

The Ministry of Reconciliation

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[0 : 00] Good morning, I'm Jeff, I am one of the pastors here at Advent, and if this is your first time joining us, I just want to wish you a warm welcome, and I would love to say hello and to meet you after the service.

My freshman year of college, I lived in Easton Hall at the University of Maryland, College Park, go Terps. And in Easton Hall, there's several hundred students, and Stephen was one of the, the first people that I met during the first few weeks of the semester.

We became fast friends, hanging out together in the dorm late at night, eating in the dining halls, having fun, spending time together with other people on our floor.

We would often have kind of those typical dorm room conversations late at night, where you sort of stay up late at night talking about politics and the meaning of life and the existence of God and all of the deep mysteries of life.

And in those, in the midst of those conversations, I had a chance with Stephen to share what I believed as a Christian about the good news of who Christ is and what he came to do.

[1 : 14] And in conversation, I learned that he, although he was interested in talking about faith, that he had a lot of objections, questions, skepticism about Jesus and about faith.

And I tried my best to sort of answer his questions and objections as well as I was able to. But as the semesters went on, we had about two years of conversation.

And after two years of conversation, Stephen remained pretty unconvinced. And eventually, to be honest, I felt really discouraged. I felt really discouraged about if he would ever come to know Christ through the message of the gospel.

I wondered if he would ever come to faith. And not only did I was discouraged about him coming to faith, but I also doubted my own efforts to share the gospel. Maybe I wasn't doing a good enough job.

Maybe I wasn't sharing it clearly enough. Maybe I wasn't doing a good enough job answering his questions. If you've ever tried to share the gospel with somebody, you probably know something of this discouragement.

[2 : 20] Let's be honest. Sharing our faith is hard. And it's hard for a variety of reasons. We live in a culture where faith is a private thing.

It's okay to be a person of faith. But that's private. It's not okay to try to change other people's views or persuade them. And so I think, if we're honest, I think a lot of us probably worry what others might think of us if we bring up topics of faith or Christianity.

People might think that we're intolerant or unintelligent or perhaps even immoral. And I think, just being honest, I think for some of us, I think it just makes us feel uncomfortable and a little weird.

And so we just kind of avoid it altogether because we don't want to rock the boat in our friendships and relationships. Perhaps maybe this is why you've never really tried to share your faith, knowing how thorny and difficult it is and how difficult it is and all the social and cultural pressures that make it so.

But it was no less difficult to share the gospel in the first century when the Apostle Paul was seeking to persuade people in a Grecan-Roman world about the claims of Christ. But nonetheless, here in 2 Corinthians 5, he is adamant that sharing the gospel is the calling of every Christian.

[3 : 40] And that's true because it is part of God's reconciling work in the world. And although we won't really get into the how or the mechanics of sharing the gospel this morning, we are going to explore the why.

Because if we can understand the why for why we should share our faith, we will figure out the how. Why should we share the gospel even when it's so incredibly difficult?

That's what we're going to look at here in the second half of 2 Corinthians 5. And here in these verses, Paul gives us at least three motivations. At least three motivations for sharing our faith, even when it's hard.

And we're going to look at all three of them. And the first motivation that he gives us is this, that we are compelled by love. We're compelled by love.

Verse 11, Paul says this, therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. We persuade others. And this is, I think, something that we should address because this is troubling, I think, to a lot of people in our culture.

[4 : 49] Not only does the idea of evangelism make a lot of people squirm in their seats and feel uncomfortable, but as we've already said, a lot of people in our modern culture would say that it's wrong to try to change someone else's beliefs.

Because faith and religion are a private thing. It's fine to believe in whatever God that you want to believe in, but it's disrespectful, perhaps even immoral, to try to change someone else's views. But let's just look at that and let's talk about that. Let's think about that for a second. If you agree, if you say it's disrespectful or even immoral to try to persuade somebody about their religious beliefs to try to change someone's opinion, if you believe that, is that an idea that you would want other people to believe?

Is that an idea that you would want to persuade other people is true? And if you do, do you see, perhaps, the inconsistency in that?

What you're doing is you're actually doing the very thing that you're saying people shouldn't do. And that's true because all of us, at the end of the day, want to persuade people about some things.

[6 : 06] We all want to, we all wish that people believed the same way that we do about some things. And so to say it's wrong to try to change someone else's views is to be inconsistent.

On the other hand, for Christians, the fact that sharing our faith involves persuasion is why it's so hard. And it's why a lot of us probably avoid it.

