indicates the sphere in which reconciliation takes place; it denotes the class of beings with whom God seeks reconciliation—people from every national, racial, and ethnic group. Christ’s death *does* have infinite and unlimited value, because He is the infinite Son of God. His sacrifice is sufficient to pay the penalty for the sins of as many or as few as God saves. Because the intrinsic merit of Christ’s death is unlimited, the offer of salvation is legitimately unlimited as well. Therefore, the general call to salvation goes out to all men. But though the gospel is freely offered to all, Christ’s death actually expiated only the sins of those who would believe. God has determined from all eternity those who would be in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8). God designed the atonement of Jesus Christ to be efficacious only for those people and actually pay the penalty for their sins alone (cp. Jn. 10:11, 15; 17:9; Rom. 8:23-33; Eph. 5:25).

Besides the gift of perfect and eternal salvation, another consequence immediately follows. Reconciled to God, we become God’s ambassadors to the world (v. 20). All who are reconciled to God are entrusted with the message of reconciliation.

To all those whom He has reconciled, God ‘has committed’ (*tithēmi*; lit., ‘placed’ or ‘set’) ‘the word of reconciliation. *Logos* (‘word’) is more than just a synonym for ‘message.’ In Greek thought, *logos* indicates what is true and trustworthy as opposed to the term ‘myth’ (*mythos*) which is descriptive of what is fictitious and spurious. Hence the term *logos* carries with it, like a kind of overtone, the implication of truth and genuineness, and is accordingly peculiarly appropriate as a synonym for the gospel, which is ‘the word of truth.’

c) Messenger of Reconciliation (5:20)

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

Two ideas appear to be in Paul’s mind in relation to Christ’s death ‘for’ (*hyper*) others – *representation* and *substitution*. ‘Ambassadors for Christ’ implies representation, whereas, in ‘we beseech you *on behalf of* Christ’ the stronger idea appears to be substitution. Paul appears to envisage Christ as our representative, who, in dying and rising, achieved reconciliation with God. Closely connected with representation is the notion of incorporation. When Christ died and rose again as our representative, we who belong to Him died and rose again in Him.

‘Ambassadors’ is a form of the verb *presbeuō*, which derives from *presbus* (‘old man’). The term is an apt one, for ambassadors in ancient times were usually older, experienced men. An ambassador is both a messenger for and a representative of the one who sent him, and believers are messengers and representatives of the court of heaven. And just as an ambassador lives in a foreign land, so also do believers.

We should not give the word ‘ambassadors’ too modern a sense. When a Roman army had defeated that of some other nation, the victorious general would send an appointed ambassador into the camp of the defeated foe. He would carry with him the peace terms. This is the function of the Christian preacher. He is sent out into the world with God’s peace terms, and he goes as an ambassador of the God of grace who offers forgiveness to His defeated foes. Because the peace terms come with divine authority, men and women can be commanded to repent and believe the gospel, and yet, amazingly, there is a pleading note in the voice of the ambassador,

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quite alien to the normal outlook of one who represents the victor. Why? Because in this case – sublime and amazing fact! – the Victor loves the vanquished. Was there any other conquest ever carried out on the basis of such motivation? Both authoritativeness and winsomeness are appropriate in preaching the gospel, and the Spirit of God is able to give this perfect balance as the preacher seeks it from Him.

The Apostle Paul (having been entrusted with the ministry and message of reconciliation) employs a bold analogy to describe his ministry, that of the ancient ambassador, an imperial legate in the Roman Empire, an man of immense authority. As such, he did not speak in his own name or act on his own authority. Nor did his message originate in him, but from above. He stood in his Sovereign's stead and authority. So the actual truth was that as Paul spoke, God spoke. As the Apostle Paul made his ambassadorial appeal, it throbbed with divine conviction. We must not miss the thrust of his passionate plea because it is not 'reconcile yourselves to God' but 'be reconciled' (passive)—that is, be reconciled *by* God. Receive God's offer of reconciliation! This is a passionate offer of peace because peace with God is the result of reconciliation. The gospel is not 'reconcile yourselves.' The gospel is 'be reconciled.' Receive reconciliation from God.

This begging of people to be reconciled makes it clear that the sinner is never delivered from wrath and judgment to blessing and reward without personal response to the truth of the gospel through the means He has provided—faith.

