

Regarding Christ

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[0 : 00] Good evening folks, if you are joining us for the first time, my name is Aaron, Jordan and I are the ministers for this service, wonderful to have you here. If you're here for the second or more times, you'll realize we had this passage last week, right?

It's such a dense passage, we want to have two cracks at it, two sermons at it, so here we go, here's my one. So 2 Corinthians 5. You know about Paul, right?

Now, Paul, before he was planting churches and preaching, he was persecuting the church and he was very good at it. He was rising in the Jewish ranks because he was so good at destroying the church.

Now, he didn't wake up one day and decide by his own initiative to drastically change the direction of his life. No, on the way to Damascus, he was going to the city to try and shut down some churches and throw the people in jail, likely.

So he was on the road to Damascus. He had just overseen, most likely overseen the murder of Stephen, one of the early Christian leaders. So he's probably feeling fairly good about himself.

[1 : 12] And he's on the road and God speaks to him, this persecutor of the church, this big, boomy voice. And the voice says, why are you persecuting me?

And Paul says, who is speaking? And the voice says, it's Jesus. And Paul's life was completely changed.

And Paul was not the change agent here. He wasn't weighing up his options and settled on Christianity. No, the sole catalyst for this extreme course change was an encounter with God, was the message from God.

And Paul describes this change in this passage. I think you read this passage and it's got to be, I think it has to be autobiographical. Like he's describing his experience of coming to faith.

Look at verse 17 there. If anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. This is what happened to Paul and he wants us to experience this as well.

[2 : 18] So I think the rest of it, most of it here is just him unpacking what that means. Right? What this new creation thing, what this all means.

And to do that, he talks about, I think, two things primarily in the passage. He has two significant interests in the passage. First, he just tells us the gospel. Just the straight gospel.

He just tells it. Just lays it out what the gospel is. And second, he explains to us what happens when we become a new creation because of the gospel. So he presents the heart of the gospel and then the purpose of the gospel.

I'll start one more time just to be clear. God changes us when we come to faith. But what God does in us is preceded logically by what God did for us, which is the gospel.

So Paul makes sure we understand the gospel and also how it changes us. Now, why am I being so bedantic about sort of separating those two things out and explaining them right there?

[3 : 21] Well, it's because this is what Paul is trying to do. We don't get saved by believing the gospel and then grow by trying hard to live out in some other way.

The gateway is not the gospel and then there's some other methodology of change. No. Believing the gospel is not only the way we meet with God.

Meet God. It's also the way we grow in our faith. So that's what the passage is about. It's about, one, the gospel, and two, gospel change.

That's the structure of the sermon. Let's start off by looking at the gospel. Well, now you might be thinking, come on, I know the gospel. I know the gospel. I've been around. I've been around. I know these things.

Folks, I'll say it one more time. The gospel is not just our ticket into heaven. It's not just our ticket into heaven. It's not just to get your ticket stamped. And then, you know, after that you can walk away from it and start studying Richard Warren, Catholic mystics, and freaky stuff, and be all up here with real intellectual Christianity.

[4 : 26] No, this is, it's not like this is kind of like the baby stuff and then these, all these high-level doctrines, you know. Paul's single-mindedness, his incredible fortitude, came from the fact that he stayed in the gospel.

He lived in the gospel. It was the controlling factor of his life. So the gospel of Jesus is not just our entry point to faith. It's what keeps us going. You'll see it in Paul's writing.

As we continue to study Corinthians, you'll see no matter what Paul is talking about, and maybe it's kind of one of these kind of higher kind of theological things, you know, he wants us to kind of grasp, he always comes back to what Jesus has done for us.

And that's because when we lose sight of the gospel, your Christian life will drag. It will have a sense of lag. I'll come back to that. All right, so how does Paul explain the gospel of Jesus?

Well, I think the key verses in the explanation are verses 19 and 21. Okay, let me read those to you. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

[5 : 38] Verse 21. For our sake he made him, that's Jesus, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we may become the righteousness of God.

