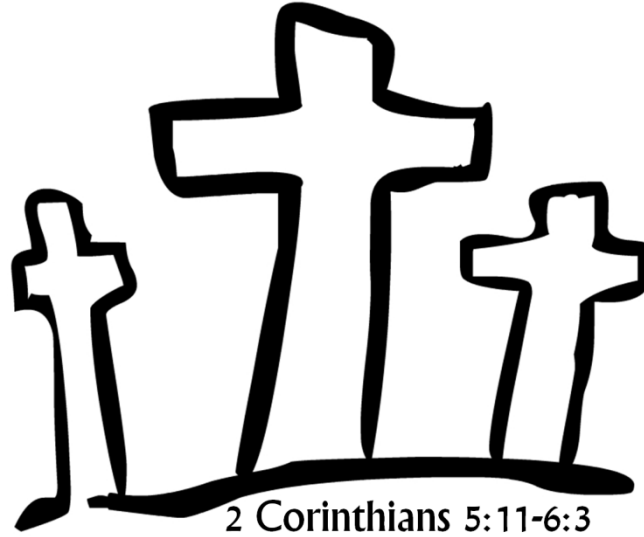


Ambassadors for Christ



¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you."^b I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

When we left off two weeks ago in 2 Corinthians we learned a key verse that can be used to present and explain the gospel—2 Corinthians 5:21. Do you still remember it? *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.* This is the gospel message. It is not a lengthy theological treatise, but this one verse contains the essence of the gospel. If someone asked you how to become a Christian, would you be able to explain it to them? In general, Christians have two problems with the gospel—we don't understand the gospel and we do not share the gospel. I believe the reason we have these two problems is because we do not understand God's role in the gospel and our role in the gospel. There are two

extremes. On the one hand you have some Christians who will do practically anything to get people saved.

Last summer I attended a youth event in Sparta with two Christian bands and a youth speaker. The speaker drew the teens in with what was literally toilet humor. Then he told some heart wrenching stories of teenagers in pain and sorrow. Just a cursory glance around the room would tell you that many of the youth present there had the same pain and sorrow in their own lives. And that was a good thing—that troubled teens would find their way to such a Christian event. But the problem arose when the speaker shared the gospel message. This was his basic message. “You are in pain right now and if you want the pain to go away, you need to believe in Jesus.” I am not exaggerating. That was the essence of his gospel presentation. Do you really think the greatest problem of those teens was their personal pain and sorrow? No, their greatest problem was that they were sinners on the broad path to destruction. Their pain and sorrow were clearly part of their felt need but Jesus did not die to take away only felt needs. I know that there may have been some definite conversions that night but it could have only happened in spite of the speaker and not because of him. People like this do whatever it takes to get people saved and more often than not, it involves changing the message of the gospel. And why do they do this? Because they believe that God has told them to share the gospel with as many lost people as they can. Their motivation may be right but their methods are all wrong. They take too much responsibility upon themselves. They depend too highly on their own skills of persuasion.

On the other hand there are some people who believe that God will save whomever he wills and therefore they do little or nothing to share the gospel. These folks are partly right. Conversion is purely a supernatural work of God. You and I do not have any ability to convert a single soul. In a similar but opposite way, their motivation is also right but their methods are all wrong. I know they exist but I have never actually met such a person—someone who would literally never share the gospel because they believe that God will do all of the work of conversion. The man who tried to dissuade William Carey from a lifetime of missionary work thought this way when he said to Carey, “Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he’ll do it without consulting you or me.”¹ Have you ever met a person who believed like this? I have not, however, the majority of Christians act like this. They may not believe that they don’t have to do anything and that God does all of the work but if you examine their lives this is what you would conclude that they believe. Since most believers do not share the gospel then we could say that practically speaking, they believe that they don’t need to do anything.

Both of the opposite errors come from a lack of understanding between God’s role in conversion and our role. I believe that this passage in 2 Corinthians will serve to correct this imbalance and set us on the correct path as ambassadors for Christ.

Paul begins this passage in verse eleven where most believers are not comfortable. *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.* We know what it is to fear the Lord. Do we? Do we really know this? And notice carefully why we should fear the Lord. Paul began verse eleven with the words “since, then,” which grammatically is like a “therefore,” so we know that Paul is referring back to what he just said in verse ten. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* If you recall when we studied this a few weeks back we

concluded that this was not a reason for fear. When Christians appear before the bema seat of Christ, we do not need to fear any condemnation from the Lord. This will be a place of reward. Why then did Paul mention the motivation of fear in verse eleven and link it so clearly to this judgment seat? Paul did so because this is a different kind of fear.

