

2 Corinthians 5:11-21 AM

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[0 : 00] Let's bow ahead and pray as we stand. Our Heavenly Father, you've told us that we don't live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from your mouth.

! And we ask now that you would give us the hunger, the spiritual hunger that we need to receive the bread from heaven that you have for us this morning, so that we might never hunger again. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated. And if you would turn, please, to 2 Corinthians 5, just read for us on page 966. This morning we are on holy ground.

This passage, 2 Corinthians 5, takes us deeper into the heart of what God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son were doing on the cross than any other passage in the Bible.

And as we continue our series on the cross and what it means for us today, there's such power and new life in what the Apostle writes here, he compares it to a new creation.

[1 : 07] And he's writing to Christians in Corinth who have almost completely lost the sense of privilege of belonging to Christ. A new crop of teachers has come along.

You remember using the words of Christianity but changing their meaning. And their message has found a deep resonance in the people in Corinth because it focuses on the good life now.

In fact, they've written books about this. And this is the mark of losing sight of the privilege of what it means to belong to Christ. In verse 12, they have fallen in love with outward appearances.

They've become self-focused and superficial. They're embarrassed. They're even ashamed of the cross of Jesus Christ.

And again, it's just lovely to see what the Apostle does. He doesn't get out the big stick and make them feel guilty. You don't know how lucky you are, you wretched Corinthians.

[2 : 11] What he does is he takes us to the cross. And the passage is full of the cross of Christ. Verse 14, one has died for all.

Verse 15, he died for all. Verse 15, he died for their sake. Verse 18, God reconciled us to himself in Jesus.

Verse 19, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. And then in verse 21, the most astonishing verse of all.

So I've got two points this morning, two very simple points. The first is this, what did God do at the cross? And that's verse 21. And the second point is what difference does that make to us today? So number one, what did God do at the cross? And the answer we have from verse 21 is he made a great exchange.

[3 : 21] Verse 21 is one of the clearest and most shocking ways into the heart of the gospel. It remains one of my favorite texts in the scriptures. And I feel I kind of grasp it.

And then my heart says, no, you haven't grasped it at all. And I think that's probably where we ought to be with it. Look at the verse, please. Verse 21. Let's take those two lines separately, shall we?

Number one. This is what lies behind the degradation and shame and rejection and agony of Jesus on the cross.

God took the sinless, perfect son of God and made him to be sin. It's not that Jesus became a sinful person.

The United Testimony of all who knew him and of all the scriptures is that he knew no sin. His life was entirely without sin. He never sinned. It's not even just, as it says in other places, that he somehow bears our sin.

[4 : 48] It's not just that he takes our sin to himself. But by a terrible and awesome miracle of power, God the Father made Jesus our sin.

Sin which is utterly alien. It's completely foreign to Jesus Christ. By a wonderful and terrible transformation, God makes him to be sin and treats him as though he is our sin. It is only this that can explain the terror of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's only this, really, that can explain the cry on the cross, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And notice, please, it happens, for our sake. For our sake, he made him who knew no sin to be sin. This is what he was doing out of his sheer love and goodness. And the second phrase is just as remarkable. And it gives us the reason why God made him to be sin. [5 : 57] So that in him, we might become the righteousness of God. This is way more than just forgiveness. God is not just wiping the slate clean.

It's not that the negative sins we have committed are taken away and we can begin afresh. It's not just that our guilty consciences and our offences against the Holy God are paid for. But in a miracle of mind-blowing transformation, we become the righteousness of God. Not just we become righteous.

We become the righteousness of God. It's amazing, isn't it? And this is what theologians call the great exchange. Christ exchanges the righteousness of God that is his for our sin so that we can exchange our sin for the righteousness of God.

And we're used to prisoner exchanges and all sorts of exchanges in our world that seem terribly unfair and unjust. And it took 1,500 years for the Christian church to come to terms with the stunning wonder of this.

[7 : 22] In 1518, soon after God opened the eyes of the monk, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther, to his gospel, he preached a famous sermon.

And the title of the sermon was called Two Kinds of Righteousness. And there are two kinds of righteousness. The first is human righteousness. That's the righteousness that we produce. Our good deeds of kindness, our sacrifices, our love. And they're great. And they're all very fine. But they cannot make us acceptable to God. But there is a different kind of righteousness. It is the righteousness of God himself. And Luther calls this the alien righteousness. And it's alien because it is outside of us.

