

Our Ministry

In 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2, we consider what the Apostle Paul says about a responsibility we share, as both clergy and laity, the ministry of reconciliation.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 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.

6 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

***“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”***

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

We continue to be dismayed by the ongoing, seemingly insoluble wars in Ukraine and Gaza. A lot is at stake without some kind of resolution to these wars, and we pray for all nations and leaders to do the seemingly impossible.

Yet, as God's people we're also on a high mission, one with eternal consequences. We are called to be arbitrators, seeking reconciliation, a right relationship between others and God. Unlike some ambassadors and other government representatives, we never have to be apologetic about the Kingdom we represent. And our mission is entirely possible by the grace of God. We're called and enabled in the ministry of making peace between God and others.

The ministry of reconciliation is for all who're in Christ, a key subject in the teaching of the Apostle Paul. The concept "in Christ" is all encompassing. To be in Christ is to be made right with God, put in a right relationship with him, and living in a love relationship with him. The Holy Spirit lives in us as the very presence of Christ in us!

Our text begins in the Greek with "therefore," an adverb connector with the previous verse about how Christ died for all. The result of knowing one died for all means we must not regard anyone in the same way that we did when we were not in Christ. We're new creations of God (¹⁷). We view things in a new and eternal way, and value spiritual, unseen reality (4:18). Wherever our place of ministry and whatever the shape of our calling, as God's people we need to become "world Christians," realizing God has placed us in our own unique part of his world-wide mission field.

Before his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul had his opinion about Jesus, as he says, from a worldly, though religious point of view (¹⁶). Like a good Jew, uninformed by the Holy Spirit, he thought Jesus was a pretender and deceiver of the ignorant. Saul of Tarsus was looking for a warrior-king messiah, who would overthrow the Romans, and immediately establish a visible, profitable kingdom on earth. Christians as well as Jews can be guilty of making Jesus in our own image, shaped by cultural or personal desires and expectations. But as ministers of reconciliation, we are to be committed to the Jesus of Scripture, the Christ of the cross, who conquers through his suffering love.

As ministers of reconciliation, we learn to see people as God sees them, and we also see Christ from a spiritual perspective, and not from a just human or historical point of view. This is the work of saving grace, to give us faith to see Jesus for who he is, and as all he claims to be, as the eternal Son of God, and the Savior of all who believe in him. And the Holy Spirit gives us the “mind of Christ” to also see people from an eternal perspective. In the words of CS Lewis, we should understand that there are no mere mortals. Everyone we see is either a candidate for heaven and thus destined to be a glorious creation, or is a candidate for hell, destined for eternal separation from God. As kingdom citizens, we need to ask God to help us see as God sees, and to look at the hearts of people, knowing each has an everlasting destiny.

Paul says that we are saved from the power of evil, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies body and soul. We’re to glorify God in our bodies, which also are being redeemed by the power of God. “The old has gone....” This means we’re not what we used to be, and the former way of life is behind us. We’re not sinlessly perfect, but we’re daily overcoming the old way of life, which was dominated by Satan’s power, and the old, unconverted nature. And, “The new has come!” We now have a new desire to love and please God, and to live a life like Jesus’ own life, having different attitudes, vocabulary, and actions, as well as relationships.

C. T. Studd was one of evangelist D.L. Moody’s most famous converts in nineteenth-century England. Studd was a wealthy, worldly businessman who attended a Moody Crusade on a dare and eventually became a Christian. He lived only two years after his conversion. However, at his funeral, someone said that he did more in two years than most Christians do in twenty. He changed his life-style and turned the great Hall at Tedworth into a gathering place for Christians. He wrote to his friends about their souls, called on his tailor and his shirt-maker, and spoke of Christ. “All I can say,” said his coachman, “is that though there’s the same skin, there’s a new man inside” (B. Harbour).

Paul says we were at one time God’s enemies (Rom. 5:10) and are now made God’s friends through Christ. And, we’re now transformed by grace to the degree that we, who were enemies, are now being remade and appointed as his representatives. What an amazing truth, that we’re God’s new creations, called to join his work of making people right with himself!

The great Presbyterian pastor-preacher, Clarence Macartney, spoke about the critical importance of verse 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.*** He said that if this verse isn’t true, then, “Let us close the Bible, mute the organ, empty the pews, silence the hymns, lock the doors of the church, and throw the key into the river.” The great preacher continued saying that if this verse isn’t true, “we

have nothing to talk about, nothing to sing about and nothing upon which to build our hopes. But since it *is* true,” says Macartney, “that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself”(v.19)—we have something to talk about, something to sing about, and a solid foundation upon which to build the structure of our everlasting hope.”

The sinless Son of God, while he was on the cross effecting our salvation, became “the most sinful man who ever lived.” “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (19). The Triune God was involved in the cross, not a tyrannical father punishing his Son on the cross for us. From before Creation itself, the Father and Son conceived our salvation and paid the full price. We see in the cross the amazing love of God and his self-giving to us. This verse is about the “sweet exchange,” how through our faith in what Christ did for us on the cross, God gives us credit for the righteousness of Christ in exchange for our being condemned as guilty sinners (F.F. Bruce).

