

New Year's Day Sermon

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[0:00] I'd like to think with you a few minutes just now about some words that we read earlier in! 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has gone, the new has come. The old has gone, the new has come. Well, that's the way we may feel at the beginning of a new year.

The old year, with all its sorrows and mistakes, is gone. The new year, with all its potential and new opportunities, has come. We may look forward with optimism, but it may be that we feel the opposite. We may feel very pessimistic and anxious. The old year perhaps had many joys and successes for you. The prospect of the new year can fill us with dread. The effects of Russia's war against Ukraine, the hike in the cost of living, especially energy, the bungling by governments, and perhaps also personal challenges as well. But our text, of course, isn't speaking about old years and new years, or about the passing of time in general. It's talking about a personal revolution in your life, a spiritual revolution that changes your attitude that changes your attitude to everything, including the passing of time and worries about the future. It's talking about the radical change that happens when someone becomes a

Christian. Now, we may use different expressions to describe that. Conversion, coming to faith, being born again, becoming a believer, becoming a follower of Jesus. But here Paul uses an expression that really gets to the heart of it, that expresses the radical nature of this change, new creation. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Now, creation and creativity are wonderful things. The great artist, Pablo Picasso, said, others have seen what is and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked why not.

Of course, the primary use of the word creation in the Bible refers to the original creation of the universe by God. Now, here it's not used in exactly that sense because it's not been used in the sense of creation of a recreation. It's like Michelangelo's statue of David that stands in a museum in Florence.

[3:25] It's 17 feet high and is widely considered to be the greatest statue ever made. But when Michelangelo started work on it in 1501, the huge piece of marble had already been badly blocked out and had lain neglected for 26 years.

In the same way, God takes a human being that has been badly marred by sin and evil and creates someone far more beautiful and precious to him than even the greatest statue ever made.

Michelangelo's work was amazing, transforming what seemed an impossible thing to create this beautiful statue out of a block of stone that seemed impossible to use.

God has done something that seems even more impossible to take sinners like us and make new creations of us. How does this come about? Well, there are various expressions used here in this passage that we need to look at.

And the first one is this whole idea of creation or recreation or as it is used in theological terms, regeneration.

[4:52] Regeneration is the theological term that's used to describe this recreation. What before was dead has been brought to life. Ephesians chapter 2 from verse 4, But because of His great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. Now, this is a work of God. We cannot make ourselves alive. We cannot recreate ourselves any more than that marred block of marble could make itself into that

amazing statue of David.

Only Michelangelo could do that. And only God can make you alive in Christ. If you're a Christian today, it's not primarily because of some act of yours.

It is because God has worked in your life. He has created you a Christian. He has given you new life. This is where the Christian gospel radically differs from the world's religions.

They all in one way or another emphasize what we have to do to please God or the gods before they or he will accept us.

[6:13] By contrast, the gospel tells us what God does to make us acceptable. And part of that, the start of it in our experience, is regeneration.

Now, this is tremendously liberating. If you love the Lord Jesus and you trust in Him, it is the Lord's doing. And no matter how you may fail Him, and we all fail, that new creation cannot be undone.

It is God's work, and He will bring it to completion. It's also tremendously inspiring. George MacDonald, who was a huge influence on C.S. Lewis, said, I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of.

For to have been thought about, born in God's thought, and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest, and most precious thing in all thinking.

But how is it that the dead can be made alive? How is it that sinners can be transformed into this new creation, that what was marred and spoiled can be recreated?

[7:31] Well, it's because there's something that comes before regeneration, and without which regeneration could not take place. And for those of you who like alliteration, it's another word beginning with R.

Reconciliation, as we have it here in our passage. In verses 18 and 19 here, All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

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.

Reconciliation means that peace is made between two parties that are at odds with one another, or hostile to one another.

Well, people may say, but I'm not hostile to God. I have no worries about God. I have nothing against Him. But what is our reaction when God tells us that what we're doing is wrong?