Okay, verse 19 first. We are reconciled with God. That's what it's saying.

We are reconciled with God. Now that presupposes something, that at some point we were unreconciled with God, that we had a problem with God. Now I think perhaps you're here and you're not a Christian.

If you're here and you're not a Christian, welcome. Fantastic. Welcome to church. Love it. You might say, I actually don't have a problem with God. And actually many people who are not Christians will say, I actually have no problem with God.

I'm just doing my own thing. I'm kind of, it's like I just keep a polite distance, like a polite distance from God. Like the person in the office at school that I don't have any shared hobby.

[6 : 36] I don't share hobbies with them. We're from different backgrounds. And so we kind of just do our own thing and they do their thing, I do my thing. God does his thing, I do my thing. It's great. It works really well.

I mean, we can dress it up like that, but underneath it at all, it is a rejection of God. Because you're saying, God has no right really to tell me how I can live my life.

God has no right to tell me how the universe works. God has no right to say, this is right and this is wrong. C.S. Lewis talks about this.

He says this, there's no word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word interference. This is what he's talking about before here as a Christian. God, you don't have any right to tell me how to live.

Which is rich really, thinking about it, considering that God created everything. Was the agent for all life, including you, including us. And he wants to be in relationship with you, as is the order of the universe.

[7 : 37] So we are unreconciled with God if we're not trusting in Jesus. So there is a break in that relationship. People don't want God over them. Maybe God sort of beneath them as a philosophical dialogue partner.

Or something that, you know, is cool to think about. But not above them. So, reconciliation is needed. Because that's not how the universe is ordered.

That there is a God and it's not us. And we're under God. That's how it works and it's beautiful. So reconciliation is needed because we're alienated from God.

And that alienation is on us. It's us that rejected God, not the other way around. Verse 14 says, Christ died for all. It's us that reconciled. It's us that pushed away, not God.

One of the remarkable aspects of the gospel is here, is in this idea here. Is that God personally takes initiative to reconcile humanity with himself. So we push God away, but he makes the initiative to make it right.

[8 : 42] You know, in a normal situation like life, marriage, like a workplace problem, a war or something. Often there's like a third party that kind of mediates and initiates and sort of gets everything sorted like a counselor or United Nations or something like that, right?

But here, it's the wronged party that initiates action. It's God who initiates action to make things right. And how does he do that? How does God reconcile us with him?

It's verse 21. For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. So what does that mean?

I was talking about the cross. Sinless Jesus paid the price for all our wrongdoing. The gospel is good news.

You've heard this before. The gospel is good news. It is not good advice. It is not good advice on how to connect with God. Now, the Greek term there for the gospel is evangelion. Now, it's a word used to describe.

[9 : 44] It wasn't originally a Christian word, but it's a used word to describe like big news.

Something's happened. Like, you've won a war. There'll be an evangelion. What a war. So the evangelion of God is this.

God entered the world as Jesus to achieve salvation that we couldn't ourselves. Jesus lived the life we couldn't and paid the penalty we owe for rejecting God. Now, if you are new to this Christian thing or you're not a believer at all, you might think, well, that just sounds a bit brutish, doesn't it? Sounds a bit brutish. Like, why can't God just kind of get over it? Sweep it under the carpet? Well, think about the alternative. The alternative is a God who is...

There's a couple of alternatives. One, there's a God who is only placated by back-breaking moral effort. That we do really, really, really, really, really well at living life, and that makes God happy, and so that's how we're cool with him.

Would your life withstand that kind of scrutiny? Is that the scenario that you want? No, I don't. The other alternative is what C.S. Lewis, he talks about this.

[10 : 55] He says that, you know, the alternative is to think of God as a senile, old benevolence who sort of tolerates everyone, everything, no matter kind of what. It just kind of, like, sweeps it under the carpet.

He tolerates human traffickers who send families out ill-equipped and die washed up on beaches. Is that the God we want? That's the alternative. No.

