

Be Reconciled to God

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[0 : 00] Well, this will be our last week in 2 Corinthians for this year. It's not the end of the letter, but we'll come back to it next year, probably later in the year.

So as Gillian said, if you have your Bibles open with you to that passage, 2 Corinthians, that would be great. Well, there's no secret that here at HTD, we encourage everyone as disciples of Jesus to be involved in ministry.

And I often say to new members that they should take some time to settle in. But then after a while, whether you're a new or seasoned Christian, to get involved in serving God and others.

Be part of the ministry of the new covenant. It's not just the pastors or the mature people who should do it, but everyone. So much so that Jeff, Michelle, and Jan, they even encourage the youth, some as young as year 7 and year 8, to start serving at Jade Kids or Kids Church.

Well, today we want to stand back and consider why we do it. Especially given that over the last few weeks, Paul has been describing just how costly and sacrificial ministry is.

[1 : 19] Why do ministry? Well, Paul gives us the first motivation in the start of our passage today, in verses 11 to 13. First motivation is because of the fear of the Lord.

So he reads, or he says, Since then we know what it is to fear the Lord. We try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.

We're not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but 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. If we are out of our mind, as some say, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. This reference to the fear of the Lord goes straight back to last week, where Paul spoke of everyone having to come before the judgment seat of Christ.

In other words, fearing the Lord is about knowing that we will be accountable to God for what we've done in this life. For Paul, it's the fact that he was accountable as an apostle, appointed by God to preach the gospel.

[2 : 32] Hence his goal of persuading others of the gospel, to tell them to repent and believe in Jesus. But he also knows that they themselves, those people that he preaches to, will have to come before Christ themselves, and give an account for their lives.

So often our ministry will involve caring for people in this life, either to look after them in their need, to feed them, to care for them when they're down and out.

And those are very good things to do, especially if they're part of God's people. But ultimately, we mustn't forget that if we really care for them, then we need to think about their eternity as well.

We may not like the idea of it, but all of us have to face the Lord as judge one day. So Paul has this reality firmly in view.

He's not distracted by the antics of the other preachers. That's why he talks about being plain in God's sight and the Corinthians' conscience. He's answerable to God, and he's only thinking about the Corinthians' welfare.

[3 : 45] And we already heard this in the earlier chapters, how he contrasts himself with them as peddlers of the word, those who are waving their letters of commendation.

Well, now we hear that these preachers claim to have ecstatic experiences with God as a claim to their authority. This is what the phrase, out of their mind or out of my mind means.

It speaks of the visions of miraculous encounters that they have with God, which Paul himself has experienced. But he says, if I'm out of my mind parroting them, then it's for God and him to know privately.

It's not really for ministry. Instead, he would rather speak coherently and persuasively in public. Use words. Use God's word.

Not claim special encounters with God or other sources of authority to make people believe. Paul's example, therefore, is what we ought to look to as our model for ministry.

[4 : 50] Again, our right motive for ministry is important. What we do ought to be plain and open to people. There should be no self-serving hidden agendas. But likewise, we also need to be wary of leaders or pastors who claim to have special authority because they've got special encounters with God.

No, even though Paul could have done the same to bolster his credentials, he sticks to the plain message of the gospel. He persuades with the content of it.

And all of us can do the same. No one has special access to God's word. We all have the same word. And we all need to use this same word to persuade others.

Why? Firstly, because of the fear of the Lord. He knows that he will have to account to the Lord one day. And he'll have to say whether he's serving the Lord for the Lord's sake or for himself.

But secondly, it's because it's in the plain message of the gospel that his hearers will hear what they need to save them, what they need if they were to stand before the Lord.

[6 : 05] His hearers need the plain message of the gospel in order to fear the Lord. And I know we often cringe at the sandwich board preachers, you know, the ones on Flinders Street or, I don't know, Bond Street in London or whatever.

I've got a picture of that, yeah. Where they confront people with the warning, repent or you will perish, the end is nigh. Ironically, nowadays, just as an aside, you're more likely to hear that same message in climate change rallies, actually.

