THE MINISTRY OF RECONILIATION

2 Corinthians 5:11–6:2

Key Verse: 5:18

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation…”

Have you ever had a broken relationship? How did it make you feel? If you weren’t very close to the other person, it probably didn’t matter that much anyway. But if you were close, it had to be painful. Whether you caused the problem or the other person did, it was hard, right? We can try to ignore a broken relationship, but it affects us more than we know. People hurt each other deeply, trust is destroyed, and then it seems impossible to ever really get back together. In today’s passage Paul introduces us to the ministry of reconciliation. But he’s talking about reconciliation with God. What is *that*? Why do we *need* it? How is it *possible*? And how can we, as weak and fallen creatures, *carry out* such a ministry? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word.

As we’ve seen in our study thus far, Paul has been defending himself and his ministry and explaining the role of suffering in Christian life. He said as suffering Christians we’re the aroma of Christ in the world (2:14). We’re the reflection of Christ as we contemplate his glory (3:18). We carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life might be revealed in our bodies (4:10). Now Paul gets into the heart of what gospel ministry really is. In 5:11–17 he explains the motives for ministry. In verses 18­–21 he explains the contents of ministry. In 6:1,2 he appeals for the outcome of ministry.

Look at 5:11a. “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others.” Paul just mentioned in verse 10 that one day we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due us for the things done while in the body. With this gospel truth in his heart Paul lived in the fear of the Lord. This healthy reverence for God motivated him to do his best to convince others about the gospel of Jesus and turn to God. He goes on in verse 11b, “What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.” It shows how the fear of God helped Paul to live openly in the sight of God, and to conduct himself and his ministry in a way that appealed not to people’s emotions or base desires, but to their consciences. He wrote in 4:2: “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” The fear of God changed his inner man. He wrote in 1:12: “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, not relying on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace.” If we are going to engage in ministry, we need the fear of God to lead us in these same ways.

Look at verse 12. Here Paul again uses the word “commend.” He said the same thing back in 3:1. He didn’t need to commend himself to the Corinthians, because they already knew him from firsthand experience. But he explains that he was giving them “an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart.” Here, “take pride in” means to “boast,” or even better, to “glory in.” Boasting is not good. Glorying in the wrong things is not good. But glorying in the right things is really good. To glory in an authentic servant of God is a good! The expression “what is seen” is literally “the face,” and it’s contrasted with “what is in the heart.” Many people glory in their face, how good it looks, never thinking what their heart may look like to God. Paul probably was not a good-looking person outwardly, but he had a heart of gold when it came to loving God and loving people. His motivation for ministry came from such a heart. By standing up for him as God’s servant, the Corinthians could, in a sense, also defend the gospel he preached.

Look at verse 13. Some were saying Paul was out of his mind. Why? Because his lifestyle was so radical. Because his passion for Christ and his passion to win people were so intense. They said the same thing about Jesus when he even skipped meals to engage in ministry (Mk3:21). Paul says here that even if he *was* crazy, it was “for God.” It’s good to have such a passion, such a crazy love, for God. He adds, “if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” Even the state of his mental health was for God and for others, not himself. In the midst of all the hardships, demands and criticisms of ministry, how could Paul keep it together? Look at verse 14a: “For Christ’s love compels us…” This is his other main motive for ministry—the love of Christ. The word “compels” in Greek has two meanings. The first one is “to seize.” Paul was “seized,” or “overcome by,” or “completely dominated by,” the love of Christ. The other meaning is “hold together.” It was Christ’s love that kept Paul sane in the midst of all the pressures and discouragements. So if we get discouraged or are feeling unmotivated to get involved in ministry, we need to reconnect with the love of Christ.

What *is* “the love of Christ”? Paul says in verse 14b: “…because we are convinced that one died for all…” He wrote in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Our Lord Jesus told his disciples that the greatest love is to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (Jn15:13); that’s what Jesus did for us, and that’s what he’s asking us to do for one another. “Jesus died for me” may sound like a cliché, a dry statement, but if we really stop to think about it, it moves our hearts like nothing and no one else ever could. How could Jesus love me so much that he even *died* for me? And it wasn’t just for me; Paul says here that he died “for all”—for *everyone*. This love of Christ is what always motivates us to ministry. Every person, no matter who they are, or how bad they seem, is someone for whom Christ died. We should at least *try* to reach out to them.

Paul says at the end of verse 14, “..and therefore all died.” What does he mean? He’s talking about the experience we have when we accept the death of Jesus for our sins. We can’t accept his death partially, or, superficially. To really accept his death, it’s all or nothing. We’ve got to be “all in.” When we fully accept it, we die to sin (Ro6:2). We become united with him in his death (Ro6:5). Our old self is crucified with him (Ro6:6). We count ourselves dead to sin (Ro6:11). We also die to self. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me…” Accepting Christ’s death changes us at our *core*. We naturally live for ourselves. But the death of Christ makes us do a 180°. Read verse 15. “Him who died for [us] and was raised again” is Jesus our living Lord. The death of Christ changes us so deeply that we actually start living *for him*—not for people, not even for a church, but for Christ. Our Lord Jesus becomes most important in our lives. Paul wrote elsewhere, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Php1:21). To really do ministry, we’ve got to do it not for ourselves but for Christ alone.

