

Regarding Christ

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] If you would turn back to 2 Corinthians 5 and the beginning of 6 on page 966 that Paddy read for us. As I say that, thank you for your condolences on the rugby loss.

I don't need anyone else to remind me of it. Don't talk about it anymore. Think about me this week as I can't get away from Aaron Roberts. He will be insufferable.

So just think of me. Well now this passage is so full of treasure. It's easy to mistake where we're going and why it's really here.

I don't know whether the extra hour sleep made the 9 o'clockers more sleepy this morning. I feel like I'd like to have a sort of liturgical Anglican way to get people to say amen from time to time. You know, and all God's people said amen or something like that. I guess that's not absolutely vital. But boy, if you don't, your heart is very stony cold in this passage.

[1 : 10] But because it's so full of treasure, it's not just a random collection of inspiring thoughts. Why does Paul put it here? Why does he write this in this way here?

And the answer is chapter 6 verse 1. This is the purpose. Paul writes this section. Working together with God then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Receiving the grace of God in vain has a very particular meaning. He's writing to Christian believers. He's writing to the church of God at Corinth.

He's not worried that they're suddenly going to stop being Christians, that they're going to reject the grace of God. He's worried that they're going to keep the grace of God for themselves.

What's going on in the church is going to somehow stop the overflow of grace through them to other people, through their witness and serving and through their generosity.

[2 : 14] To receive the grace of God in vain, vain means that God's grace will be frustrated. It won't reach the purpose for which God has given it.

Because it's one thing to receive the grace of God to you. It's another thing to allow the grace of God to flow through you. And if you don't, God's grace comes to nothing.

That's the sting of this passage. And that's why he's writing this. He's trying to get these Corinthians and he's trying to get all Christians everywhere who will read this to embrace that deep sense of privilege that we have and to take responsibility for the grace of God that he's given to us going through us.

But how do you get privileged people to get a sense of their privilege? How do you get people who've lost a sense of privilege to regain it? I think it's a really uphill battle, particularly in our age of entitlement.

There's a non-profit organisation called Water for Life or Water is Life that tries to raise funds for clean water and sanitation in the developing world.

[3 : 27] They run a brilliant campaign in 2012 called First World Problems. It was just after the earthquake in Hawaii, in Haiti. And they'll have a close-up on a little boy, a little Haitian boy, and he says this, I hate it when my leather seats aren't heated.

And the camera pans back and he's sitting on a dirty pile of rubble. Or a close-up on another little boy, he says, I hate it when I have to write my maid a cheque, but I forget her last name.

And it pans back and he's sitting in the ruin of a concrete building. It's pretty confronting. And it was one of their most successful campaigns. Because the whole idea of entitlement has become an issue, much of a deeper issue, and is increasingly recognised as a problem.

One of the Globe and Mail writers calls the current university graduates the entitlement generation. Because they get angry if they don't get the marks they think they deserve.

And if they have to hand-spot late and get docked marks, they think that's just unfair. I heard a university professor from the States this week say that she made the ruling 10 years ago that if you

handed your work in late, no matter what the excuse, you would be penalised marks.

[4 : 56] And in the interview she said, I've saved the lives of tens of thousands of grandmothers all across the country. Because university students say, I couldn't hand it in because my grandma was sick, you see.

This sense, you know, of course, this sense that I deserve special treatment, that the rules don't apply to me, that I can get something for nothing, it's not confined to any age group or any demographic.

It's as old as the Garden of Eden. It's in me. It's in you. It's in every one of us. It's costly in the workplace. It's costly in families. And it's costly in every relationship.

The most difficult question is, what do you do with Christian believers who've lost a sense of privilege? Who've lost that sense of open-eyed awe and wonder at what God's grace has done to us and what God's grace can do through us?

How do you help Christian believers who've gradually are becoming self-focused and taken themselves out of mission to others or have never really taken responsibility for the grace of God that they received?

[6 : 14] That is why Paul is writing this. And it's triply difficult for him as he writes to Corinth. First, because this group of people feel they are entitled to the good life now. That's what life was like in Corinth.

Secondly, because they'd become enchanted with a new gospel that said, God wants that for you as well. And thirdly, because their focus was entirely on the externals.

Have a look at verse 12, the second half of verse 12. The new teachers boast about outward appearance and not what is in the heart. The woman who cuts my hair said to me this week that the customers pay her to make them look 10 years younger.

Then she took a step back and looked at me and she said, but there's only so much I can do. I think it's absolutely wonderful to see the way Paul does not deal with these Corinthians.