It is not produced by us. It is apart from me. It is not inherently mine. It belongs to Christ Jesus. And it becomes mine in Christ Jesus when I put my trust in him.

[8 : 30] And then I can say, as Luther says, mine are Christ's living. Mine is Christ's doing and speaking, his suffering and dying. Mine as much as I had lived, done, spoken, suffered and died as he did.

That is the great exchange. Or as Luther called it, the fralike vessel, the joyous exchange. It's not that suddenly we become ethically pure and perfect in our thinking and acting, just in case anyone should think that.

Though it will make us hunger and thirst for righteousness and will change our behaviour. But we all still struggle with sin. We all fail. And we will every day until we die.

But just as Christ was made sin for us, we are made the righteousness of God. Just as God made Jesus something completely alien to him, now by a miracle of God's grace, he makes us something completely alien to us.

He makes us the righteousness of God. It's hard to take in, isn't it? I think it is. So before we look at what difference it makes in our lives now, I just say two other things which will help us to hold on to it.

[9 : 53] And the first is this. Verse 21 is God's doing, not our doing. To look back at the beginning of that paragraph in verse 18, all this is from God.

Who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation reconciliation. That is, in Christ, that is in Christ on the cross, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

What happened on the cross reaches deep into the very nature of God. As he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, it's not that the loving son buys off the angry father.

God was in Christ. He was there in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Not that God's somehow generally in Christ since the incarnation, but somehow as Jesus was forsaken by God the father on the cross, God the father is in Christ.

It is a mystery. There is no theologian who understands this. But it means that the father is not remote at a distance, detached from the pain. Somehow the father bears the pain as well.

[11 : 18] On the cross, it is God's deliberate choice not to reckon our sins against us because he's made Jesus to be our sins so that we might become the righteousness of God.

And since it is God who makes us to be his righteousness in Christ, it means that we have his eternal approval and his smile.

And that begins to free us from needing the applause of others and protects us from the love of outward appearances because there's nothing and there's no power in heaven or earth that can change this or take it away from us.

It's God's doing. The second thing to point out is that the action described in this verse is complete. There's nothing that can be added or taken away from it.

You could not have a more absolute statement of what God has done in the death of Jesus. Jesus has been completely made sin for us so that we have been made completely the righteousness of God.

[12 : 29] Okay? The problem is we don't feel it, do we? We don't feel as though we're the righteousness of God. I've never met a Christian who does. We still feel...

We are still prone to sin and we suffer and we struggle with our selfishness. We're so very conscious of our sins and failings and what we've done and then this vast what we've left undone. So we develop strategies to deal with that sense of guilt that have nothing to do with the cross. And the most overused strategy is employing our inner lawyer.

And the inner lawyer steps up and offers all the excuses he can to justify our wrongdoing. This is the voice of the inner lawyer. It's not as bad as all that. Others have made much worse mistakes. You've been under a lot of stress lately. No one's really going to notice it. You've done so many good things. You're just misunderstood. And it's other people's fault that they haven't been more considerate of your feelings.

[13 : 36] And it makes us feel better for exactly 23 seconds. The true purpose of the inner lawyer is not to get you off. But so we can avoid the gift of God's righteousness on the cross.

What if we were able to turn this around? What if we were able to ask Jesus on the cross, do you feel like you've been made sin for us? What would he say?

I think what he might say is that's completely irrelevant. What I feel is abandoned and forsaken by the Father. Just so, the question for us is not whether we feel we are the righteousness of God or not.

The fact of whether we feel it or not is actually irrelevant to the fact that God has made us his righteousness. What we are to feel is not the righteousness of God, but the opposite of abandonment and forsakenness.

We ought to be feeling the embrace of his grace and his love. So that even while we are sinning and while we were still full of failures, yet he has declared us truly righteous.

[14 : 50] And that is the issue. We feel the grace of his embrace. So that's point one. What did God do at the cross? The great exchange.

Secondly, then, what difference does that make for us today? And, um, I've called this the great change. I know you, we need to ask the question, how is it that what happened 2,000 years ago, how does it affect us now?

