

God's Ambassadors – 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today we're going to be in the book of 2nd Corinthians chapter 5, so if you have your Bibles you can go ahead and turn there now...2nd Corinthians, chapter 5. Well, as you can see all around us here today, we have a big week ahead of us here in our body at Union Baptist as we kick off Vacation Bible School tomorrow, and I'd like to share a message today that should help each person involved keep the right focus and find the energy needed to thrive through this next week, rather than just trying to survive it. But what we'll study today is also completely relevant and applicable to every person here today, no matter where you plan to go or what you plan to do this next week.

As we zero in on 2nd Corinthians chapter 5, we're going to be reminded of a special calling and special privileges and a holy responsibility that has been given to each person who has trusted in Christ as their Savior...each person who is walking in an eternal life relationship with the one true God. This calling and responsibility is meant to trump a lot of other things that we could concern ourselves with in life and will even call us to give ourselves up and put aside our ego and our rights and even our feelings for the sake of a greater cause. We're going to consider today, what it means to be God's ambassadors. And whether you're helping at VBS this week, working at your job, running your household, or going on vacation, you are God's ambassadors.

So what is an ambassador? The Encyclopaedia Britannica states that an ambassador is the "highest rank of diplomatic representative sent by one national government to another."

It also goes on to say that: "Ambassadors were deemed to represent the person and dignity of the sovereign [meaning the king or the president] and were entitled to personal access to the sovereign to whom they were accredited."

So what we're talking about here is a very important person who represents a certain country and promotes its interests and goals to other countries. And this person's responsibility is to be a good and faithful representative of his or her country's king or president. What they say and do will forever influence the way whole nations will view and interact with their country and could either promote peace and cooperation or lead to war and conflict.

The other interesting aspect of this is that an ambassador has direct access to the king. Give that some thought as you think about your role as an ambassador of Christ. We also have direct access to the King don't we? And we need to be sure we're in constant communication with him and well aware of his goals and mission and directives.

Now my own oldest brother came very close to being an ambassador of the United States of America. He spent most of his working career as a diplomat of the United States serving in places like Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, and most recently, Belgium. And a diplomat's duties are very similar to an ambassador's because an ambassador is really just the highest ranking diplomat possible.

Now when my brother turned 50 years old he had the option to either retire or become an ambassador. After the many challenging years he had as a diplomat he decided retirement sounded a lot more appealing. He's currently been called back on a short-term assignment in Israel, but is for the most part retired. But in his role as a diplomat he promoted the interests of the United States of America and served as a representative of our government. When tensions arose in the various countries where he was serving, he did his best to calm the tension and maintain peace and cooperation through diplomacy. And when you consider that most of the countries he served in were in the Middle East, you can imagine a few tensions arose from time to time. So hopefully now we have a pretty clear idea of what an ambassador is and does.

II. CONTEXT: CALLED TO PREACH CHRIST BY THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Before we read our central passage today let's get a quick idea of where we are in the book of 2nd Corinthians. In chapters 3 and 4 of 2nd Corinthians, we find Paul talking in detail about the special calling that he and the other apostles had

received to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. His emphasis in those chapters was that he was not promoting himself in any way or trying to get a following. He says in second Corinthians 4:5:

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus sake.

He emphasizes a similar point in second Corinthians 4:7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power would be of God and not from ourselves;

You can see clearly in these two verses that Paul is not concerned in any way about impressing people with how smart or talented he is. He doesn't care if people are impressed with him, or if they think he's funny, or if they he's the best speaker they've ever heard. He's not trying to get a following for himself. Instead he's focused fully on drawing attention to Jesus Christ and carrying out his mission.

Paul is just an ordinary guy with ordinary human weaknesses and struggles. And he knows that God has designed it to be this way so that we don't try to steal his glory and take credit for what he has accomplished. Instead, our weakness puts God's strength and power on display, and we are most effective when we know our own weakness and trust in God alone for the strength we need.

