

Ministry of Reconciliation

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Our Heavenly Father, we do indeed pray that your Word will be written in our hearts by your powerful Spirit, changing our hearts from one degree of glory into another, so that on the final day we may be perfectly in the mirror image of the character of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Well, as I'm sure you're all aware, the cricket is on. And what a relief it is that the cricket is on. Not that I've had time to even look at it, but after the events of the last two weeks from the Sydney test, it looked as though the Indian tour might be over. They might be packing their bags, going home, or playing volleyball on Bondi Beach instead. But today, of course, they've started the third test. For those who don't understand what cricket is, then bear with me.

One day God might enlighten you and bring you to these great things. The cricket test has started in Perth today. And it's a match that we thought may not happen because of hostilities between the two teams when they played in Sydney.

[1 : 1 0] But it has happened. Admittedly, the umpire at the centre of some of the controversy is probably back in the West Indies, watching it on Foxtel or something like that. Two of the players that were particularly accused of racist or rude words are not playing.

Maybe that's coincidental. Both of them are spinners. And they're not needed in the bowling attack that's needed in Perth. So Hogg and Harbergen are not playing. And apparently, when they started the match this morning, unusually, the team shook hands.

They don't normally do that, apparently, before a game. They do it at the end. But they didn't do it at the end at Sydney, so maybe they're making up for that now. And I don't know, really, what's happened today particularly, but presumably, they're playing in the so-called spirit of the game. Now, of course, central to the game happening today was the fact that there was intervention to bring some conciliation, mediation between the two teams.

And so the International Cricket Council took some action, apart from sacking Steve Buckner, the umpire, and sending him back to the West Indies. They sent a mediator, one of their, or I think the head of their panel of umpires, a Sri Lankan, I think, Rajan Madagali.

[2 : 3 3] And he brought the captains together. There was a photo of that in the paper, I think, the other day. And to help them come to some conciliation and agree to keep playing and to play in the spirit of the game.

Now, that's just a little microcosm event. One of the most significant things, of course, is cricket in the world. But at more trivial levels, there's mediation to bring about peace in the Middle East. George Bush has just flown over there, thinking that in his last year of presidency, he'll save the world. And American presidents apparently try to get peace in the Middle East in their last year in the job.

And so somehow he thinks that an end of decades and decades, if not centuries, of hostility in the Middle East, he will somehow be able to bring about in the last few months of his presidency. Well, good on him. But he's trying to act, in a sense, as a sort of mediator between the Israelis and the Palestinians and Arabs and Jews and so on. Trouble is, I guess, that for most of those people, he's identified much more with Israel than he is with the Palestinians.

[3 : 3 3] And therefore would be thought of as being a little bit biased in that. But nonetheless, it's not a bad thing to try. I'm not trying to pour scorn on it. But he's trying to be a mediator between hostile, estranged groups.

A bit like the UN coming into Burma in September. And the role of the UN and NATO in so many countries and hotspots around the world over recent decades.

In Bosnia, Cambodia, Northern Ireland, South Africa, etc., etc., etc. It's the same, of course, at the family level or at the personal level, where there's a marriage breakdown or estrangement or alienation.

Very often, some external person comes in from the family court or a councillor to mediate between the parties. Sometimes successfully, sometimes not. In all of these situations, whether it's cricket, international warfare, family breakdown, we find very often a third party, a mediator, to bring together the estranged parties to reconciliation.

To bring them to the table, to discuss, to thrash out some of the issues, to work out what are the obstacles, the barriers towards there being ideally peace, but if not at least a sort of detente or standoff.

[4 : 47] To broker peace, bring about a ceasefire, all those sorts of things. Reconciliation, of course, is never easy. And that's why we see in the world such problematic ongoing situations.

They're not easy to fix. In 2 Corinthians, in this passage in particular, at the second half of 2 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul is primarily still defending his ministry.

Defending his ministry motives and defending his ministry methods, we might say, as well. And he continues that in this passage. That's his fundamental drive in this passage.

But in doing so, he provides us with one of the great jewels of the New Testament, to talk about the reconciliation between God and humanity.

It's almost in passing. I think Paul can't help himself from elaborating on the glories of the gospel, but it's actually the glories of the gospel that he elaborates on that provides the kernel, the motive, and indeed the method for his ministry.

[5 : 51] And so whilst his primary aim is to defend himself and his ministry to the Corinthians, who are being misled by others criticizing Paul, we find him then elaborating on the nature of the gospel of reconciliation as he does so.