How else does the death of Christ change us? Read verse 16. In Greek the word “regard” means to use our instincts or intuition to “sense” them. And the phrase “worldly point of view” is literally “according to the flesh.” To “sense people according to the flesh” means to check them out based on their outward appearance, ethnicity, social or economic status, intelligence, etc. It implies that it’s all pretty superficial. Still, worldly people are so preoccupied with these externals. People even regarded Christ “according to the flesh”—meaning seeing him as nothing but a carpenter from Nazareth, with no pedigree or credentials. But when we accept his death, we’re so much changed that we see everything and everyone differently. How so? Read verse 17. What does “the new creation has come” mean? The footnote says, “that person is a new creation.” The emphasis here is “if anyone.” Anyone “in Christ” becomes a new creation. The words “in Christ” are crucial. Even if our old lives were ruined and damaged by sin, in Christ we are a brand new creation. We’re united with him by faith in his death and resurrection, and we’re born again by the power of the Holy Spirit to live a brand new life (Jn1:13; Ro6:4). We’re like new wineskins with a new self, a new knowledge of God, and a new and living hope (Mk2:22; Col3:10; 1Pe1:3,4). No other religious standards or rituals matter (Gal6:15). The NIV misses one important word in Greek here in verse 17. It’s the word “Behold!” or “Look!” It should say, “Look! The old has gone, the new is here!” It’s amazing! It’s exciting! We see with our own eyes ourselves and others being totally changed in Christ! Paul was excited to be a part of gospel ministry, to see this glorious changing power in people’s real lives. To get involved in ministry, we need to stop seeing ourselves as unqualified sinners or hypocrites, but as new creations in Christ. We need to see our fellow believers as new creations in Christ. We need to see all those not yet united with Christ as those who can be made brand new by him. Faith in “the new creation in Christ” gets rid of all our cynicism about ministry.

Read verse 18. “All this” means all these new motives, new ways of living and seeing people. All of it comes from God. How? It says that God “reconciled us to himself through Christ.” In verses 18–20 Paul repeats the word “reconciled” five times. What does he mean? Literally the word means to be restored to friendly relations after a presumed wrong. But for true reconciliation to happen, a transaction has to take place, a price has to be paid for the wrong. Paul repeats in verse 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself “in Christ.” But he’s stressing that this reconciliation was God’s idea, God’s initiative. It’s surprising. Why? Because in this broken relationship, God didn’t do anything wrong; we did. Usually it’s when we realize that we did something wrong to somebody that we start to seek reconciliation. But in this case, God, who did no wrong, seeks the reconciliation and even pays the price for it.

What price did God pay? Read verse 21. Christ is the one who had no sin. He was God’s precious and only Son, who had no sin in him and never did any wrong. God made him “to be sin for us.” God crucified him on the cross and punished him in our places for all the sins we could ever commit. We might like to try to pay God back for all the wrongs we’ve done—by doing good deeds, serving others, or being faithful to church. But nothing we could do could ever pay God back for our sin. Jesus is the one who paid it all when he suffered and died in our places. We just have to believe that he did it for me.

What happens when we do? Paul says “…so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” By faith in Jesus, God makes us right with him. God clothes us with the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. God no longer sees us in all our sin, but as who Christ made us to be. This truth heals our view of ourselves—not how people see me, not even how I see myself, but how God sees me in Christ. Paul says in verse 19, “…not counting people’s sins against them.” It’s called “forgive and forget.” In Isaiah 43:25 God says, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sin no more.” He doesn’t even remember them? Not even a hint of a grudge of any kind? No condescension at all? That is real reconciliation! It really happens when we believe that Jesus died for me, for all my sin. 1 John 3:1 says, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” Each of us needs to really experience this.

But there’s something else here about reconciliation. Read verse 18 again. God gives us “the ministry of reconciliation.” We’re nothing but sinners like everybody else. But when we experience God’s reconciliation in Christ, we are immediately ready for reconciliation ministry. Why? Because we come to understand God’s heart for the lost. We know his amazing grace and the great cost he paid. We become ready and willing to share in the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation between hostile parties is always hard. In this case, it’s sinful people who remain hostile to God. But we’re willing, like God, to take the initiative, to make whatever sacrifices necessary, to help people realize how much God loves them. We’re also moved to try to restore the broken relationships in our lives. To those whom we have wronged, we go and ask their forgiveness. To those who have wronged us, we go and tell them we forgive them. We can’t be reconciled to God but ignore these broken relationships. This ministry requires humility, great patience, and Christ-like behavior.

In verse 19b Paul also says, “And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” He’s laid it on our shoulders. It’s our responsibility to tell others what this reconciliation in Christ can mean to them. Read verse 20. This is what it means practically not to live for ourselves but to live for Christ. It means to live as Christ’s ambassadors—to represent Christ in all that we say and do. We should do some serious self-reflection to see whether or not I’m really representing Christ well. People need to see Christ in us in order to believe our message. Paul says, “We implore you.” Literally it means, “We beg you.” The ministry of reconciliation even involves begging. Paul says, “on Christ’s behalf”—for his sake. It’s a strong message: “Be reconciled to God!” God already did it for us; he’s paid it all. But people have to accept it. We’ve got to be urgent to share it. Look at 6:1,2. Paul says we shouldn’t receive this message of grace “in vain.” We should believe it, take it seriously, and not abuse it. Most of all, we shouldn’t put it off; we need to act on it *now*.

Read 5:18 again. May God help us newly experience this amazing reconciliation with God through Christ. And may he grant us a new commitment to join wholeheartedly in his ministry of reconciliation.