Except their call isn't to repent, as it says in the Bible, but, you know, perhaps something like stop burning coal or something. Anyway, it's a digression, but we may not think that this sandwich board method is effective, but if you believe the gospel, then this sort of is the truth, isn't it?

One day, whether the end is nigh, the end will come, wouldn't it? And we will come face to face with the Lord. And so there ought to be a healthy fear that comes out of that.

So there's a negative side to that message, which is the warning. Are you ready to face the end?

And sometimes that's exactly what people need to hear, to wake them from a false sense of safety.

[7 : 19] It's like if you're dozing off at the wheel in the car, right? What's the best thing to do for that if you're the passenger next to the driver?

Probably to slap them in the face, right? To wake them up. Because this is a life-threatening situation. There is a looming danger which you need to avert. So there's no aspect of the gospel which is a warning side of it.

But the gospel message is also overwhelmingly positive, especially once you take the warning seriously. And this is the second motive in ministry for Paul.

He says in verses 14 to 15, This is the flip side of Christ's judgment, isn't it?

Christ's amazing sacrifice beforehand. His great love for us, Christ died for us all, took our place so that we no longer need to face the death ourselves if we put our faith in Him.

[8 : 29] So whilst there's a judgment that is awaiting us, God has already provided a way out of that judgment. And for Paul, all those who are in Christ, that is believe in Jesus, have also died in Christ.

That's what the phrase therefore all died refers to. We've appropriated Christ's death and its benefit for ourselves, even though physically we have not died.

And so as a consequence, the life we now live is no longer for ourselves, but for Christ. Hence, Paul is compelled by what Christ has done for him, both in heartfelt gratitude, but also as a spiritual reality that he's already dead, and now he's living for Christ.

And so he's compelled by that fact to live for the gospel as a minister for the gospel. And when the day then comes when he faces Christ, Paul's aim is to demonstrate that his life has been lived fully in line with this reality, living the resurrection life in Christ.

And so for us as Christians, there's a looking forward to what will occur at Christ's judgment seat, but then there's also looking back to realize what Christ has already done for our lives.

[9 : 45] To Paul, therefore, Christ's death and resurrection is a pivotal and seminal point in history. This is the moment, this is the turning point in all of history, not just for our individual lives, but for the whole world.

And actually, if you look at our own calendar, it points to that reality, isn't it? What year is it this year? 20?

21. And why is it 2021? Because it's the 2021st year of the Lord, isn't it? Our whole history, actually, is divided based on that moment in time, isn't it?

Everything else is BC. What's BC? Before Christ, isn't it? Now, I know that, you know, back in the day, I think it was 580 or something, they got the counts a bit wrong.

So Jesus was actually born in 4 or 6 BC, not 1 AD. But regardless, the whole dating system is based on before Christ and in the year of the Lord, isn't it?

[10:52] And so Paul writes in verse 16, saying, 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.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. And I spoke last week about how the new creation came when God spoke the word into our lives, spoke the gospel, isn't it?

The old has gone, the new is here. And Paul means by a worldly point of view, literally what it means is we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh.

And the contrast is according to the spirit. Therefore, what Paul says is that he can no longer see the world as it used to be in terms of the old creation, according to the flesh.

Now he sees it in terms of the new creation, the age to come. What happens now in life and history for him and for us is not to be considered in terms of what's happening in the world alone, but with a view to the new creation, to the new heavens and the new earth.

[11:59] The motivation and the message of the preachers that compete with Paul, however, are all about this life, isn't it? But no, Paul preaches with the perspective of new creation in mind.

And Paul, Paul himself said, I used to have this worldly perspective. Remember, he himself was a persecutor of Jesus, wasn't he? But when his eyes were opened to the gospel, from that life-changing moment onwards, he's unable to unknow what he now knows about Jesus.

Once you've believed in Jesus, you cannot look at history, you cannot look at what's to come in the old way anymore. You see it purely or you will see it predominantly in terms of what the Bible teaches us.

Now, you're all familiar with some of these optical illusions. See that one? Most of us will see one picture first and then the second picture, right? So, anyone see the old woman? Yeah.

Okay. But when your eyes are open to the young woman, you see the young woman? Then you can't unsee that picture, can you? Can you see the young woman?

[13:07] No? Yes. Okay. Enough time. That's not the main point of the sermon.