Paul begins this passage referring to one of two chief motives for his ministry. And the first is fear. Therefore, he says, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others. Now it begins therefore, and therefore connects it back in this case to the previous verse.

All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade or we try to persuade others.

The urgency of Paul's ministry is driven by a fear of the Lord in the context of future judgment. Paul knows that one day he, the Corinthians, everybody, the living and the dead, Christian and non-Christian, Jew and Gentile, will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and receive then recompense in accordance with their good or evil that they've done and been.

[7 : 16] It's that judgment and fear of the Lord and fear of judgment and being found lacking in that time of judgment that is a primary motive for Paul in trying to persuade others of the gospel.

It gives him an urgency because he knows that unless people respond rightly to the gospel, then the judgment day will be an horrific day for them. Hell is their destiny.

Well, sadly, I think it's because we have in so many parts of the church around the Western world, in particular these days, a weak or almost non-existent view of the judgment of God that there is no urgency in Christian ministry.

Paul is urgent because he's convinced of the future judgment of God and the separation of people on that day.

Not a future judgment where everyone will stand there and Jesus will say, you've all done very well like young Mr. Grace in *Are You Being Served?* and pat them all on the back and usher them into heaven. No, not at all. Judgment Day will not be like that.

[8 : 21] The Bible is consistent and frequent in its warnings of the separation on that final day. If we're not convinced that the people of our world will face the real judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ on that final day, then our Christian ministry will not have urgency.

And indeed, it will not actually have a theological gospel at its heart because if you take out judgment, the rest of it falls to pieces like a house of cards anyway. I've just been reading a couple of weeks ago a book about mission in Asia and the drive behind this mission organization was that so much mission work these days is social, bringing temporal benefits, whether it's schools or English lessons or hospitals and so on, none of which in itself is bad, but it doesn't have the urgency of telling people who are on their way to hell what the gospel is.

And indeed, it argued at places that sometimes that missionary focus of care for the poor and so on, noble and good in its principles, is actually sadly undermines the urgency of preaching the gospel.

Well, Paul's fear of the Lord here is actually twofold. One is his own fear of standing on that final day. He knows he's been called to be a minister of the gospel and his fear of himself before the judgment seat of Christ on the final day drives him to try to persuade people.

It drives him in gospel ministry for himself personally because he knows that he will be accountable before God on that final day. But Paul also recognizes a fear that he has for unbelievers.

[10:07] And so while he says here, knowing the fear of the Lord, he's referring both to his own accountability before judgment. Therefore, I must preach the gospel.

Woe to me if I do not. But also recognition that out of fear of the Lord, those who are not believers, they will stand condemned on that final day. And so out of a fear of the Lord of the judgment that they will face, he is driven to proclaim the gospel and to try to persuade people of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He uses the word persuade in the sense of convincing people. It's a word that addresses in effect the mind primarily rather than the affections. And it suggests then that he's speaking clearly, logically, maybe argumentatively, debating, apologizing or apologetics for the gospel.

That is, he's seeking to convince people of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not simply at an experiential level or at an emotional level, but rather at the level of addressing minds, probably primarily is behind the idea.

What Paul is reflecting here is that Christian ministry and mission is urgent. It's a rescue mission for people whose lives are in danger of a destiny of hell, in effect, after the judgment seat of Christ.

[11:41] It's got the same sort of urgency in Paul's language as we've seen a couple of cases in recent times in Melbourne of neighbours or others who've plucked people out of burning houses and saved their life.

Just the other day, a man saved two children, I think, somewhere in Melbourne. It's like grabbing someone who's drowning before they drown. People get bravery medals for doing that in our society, but they get ridicule if they try to rescue people from an eternal damnation.

Sadly. But Paul's urgency is clear and the same urgency that we see people engaged in rescue missions today, whether it's plucking from fire or drowning or accidents or whatever it is.

That's the same sense of urgency, the same sense of maybe not quite desperation, but with an even greater significance. It's not just earthly life that's being saved, but ultimately eternal life is the aim.

We know the urgency when someone, for example, like just over a week ago is on a life support machine. The urgency there is to make sure that that person understands the gospel before it's too late, knowing that the days are short.

[12:56] But actually the whole human race is in effect on a life support machine. Well, God in his mercy keeps this world alive and going, sustaining it by his power before the day of the Lord's return.