Let me describe the three kinds of fear of the Lord. First there is the dreadful fear of condemnation. No believer should ever have this kind of fear. We are covered in the blood of Christ and this kind of fear is reserved for unbelievers. The second kind of fear is what we usually call a reverent fear. This is what most Christians think about when they see the phrase “the fear of the Lord.” We need to approach the Lord in reverent fear. We should not be callous about our worship and our attitude. We should remove our hats when we pray—that kind of a thing. I call this reverent fear a wimpy fear. What I mean is that when we call the fear of the Lord a “reverent fear” what we are doing is taking all of the fear out of the fear of the Lord. We reduce fear to mere respect. Now I am not saying that there is no such category as a reverent fear but more often than not, the fear of the Lord is much more than a “take your hat off when you pray” kind of a fear.

I believe that there is a third kind of fear of the Lord—a trembling fear. Moses had it on the mountain. Hebrews 12 records, The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” Does this sound like reverent fear to you? But you will say, “That was the old covenant. Surely we do not need to fear like that under the new covenant.” Listen to what happened when Peter confronted Sapphira in Acts 5. *Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”*¹⁰ *At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*¹¹ *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.* The same phrase was repeated in verse five. *And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.* I am telling you this was not a “take your hat off when you pray” kind of a fear but rather a “God kills liars” kind of a fear. That’s what I imagine the whole church was thinking, don’t you? “God killed Ananias and Sapphira because they lied and God might kill me also.” We know from 1 Corinthians 11 that some people in the church in Corinth had died because of their sin. By the way, what do you think the word translated as fear actually meant in the original language? It means fear! They could have used a different word for reverence but they chose to use the word fear.

I am not suggesting that we walk around with a trembling fear that we will be struck down at any second. However, if you live your life with little regard for the commands and ways of the Lord then you should be afraid of being struck down at any moment. The rest of us should be living somewhere between what we normally think of as reverent fear and “God kills liars” kind of fear. Don’t forget that Paul links this kind of fear with the coming judgment seat of Christ. We should fear the Lord now as a motivation for wanting to please him and do his will and not our own.

Moreover, in one sense Paul looks back and applies this fear of the Lord to the coming judgment but he also applies it to our sharing of the gospel message. Let’s go back to verse eleven. *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, (that is, we fear the Lord in view of his coming judgment in glory and power) we try to persuade men.* Of what are we trying to persuade men?

A few verses later Paul wrote that God has given us the ministry and the message of reconciliation. Remember that verse 21 is the message: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. But this message was never intended to sit on a shelf. We are to be ministers of the message. Answer a simple question for me. What is the number one reason that Christians are not ministers of this message? Why do most of us not share our faith? Fear! This is the almost always the number one reason that Christians use for not sharing their faith. We are afraid, but of whom? We are afraid of man, what they will think of us, what they will say about us or to us or behind our back. We fear man but Paul says that we should fear the Lord. If we had a proper fear of the Lord our fear of man would disappear.

And what should happen if we have a proper fear of the Lord? Paul says that we should try to persuade men. There's that word that bothers me—persuasion. In our day it is almost equivalent to marketing. In the ancient world the art of persuasion was limited mostly to rhetoric. If you had a way with words and could overwhelm people with your logic and passion, you would be persuasive. But in our day, persuasion is marketing and glitz and pizzazz. The person with the shiniest object and the latest and greatest gadget is the one who is most persuasive. It's all glitter and no guts. It is all form and no substance. Persuasion is the art of convincing others to buy your shiniest package regardless of the contents. But let us not confuse this modern type of persuasion with what Paul meant. Persuasion is merely telling the truth about the gospel and leaving the results to God.

We have a first hand look at Paul's method of persuasion in verse twenty. *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* That is the essence of his persuasive techniques. He begged and pleaded² with people to be reconciled to God. The number one problem of the troubled teens at the Sparta youth event was not their uncaring parents or their drug habits or their sexually transmitted diseases or their cutting. Their number one problem was that they were not reconciled to God. But Paul's message of reconciliation and our message of reconciliation is not merely to plead with others to be reconciled. Instead, he gave them reasons why they needed to be reconciled to God. This is what verse 21 is all about. ²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* In one short sentence Paul laid out the vital components of the gospel. What we need to do it take time with others and explain the parts of the gospel to them, in the way I did in [the message from two weeks ago](#). If you do this, what are you using to persuade others? You are not using glitz and glamour but rather the word of God. Of course you can use illustrations and stories. Use others Scriptures and your own testimony. Beg them. Plead with them. Persuade them.

Verse fourteen gives us yet another reason to be ministers of the message of reconciliation. *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.* First of all, don't trip over the phrase, "therefore all died." Obviously Paul is not advocating a type of universalism here. The "all" in verse fourteen is clarified in verse fifteen. *And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.* The all is referring to believers—to those who applied Christ's atonement through their belief. We'll get to that in a bit, but first I want to focus on the phrase in verse 14—*for Christ's love compels us.*

The word compel can have two shades of meaning. On the one hand it can be a type of forced action. For example: The Federal government has compelled me to pay taxes. In this example, I am compelled to pay taxes in order to avoid punishment for non-payment. I am forced to pay taxes or face the consequences. But compel can also have a more positive and encouraging meaning: Now that the weather is finally turning warm and the buds are starting to bloom, I am compelled to take a long walk in the warm sunshine. In this case, the compulsion is a type of inner motivation. When we are so drawn very powerfully toward something or someone, we can say that we were compelled in that direction. We moved in that direction because we very much wanted to move in that direction.