Okay. I'll give you another illustration. All right. Have you seen these 3D images, 3D pictures called stereograms? Who's seen any of these?

Yeah, yeah. Can anyone see the 3D image? Maybe a bit too far. Too far? Okay. Maybe go home and look through YouTube again and you can see it. But there's actually a 3D butterfly in that picture, not just the 2D picture.

I think the trick is to actually focus behind that image instead of on the screen itself. Anyway, you've got to believe me. Otherwise, go back home and...

But again, the point of the illustration is this, that once the 3D image materializes or that second image or that second picture comes to view, it sticks in your mind, doesn't it?

[14:11] You cannot unknow that image. You cannot ignore that it's there anymore. You know it's there. And that's the way with the Gospel and Christ's death and resurrection.

Once Paul is convinced of his reality, which he is and we are, that it happened in history, then he can't ignore it anymore. It compels him to live according to it. And that's true for me as well and I'm sure for many of you.

Now that I'm in Christ, I'm awakened to that spiritual reality. I may look at my neighbor and my friend and rejoice with them when they get a new job or they have, you know, children or things like that.

But in the back of my mind, I'm also conscious as I look at them that they have an eternal destiny to face. As I look at every person, it's not always that, but if I know them well enough and I've spent enough time, it always comes to the back of my mind that this is a person that I know and I would love to care for, but I don't want to just care for them in this life because there is an eternity for them as well.

And just like me, I know that all of us have turned back, turned our backs on God and that the only way for that person or you, me, to come back to him is through repentance, through faith in his son.

[15 : 31] What we need is Jesus, isn't it? Through whom there's forgiveness. And Paul says that when we believe in Jesus, we go from the old creation into the new, as we said last week.

They have treasure. We have treasure now in clay jars, don't we? That's a spiritual reality that we have now. We have the spirit that guarantees us this heavenly home.

And all this is possible, Paul says, because God took the initiative to reconcile us to himself by sending his son. Yes, there's a day of judgment coming, but rather than portray that as, oh, you know, God is so mean, he's just waiting to judge us.

Rather, Paul's saying that's more an indication of how serious our rebellion against him is, our sin. The problem, you see, is not with God, it's with us.

And yet, in his amazing love, God has provided us a way home. Even when the judgment's there, he said, look, you can avert that judgment, but put your faith in my son Jesus.

[16 : 39] And so that's why Paul says in verse 18, 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 people's sins against them.

It's only through Christ that we can be reconciled to God. But having been reconciled ourselves, Paul says, we're now given this ministry of reconciliation.

Paul goes on, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 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.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Now recently we saw the French were unhappy with Australia.

What did they do? I think it was something about nuclear submarines. But they recalled their ambassador, didn't they? And then after a while, okay, send them back again. But anyway, there was a time when they said, nope, we're bringing back our ambassador.

[17 : 48] But why did they do that? Because an ambassador is a sign, isn't it, of relationship between the country. It's a sign of friendship. It's saying, you're my friend and not my enemy.

Well, Jesus was God's original ambassador to humanity. It was God saying, I desire relationship with you. I desire reconciliation with you.

But an ambassador comes with a message. And in Christ's case, he came with a costly act of sacrifice as well. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

That is, dying on our behalf as though he were a sinner in order that we can be made righteous, in order that we can then have a relationship with God.

For God is a holy God and if we want to be reconciled with him, we too have to be holy. But once reconciled, we take on the role of ambassadors on behalf of Christ.

[18 : 50] That's what the reading in Isaiah is all about. Jesus is the righteous servant of Isaiah. He draws the world back to God in himself, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. And then, in Christ, that's what we do too as his ambassadors.

We are given the same message to preach as Jesus. Paul says here in 2 Corinthians, we become God's mouthpiece as though God was making his appeal through us.

That is, when we share the gospel, we tell people to believe in Jesus, God is actually using us, talking through us to appeal to them. That's why Paul says, I implore you on Christ's behalf.

He's speaking on Christ's behalf. And the message, be reconciled to God. And so, if you're listening here today or on YouTube, and you're not yet a believer in Jesus, then I echo Paul's words as well. Be reconciled to God. God has a message of reconciliation for you. He has come to rescue and save you. And this is only possible as a free gift because of his son Jesus.