And so the same urgency that Paul has here ought to be ours in our Christian lives and witness as well as persuasion. Not that we're all called to the same role or ministry as Paul, but we all have the same witness at least and the same commitment to the gospel.

Paul does not sacrifice urgency and truth on the altar of public approval. And that's another part of his defense here, as we've already seen glimpsed in earlier chapters.

Paul is being attacked, it seems, by some outsiders who've come into Corinth, misled some of the Corinthian Christians, and they've tried to undermine Paul's motives, his methods, his person, his gospel even.

Paul is not prepared to compromise anything about the truth of the gospel or its urgency for the sake of winning a general approval of people. And somehow he'll do it their way so that he wins them over.

[14:08] He's not prepared to compromise in that way. And so his urgency is reflected in how he commanded Timothy at the end of his life. Be urgent, preach the word, in season, out of season, etc.

In 2 Timothy chapter 4. And that motive and that urgency of Paul, he knows the Corinthians have seen it. So he says at the end of verse 11, we ourselves are well known to God, or maybe better,

plain to God, clear to God, and I hope that we're also well known or clear to your consciences. That is, the fact that he's driven by the future judgment of Christ as a primary motive, ought to be clear to the Corinthians, as indeed he's sure that it's clear to God as well.

Paul is defending his own personal motive and integrity before the Corinthians at this point. Now, not all of us, of course, are evangelists or preachers, as Paul was, but the same urgency ought to underlie our Christian witness and life.

How do we persuade others? How do we encourage others to persuade? Is this urgency reflected in the way we live our life, the ministry that we support, in our prayers?

[15:23] How urgent is our Christian witness? Paul's urgency ought to be a model for us. Well, as I say, Paul is defending himself from the outsiders who are seeking to mislead the Corinthian church.

And so he says in verse 12, Now, Paul's making a clear distinction between himself and these other teachers or claimants to the title of apostle who've come to Corinth and to the church there.

They, it seems, are judging by appearances, is what he's hinting at here. We see a little reflection of that in this letter. Remember the passage earlier on in chapter 3 about wanting letters of recommendation?

Paul says, I don't need to give you one. You know my ministry. Later on, it seems that they play up the Jewish ancestry. They also play up their place of signs or visions or some sort of ecstatic state later on in this letter towards the end.

I think that's the sort of thing that Paul's got in mind here. They're worried about the externals. Does he come from the right stock? Does he do the right signs? And so on.

[16:58] Is he speaking in tongues or in some other language, etc.? Paul says that's not the issue. They're judging by external appearances. But the right judgment is in the heart.

And as Paul has in effect made clear, I'm motivated by a fear of the Lord for the judgment day.

That's a right motive that comes from my heart. I'm not about putting on an appearance here.

So Paul is defending his motive in ministry. Well, some claimed, it seems, that maybe Paul was even mad.

Certainly that was what Festus said, if you remember at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, you're mad with all your learning and so on, in Acts chapter 26. And it may be that the opponents of Paul in Corinth are suggesting the same sort of thing.

And maybe that's what he's referring to in verse 13. If we are beside ourselves, which could be translated as mad, it is for God. If we're in our right mind, it is for you.

[18:03] That's a slightly puzzling statement here. And therefore, we're not exactly sure to what he refers. But again, I think, he's picking up or alluding to the criticisms that are being made of him.

So it may be, well, Paul's a bit mad, really. He's saying, if I'm mad, if I'm beside myself and mad, that's for God. The other way of understanding this, beside myself, may not have the sense of madness, but may have the sense, in contrast to being in a right mind, of being like in an ecstatic trance.

And certainly it seems that these Corinthian impostors are boasting later on about their signs and wonders and ecstasy and so on. Speaking in tongues perhaps may be part of that. So maybe Paul's response here is not so much to an accusation of madness, but it might be, if I do sort of speak in an ecstasy beside myself, out of my normal speech or mind, not quite rational, that's between me and God.

That's a personal thing. That picks up how Paul responds to the issue of tongues, say, in 1 Corinthians as well. But for your sakes, he says, I'm in my right mind.

I'm speaking the sober truth. I'm speaking intelligibly. That is, in my ministry of persuading others, I speak clearly. I'm in my right mind, so to speak.

[19:24] So maybe, whatever way we understand it, Paul certainly seems to be responding to some form of dismissal of him or accusation of him or undermining of his ministry and his motives in this.

With you, I'm speaking intelligibly, for your sake. If I do have ecstatic times, that's between me and God. And that seems to be the sort of thing that he says in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 as well.