Persuading people of the claims of Christ, of the good news of the gospel, is hard, difficult work. It might not go well. I might fail at it. It might jeopardize my reputation or my relationship with this person.

I certainly experienced that as I sought to share the gospel with Stephen my freshman year of college. But here's what both modern secular people and Christians need to both understand. That all of us are evangelists about something. All of us are evangelists about something. I'm an uncle.

[7 : 07] I love being an uncle. I have six nieces and nephews. And I love spending time with them. I love talking about them. But perhaps no one in the world loves talking about my nieces and nephews more than my mom.

Because she is their grandmother. And if you know anything about grandparents, if there's one thing that grandparents can't stop talking about, it's their grandkids.

Grandparents have a love for their grandkids that is almost too hard to put into words. And if you are talking to a grandparent and if you don't want to hear about their grandkids, it actually doesn't matter.

Because you're going to hear about them regardless of whether you want to hear about them or not. They're going to tell you about them anyway. Listen, all of us in this room are grandparents about something.

We're all evangelists about something because we love to talk about what we love. We love to talk about what we love. We can't help it. And this is what Paul says here in verse 14 and 15 about where our heart for evangelism comes from.

[8 : 18] In verse 14, he says, For it's the love of Christ that controls us, that compels us. Because we have concluded this, that one has died for all. And that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Our primary motivation to share the gospel is certainly not guilt, but it also shouldn't be a sense of duty or religious obligation.

But the love of Christ. We share the gospel with people because we love them. But even more so, because Christ loves them. Because he died and was raised for them.

And so if you struggle with this idea of evangelism, of sharing the gospel with others, and by the way, we all do. We all struggle with it to some degree.

I think this text would show us that the first place to start is not the how. It's not to learn strategies or techniques, but it's in asking God to give you a deeper experience of the love of Christ.

[9 : 30] That's where evangelism starts. It starts with Christ's love for the world, and it starts, as that shapes us, that gives us a heart for others. And so if you struggle with sharing your faith, I would encourage you to pray and ask God to give you a deeper experience of the love of Christ, because that's where it starts.

So first of all, we're compelled by love. And secondly, we are made ministers of reconciliation. We're made ministers of reconciliation. This word reconcile is repeated five times in five verses. It's Paul's main theme that he's trying to address in this passage. And this word reconcile in the Greek has kind of two senses to it. There's a relational aspect of it, and there's also an economic aspect of it.

The relational sense is to restore a relationship that has been broken, where there's been alienation, where there's been separation. But it also has an economic sense. And the economic sense of reconciliation is to exchange two things of equal value between two parties. And both this relational and economic sense of this word are both about being made right again.

[10 : 42] And this is the heart of the Christian faith, that God is on a mission to reconcile the world. He's on a mission to make things right again. And this is an area of common ground that we have with all people.

Most people don't need to be persuaded that things have gone terribly wrong, and that things need to be made right. As we even look at macro problems of things like war and poverty and injustice and violence, what we share with everybody is that things have gone terribly wrong, and they need to be made right again.

But the Bible's unique diagnosis is that what's wrong with the world out there is also what's wrong in here. The evil, the injustice, the selfishness that's out there in the world is also inside each and every one of us.

And therefore, not just social systems, but every single person needs to be reconciled, needs to be made right with God. The bad news is that there's nothing that we can do ourselves about this, but the good news is that God is on a mission to reconcile the world to himself.

Verse 19 says that in Christ, God is doing this. In Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's trespasses against them. But how does this happen?

[12 : 06] How does God not count people's trespasses against them? How does God reconcile a world that is in rebellion against him and that deserves his justice?

Well, Paul makes it very clear here in verse 21. He forgives sin because he became sin.

Verse 21, for our sake, he made him, Christ, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He forgives sin because he became sin. And this is where we start to see the nature of the gospel, that what is offered to us in the gospel is this sweet exchange. It's this sweet exchange that Jesus is the son of God.

He's fully human. He's fully divine. And he lived this sinless, perfect life. And the way God reconciles the world to himself is that he exchanges all of our sin, all of our sin for all of the righteousness of Christ.

[13 : 10] It's this sweet exchange. And then verse 17 describes what happens to those who receive the sweet exchange. Paul says, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. And when we hear this word, new creation, our minds should immediately go back to Genesis 1 and 2.

The same power of God that was at work to create the whole universe, to create all things in heaven and on earth, is also present in conversion to recreate us, to regenerate us, and to give us new life.

To be a new creation means that we get a completely new nature, where God transforms us from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit. So the gospel is this incredibly good news that through Jesus, God reconciles us to himself through this sweet exchange and makes us new creations.