And this passage is full of practical differences that it makes. We've only got time for just two. The first is this in verse 14.

The love of Christ controls us. For the love of Christ controls us, verse 14, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

This is the love Christ has for us, not our love for Christ, and it controls us. This is a fantastic word. It holds, it holds something together that's about to fall apart.

[15 : 59] It holds it together and then forces it forward. It's used of streams rushing down mountains into a riverbed, and the sides of the mountains hold it together and push it forward.

Or for those who are under 30, a toothpaste tube, holding the sides together and pushing it forward. So the love that Christ has for us on the cross, the heart-melting, self-sacrificing love that drove him to give himself, holds us together and drives us forward in a life under the love of Christ Jesus. Notice again, it's not a feeling, it's a conviction. The love of Christ controls us because we have concluded that one has died for all. This is what the Apostle said last week when we looked at Romans chapter 5.

Do you remember Romans 5, 8? God shows his love for us now in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Notice the time-shifting miracle there. When did Christ die for us? In the past. When does God show his love for us? In Romans 5, 8? Now.

[17:21] God shows his love now, ongoingly, in the present. If you want to know whether God really loves you now, you need to go back to the cross and ponder and think it through.

And as you do that, as you meditate on it and pray it through, God reveals his love to you now. Hear what St. Augustine wrote in the early 400s.

God's love is incomprehensible and unchangeable. It was not after we were reconciled to him through the blood of his son that he began to love us.

Rather, he loved us before the world was created. He doesn't begin to love those whom he reconciled. He loved us even when we practiced enmity toward him and committed wickedness. So, you see, the great exchange isn't some cold, impersonal calculation. The cross is the highest revelation of the love of God.

[18:23] And at the heart of his love is his glad and willing taking of our place and taking of our punishment. It is not our love for him that drew him out of heaven.

It's not the great potential that we had that drew him out of heaven. It was simply he couldn't help himself. And once we begin to ponder the love Jesus has for us, you know what it enables us to do? You can sack the inner lawyer. You don't have to pay him anymore. And the love Christ has for us controls us and pushes us forward because we're no longer frightened of God and we're no longer frightened to obey his commandments.

We begin to love him and we live for him. We begin to live for him and not for ourselves. Very imperfectly. But the one controlling reality in our lives now is the love of Jesus Christ.

That's the first practical difference it means today. And the second is this. We have new eyes to see ourselves and each other.

[19:26] Verse 16 and 17. 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.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, literally new creation, old has passed away, the new has come. When we come to see the love of God and love of Christ in the cross, God works a miracle in us of the same order as the first creation.

Because it was God who said, let light shine out of darkness in that first creation, shines in our hearts to show us the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So becoming a Christian is not finding yourself, it's not conforming yourself to some outward standard, it's not turning over a new leaf. It's literally being recreated.

And God plants a new nature in us, something that wasn't there before. It's a new existence marked by now wanting to do what Christ wants.

[20:37] And the things that we thought were so important before now become less important. And the things we'd never valued before become very precious, particularly other people. You find there's a new life in you that you can't explain, that you can't fake.

Yesterday I heard an interview with a counsellor about how to deal with emotionally immature parents. She said the marks of emotional maturity are egocentricity, that is, people who make everything about themselves and having no empathy for others.

She called it the soprano lifestyle after the TV series by those mafia characters. She said it's incredible, every episode and every character in that series, everything they do is about themselves and they have very little empathy for others.

But as the love of Christ begins to dawn in our hearts, we're made new and we begin to see ourselves and we begin to see others differently. Not according to the flesh, not based on outward things, but we know each other according to the Holy Spirit.

So the love of Christ through the Spirit in our hearts enables us to see other people as Jesus saw them, worth giving his life for, sheep without a shepherd.

[22:02] The cross of Jesus shows you the infinite value of those people who are sitting around you now. He died for them. They must be very important.

And if you lose your grasp on this central reality of the Christian life, this great exchange, Christian living becomes such a drag. That is why at the heart of normal Christian living is our understanding of the gospel.

At the heart of everything we do as people is our understanding of the gospel in the death of Jesus Christ. We come by the gospel, we live by the gospel, we die by the gospel, and in glory, we will sing the song of the Lamb forever and ever.
Amen. Amen.