Well, if fear is the driving motive here so far as it is, the other twin driving motive is love. So Paul goes on to say, for the love of Christ urges us on.

To urge on, sometimes you get the word control in some translations. The sense more is of motivation than control. That is, it's not the love of Christ demands, controls, or directs me, but

rather the love of Christ pushes me and pressures me, compels me in a motivational sense. That's the sense of this verse here. That is, the love of Christ is so compelling that I am obligated motivationally by it to preach the gospel, in effect, is what's behind this.

[20 : 46] By the love of Christ, he doesn't mean his love for Christ, which could be the case, but rather, and most obviously, the love that Christ has for him.

That is, it's in response to the love that Christ has demonstrated for Paul, and indeed for others too, that compels Paul, drives him, pressures him, urges him, convinces him to keep on persuading others about the truth of the gospel.

So his motivation is fear of judgment for himself and for others, and the love from Christ, again for himself, and as we'll see very clearly in this passage, for others as well.

He says in verse 14, the love of Christ, or from Christ, urges us on because we are convinced that one has died for all.

The one being Christ, clearly, dying on the cross, Paul is making it very clear, if there's any doubt, that it is an act of love.

[21 : 54] Jesus dying on the cross for us is Christ's love for us, demonstrated by his sacrificial death. Now how important it is, seems to me, that we understand this carefully, because we come here in these verses where Paul spills over into explaining something of the gospel by way of defending his gospel ministry, we're coming here to the heart of what the Christian faith is about.

And these days, maybe we can't take it for granted that every Christian knows and understands correctly the heart of the gospel. One died.

That is, an act passed. the tense of the verb, I mean, in some sense it's obvious, but it's passed. He's dead. He died once, then, 2,000 years ago, on the cross.

He died for all, and the for has got a deep sense. It's not just for the benefit of, but it's more, in a sense, in the place of, on behalf of, as we might even say both a representative and a substitute. That is, in our place, instead of me, Christ died. It's not a weak word, and though it's just a preposition, it's got, it's packed with meaning.

[23 : 23] Christ died for us. As he says again in verse 14, we are convinced that one has died for all, on our behalf and in our place, as our substitute.

For example, in cricket, when somebody's injured, they're off the field, and today, Hogg came on, I don't know who he was fielding for, I just heard them say, he's substituting for somebody. So he's in their place, on the field.

When that person's better, or gone back from the toilet, or whatever it is, Hogg goes off, and the correct player comes back on again. Jesus died as our substitute in our place on the cross.

Indeed, it says here, he died for all. And the all picks up verse 10. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

So all of us will face judgment, and Christ has died for all. All, Jew and Gentile, not limited to the Jewish people, all, suggesting the scope of Jesus' death.

[24 : 39] That is, his death is sufficient for all people, of all time, and all place. That's very, very vast in extent. It's not, though, a universalism that Jesus died for all, and therefore all are going to heaven.

because even in this passage it's clear that those who benefit from Jesus' death are not necessarily all, and we'll see that in a minute or two.

But Jesus has died in a sense making available a death for all people, of all places, and all time. the conclusion comes at the end of verse 14. Therefore, all have died. And the connection is that because Jesus is dying in our place as our substitute or representing us, then in effect we have died.

I mean, at one level he's died so that we don't die, but therefore all have died. So the implication of Jesus' death is that we are different. Not just, I think, here, that our sins are forgiven, but that more powerfully even than that we have died to sin as a result of Jesus' death for us.

[26 : 02] That, I think, is what Paul is suggesting. So that the death of Jesus actually makes an effect on our lives now, not just at the level of forgiving us our sins, profound though that is, but at the level of us dying to sin.

So we have here a gospel of great grace but not cheap grace. We are not left with the option of sinning all the more so that grace may abound.

We are left as recipients of the death of Jesus profoundly changed, actually, through faith. Therefore, all have died means that we have died to sin and we might put that as well died to self. And that comes out a bit more in the next verse. And he died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them. That is, the change, we therefore all have died means that we have died to sin or, in this language, died to ourselves. And rather, now, as recipients of the benefit of Jesus' death, we now live for him. [27 : 20] Again, you see, there is no cheap grace here. We can't simply receive the benefits of Jesus' death and say, well, I am forgiven now and I am still going to live for myself. That is not part of the package.

It is not part of the logical consequence of having faith and being in Christ. His death, then, for all, makes available life.