He doesn't use guilt against them. He doesn't take out the big stick and say, you don't know how lucky you are. He comes beside them as a brother in all his weakness.

[7 : 27] He explains how the grace of God has come to him and works through him and how that's how God's grace will work to them and through them. And he says, if you've experienced the grace of the true God, it will overflow through you to others.

And the way he does that is by taking them back again and again and again to the gospel, to the ABC, to the nature of what God has done in Christ. Last week, Bishop Charlie preached on this passage.

He said, we need to come back to it. It's so full of treasure. He's right. This passage is the heart of the book. It's like the engine room that drives everything. It is so full of spiritual depth and mystery. We could spend six months and only scratch the surface. But what I want you to see is that the passage is full of the gospel of what God has done for us in Christ. Because the sense of privilege does not come from running faster, jumping higher, trying harder.

It comes from growing into the gospel. And there are two halves of this passage, both of which have the gospel at their half, both of which are very practical. The first I've called grace to us and the second is grace through us.

[8 : 41] And we need to do both together. Okay? So if you are someone who takes notes, verses 11 to 17, what is God's grace to us? It's summed up in the words of verse 17, we are new creatures.

We are new creation. Just look down at verse 17. It's perhaps the most dramatic statement of what it means to become a Christian. It is a complete transformation.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

In the Greek, it's literally, if anyone in Christ, new creation. It's a massive miracle. It's on the order of what God did when he created the world.

On the day he said, let there be light. When anyone becomes a Christian, God says into that person's heart, let there be light, which shines the gospel of the glory on the face of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 42] It's very important. You see, becoming a Christian is not about finding yourself. It's not about having a sort of a moral conformity to outside rules. Becoming a Christian, God's grace to us is being recreated.

We receive a new nature, an altered nature that was not there before. It's a new existence that begins and it restructures everything.

It restructures our thinking and our feeling and our willing and our deciding and our acting and our choosing. You come to value new things you never thought you could value before like other Christians.

And you lose some things that you used to value, you don't value anymore. Yes, our bodies decay. Yes, we die. Yes, we're still prone to sin.

Yes, we still suffer with affliction. Yes, we struggle with our own selfishness. But there is now within us a new life that no human can create and no human can destroy.

[10:43] That is an eternal life, which you could never fake. And God has made you into a new person with new relationships and new priorities and new desires.

It's great. But we have to put this back into context. What does it mean that we are new creatures? And the first word in verse 17 is therefore, it's the conclusion of verses 11 to 16.

And it's a surprise when you push it back into its context because the new creation means two things. It means having a fear of the Lord and it means being controlled by the love of Christ.

Those two things together, not one without the other. Verse 11, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others.

Verse 14, for the love of Christ controls us. Don't lose me here. You've got to hold these two, it's only the two things together that can restructure our hearts.

[11:45] See, every Christian knows the fear of the Lord because of verse 10. Just look at it, please. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

And I know you all believe that because you just confessed in the creed, he will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. That means that we believe that there is a day coming when every human being who's ever lived and every human being who will ever live will be raised by Christ and stand before him and he will judge us, the one who sees everything will judge us exactly according to our actions with righteousness.

I'm not trying to frighten you, this is exactly what Jesus taught. But this truth on its own has no power to transform. Remember in the book of James, James says that Satan himself believes this, it doesn't make any difference to him.

You can be utterly convinced of the truth of judgment, but it will by itself not make you a new creature. You have to know and experience the love of Christ. Or as Paul says in verse 14, you have to be controlled by the love of Christ.

One of the best-selling authors in the States, John Townsend, has just this month published a book called *The Entitlement Cure*. I heard him interviewed this week. He said, what is leading to our sense of entitlement more and more in our culture is that we are missing two things.

[13:19] We're missing love and we're missing structure and accountability. He says, if someone grows up without love or without accountability, the vacuum is filled by shame and guilt and a growing desire to disconnect from other people.

He says, long-term what we need is both accountability and love. Together, we know the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ, which controls us.

The word control is a beautiful word. It's not a robot sort of thing. The word literally means you take something that's falling apart and you hold it together.

You hold it together so it's not going to fall apart. You constrain it so that it is whole. And where does this come from? It comes out of the very nature of the gospel.

You see in verses 14 and 15, out of the very nature of what Christ has done for us. It's not a feeling so much as it's a conviction that one has died for all. Therefore, all have died.