Then, in 2nd Corinthians 4, verses 5-7, Paul shares with us the source of the power and strength we need, which is the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us. He says:

Now he who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that when we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord - for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Because we know that God has given us his Holy Spirit and that he himself has prepared us to preach the gospel, we can always be courageous. We can operate outside of our own human weakness and insecurities. We don't have to be afraid. He's given us the Spirit and promised to give us the words we need to say, the

courage and boldness we need, and the strength to endure any opposition. As we discussed last week, we walk by faith, not by sight, choosing to trust in the Holy Spirit rather than in our own abilities.

Then, as we move into chapter 5 of 2nd Corinthians, Paul continues to explain the calling he has received to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and he tells us why and how he does it. We learn that the love of Christ is what controls and motivates him.

In verses 14 and 15 we read:

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

You see, Paul has been transformed by the love of Christ and he longs to share that love with other people. He knows that Christ demonstrated love to each of us that is a greater love than any of us have ever experienced. It's a love that motivated Christ to die the worst type of death imaginable for people who were his enemies, so that he could take the punishment they deserved and reconcile them to God...to take them from being enemies of God to being God's own sons and daughters. And he gave these new sons and daughters eternal life and a new mission and an ongoing love relationship with him.

Paul's experience of Christ's life transforming love, led him to no longer live for himself but to rather give himself up for other people. Having been rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, he was overcome with a consuming desire to share the same love and new life that he himself had received, with other people. And no matter what difficulties and challenges and false accusations and persecutions he experienced, he remained secure in the unchanging love of Christ.

So now that we have a clear idea of the context, let's read the passage we're going to focus on today, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of

reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

III. I AM A NEW CREATION RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

First off in this passage we see that well known verse, 2 Corinthians 5:17, stating that profound truth that we are now new creations reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Having trusted Christ as our Savior and Lord, we've been reborn, recreated...we have new life sprouting inside...we're not the same person we were before. This new life is what changes us from the inside out and actually gives us the ability and desire, through the Spirit living inside us, to live a life that is pleasing to God and to do his will. As we saw last week, if we haven't truly accepted Christ as our Savior and experienced this new life in him, we cannot please God. Without faith it is impossible to please him. We cannot be an ambassador of Jesus Christ if we haven't been born again through believing in Christ and surrendering our lives to Him.

IV. I HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

Secondly in our passage, we see that those of us who have received new life have been given a special ministry and calling. Faith in Christ doesn't just bring forgiveness of sins and then call us to sit around and wait for death so we can go to heaven. No, the new life we receive through Christ brings transformation right now and calls us into a completely new way of living. We now each have a calling and a ministry.

Did you know we're all in ministry? It's easy for us to just of pastors and missionaries as those who are in ministry. But the truth is that every true believer in Christ is in ministry. Ministry is simply something we do to help other people. And Paul tells us that the ministry we've each been given, whether we're an auto mechanic, a nuclear scientist, a factory worker, a pastor, or a stay-at-home mom, is the ministry of reconciliation.

How many of you have ever had a fight with a friend or maybe a parent or brother or sister? When you were having that fight, did you have any desire to hang out with them and do things together? Probably not. More than likely you wanted to stay as far away from them as possible. In order to reach that point where you wanted to hang out with them and be friends again you needed something we call reconciliation.

Reconciliation is simply the process of making two enemies friends again. And usually something needs to happen in order to make reconciliation possible. Sometimes time will do it and eventually you just break down and try to ease back into relationship and move on. But often what really needs to happen to bring true lasting reconciliation is a sincere apology. Somebody needs to walk in humility and work up the courage to say they're sorry. And in order to complete the process there needs to be forgiveness, the decision to listen to and accept an apology and stop being angry.

Peacemaker Ministries has some great tools on reconciliation and one of their snippets of wisdom in this area is called the "Four Promises of Forgiveness." Listen closely to these as you consider how you're doing in the area of forgiveness: "1) I will not dwell on this incident; 2) I will not bring this incident up and use it against you; 3) I will not talk to others about this incident; and 4) I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."