But notice how verse 15 is put as it seeks to explain verse 14 so that those who live might live no longer for themselves. You see, if Paul was saying here a universalism that says Christ died for all, therefore all are believers and all will go to heaven, he wouldn't have written, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves.

He would have said so that all no longer live. So what Paul is showing a difference is that the sufficiency of Jesus' death for the sins of all, but what sometimes people say is the efficiency for those who believe.

That is, the availability of forgiveness and salvation for all, but it's only effective, it only works in those who believe and that I think you can see by verses 14 and 15 sitting together.

[28 : 40] Those who live implies that not all live as a result of Jesus' death and of course it's through faith and repentance as Paul will explain a little bit in the next passage.

Notice then the result of Jesus' death is a complete reorientation, salvation, no longer living for self, but living for him. Some of you, most of you probably have heard of Nicholas, I think it was Nicholas, Copernicus, who lived a long time ago, more than 500 years ago, and he's renowned for the change of worldview from an earth centred cosmology to a heliocentric or sun centred cosmology, because apparently the earth is not the centre of the universe.

Most of us don't live this way, but the sun apparently is the centre. We think the sun goes round and round, that's what it looks to me like it's doing, but apparently it's an illusion. We're going round the sun. The sun's the centre. And it was Copernicus' discoveries that changed the whole centre of an understanding of the universe, the cosmos, so that instead of the earth being the centre, it was the sun.

Now of course there was great furore at the time and it took a long time for people to believe all that. In the same sort of way, the death of Christ deeply and powerfully changes the centre of believers' lives.

That is, when we respond to the death of Christ with faith, the whole centre of our life moves from me to him. And that's the implication that Paul is drawing out in verse 15.

[30 : 16] He died for all, so that, for the purpose of, that those who might live, that is, those who are believers in his death, no longer live for themselves, but they live for him who died and was raised for them.

Well, that's powerful, reorientation of our whole worldview, our minds, our living, our behaviour, our ethics, as a result of the death of Jesus.

That's a very powerful death. Sometimes we think of Jesus' death powerfully as taking away our sins and forgiving us. But the same powerful death affects our lives day by day, at least it ought. That's its purpose. So it's the power of the death of Jesus not only to forgive, but actually to change from the inside those who believe in him.

That's why, of course, Paul spoke in such glorious and glowing terms of the new covenant ministry that he has back in chapter 3. Remember that great verse at the end of chapter 3.

[31 : 28] All of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

This comes from the Lord, the Spirit. That's the ministry of the new covenant. That's the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. That's very powerful. And Paul there is saying, in a sense, what he's saying here, the whole reorientation of person, they'll become more and more like Jesus Christ.

So that when you look in the mirror, you don't see yourself so much as see Jesus, especially on the final day. So no longer living for yourself, but living for him, is how he puts it in this verse.

Of course, it begs the question then of us who are believers. Are we living for him? So it's not simply a matter of, well, you know, am I going to church and reading my Bible and praying?

Am I trying to be good? Is my whole life lived for him? Everything I do, say, think, spend, my leisure time, my work time, my relationships time, am I living for him?

[32 : 39] Are my values his values? or am I actually living for myself? They're questions we ought to keep asking ourselves. Is the effect of Jesus' death properly being worked out in my life or not now?

Yes, on the final day, we'll be perfectly in his image, thank God. But now, am I being transformed from one degree of glory to another to that day? Am I now living my life for him or rather still for myself?

What's at the centre of my life, the centre of my thoughts and behaviour and so on? It's a reminder to us of where our centre is, or ought to be. It's him.

So the gospel completely reorients our thinking. That's what Paul is in effect saying here. So then he goes on to draw another conclusion from that. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view in the flesh.

Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. Paul here is referring to his pre-Christian, pre-Damascus road life. Then he viewed Christ in what he says here from a human point of view in the flesh.

[33 : 58] He saw him as a menace to be persecuted along with those who believed in him. But now through the light of the glory of the gospel shining in his heart on Damascus road, he now views Christ and views people completely differently.

And that's what persuades him to ministry. He realizes the gospel completely reorients his whole worldview and time perspective as well as center, and therefore he's compelled, pressured to proclaim Christ instead of persecute Christ.

Christ. So he now views people as being in need of the gospel, in desperate need, because of the future judgment day of the Lord Jesus. He now knows that people need to know of the love of Christ in his death for them.

And so his whole life has been turned over. His viewpoint and orientation towards people as it was towards Christ has now changed completely. Again, Paul is defending himself against those who are attacking him.