Which shade of meaning do you think is intended in this phrase—the forced action or the inner motivation? Actually, it is some of both. The ESV and the NASB both translate this word as control and the KJV translates it as constrains. We are controlled and constrained by the love of Christ. These both seem to be closer to the forced action however, the thing that controls us is not a tax happy government or the threat of prison but rather the love of Jesus Christ. Let's explore this idea. In what sense are we controlled by the love of Christ? This is where we have to get back to verse 21 that describes this amazing love. A love that became sin for us; a love that bore the wrath of the father for us; a love that died for us even while we were still sinners; a love that would trade our sin for his perfect righteousness—all of these are reasons that we are—or should be—controlled by the love of Christ. Another way of saying it is that we are *captive* to his love. His love is so powerful and all consuming that it swallows us whole. It captures us in the fullest sense. It captures our hearts, our affections, our mind and our will. And since it has captured us, it also compels us. It moves us in the right direction to his will and his way.

But not only are we controlled by the love of Christ, this love has made us into a new creation. Answer this simple question—who creates? Of course God creates, but don't we also create things? Don't we create music and artwork and houses and wonderful tasting food? Every person has a potential for creativity and even though all of this flows out of the creativity of God and our being made in his image, none of it is creation. It is creativity because we are using what already exists and creating something new out of it, but what did God start with in creation? Nothing. This is a fundamental tenet of Scripture—God creates out of nothing. When Christ takes our sin upon him and imputes his righteousness to us, he has made a new creation. Now you could argue the point that God did not start with nothing when he made us into a new creation. We were, after all, existing before this happened. We don't want to push the creation analogy too far here, but on the other hand there is a very real sense in which God did create out of nothing because what does the second half of that verse say—the old has gone, the new has come. The old man is no more and in its place is the new man. And where did the new man come from? Jesus did not take the old man and give it a new paint job, an extreme makeover if you will. Jesus killed the old man. Romans chapter six tells us that we are dead to sin. We are a new creation. A new creation without the guilt of sin, released from the power of sin and credited with the righteousness of Christ. You are not what you used to be.

Other than the gospel itself, the most exciting part of this passage comes in the next three verses. *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:* ¹⁹ *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's*

sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*

We have been given the ministry and the message of reconciliation, but the ante has been upped even from there. If we were merely given the message of reconciliation, we would be like messengers delivering a vital message to people. But we are not mere messengers—we are ambassadors of Christ. One of the privileges of serving as an ambassador is diplomatic immunity. If the ambassador from France gets pulled over on the highway for speeding, he only needs to show the officer his credentials and he is let go with no consequences. This is not at all what Paul had in mind. More than anyone else, Paul knew that being an ambassador for Christ did not keep him out of trouble. He was imprisoned, flogged, stoned and more because he was an ambassador for Christ.

Above all, an ambassador is given the authority to act on behalf of the nation who sent him or her. Paul immediately explains what it means to be an ambassador for Christ—as though God were making his appeal through us. Can you stop for a moment and take in the reality of this truth? When we faithfully share the gospel message with others—and I said that intentionally. When we faithfully share the gospel message—not some watered down version—it is as though Christ were making his appeal through us. There is a derived authority that is shared with all believers which makes our message of reconciliation fully authoritative.

This reminds me of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” ¹⁹ *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ²⁰ *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Jesus has all authority given to him and we in turn act on his behalf. We do not have all authority because that would make us god-like, but we have a derived authority that gives power and clarity to our gospel message.

Paul ended this section with a dire warning.

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² *For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.”*

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

If we fail to act as ambassadors for Christ, it is as if we have received God's grace in vain. Is that how you want to your life to be marked—as having received the grace of God in vain? To have seen no urgency; to not understand that today is the day of salvation; to live this life as if you are a slave to the world instead of an ambassador to the King of Kings—this is vanity. This is to have received the grace of God in vain.

But what happens if I share the gospel and they don't respond?

That's not our problem, is it? We share the truth and God converts the soul. But generally we share the gospel as if it was our job to convert the soul. It is not our job to save others. God does not count their sin against them. God reconciles them to himself. God makes them into a new creation. God made him who had no sin to be sin for them so that in him they might become the righteousness of God. We can't touch these things and it is blasphemous to take on this responsibility. This is God's role. Our role is to live in the fear of the Lord, be constrained by the

love of Christ, minister to others by taking the message of reconciliation to them as ambassadors of Christ.

Rich Maurer

May 8, 2011

^b Isaiah 49:8

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/missionaries/carey.html>, accessed on May 5, 2011.

² The word *implore* can also mean *beg* or *plead* (δεόμεθα).