This ministry of reconciliation is not our work. It’s the work of God through Jesus Christ, who has chosen to work through you and me, we who have been reconciled to God. What an amazing privilege and responsibility it is to represent King Jesus, and the Kingdom of heaven here on earth! It’s imperative that we faithfully fulfill our task. We’re ambassadors if we are believers, and we’ll be either good ones or poor ones. An ambassador was to be *persona grata* (personally acceptable or welcome) with both his home country he represented as well as the country to which he was sent.

To negotiate peace, someone has to translate so we can cross the language barrier. I remember during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, President Carter sent a Muslim to arbitrate a settlement with the radicals, and he quoted passages from *The Koran*. We have a higher calling, and more is at stake in our ambassadorship. You and I have people to whom God has sent you to share words from his holy word, that will lead to peace with God and with others. Paul says that when we share Christ it’s God making his appeal through us. The kind of motivated love that Paul expressed was nothing less than Christ’s speaking through Paul. Christ gave Paul his own compassion (Rom. 9:1-3). When we work with Christ, we become like him and speak his language of love.

John Faulkner, a missionary leader for many years in Eastern and Southern Africa, reported the response of a village in Mozambique to the showing of the popular and effective *Jesus* film. Produced by Campus Crusade (now CRU), the *Jesus* film is based on the Gospel of Luke, and lends itself to be adapted to any language where it is shown for evangelistic purposes. John related that early into the film, an African lady was so overcome with joy that she jumped up and began to dance and shout, “Jesus speaks *my* language! He speaks *my* language!”

About six years ago, a lovely Congolese family joined our worship service toward the benediction. We discovered they didn’t know any English, and we were all frustrated by being unable to communicate. I made numerous efforts, through my friend Jean- Renee Watchou, a local internationals ministry director, to find a Swahili speaker who could translate for them and communicate our concern and willingness to assist them. With his help we were able to connect and communicate, and I believe God sent them our way, for us to minister to them. Even with the language barrier, we could speak the language of love and concern.

Philip Yancey expresses the breathtaking responsibility and privilege we have to engage in this ministry of reconciliation as partners with God. Referencing our text, Yancey writes that Paul is saying “that God has now relegated to the followers of Jesus the message of reconciliation with God, adding this remarkable phrase: ‘as though God were making his appeal through us.’ “I shudder,” says Yancey, “at the sheer audacity of God entrusting such a task—God making his appeal through us—to a species known for making divisions between beautiful and ugly, rich and poor, dark-skinned and light, male and female, strong and weak.”

“Taking God’s assignment seriously,” says Yancey, “means that I must learn to look at the world upside down, as Jesus did. Instead of seeking people out who stroke my ego, I find those whose egos need stroking; instead of important people with resources who can do me favors, I find people with few resources; instead of the strong, I look for the weak; instead of the healthy, the sick. Is not this how God reconciles the world to himself? Did Jesus not insist that he came for sinners and not the righteous, for the sick and not the healthy?”

The Message paraphrase gives translates verse 18: “All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.” Only when we’re in fellowship with our fellow believers are we able to engage in the work of leading others to reconciliation. Part of our work is the work of leading the body of Christ to be reconciled with one another. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” says Jesus, and we are called to seek peace with and among one another (Matt. 5:9). Dale Heights is one of the sweetest and most loving church families I’ve known anywhere. But there may have been occasions of broken relationships, and it’s possible, though certainly not known to me, that someone has fallen away from church fellowship and worship attendance because of a disagreement or unsettled dispute.

A Christian businessman and concert soloist from Springfield, Missouri, Russell Newport, had a son with Down syndrome who died several decades ago. During the older childhood and teen years of his brief life, Timmy Newport was used of God as a unifier of the fellowship of the First Baptist Church of Springfield. According to his father, Timmy had an innate sense if there were people in the church at odds with one another. Timmy would take the hand of one person involved in conflict, and then would lead that person to stand before his or her antagonist. He then would take the hand of one and place it in the hand of the other. “Now forgive each other,” Timmy would exclaim to the befuddled and disarmed adversaries.

God is calling us to be involved in his church as ministers of reconciliation, joining Jesus in making ourselves and others right with God and with one another. Let’s pray for peace between warring nations, for peace within our very divided nation, and the peace of Jesus when we get right with God. Our first need is to look within ourselves. Some of us need to make peace with ourselves, accepting God’s unconditional love for us, just as we are. We don’t have to earn it! Therefore, be at peace with yourself. We need holy self-love and complete self-acceptance. Let’s put our hands in God’s hand. And then, look at family, friends, neighbors and perhaps fellow church members, and seek to put their hand in ours, or their adversary’s, and most importantly, in God’s hand.

Let's pray that God will enable us to always speak the language of love, for God, for ourselves and seek to be God's reconcilers, leading the people God brings to us and puts in our way into a love relationship with our loving heavenly Father.