And by explaining what the gospel is in its heart, he shows his consistency with that gospel in his gospel ministry and in his gospel motives and methods.

[35 : 04] So he gets back to the gospel as the, in a sense, the control over his ministry. That is, Paul's not driven in ministry by pragmatism, by what seems to work, or by human approval.

He's driven by the gospel and its priorities at every point of his life and ministry. Well, this newness of thinking and re-centering that comes from the gospel is so radical.

He says in summary in verse 17, if anyone is in Christ, that is a believer, there is a new creation.

Literally, if anyone is in Christ, new creation, as though it's like a proclamation, new creation.

It's an amazing change, Paul is saying. It alludes, of course, to words of that he's used earlier on that we've seen in the last couple of weeks in this same letter. Remember the creation language he used in chapter 4, verse 6.

The God who said, let light shine out of darkness, alluding, I think, to Genesis 1, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[36 : 15] That is, the God of the old creation is the same God powerfully who brings the new creation through the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the hearts of believers. So if anyone is in Christ, new creation.

Now the language of being in Christ is again strong language. It's a typical language of the New Testament. That as believers in Christ, there's a sense in which we are in him.

When he died on the cross, we died. When he was buried, we were buried. When he rose, we rose. And when he ascended, we ascended. We are in him. So close is the identification of believers in Christ.

But it fits, of course, with Paul's expectation that at the final day, when we're changed to the utmost degree of glory, when we look in a mirror, we will see Christ. That is, we'll be perfectly in his image

at the end of chapter three.

So that's in a sense the ethical conclusion of us now being in Christ as we are through faith in him. Of course, it's also the language of new covenant that Paul's being held.

[37 : 21] If anyone is in Christ, new creation, and remember that he contrasted his ministry with those of Old Testament times and by implication the false teachers in Corinth as being old covenant ministry with veiled faces in those who hear the old covenant.

Paul preaches the new covenant of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's a new creation. It's very powerful, you see. Don't underestimate the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Well, as I said at the beginning, a mediator is usually needed for reconciliation. The heart of the gospel is a reconciliation between a heavenly God and humanity.

But what is striking is in a sense the absence of a third party mediator. Now, yes, of course it's true that in one sense Jesus is the mediator to bring God, the father and people together.

But the language here is more striking than that. And I want to illustrate or show how Paul uses this language. Paul goes on in verse 18 to say, well, I should have read the end of verse 17, everything old has passed away, see everything's become new.

[38 : 37] All this, that is the gospel really, is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. Now, it could be that we simply read verse 18 and say, well, God's reconciled us to himself through Christ.

Christ is the mediator out there and he's like the third party and God uses him to bring him and humanity together again. And there's some truth in that, but it's very deficient.

Paul goes on in verse 19, which is a verse that runs very parallel with verse 18. That is, he's saying the same thing twice using slightly different language for the sake of clarity. In verse 19, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.

That is, God is not using a third party to bring mediation. God himself is bringing about reconciliation in a sense he is in Christ doing it.

[39 : 54] Now, the striking thing here is that God is the aggrieved party. God is the one who's been offended by our trespasses and sins.

God doesn't have to do this. If anything, we are under obligation to make or seek atonement. But it is God who takes the initiative.

That's the emphasis in verses 18 and 19. It is God who takes the initiative. It's God who activates a rescue plan. It's God who brings about reconciliation. It is God who brings forgiveness.

God who does it. It is God who does it. Of course, we know that from the Bible time and time and time again.

But here Paul is summarizing it so succinctly. It is all the initiative of God, which he doesn't in a sense have to do, and we certainly don't deserve it.

[40 : 55] It's not a third party who says, come on, God, and come on, people, we've got to get you together here. Not at all. That is when Jesus acts, even in his mediatorial role, it is God acting.

It is really two parties, and it is God who goes all the way to make reconciliation with sinful, fallen, estranged humanity.

That's very striking, I think. God is not the one who's at fault in any way at all. And you think about the times when you've been alienated or estranged from people.

There may be fault in your side and probably in somebody else's side as well. And how reluctant sometimes we are to take the first step. They're at fault. They're the ones who've got to come and apologize to me.

God could easily have said that, justifiably. But no, he doesn't. He acts. He initiates. He activates a rescue plan. He affects it in Christ.

[41 : 56] It is him, not even through an independent or third-party mediator at all. So in verse 18, when it says, God who reconciled us, it's again an aorist tense, a past tense that it's done.