No, we want a God that's just, and we want a God that's loving. And because God is just, and because God is loving, there must be a cost to sin. But Jesus paid that cost. Now, the result, the result of that, the result of the cross is we are reconciled with God, which means God treats me, God treats you the way Jesus deserves to be treated.

Isn't that wonderful? God treats you the way Jesus deserves. Not the way you deserve, the way Jesus deserves. God doesn't hold your record against you.

He looks at Jesus' record and applies that to you. That is unimaginably good news. We are not reconciled to God through our efforts, our records.

[12 : 05] That's what other religions are about. That's what other religions do. We are reconciled with God through his efforts, through Christ's record.

So that's the gospel. That is the gospel. And folks, if you are feeling a bit stuck in your faith, perhaps you have left that truth behind.

If you take just the basic message of the cross out of your faith, you take away the idea of Christ's substitutionary atonement, and you replace it with moralism.

You replace it with trying to be really, really good. Or replace it with a faith that is just intellectual, without the relationship.

It will take from you the joy and the amazement that should come from faith, that should arise out of faith. And it will rob the gospel of its power to change you.

[13 : 19] Let me summarize this first section before moving on. Okay, remember that one of the key lines, I'll summarize it from a slightly different angle. As I've sort of read the scriptures out here, you notice they keep saying this line, in Christ, or in him.

What does that in him mean? That's very, very important. To be in Christ, which is what happens when we become a Christian.

To be in Christ means two things. One, the Father accepts us as if we have done all that Jesus has done. But it also means that the life of Christ, the Holy Spirit, comes into our life and changes us.

It makes us new people. So let me repeat that again. The gospel is not just a doctrine we give mental assent to, although it is.

It's not just that. It's something we experience in our hearts, and it's why Paul keeps coming back to it. I'll give you an example of this. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul wants to take up an offering for the poor in Jerusalem, because the poor are really poor.

[14:27] Now, he doesn't go, folks, I started your church. I'm the boss. Just do what I say. He doesn't do that.

And he doesn't say, folks, let me tell you some stories about some really poor people. You're really, really, really poor. It's really hard. You know, it made them feel guilty. You know, he could have done that, but he doesn't do that.

What does he do? There's no big emotional story about how bad they have in Jerusalem. He says this. He says this. This is from 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

What does he do? He brings them back to the gospel. The generosity of Christ in the gospel, because the gospel doesn't just save us, it changes us.

Right. That comes to our second point now. Second point. How does the gospel change us? So that's the gospel. How does the gospel change us? There are three ways it changes us that are mentioned in this passage. The first one, a new compulsion.

[15:35] Two, a new perspective. And three, a new vocation. New compulsion, new perspective, new vocation. I'll do this quickly. A new compulsion. Look at verse 14 there. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

And he died for all, that those who... live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised. Okay, what is all this died business about?

So Paul says, Christ died for him, Christ died for him, and that caused a death in him. So you'd think it would say something like this, Christ died for me, and that caused me to live.

That this big livey, livey thing happened, right? It doesn't say that. It says he died. He's trying to say, and I died. Because Christ died, I died.

And what is that death? It's the death to his own sovereignty. It's a death to him saying, I'm in complete control of my alone life. I'm the captain of my boat. I'm the whatever, you know. Paul says, I no longer live for myself, but for Jesus.

[16:40] That's the result. It's not about me anymore. I died to the idea that I live just for myself now. So the gospel, through the Holy Spirit, changes our heart, and it changes our inner motives. It changes our compulsions.

So that as believers, we're no longer controlled by whatever controls us. That could be material stuff, like I just have to have more stuff. It could be status. I've got to achieve. Keep going up the ladder.

I've got to go to the best university, the best school, get the best job, have the nicest time, have the most beautiful wife or beautiful husband and perfect kids, whatever it is. It could be sensual satisfaction. I just live to be, kind of be like, feel good.

That's what I want to do. I just want to feel good and have adventures. No, we're not controlled by these things anymore, even though they could be really good things. We're not controlled by them. We're controlled by the love of Christ. Paul's compulsion has been transformed.