[20 : 00] And then Paul continues, as God's co-workers, we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, in the time of my favor, I heard you, and in the day of salvation, I helped you.

Here again, Paul is quoting from that same passage that Bevan read from Isaiah 49. And he's saying, the time of his son's coming is the time of favor. This is the fulfillment now of Isaiah 49.

Now is the day of salvation. As God has foreshadowed in the Old Testament over thousands and thousands of years, God's Messiah, Jesus has come.

Respond then to God's gift of salvation. Find your way back to God and enter the new creation. But the message, finally, of reconciliation also comes with urgency, doesn't it?

Yes, it's a message that says, come, but it's also a message that says, come now. I tell you, now is the time of God's favor.

[21 : 05] Now is the day of salvation, Paul says. Don't wait another day, is what he says. And this applies to those of us who need to be reconciled to God, but I think it also applies to us who are Christ's ambassador.

That is, we have an urgency as well to be sharing the good news so that people will believe. We're motivated because time is shorter than we realize.

I don't know whether you feel the same way as I do, but I regard it as a privilege to be doing ministry for God. It's a wonderful ministry, isn't it, of reconciliation.

Just think about it. We're peacemakers. In a world where there's been so much war, God has called us to be peacemakers, but making peace not just between people, but with God, helping them to find God by his grace.

And so as we do, we show people, don't we, the doorway between the old creation and the new. Between this fallen world with sin, suffering, and hopelessness, every time there's a variant, everyone gets scared.

[22 : 21] There's fear, isn't there, in this world. We show them the doorway into the new, where Christ reigns, where there's not need to be fear, where there is security in our future.

Yes, of course, as we saw last week, we still do it in our earthly tent, don't we? This body of ours. We still suffer from the effects of the old creation, but our feet are firmly planted, is it not, in the new creation?

And it's planted now, not in the future. But time is short. We don't know when God will bring all of this to a head. And besides, what's the point of waiting anyway?

I mean, if this is something that's going to give us great blessing now, why wait until we're at our deathbed, or when your friend is at his or her deathbed, because before you try and get them to reconcile with God?

It doesn't make sense, does it? There was a time in my life where I think I was daunted by this whole ministry of reconciliation or being Christ's ambassadors. I didn't think I had the skills to do it.

[23 : 32] I still don't. I was afraid of failing. I still do. But if you think about it, I'm actually putting the emphasis in the wrong place, isn't it?

Thinking about my failure, thinking about my adequacy, because I'm focusing on the clay jars, am I not, when I say that? And to be honest, there's nothing impressive with any of us, with me.

Instead, what we need to do is focus on the treasure that we have, isn't it? You and I, we have this treasure, don't we? We need to focus on that treasure, telling people about that treasure and allowing God's glories, remember how we're all surpassing power to shine through even in our weakness.

And when we do, God is making that appeal through us. So let me encourage you, over the next couple of weeks and even beyond, invite someone to the carol service.

Or perhaps just write a Christmas card that has the message of the gospel on it. Or when people ask, just give a simple and heartfelt testimony of what Jesus means to you and why you believe in him.

[24 : 43] Now often when you do that, nothing happens. Nor should it. And that's fine. Because it's up to God to do what he wants with it, isn't it? All we've done is to be faithful to his calling.

As ambassadors, we give the message. We don't have to make sure they believe, do we? But God will do his work, isn't it? He will decide who will respond to his message of reconciliation or not.

And you'll be surprised how many people will respond. And when we come before him on that day, then we can give an account for what we've done, can't we? That we have just been faithful ambassadors, asking people, imploring people to be reconciled to God.

So as I close in prayer, and we sing We Belong to the Day, let me encourage you to just think over this and to consider whether you're responding with the urgency that God calls for, inviting people to be reconciled to him.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that you took the initiative to send your son, reaching out to us so that we may be reconciled to you. Thank you that we are saved from the certain judgment on the day of Christ.

[25 : 56] Help us who have trusted in you to implore others whom we love with the same message of reconciliation that we have received from you through your son.

In his name we pray. Amen.