It's completed. God has reconciled us to him. Notice verses 18 and 19 run clearly in parallel, as I say, to explain each other.

And so in verse 18, God reconciled us to himself through Christ. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world.

Verse 18 is God has reconciled us. In Christ God is reconciling the world. Well, it's the same event that's being spoken of, but Paul, to make sure that the Corinthian people don't think, oh, it's just for us or it's just for Jewish Christians, because Paul, of course, is a Jewish Christian.

The world is people of all races, Jew and Gentile, any person. It fits in with the all in the earlier verses as well. So Paul is careful here not to be misunderstood at all.

[43 : 12] Well, let me say that the cross of Christ and the atonement of the cross is always probably under attack, even in Christian churches, probably mostly in Christian churches.

People outside the church don't understand it at all. But sadly, yet again, even by evangelicals so-called, the death or substitutionary atonement of Christ is under attack.

There are books that try to demolish the argument. And a common one in recent times is that the doctrine of atonement or the substitutionary atonement of Christ's substitution in our place is actually just a gross form of child abuse.

That somehow God the Father has punished an innocent son, his child, instead of our place. How could we accept a doctrine of God that does that to his son?

The trouble is, of course, they've set up a completely false scenario. That is, they've set up something that's not biblical to demolish. you see, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

[44 : 23] That is, those who argue that sort of theology, like the previous primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, have got a very weak doctrine of the Trinity. They think somehow that God the Father and God the Son are almost separate individuals.

But it's God who's in Christ. So it's God who's actually taking the punishment in his son, but he's not sort of condemning an innocent son, you're going to die for all those people.

It's not a gross, horrific form of child abuse, but actually it's a most profound statement of love. And this is not the only place, of course, in the New Testament where the doctrine of the death of Jesus is a motive of love.

John 3.16 even more well known, but not only there as well. So we must be careful not to abandon one of the hearts of the gospel.

That God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself. And yes, it's a substitution. He dies in my place and he dies and I die.

[45 : 30] I'm in him and I trust in him and so on as we've seen. The death of Christ is sufficient for the reconciliation of the whole world, as verse 19 makes clear as well.

It's not limited to a particular race or group. It's not limited to what some might call the elect. That is, it's offered, it's sufficient for the sins of the whole world.

Not saying that the whole world benefits from it. It's not necessarily efficient for the whole world. The death of Christ removes the obstacle to reconciliation, which significantly is human sin and the sinful heart that leads to human sin.

So the human sin is taken away and forgiven and the human heart is changed by the powerful cross and resurrection of Christ applied by a powerful spirit.

Now remember that in all of this, Paul's key theme is the defense of his ministry. It may be that the actual doctrine is under attack as well, but it certainly seems to be largely a personal attack in Corinth against Paul.

[46 : 44] And so whilst he's given us one of the gems about understanding the death of Christ, his primary motive is to help them understand his ministry, his motives and methods, which come out of the gospel, which is why he's told us more about the gospel.

So the end of verse 18, God has not only reconciled us to himself through Christ, he's given us the ministry of reconciliation, not just Paul, but I think they're by us, he includes the Corinthians.

So whilst they might not be preachers and evangelists by calling, they, being Christian, have a ministry of reconciliation. The end of verse 19, the same thing, having said in the first half of the verse something about the reconciliation in the death of Christ, he finishes the verse paralleling verse 18, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

That is not just to Paul, or I think the apostles, but to us Christians, you Corinthians, with me, he's identifying with them, it's us in this together.

He's not distancing himself from them at this point. So it's a reminder to us that the message of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation, and I'm not talking here about bringing cricket teams together, I'm not talking at the social level, I'm talking at the theological level, bringing humans and

God together, is a ministry that is given to all believers.

[48 : 09] We'll have different roles and gifts in doing that, but we have the same obligation, the same ministry, and the same message. Paul says then, we are ambassadors for Christ.

Again, notice first person plural, we. I don't think he simply means himself and the apostles and those who are with him. I think he's inclusive of the Corinthians by and large, that every believer is actually an ambassador of a heavenly kingdom here on earth.

We belong in that kingdom, but we live in this, like an embassy staff in another country. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us, and we entreat you, notice the urgency in that language, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Well, there's our response. After all the statements of what God has done, for us, be reconciled to God. Do not command, it's not unusual in the scriptures for a command like that.