I mean, think about this. Before his conversion, his major motivation was what? Murderous bigotry. But the knowledge that someone loves you is incredibly transformative.

[17:42] And Paul found himself an object of unconditional love. This murderer, this killer of Christians, this destroyer of church, found himself the object of unconditional love.

How does he know he was the object of that? Because the passage says, he knew this one died for all. He died for Paul. He died for you.

So Christ in a tree at one point was this object of hatred for Paul. And now it's an object of Paul's love and the controlling force in his life.

Paul was a new creation with a new compulsion, a new driving motivation. Driven by bigotry, Paul destroyed churches. Now he plants them. Isn't that just mad?

Isn't that wild? Augustine, have you heard of Augustine? He was a 4th century theologian, a bishop in North Africa, who was most likely a sex addict.

[18:40] Shortly after his conversion, his conversion, he ran into a former mistress on the street. Runs into her. He sees her. Recognizing her, he turns around, starts walking the other way.

Because his drive was sensuality. But he's been converted. He sees his mistress. Walks away. And the woman, surprised at seeing Augustine, and equally surprised at his kind of quick reversal there, shouts out, Augustine, it is I.

And Augustine continued to move away and replied, yes, but it is not I. I just think that's, isn't that beautiful? This is the experience of Christians.

What once drove us is conquered. Okay, the next change resulting from the gospel, a new perspective. Look at verse 16 there.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh, even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. The gospel has changed Paul's attitude towards others and Jesus.

[19 : 48] Now, we've talked about his attitude changed direct towards Jesus. Let's talk about his change towards people. We regard no one according to the flesh. To regard someone according to the flesh is to look at others and divide them up into categories that matter most to us.

So the false teachers, the super apostles in Corinth, these dodgy kind of rhetoricians who came into the church and were trying to change the gospel there, they were professional speakers.

And it was at a time when this was the thing that young princes, this is what young wealthy folks were taught. They were taught to speak really well publicly. They were taught to be debaters, rhetoricians, sophists.

So that was what they were really into. So they wrote Paul off because he wasn't a very good speaker. You're nothing, you're nothing. I think we do this. If you're really into politics, you may, if your heart is sort of unhealthy, you may sort of just see people as either liberal or conservative. If you're really into career, if that's your driving force, if this is what your life is all about, you rank people. Don't you? Astronauts up here. I was trying to pick something that I knew no one was here.

[21 : 04] Astronauts, right? Janitors down here. I remember somebody asking me what my father did for a living and that somebody had done quite well in life and this was something important to them, what your parents did.

My father was a janitor and so the conversation got quite awkward. They said, what does your father do? I said, he was a janitor and they didn't know what to say to me next.

It was very awkward and they were embarrassed because they thought I was embarrassed by that and I probably was and wasn't. It was the best job he could get and he worked very hard.

But that awkwardness there was all around categorizing, wasn't it? It was like, there are people up here and there are people down here and these people, we weld or attribute goodness to this and badness to this.

Why? Folks, the gospel wants to give us a new perspective or wants to destroy these type of categorizations. So through the Holy Spirit we reject racism, ageism, classism.

[22 : 22] We reject the idea of cool and not cool. We reject the modern tendency to value people in such shallow categories.

We reject that. We must also reject the idea that God can only save some people. The passage says Christ died for all. So the new gospel outlook means we see everybody as someone whom Christ died for.

So to say that that person is too together, too successful, too well thought out, to accept Christ. That's a fiction.

To say somebody is too sinful, too far gone, too much of a write-off, to become a Christian, that is also a fiction. We need to cast these ideas from our minds. Christ died for all, the passage says. Christ died for all. And he's calling you to be part of that saving process. And my last point and quickly now.

[23 : 29] So how does the gospel change us? One, a new compulsion, a new driving force, two, a new perspective, and lastly, a new vocation.