[14:25] And this is the gospel. Jesus Christ died for us. On our behalf, as our representative, as our substitute, he died our death.

Why? Verse 15, so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for him who for our sake died and was raised. George MacDonald was an author in the 1800s.

He says, there's one principle in hell. It is this, I am my own. I am the center from which go out my thoughts.

I am the object and end of my thoughts. Back upon me as the alpha and omega of life, my thoughts return. My own glory is and ought to be my chief care, my ambition to gather the regards of others

to this one center to myself.

My pleasure is my pleasure. My kingdom is as many as I can bring to acknowledge my greatness over them. And Tom Howard's recently written a book and he says, actually, there are two ways of living.

[15 : 33] There's that way that MacDonald speaks about. I am my own, my life for me. And there's Jesus way, which is my life for yours.

And every day, you and I have a thousand choices where we say, my life for me or my life for yours. And he gives the illustration of childbirth.

He says, no child has ever received life through the laying down of the mother's life for months in bearing and nourishing him. Somebody has to lay down his or her life for the child year after year after year in caring for and training and providing him.

This laying down of life always entails death. And all the young parents in the congregation say, Amen. See, the source of this different way of life, my life for yours, is Jesus giving himself to death on the cross.

That's what he's done. He's stepped into our place. He's taken the judgment we deserve. And that is the basis of the new creation. See, in verse 16, when we come to see it, we then begin to see everything in a different way.

[16 : 50] We see the world through different eyes. We certainly see Jesus through different eyes. We begin to see other people, not just as other people, or people I can use or manipulate, or we see them as those for whom Jesus Christ died.

That's the privilege of new creation. It's something God does in our hearts. But I'm aware if I stop here, I mean, that's all good, isn't it? If I stop here, we miss the point of this passage.

We have to not just focus on what the grace of God does in us, but what he does through us. Isn't it lovely to hear the rain?

Let's hope it goes by us. So here's the second point. If the first point was God's grace to us, we are new creatures. The second point is God's grace through us, we are ambassadors of Christ.

This is just the way God works. He works directly in our hearts to make us new creatures, but when he appeals to the world, he works indirectly through his people.

[18 : 04] His grace is given to us so that it's meant to overflow to others, and then God makes his appeal through us. Just look down at verse 20 for a moment. Verse 20. Therefore, the apostle says, we are ambassadors for Christ.

God making his appeal through us. Now, an ambassador is someone who doesn't live at home anymore. They're sent out to represent a particular leader or a nation or a group, and they embody the one that they represent, and they're constantly seeing to promote the interests of the group they represent in the new place.

And they have to understand the new place where they are sent. They listen. They work carefully. It's quite dangerous at times. They have to figure out what's really going on so that they can protect and promote the interest of their sender.

And a good ambassador understands where they're placed so that they'll well be able to communicate the desires and messages and wishes of their sender. By the way, that's why we're here as a church.

That's what we're doing here. And I just point out to you that the apostle Paul is speaking not just about Christian preachers. He's speaking about every Christian.

[19 : 18] I want you to see this logic. Just look at verses 18 and 19, please. Verse 18. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself, us, and gave us the message of reconciliation, the same us.

Right? Verse 19. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

It's the same us. It's every believer who is reconciled to God. And it's very simple. God gave us the ministry of reconciliation, the serving of reconciliation, because he's given us the message of reconciliation.

You know this, don't you? I mean, Vancouver is not going to be reached by James and me. You are in all sorts of places. We'll never be. It's got to be every Christian seeking to take up the ministry of reconciliation by communicating the message of reconciliation.

And it's great being an ambassador, because it means you don't invent the message, but you translate it into the local understanding and language. Now, I want you to see how, if you're with me so far, how astonishingly the apostle puts this.

[20 : 42] And to do that, I want to introduce you to the power of the preposition. Didn't think you'd get this at church. Prepositions are little words that join things together.

Words like at, by, with, for, from, to. They're very important words because they join different parts of ideas and sentences and show exactly how they relate to each other.

Okay. So take the little preposition for, F-O-R. In verse 20, we are told, we are ambassadors for Christ, on behalf of Christ.

It's almost as though we've exchanged roles with Jesus. In verse 15, we're told, Jesus died for all. He was our representative. He was our substitute. And now we are told we are ambassadors for Christ. We are his representative. We are his substitute, as it were, which is why God makes his appeal through us.

[21 : 53] See, if God's going to reach Vancouver, he doesn't open the heavens and call down, now Vancouver, repent. What he does is he calls people to himself and makes us ambassadors for Christ.