In one sense, it's a bit like be born again. That is, it's a passive verb, but it's in an imperative or command form. That is, it's not reconcile to God, but be reconciled to God.

[49 : 37] It is God who actually is active, and we are submitting to or responding to God's activity. It's like the verb be born again. You must be born again.

Not you must sort of birth yourself or something active, but be born again. Well, here it's be reconciled. And it's driving us to remember that we, our role is not an initiatory role.

We don't have to make or create atonement, but we respond to the activity of God through faith and repentance, although Paul doesn't spell that out in this verse.

God is the active one. But he does say in the first verse of chapter 6, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. And so our lives of fruitful faith is how we are responding rightly to the reconciliation that God accomplishes in Christ.

Well, friends, it's easy, I think, to forget, take for granted, be so used to the depth of the love of God and the depth of the power of the gospel that we begin to forget bits of it.

[50 : 45] This passage is a healthy reminder to us, I think, of the profundity of the cross of Christ. It is an astonishing gospel. It is astonishing love. It finishes by explaining it in a way that shows us a strange uneconomic deal, in a sense, an exchange.

For our sake, he made him, Jesus, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Now, that's not a fair deal. Most of us, when we go shopping, don't like to be ripped off. One of the tensions when you go to some countries in the world is you've got to haggle for buying something. I quite like it in Australia because the price is fixed, so you don't have to haggle and bargain.

Occasionally it's fun to haggle and bargain for something you don't really need, but it's quite stressful because you don't want to be ripped off. You don't want to pay a hundred shekels for something that should be five shekels, for example.

Here the exchange is unfair. Our sin and his righteousness. That's the deal. We come out of it pretty well.

[51 : 58] It's not the sort of economic deal you'd expect. It's not a fair price. But that's what Paul is saying here. He became, or he was made sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Christ, of course, is the righteousness of God, but there's a sense of exchange here. We'll become the righteousness of God, and he becomes sin. That's very strong language.

It's an almost troubling language. For our sake, God made Jesus to be sin. It doesn't mean he was a sinner. He wasn't.

He was sinless. It doesn't mean that he was a sin offering, simply. But rather, the language is so strong because it identifies Jesus with our sin so deeply.

That Paul can say, God made Jesus to be sin, to be regarded as sin, covered by our sin, bearing our sin. Because it's why Jesus says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[53 : 07] Because he's regarded as sin. They're our sins, not his. But it's deep language. we ought not skip over this and think, oh yes, I know all this.

We ought to come back to it again as we see the depth of love of Jesus for us, that he was prepared, though sinless and righteous, to be sin for us, to be covered by our refuse, so that we who don't deserve it in any skerrick may be righteousness in God's eyes.

And that, of course, ties back again to the end of chapter three, so that with unveiled faces we are being changed from one degree of glory into another, so that we will look in a sense in the mirror

and see Christ on the final day and be righteous in God's sight perfectly then, although already we are clearly righteous in God's sight now.

Well, this is an astonishing heart of the Christian faith. It's what drives Paul, a fear of judgment and its consequences for himself and others, and the extraordinary love of God in Christ.

The love of Christ, actually, is how he summarizes it. So it's never a sense of the love of God condemning an unwilling Jesus, but it's the love of Christ for us at the heart of this gospel.

[54 : 28] He died for us in our place. He paid the penalty of death that we should pay for our sins so that we might be regarded by God and declared righteous and on the final day, in a sense, from within, perfectly in the image of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

No wonder the hymn writer said, this is love so amazing, so divine, it demands my soul, my life, my all. No wonder Paul can say, in response to this gospel, we live now not for ourselves, but for him. If we don't, perhaps we've not grasped the significance of this gospel. Maybe we have just a cheap view of it, a shallow view of the love of Jesus for us.

When we understand what Jesus has done for us, no wonder Paul is compelled by love. No wonder he doesn't lose heart in his ministry. No wonder his hope is so strong and secure.

No wonder he's convinced about the future glory and the greater glory of the new covenant compared to the old. And no wonder he lives for Christ and does not seek the approval or applause of others.

[55 : 47] Are you as compelled by this gospel as he? Well, let's pray. Our heavenly father, we do indeed thank you for the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you that in love and in willingness you took the initiative in him to reconcile us to you. Not to count our trespasses against us, but rather for the purpose of us being righteous in your sight and changed from one degree of glory into another, till we stand in your presence on that final day.

Lord our God, help us to live for him and not for ourselves. Amen. Amen. Well, to you