[8:44] When He tells us not just that what we're doing is wrong, but that by nature we are sinners, and we cannot really change ourselves, we cannot save ourselves. Well, we don't like that very much, do we, on the whole?

Because we like to think we're captain of our own destiny. And the very fact that we are breaking God's law, and we're not putting God at the center, means really that we are hostile to God.

It speaks here in this passage of sins, not counting men's sins against them. And that is the huge problem. So, there's a problem on our side of sin, of not really putting God at the center, putting ourselves at the center.

But the problem is not just on our side. An even greater problem is on God's side. Because God cannot tolerate sin. Sin is absolutely contrary to His nature.

So, there can be no reconciliation until sin somehow is dealt with. And we know it's the same in human relationships. If there's to be reconciliation, if there's to be a coming together, then the problems have to be thrashed out and sorted out in some way.

[10:09] But the problem here is that we have neither the inclination nor the ability to deal with our sins. It's not enough just to say, well, I'll turn over a new leaf at the beginning of a new year.

I'll make new year resolutions and so on. Because what about all that we've done in the past? And what about the ways in which we're going to fail in the future?

And what about the fact that our very mentality is going to be wrong in all of this, thinking that we somehow can do something that will set things right?

It is God who brings about this reconciliation. And again, the first emphasis here is on what God has done. He has taken the initiative.

Martin Luther King said, there's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So, love your enemies.

[11:18] Now, he's echoing there the words of Scripture. We are to love our enemies, Jesus told us, because God has loved His enemies. It's out of His great love for us that He has done something to bring peace where there was hostility. This is exactly what God has done. He has loved His enemies with this great creative love. Notice it says, God was reconciling the world to Himself. That means not only all kinds and classes and colors of people, and that's true because God's love comes out to all sorts of people. There's no one who's excluded because of their background or their upbringing or the kind of person they are or where they come from or whatever. But also, it means the world that is at enmity with God. That's often the way the expression, the world, is used in the New Testament. It's a world that is hostile to God. In fact, it's describing us in our sinful condition. But what God does, we're told here, is He doesn't count our sins against us in verse 19. Now, that basically means that He is cancelling our debt. If you're counting something or reckoning something up, it's totting up a kind of total.

And on one side of the account, you might say, there is all our sins, all our debts, all our debits. But God, in His great grace, cancels our debt. And not only does He cancel our debt, but He transforms our account by putting it into the credit, putting it into the black. And He has done all this in Christ. Notice how often in this passage, verses 17, 18, and 19, the words, in Christ, are used. It is only in and through Christ that this has been done.

And here we come to verse 21, which sounds a very mysterious verse, but it's one of the most important verses in the Bible. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. And that leads us to the third and final R, redemption. There could be no regeneration without reconciliation, and there could be no reconciliation without redemption.

God made the sinless one to be sin for us. This is what happened at the cross. Now, the cross, in this sense of understanding it as the New Testament understands it, is offensive to sinful human beings.

Yet, people might think of the cross as a symbol of love and so on, but when they understand exactly what the New Testament is saying it becomes offensive, just as it did in New Testament times, 1 Corinthians chapter 1, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

[14:53] And you know, it's still offensive today. The great playwright George Bernard Shaw said, he said in his will, that he did not want to be commemorated by the form of a cross or any other instrument of torture or symbol of blood sacrifice. So, he didn't think that the cross was a great thing.

And the present-day Baptist minister, Steve Chalk, refers to the belief that Jesus died on the cross for our sins as child abuse, the idea that God was sacrificing His Son. He rejects the whole biblical idea of atonement for sin.

For him, the cross is just Jesus showing His love for His enemies. But the question is, how what Jesus did on the cross, how did it do anything for His enemies? Was it just a sort of pointless act? Did it achieve anything?

The answer is, as we're told here by the Apostle Paul, that God made Jesus to be sin for us. Or as Peter says in his letter, He bore our sins in His body on the tree. God lovingly gave and Jesus lovingly took that burden of sin to redeem us.