Right, a new vocation. I think verses 19 and 20 are the key ones for this. Verse 19, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

You hear that? And entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, verse 20, we are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us, working together with him.

Then we appeal to you. That's chapter 6, verse 1. God has given us a message, the gospel, to pass it on. Folks, this is God's strategy. This is God's play.

Okay. It's you. That's God's play. What is an ambassador?

[24 : 37] An ambassador is a representative. Very interesting, just to unpack that a little bit here. The first word in the Greek, so the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

So our translation is just, it is a translation, right? English translation. And the sentence structures in Greek are different to that in English. The first word in Greek, in verse 20, is the word for, for Christ. It's different in English, right? The first word in Greek, it's a really important word, is for Christ. Now, there's a few different words in Greek for for, that are translated for. In this case, the Greek word is hooper, which means substitute.

Now, it's used a few different ways, sort of across these passages here, but when I think I'm going to explain them, something will happen in our brains, like an aha, hopefully. So, have a look at verse 14, it's more obvious there.

One died for all, for all, one died hooper all, one died instead of, as a substitute, for all. So you know that, right? That lands, okay, you've just heard the gospel, that lands, okay, in your mind.

[25 : 45] One died instead of us, Christ died instead of us, one died hooper all. Okay, back to all ambassadors for Christ. Same word. We are ambassadors instead of Christ.

On the cross, Christ substituted himself for us, and now it's reversed in a way. We substitute for Christ. We are ambassadors for Christ.

This is God's play. Let me throw some more ideas that might be unhelpful in unpacking this. Now, I'm not going to land the plane here in terms of application. I'm just going to do what Paul does, tell you what an ambassador is, and you work out how that implies to you.

So I know a guy who knows a guy who's an ambassador. So my friend spoke to their friend who is an ambassador recently and said, so what did you do?

They're not an ambassador anymore. He said, so what did you do for your job? And the guy says, well, let me tell you. He says, number one, an ambassador. So this was a guy who was a Canadian ambassador in foreign countries.

[26 : 53] He said, you are given instructions. That's what you do. You're given instructions. So it's not like an ambassador goes off as some rogue kind of folk and he just does his own thing. The ambassador doesn't invent the message.

You say and do what the home country wants. So that was the first thing he said. Second thing, you keep the people at home aware of what's really going on. And three, you represent the interests of the home country.

That's what an ambassador does. Let me add to that. Your status as an ambassador is not determined by the place that you're living in. It's determined by your appointed home country.

If you're a Canadian ambassador, your status is put together by Canada. They declare who you are, what you are. Lastly, being an ambassador is a risky business.

This whole Benghazi thing with Hillary Clinton, this is all about the death of an ambassador in Libya, isn't it? And ambassadors die. So, being called an ambassador is a helpful metaphor, but it's not the complete picture.

[28 : 00] I think Paul fills it out at the beginning of chapter 6 there, in verse 1, because you could hear that and go, I'm completely overwhelmed by that. There's no way I could be an ambassador. But again, you're not a rogue agent parachuting into some enemy territory relying on your own guile.

No. Look at chapter 6, verse 1. You're working together with God. So you are ambassadors. God is working through us. You are an ambassador for Christ, and God will work through you.

That's God's play. God's going to work through you. Okay, I'll finish up here. chapter 6, verse 1.

We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. That's how Paul closes out his thoughts here. It's pretty hard-hitting, isn't it? We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

The word vain here means fruitless. And that means it's actually possible to hear the gospel and have no effect on you. It's possible to start well and your faith become tired, and to drag on.

[29 : 07] It's possible to actually hear the gospel and then after a while for you to feel like it's sucking all the fun out of your life or ripping you off, thinking about all the things you could be doing. It's possible for that to happen instead of it being the source of life for you.

So folks, we should pray. We should pray for ourselves. We should pray that we are saturated by the gospel, by just the most basic message of Jesus. We should pray that this will lead to and that we would know a new gospel compulsion in our life, a new gospel perspective, and the gospel

vocation of being ambassadors for Christ.
Amen.