But look at what comes next. And this is where we see the key in our motivation for sharing the gospel. Verses 18 through 20. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself

through the sweet exchange.

[14:27] But then look at what comes next. And gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us, entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. God entrusts those who have been reconciled to him as new creations with the message of reconciliation.

The reconciled become the reconcilers. The Battle of Marathon was fought in 490 BC between the armies of Athens and between the army of Persia.

And there's this legend about this Athenian herald named Pheidippides. A herald is a messenger or a courier that would travel between cities to bring news before there was newspapers and internet. At the time, Persia was the military powerhouse. They were the global power in the region. And the Athenians were kind of the underdog. And after the Battle of Marathon had ended, after these two armies had fought this battle, this messenger named Pheidippides ran from the city of Marathon to the city of Athens to deliver the news about the outcome of the battle.

[16:04] And those of you who are runners might know this aspect of the story. The distance was about 26 miles. And this is where the distance of a marathon run comes from.

It comes from this story. And Pheidippides runs 26 miles and he enters the city. And he goes into the public city where all the city magistrates are meeting and deliberating.

And you can imagine how exhausted he was after running these 26 miles. And you can imagine everybody in the city square and how on the edge of the seats they were, how eager they were to hear the news of how the battle had ended one way or the other.

And Pheidippides comes into the public square with all these people gathered around, all these people on the edge of their seats. And he says to them, he cries out in a loud voice, joy to you, we have won.

Joy to you, we have won. And it was this good news of incredible joy that changed life as Athenians knew it. And it actually changed the course of civilization.

[17:07] Historians, centuries later, would reflect on the battle of Marathon as the battle that started and ushered in the golden age of democracy for Greece of which we are in debt.

Friends, to be entrusted with the message of reconciliation, to be a herald, is to be like Pheidippides. Jesus has already won the battle.

He has defeated our great enemies of sin and death and Satan in his cross and in his resurrection. And we have been entrusted as heralds to take that message of victory to the world.

To say to our friends and our neighbors, joy to you, Christ has won. The king of the universe, the one who has made heaven and earth, has made you his ambassador to the world.

He has entrusted you with his message that he is reconciling the world to himself. Not counting men's sins against them, but offering them this sweet exchange.

[18:08] Making them into new creations and giving them the righteousness of Christ. And he has given us, he has given you, the responsibility and the privilege and the honor of heralding that message.

God is making his appeal. He is announcing the news of the victory that he has won through you, through me. And I think that when we hear that and when we read that in this text, I think all of us probably think to some degree, why on earth would God give us that responsibility?

Like what on earth is he thinking? Why wouldn't he just do it himself? I mean, he would be so much better at it than we would. You would think that he would do something more rational or more strategic than entrusting this gospel message to ordinary, broken, imperfect, sinful people like you and me.

But I think if we reflect on this, I think this is where we get to see the wonder and the joy and the beauty of being heralds, of being ministers of reconciliation.

Because as we share the gospel with others, we realize how wild it is that he has entrusted us with the message in the first place.

[19:28] That although we're the ones who rebelled against God, although we're the ones who have turned our backs against him, that he has done all the work of reconciliation and he invites us into the joy of bringing that good news, of being heralds to the world.

I think one of the reasons why God has entrusted us with the message of the gospel, why he has entrusted us to be ministers of reconciliation is for it to be a means of us to experience the good

news of a gospel for ourselves.

That as we go and tell the world about the love of God, that we ourselves would experience his love. That as we tell people about the grace and the mercy of Christ, that we would experience that same grace and mercy ourselves.

And this is, if I'm being honest, this is what I started to experience as I, in fits and starts, and even as I failed miserably in many times trying to share the gospel with my friend Stephen, in Easton Hall, at the University of Maryland.

As I bumbled through the process of trying to articulate the gospel and the good news of Christ to him, what happened was that I started to experience the good news of the gospel for myself.

[20 : 55] Friends, do you wanna grow in your faith? Do you wanna grow in your love for God? Do you wanna be transformed? Do you want the Holy Spirit to transform you to be like Christ?

Ask God to give you an opportunity to share the gospel with somebody and see what he does.

Evangelism, I think, is actually one of the ways that we most grow in our faith because we have this opportunity to, as we articulate the gospel, to experience the gospel for ourselves.

The reconciled become the reconcilers. As God works through us to spread the message of the gospel, he also works in us to deepen our own experience of the gospel.