It's our sin. Our rebellion against God, our self-centeredness instead of God-centeredness. He did that to pay the ransom price to set us free. He dealt with the root of the problem that stands between God and us. And it's not just that our sins are paid for and removed, but in Christ we're also accounted righteous, declared not guilty, and set on the road to living a righteous life.

[17:01] So, it's an exchange. Our sins and the responsibility for them are transferred to Jesus. And He bears the price of that sin as He cries out on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But He

transfers His righteousness. No one has ever lived a more righteous life than Jesus. He fulfilled every law and especially showed love to everyone.

But that righteousness is transferred to us in exchange. This is the road to becoming a new creation. Redemption leading to reconciliation, leading to regeneration. And these are the first steps on the road to the great new creation spoken of in Revelation chapter 21, the new heavens and the new earth. I am making everything new, God says.

So, that's what God has done. But what must we do? Is there anything for us to do? Or do we just say, well, that's it, it's up to God? No.

No. Here in this passage, it's very clear, we have to respond. In verse 20, Paul says, be reconciled to God. We have to come to a new view of Christ. In verse 16, he talks there about the fact that he regarded Christ once from a worldly point of view according to the flesh. He viewed him not as a good man or a prophet like many people today might look on him, but he looked on him as mistaken and misleading the people. Someone who was a blasphemer, someone who should have been got rid of and was got rid of and he wanted to get rid of all those who followed him.

We have to accept who Jesus is. He is the Son of God and accept the redemption and reconciliation freely offered in the gospel. Be reconciled to God. By doing this, you show that you are united to Christ, as it says in verse 17 here. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.

[19:28] And in the beginning of the next chapter, chapter 6 and verse 2, it says, now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation. So, here at the beginning of this new year, if you are not a Christian, if you have not yet placed your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ or you are unsure about it, there is a certain urgency about this. Now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation.

This is the opportunity where the gospel is being preached. This is the opportunity where you are being assured of God's love towards you, that God is reaching out to you and God is promising new life to all who trust in Jesus.

But then also there is a response that should be in the heart of every Christian, and that is that we are to live a new life in response to this. The old has gone, the new has come. The old is the old sinful and selfish ways of looking at life, of looking at God and looking at other people. We have to realize that that is all gone.

It may try to push back into our lives. In fact, every day it will try to. But we must reckon ourselves new creatures in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must turn away from that idea of living our lives merely to please ourselves. The old has gone, the new has come. New priorities. Living by faith, not by sight, as it says earlier here in verse 7. In other words, trusting in the words and the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ to us, not trusting in what the appearances may be or other people may say. And looking forward to being at home with the Lord, as it says in verse 8. In other words, we all know that we don't live here forever. We're passing through this life. And the question is, where are we going?

[21:36] Those who are Christians can look forward to being at home with the Lord. It's a great thing to be at home, isn't it? That's our experience at this time of year when families tend to get together and be at home together. It's a marvelous thing. But you know, all these things will pass in this life, in this world.

But where is our ultimate eternal home? The Lord has promised us that in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to look forward to that eagerly. It will also give us new purposes. This new life that we've been given, we are to be ambassadors for Christ, as Paul says. Now again, that's a marvelous thing, isn't it? That God in His great grace should choose us to be His ambassadors. An ambassador has a very high role to play. The representative of a king or a country or a government, He is there in that foreign country as the home country or the home government. He represents that authority. And so, in the same way, we are to live in this world as those who are ambassadors for Christ, with authority to speak what the king says, and nothing but what the king says in what the message that he's wanting to get across to the world. So, we have an important role to play in this new life that He has given us.

So, the Christian can surely say in truth the words of the hymn, I am a new creation, no more in condemnation.

Here in the grace of God I stand. And I will praise you, Lord. Yes, I will praise you, Lord. And I will sing of all that you have done. We have a new nature, new priorities, new purposes, new direction in life, new hope, new faith, new love, above all a new attitude to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God that He has done these things in Jesus on our behalf. Amen. Amen.

[23 : 59]