You see, it's so easy to say we've forgiven someone, but true forgiveness involves letting an issue go for good and being able to continue in relationship. If we say we've forgiven someone, but will have nothing to do with them and continue to rehash the issue and talk about it with others, we haven't truly forgiven. In order to understand true forgiveness, we need to understand how God forgives us and learn to do the same for other people.

Can you imagine if God said, "I forgive you," but then wanted nothing to do with you? That makes no sense does it? When God forgives us, he throws our sin as far as the east is from the west and he doesn't bring it up again. Satan is the one who keeps trying to bring it up. God forgives forever and draws us near again to himself. With God's forgiveness relationship is restored and we can leave the past behind for forever.

Well the amazing truth for us today is that you and I get the job of helping other people get reconciled with God. We get to help them walk into that true and lasting forgiveness that brings a restored and healthy and life-filled relationship with our Creator. You see all of us are enemies of God until we come to Christ. Because of our sins and our constant struggle to be in charge of our own life rather than giving that position to God, we are enemies of God. The Bible tells us that every person that has not trusted in Christ is under God's wrath.

But for those of us who have trusted in Christ, we are no longer under that wrath and now get to help other people come out from under that same wrath we were once under. We get to be peacemakers! Look at verse 19 in 2 Corinthians 5, and see the message of reconciliation we have the privilege of sharing with others:

namely, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

The good news we get to give to other people is that by trusting in Christ, God will not count their sins and failures against them. By trusting in Christ they get to move from being under God's wrath to being his very own, deeply loved children, who will never have to suffer the punishment they deserve for their sins. By trusting Christ they will walk into true and lasting forgiveness.

It's such a simple yet powerful message. Without Christ we are enemies of God and under his wrath. With Christ we are his children and have been freed forever from the punishment we deserved for our sin. We now walk in step with the God of the universe, having constant access to the King and commissioned and empowered by him with the ministry of reconciliation.

V. I AM AN AMBASSADOR OF CHRIST

Notice that God himself has committed this message to us. He's trusting us as his representatives to deliver this message on his behalf. We are his ambassadors. We are the people who have been appointed by God to be his diplomats: to be good and faithful representatives of him sharing the amazing message of how other people can go from being his enemies to being his own dearly loved children.

And if we are to do this in a way that honors and reflects God, we need to model forgiveness and reconciliation and love in our own lives. How can we introduce other people to God's love and forgiveness if we don't love and forgive people ourselves. As God's ambassadors, pursuing reconciliation and peace in all our relationships should be a way of life for us. That doesn't mean we can always make it happen, because some people will hold onto bitterness and refuse to reconcile. But let it not be said that we made no effort to bring it about. Rather let it be said of each of us, that as far as it depended on us, we lived at peace with everyone...that as ambassadors of Christ we were peacemakers...that as his ambassadors we lived a life that reflected forgiveness and love and drew other people to the perfect forgiveness and love that comes only through Christ.

Look at verse 20 of 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

My friends, our ministry, no matter what earthly job we have, is to beg people on behalf of Christ, with both our words and actions, to be reconciled to their Creator by placing their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. God is making an appeal to them through us. What a privilege and responsibility we have to share the word of reconciliation with others and to represent our King well as we relate to the people God brings into our lives.

VI. MY ADEQUACY AND STRENGTH IS FROM GOD ALONE

Now I know this can seem like an overwhelming and intimidating job and responsibility. It's hard to forgive sometimes...it's hard to be the one that initiates the reconciliation process. And this message we have of reconciliation through Christ is not very popular in the world today. People may make fun of us. They may say we're uneducated and foolish to believe such a simple message. And the Bible tells us and we see clearly demonstrated in the life of Paul, that when we share our faith boldly we will at times be persecuted, mocked or ridiculed.