So why should we share our faith even when it's hard? Well, first of all, we're compelled by love. It's the love of Christ that compels us to share.

Secondly, we are made ministers of reconciliation. And thirdly, finally, in all this, we rest in the fact that the work of reconciliation is from God.

[22 : 08] The work of reconciliation is from God. We see this clearly in verse 18. Paul makes clear, even though we've been entrusted with the message of reconciliation, he says in verse 18, all this is from God.

All this is from God. As we share our faith with others, it will be hard, and it will be hard for all the reasons we shared and perhaps many other reasons. The culture we live in is difficult. It's challenging to communicate our faith in a world where people think you have to keep your beliefs private.

We might be afraid of what other people might think. We might be worried that they might reject us or think less of us. We might not know how. We might not know how to articulate the gospel or answer people's questions.

But the incredibly good news in this is that the work of reconciliation isn't dependent on you. Why? Because God is ultimately the one who reconciles.

He is the one who draws people to himself. He is the one who saves and redeems and transforms. We're just the heralds. We're just the messengers. Like Pheidippides, we get the privilege of saying to people, joy to you, Christ has won.

[23 : 24] But the battle has already been won. The work of reconciliation is finished, which means that we get all of the joy and all of the honor of being entrusted with the message of the gospel. But none of the pressure of success.

All of the pressure of success, all of the results depend on God and not us. That's his work. And so if we share the gospel and no one ever comes to faith, we don't despair, we don't get discouraged because it's not on us.

God is the one who reconciles people to himself. If we share the gospel and by God's grace, we see people come to faith, then we can remain humble because it's not on us.

Because God is ultimately the one who reconciles people to himself. We get the privilege of sharing the gospel without any of the pressure of sharing the gospel.

And we get this front row seat into seeing him work in people's lives. And again, if you've never had an opportunity to lead somebody to faith in Christ, I wanna encourage you, I would even challenge you to pray about this, to ask God to give you that opportunity and to see what he does, to see how he answers that prayer.

[24 : 42] Because it is one of the most life-changing, it is one of the most joy-filling, it is one of the most faith-stretching experiences that you can ever have to see someone come to faith in Christ.

When you see that the power of God to redeem and to transform and reconcile, when you see that that power is real, it's an incredible, incredible experience.

Towards the end of my college career, after years of conversation, what I perceived as failure, what, after years of prayer, and even discouragement that my friend Stephen would ever come to

faith, he eventually started to get more involved in our campus ministry slowly. He started coming to some of our large group meetings where he heard the gospel more often. He started going to a small group Bible study. And by God's grace, one fall at a retreat center on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay, he accepted the lordship of Jesus Christ into his life. He trusted in the sweet exchange of God's reconciling work, all of his sin for all of the righteousness of Christ.

[26 : 04] And his conversion was one of the most real and genuine I have ever seen. And it was really clear that though I got to be a herald, that ultimately it was not about me.

It was about God's power at work and Stephen's life. And it has been one of the great privileges of my life just to watch him grow over the years since then. It's been over a decade ago, but now he is, over a decade later, following Christ, living in Phoenix, attending a church there, married to a great Christian woman.

But what I learned through my friendship with Stephen is what Paul teaches here in 2 Corinthians 5, and it encourages me still to this day, that sharing the gospel is not about my ability to be a great evangelist, but about God's power to save and to draw people to himself.

And we get the incredible privilege of just being part of that as those who've been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. And friends, if what we have looked at together in God's word this morning is true, and if God is in fact reconciling people to himself, like he did with Stephen, and like he does with countless others, if the love of Christ compels us to reach out to others in love, if as we are reconciled to God, we are then made ministers of reconciliation, and if we get the privilege and the joy and the honor of heralding the best news in the world without any pressure of seeing any results, then friends, the question is quite actually simple.

The question is not why would we share the gospel with others? But why would we not? Let's pray together.

[28 : 04] Our God and Father, we thank you and praise you that you are the great evangelist. You're the one who goes before us. You are the one who redeems and saves and transforms and reconciles.

We thank you that all of your work of reconciliation has been completed in Christ on the cross, and we simply get to be heralds. God, thank you for the joy and the privilege of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation.

Lord, I pray for all of us here in this room. And Lord, I pray for our church, and I pray that you would give us a spirit of evangelism.

Lord, knowing that we are entrusted with this incredibly good news, would you give us lots of opportunities to declare the good news about Christ to the world.

And Lord, I pray that as we do, whether or not we see results, that it would deepen our own experience of the gospel. We pray this in Christ's name.

[29 : 08] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.