Rightly understood, in evangelism, it is God Himself who makes the appeal. We are to implore men and women, 'Be reconciled to God.' We are to urge them to find their peace with Him through the provision He has made for sinners in His Son's death. As we do so, it is God's voice that they hear and recognize. What greater privilege can there be in life?

d) Manner of Reconciliation (5:21)

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.*

In verses 18-20, Paul described the glorious truth of reconciliation—that the sin-severed relationship between holy God and unregenerate sinners can be restored 'through' and 'in' Christ. But reconciliation raises some profound questions. How can an absolutely and infinitely holy God be reconciled to sinners? How can His just and holy law, which demands condemnation and punishment of all who violate it, be satisfied? How can those who deserve no mercy receive it? How can God uphold true righteousness and give grace? How can the demands of both justice and love be met? How can God be both 'just and the justifier' (Rom. 3:26) of sinners?

As hard as those questions seem, one brief verse answers them all and resolves the seeming paradox of redemption. With a conciseness and brevity reflective of the Holy Spirit, this one brief sentence, only fifteen words in the Greek text, resolves the dilemma of reconciliation. This sentence reveals the essence of the atonement, expresses the heart of the gospel message, and articulates the most glorious truth in Scripture—how fallen man's sin-sundered relationship to God can be restored.

Now we come to the heart of the atonement, the how of reconciliation. These fifteen words in the original Greek, given in two parallel, mutually defining clauses, take us into the mystery of reconciliation. The message Paul proclaimed concerned both the kind of person Christ is and the

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work he effected for us. In this verse, he twice refers to sin and one of these references relates to His character and the other to His work.

(1) Christ Made Sin (5:21a)

Only God could design an atonement for sin that would satisfy the demands of His justice, propitiate His wrath, and be consistent with His love, grace, and mercy. Only God could conceive the plan in which the second person of the Trinity would, ‘being found in appearance as a man, [humble] Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross’ (Phil. 2:8). Reconciliation flows out of God’s love. It is this emphasis on a loving God reaching out to sinners that sets Christianity apart from the false religions of the world. The gods of those religions are sometimes depicted as cruel, angry, and hostile and hence to be feared and appeased. But Christianity proclaims the glorious, liberating truth that God is neither hostile nor indifferent but a loving Savior by nature. He does not need to be appeased (and indeed cannot be by any human means). Instead, He Himself has provided His own appeasement for justice and the means for sinners to become His beloved children through the sacrifice of His Son (Rom. 8:32; 1 Jn. 4:10, 14), which fully propitiated His wrath.

The first clause rides on the fact of Christ’s sinlessness and is the most explicit statement of it in Scripture. Jesus Christ knew no sin. Other Scriptures, of course, also reference Christ’s sinlessness (e.g., 1 Pe. 2:22; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Jn. 3:5; Rom. 5:19; 8:3). The significance of Christ’s sinlessness is that this is what He was as a *human being*. As a person, through every stage of His thirty-three years, He knew no sin.

Only one who ‘knew no sin’ of his own could qualify to bear the full wrath of God against the sins of others. The perfect sacrifice for sin would have to be a human being, for only a man could die for other men. Yet he would also have to be God, for only God is sinless. That narrows the field to one, the God-man, Jesus Christ. The impeccability (sinlessness) of Jesus Christ is universally affirmed in Scripture (cp. Acts 3:14; 1 Pe. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:5; Heb. 4:15; 7:26).

The words ‘Him who had no sin,’ which come first in the Greek, evoke a great sense of mystery. They describe the Son of God (1:19), the image of God (4:4), the Lord (4:5) who was without sin (Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pe. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5).

And yet God ‘made Him ... to be sin.’ What does this mean? Paul had in mind that grim event, the crucifixion of Jesus. The curse of God, which falls upon law-breakers, fell instead upon the accursed, crucified on, so that law-breakers can be set free (cp. Gal. 3:13).

After presenting Jesus as the absolutely holy substitute for sinners, the text makes the remarkable statement that God made Him ‘to be sin.’ That important phrase requires a careful understanding. It does not mean that Christ became a sinner; the above-mentioned verses establishing His utter sinlessness unequivocally rule out that possibility. Isaiah 53:4-6 describes the only sense in which Jesus could have been made sin. Christ was not made a sinner, nor was He punished for any sin of His own. Instead, the Father treated Him as if He were a sinner by charging to His account the sins of everyone who would ever believe. All those sins were charged against Him as if He had personally committed them, and He was punished with the penalty for them on the cross, experiencing the full fury of God’s wrath unleashed against them all. It was at that moment that ‘Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying...“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”’ (Mt. 27:46). It is crucial, therefore, to understand that the only

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sense in which Jesus was made sin was by imputation. He was personally pure, yet officially culpable; personally holy, yet forensically guilty.