In some countries of the world today you could actually be put to death for sharing the word of reconciliation with someone. Currently in America we still have the freedom to share this message in most places and there's no penalty of

death for doing it. But that may not always be the case and certainly there is more and more opposition every day, even in America, to the good news of Jesus Christ. So how do we find the courage and boldness to do be beg people, on behalf of Christ, to be reconciled to God?

Let's turn back to 2nd Corinthians 2, verses 14 to 17, where we get a beautiful picture of what God is doing through us as we serve as his ambassadors and where we find the strength and boldness to do it. Starting in verse 14 of chapter 2:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place. For we are fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

First notice that beautiful word picture of what God is doing through us as we serve as his ambassadors: he ***manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place. For we are fragrance of Christ to God...*** That is our role as ambassadors of Christ: to manifest the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place.

Do you have any favorite smells in the world? Some of my favorite are: the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies; the smell of outdoors after a good rain; the smell of hot apple cider during the holiday season; the smell of lavender or lilacs in the spring. Well our goal as ambassadors of Christ is to live and speak in such a way that we put off an irresistible aroma of Christ that draws people to him and to the opportunity to be reconciled with their Creator. We are to be that chocolate chip cookie smell or that hot apple cider smell or that smell of lilacs that calls people to come and be satisfied and fulfilled through Christ in a way that cookies or hot apple cider or flowers can never do. Again this can seem like a really challenging task for ordinary people like you and me. But let's look back at our passage today and see how it's possible for us to do what God calls us to do.

Notice first that the strength comes from God alone, not from our willpower and talents. Verse 14 of chapter 2 says: ***But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ.*** Thanks and glory goes to God because he's the one who gives us the power we need and makes us able to conquer our fears and our doubts and our weaknesses. And he does this for those of us who are in Christ; who have become new creations through trusting in Jesus Christ. He ***leads us in triumph in Christ.***

This is emphasized again in verses 16 to 17 of chapter 2: ***who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*** The implication here is that none of us are adequate in ourselves for this job. The only way we can pull it off is by being in Christ and relying on God to work through us by his Holy Spirit.

This point is hammered home again in second Corinthians chapter 3, verses five through six: ***Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*** You can't get much clearer than that. The only way we are able to be the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ to other people is through God's Spirit working in and through us as we trust in him.

VII. I HAVE A MESSAGE AND AN APPEAL TO MAKE

So as we begin wrapping up today I want you to think about where you're at in this process. When you look at your life and the way you speak and act and relate to others, are you putting off the sweet smell of the knowledge of Christ with other people? Are you modeling forgiveness and reconciliation in your own life? As people talk to you and spend time with you are they seeing Christ and being drawn to him? And when they're drawn to him are you taking that next step of sharing with them the message of how to be reconciled to God through Christ?

This is not a call to necessarily go out on Main Street, stand on a box, and start preaching to everybody that walks by. But this is a call to be actively growing your love relationship with Christ, and asking him to transform your life in such a way

that you are living as he designed you to be by the power of the Spirit, putting off the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ wherever you go.

Many of us have a special opportunity this week to be that sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ as we participate in VBS. It's a lot of work to pull off VBS and to try to manage around 100 young elementary and preschool students. And sometimes we can just get in survival mode and get the mentality of just trying to somehow make it through the week. It takes a lot of energy and can really test our patience at times.

But I'd like to challenge each of us this week to keep that constant perspective that we are God's ambassadors, representing to these young people what God is like. A very large number of these kids don't go to church and have very few other opportunities to learn what God is like and hear about the good news he's offering to each of them. What we do and say will impact them greatly and we want to plant seeds that will sprout up to eternal life in Christ.

And for those of you that aren't helping with VBS this year, please pray for us. And I'm not just saying this as a passive request, but I'm pleading with you to pray diligently for us this week! We need God's strength and energy and the power of his Spirit to pull this off and be faithful representatives of who he is. I'd like to invite every person here who's helping in any way with VBS to come up front now so that we can pray together for the team God has raised up this year.