Christ will not do it. We have to do this. Or take the preposition through. Verse 18, all this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself.

Verse 20, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. Are you with me? Oh, thanks. I didn't give you a liturgical lead on that. Come on. See, if this is true, it means that the great work of reconciliation has two parts, right?

It's only through Christ that God has reconciled the world on the cross. It's only through us that God will appeal with the message of reconciliation to his world. God has one son who dies through whom he reconciles.

[22 : 59] God has one people who are ambassadors through whom he appeals with the message of reconciliation. Isn't that amazing? Reconciliation, it's such a personal term.

It's more than being ambassador. It's bringing people together. That's why there's this language of imploring and appealing and urging throughout the passage. Reconciliation is a marketplace word. It literally means exchange. When you take some money, exchange it for a different currency. And then it picked up a metaphoric use for changing war for peace or hostility for friendship.

It always assumes there's alienation and separation. But the Apostle Paul uses it in a way that is completely unique. It's never used this way anywhere else in the Greek world.

Every occurrence of reconciliation outside the New Testament works like this. Let's just imagine, and I know it's hard to imagine this, but just imagine that I offended you in some way.

[24 : 05] Oh, I don't know. I could think of some ways. In the Greek world, what I have to do is I have to take some action to remove the offense and then beg you to be reconciled to me.

With God, it's different. It's we who have offended, but God has taken action to remove the offense and he invites us to be reconciled to himself and he gives us the ministry and message of reconciliation.

So what's the message of reconciliation? It's verse 21. And in verse 21, we come to the heart of the gospel, brothers and sisters.

I feel every time we speak about this, it's like standing on holy ground. I think this is a verse that perhaps we can grasp a bit with our minds, but it's harder to understand it with the heart.

So I find it hard to grasp with the heart. It has two parts which explain each other. Verse 21, first part says, for our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin.

[25 : 20] It doesn't mean Jesus became a sinful man. The United testimony of all those who knew him is that he was entirely without sin. It's not even just that Jesus somehow bears our sin.

If this is true, it's saying by a miracle of terrible and terrifying power, God causes Jesus to become sin for us.

Sin which was completely alien and foreign to Jesus. God takes to himself so closely that he becomes sin for us.

God treats him as though he were our sin. It's a terrible and amazing miracle that he stands in our place in relation to God, estranged and alienated and cut off.

He was made sin for us. Part two. So that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

[26 : 23] God takes them out of our account and puts them out of our account and puts them out of our sin. This is way more than God just taking away our sins and wiping the slate clean. You look back in verse 19, we read, God was in Christ, on the cross, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

So all the debts and all the sins and all the things that we've done wrong and failed to do that we should have done, God takes them out of our account and puts them into a Jesus account on the cross so that we can be forgiven.

So he doesn't hold our sins against us. That's a mystery in itself. How was God in Christ when Christ was forsaken on the cross?

I cannot explain. But what happens in verse 21 says that what God's doing in the cross is more than forgiveness. It's more than having a clean slate.

In him, in Jesus Christ, we become the righteousness of God. It doesn't mean we suddenly become ethically perfect. But just as Jesus Christ became sin for us, we become the righteousness of God.

[27 : 38] Just as God took something completely alien to Jesus and made him into that, now by a miracle, a wondrous miracle of God's grace. He takes something completely alien to us, the righteousness of God, and he makes us, he makes us his righteousness.

I think this is fantastic stuff and this is where I should say, all God's people say, amen. It's what theologians call the great exchange. Christ takes, exchanges the righteousness of God for our sin. We exchange our sin for his righteousness. It's not enough to be rid of your sin. You must be reconciled to God. It's not enough to be religious.

Only in Christ can we become the righteousness of God. And this is where new creation comes from. I'll finish with this. The DNA of that new creation looks like this.

It looks like living, not for ourselves, but for him who died for us. And it looks like being ambassadors for Christ. And in a great wonder in chapter 6, verse 1, God humbles himself to become our co-workers as we seek to be his ambassadors.

[28 : 58] And these, both these things, the new creation and being an ambassador don't happen automatically. Christ has died. He's opened the door to reconciliation. God is willing to pour out his grace to us and through us, but we have to embrace that privilege or it remains outside us.

just as we have to embrace it to be forgiven and to be made the righteousness of God. The same is true for being ambassadors for Christ. He's given us the message.

He's given us the ministry of reconciliation. But we have to embrace that privilege. Otherwise, we receive the grace of God in vain. Amen.