As to how God made Him to be sin, we must first understand that it does *not* say that God made Him to be a ‘sinner.’ This would do away with the ground of redemption. So then, how did God make Jesus, who never ceased being sinless, sin. Some would suggest that Jesus’ being made sin means a ‘sin offering,’ which, of course, He was as the Lamb of God who fulfilled the Old Testament’s vast promises. But it goes further and deeper than that. So complete was the identification of the sinless Christ with the sin of the sinner, including its dire guilt and its dread consequence of separation from God, that Paul could say profoundly, ‘God made Him...to be sin for us.’ Thus Christ became sin while remaining inwardly and outwardly impeccable. He became sin as our substitute and sacrifice.

The other thought-model, substitution, seems to be implied in ‘God made Him ... to be sin for us.’ The intensity of this verse suggests that God substituted the sinless one for the sinful ones. The sinless one takes our sin in Himself; the sinful ones are given the ‘righteousness of God’ in exchange.

(2) Sinners Made Righteous (5:21b)

The reason that Christ did this is given in the second clause of verse 21. There in the darkness our sins were imputed to Christ, and His righteousness was imputed to us who believe. All our sins were credited to Christ, and the spotless perfection of His righteousness was credited to us. Therefore, we are declared to have His righteousness. Yet this is more than a legal declaration. On the one hand it was a legal forensic declaration by which the righteousness of God is given to us. On the other hand, the righteousness of God describes a new way of living. We live righteously because God has declared us righteous.

In dying on the cross Christ did not become evil like we are, nor do redeemed sinners become inherently holy as He is. God credits believers’ sin to Christ’s account, and His righteousness to ours. The phrase ‘so that’ reflects a purpose clause in the Greek text. The benefit of God’s imputing believers’ sins to Christ and His righteousness to them is that they ‘become’ righteous before Him (cp. Phil. 3:9). The very righteousness God requires before He can accept the sinner is the very righteousness He provides.

Our Lord Jesus Christ’s sinlessness was crucial to our forgiveness and salvation. Because He knew no sin, He could take ours. The gospel is the good news of the great exchange. That exchange took place at the cross. The Lord Jesus took in our place the wrath of God our sins deserve, so that, in exchange, we might receive His righteousness.

Paul makes a most striking and deeply moving assertion about what an early Christian write described as a ‘sweet exchange.’ Here is God in His amazing grace treating Christ as a sinner so that the sinner may be treated as righteous. This is what theologians describe as ‘double imputation.’ This means that our sin was reckoned His so that His righteousness might be reckoned ours! This is why Jesus was forsaken. By God’s initiative and of course with His own will in total conformity to that of His Father, He was acting as a substitute for sinners and so experienced in His own being that dereliction which is the rightful penalty of sin.

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3. Response (6:1-2)

It is difficult to know whether to put verses 1 and 2 of chapter 6 with the end of chapter 5 or with the first section of chapter 6 beginning at verse 3. They provide a bridge between the two parts. Paul has shared in 5:11-21 the wonder of the gospel in its achievement and declaration of God's reconciling work through the atoning death of His Son.

a) *The Grace of God (6:1)*

¹*Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.*

The word *synergein* ('to work with') is made up of the preposition *syn* ('with') and the verb *ergein* ('to work'). The apostle Paul, and all Christians, represent Christ and 'work with' God. This speaks both of our very considerable privilege in acting as colleagues of God and also of the resources of divine power by which He enables us to make His appeal to others. We are not helpless and alone as Christ's representatives. God has made us partners, co-workers with Himself in His great rescue mission to reconcile the world to Himself.

The noblest view of ministry is to see it as 'working together' (from *sunergeō*; 'to cooperate with someone') in partnership with God. The phrase 'with him' is not in the original Greek text; however, the translators were correct in supplying it, since God is the antecedent from 5:19 and 20. Amazingly, the God of glory condescends to work through believers to proclaim His gospel of reconciliation.

Paul's use of the verb *paralaloumen* ('urge', 'plead,' 'beg') in the present tense reflects his constant, passionate concern for the Corinthians. Specifically, Paul was urging the Corinthians not to turn away from the gracious opportunity to hear the gospel of forgiveness he had so faithfully preached to them. Paul was concerned first that the Corinthians not receive God's grace in regard to salvation 'in vain.' Those in the congregation who were not regenerate were in grave danger of being deceived by the false teachers. The Corinthians were also in danger of receiving God's grace in vain with regard to sanctification. The legalists sought to turn them away from living in the power of the Spirit to living in the strength of the flesh. In either case, the grace of God to them that sent Paul with the gospel was in danger of being nullified.

Paul's appeal, directed, so it appears, to only some of the Corinthians, is made necessary by their present uncertainty about Christ and the gospel which has been created by the newcomers. Some at least are now interested in the 'other Jesus' as proclaimed by them in a 'different gospel' (11:4). There is now the serious danger that the original response to the apostolic gospel may have been 'in vain.' Thus Paul is recalling them to the true Jesus and the authentic gospel. If they continue to pay attention to a watered-down message (2:17; cp. 4:2), then the grace of God in Christ as expressed in the true gospel will indeed have been 'in vain.' Paul's words represent a call both to the church in Corinth and to the constituent members to return to the first principles of the gospel.

Knowing the gospel is not sufficient. God's grace is to be 'received' and received effectively – that is to say, not 'in vain.' What is it 'to receive the grace of God in vain'? We find the answer as we recognize the relationship between grace and gratitude. To receive God's grace in vain is to fail to respond with the gratitude that it demands we live the rest of our lives in glad obedience to God (cp. 5:15). The fitting response to grace is gratitude. Significantly, the same Greek word expresses both words. In Christianity, theology is grace and ethics is gratitude.

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b) *The Day of Salvation (6:2)*

²For 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.

Paul finds support for the urgency of his appeal in the Old Testament, and he quotes from Isaiah 49:8, a verse that comes from a very significant passage, which centers on the great Servant of God who was called to preach the word to Israel and the Gentiles. The age of anticipation is past, the time of fulfillment has come, and with it the urgency of receiving the message now!

The logic of this appeal is drawn from Isaiah 49:8, where God speaks to His servant Isaiah and coincides with Paul's emphasis on the new creation in Christ. Paul says, in effect, that Isaiah's day of salvation has arrived in the reconciliation of the cross. Therefore, the Corinthians must not miss this long-awaited opportunity for salvation. The day of salvation is here. How tragic is the thought that they might at one time have given apparent assent to Paul's proclamation, but now through unbelief and disobedience the wonders of the new covenant were being nullified. Paul was saying, you have been assenting to God's saving purposes; do not let it be in vain. The urgency with which Paul felt this is indicated by his twin repetition of 'behold' or 'look.' He is saying, 'Don't receive the grace of God in vain! Don't put it off! I implore you on behalf of Christ.'

To stress the urgency of this time, Paul quoted from Isaiah 49:8. There is a time in God's grace when He may be sought by sinners (cp. Gen. 6:3; Is. 55:6; Hos. 5:6). He repeats 'behold' and 'now' to emphasize his point. Now, when the fields are ripe for the harvest (Jn. 4:35), is not the time to waste gospel opportunity, or to be feeble, vacillating, or deceived by false teachers. It is the time to hold fast to the truth and faithfully proclaim it.

Once a person and a congregation have accepted the gospel it has become the 'now-time'; the 'day of salvation' has dawned. The writer to the Hebrews makes a similar appeal (Heb. 3:13; cp. Is. 49:8). It is not that Paul is applying some kind of psychological pressure on his readers, though evangelists have sometimes been guilty of this. It is, rather, that in true evangelism God Himself draws near through the words of the human spokesman. It is God who summons people to enter and remain in a relationship of reconciliation with Himself. The day of salvation has dawned through the death and resurrection of Christ. Because of who it is that addresses us, and the seriousness of what He says, it is appropriate to urge upon the hearers acceptance of the offer of forgiveness while it remains open.

Moreover, since it is God Himself who makes His word plain to us, we should not presume that what is comprehended today will be clear to us tomorrow. In God's purposes we are not at all times equally receptive to the truth. Therefore to the reader, whether already a Christian or not yet one, we say with Paul, 'Accept the reconciliation with God *now*.'

The 'day of salvation' was the time when they could personally call upon God for the salvation He promises in His Son. They called, and He heard them; they were saved. It is in His grace that God hears us and in the day of salvation that He helps us. This the Corinthians knew.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 6:3-7:1.