

The Heart of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

I want to invite you to go ahead and start turning in your Bibles. We're going to go to 2 Corinthians today. We are going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 16 to 21. So you can start making your way towards that.

And as you're doing that, I just want to take a moment and pause and say thank you. Thank you. I've been thinking quite a bit on passage from Paul to the Thessalonian church, and I think it describes this moment well in my affection for you.

Paul's words to the church, he says, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel, but also our very selves, because you had become very dear to us. And I think that perfectly captures, Elizabeth and I, our bond with you and our love for this church family. We're so grateful for already the four joy-filled years that we've had being knit into this crew.

[1 : 19] And we look forward to many more. There's no greater honor than to share life with you. And this morning I have the distinct honor of not only doing that, but actually doing both parts of that verse, to share my life with you, but also to share the gospel with you.

And so this morning we're going to look at the heart of the gospel from 2 Corinthians 5, verses 16 through 21. So let's read.

It says, It says, Therefore, Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ.

God making his appeal through us. We implore you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

May God bless the preaching and the hearing of his word. Well, this morning we find ourselves reviewing a portion of one of Paul's letters to the church of Corinth.

[3 : 19] This is one of multiple letters. Just happens to be labeled 2 Corinthians, but he actually had a number of correspondences already. This is a group of Gentiles who are learning, like us, how to follow Jesus.

One problem that they've had in the Bible. One problem that they've had in the recent history of the church is that some false super apostles have threatened to undermine Paul's teaching.

These false apostles sound very polished. But Paul tells the believers in Corinth that it's fool's gold. Don't buy it.

They're preaching a different message, a false gospel, and they're attempting to lead the church astray by turning them against Paul and the true gospel. Well, thankfully, the majority of the Corinthians by this point have repented and moved away from that false teaching.

But this letter kind of carries on some of the same themes of proving Paul's apostleship and the trustworthiness of his message, the true gospel. So here in our text this morning, Paul provides one of the most glorious summaries of the gospel.

[4 : 23] He's calling the Corinthians to behold the transformative power of the gospel and to live with a single-minded resolve to make Christ known.

But this call is not just for the Corinthians. It's also for us. This is for Trinity Grace Church as well. So I believe that the main point for us this morning is to be reconciled to God through Christ the King and join the mission of the church to proclaim reconciliation.

We're going to dig into this three different points. The first is we are new creations in Christ. We are new creations in Christ. Verses 16 and 17.

If you take a look at verse 16, it says, From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. To see according to the flesh here, it means that they only understood world kind of according

to worldly systems and values.

They viewed things from the perspective that the present physical life is all that there is. They had kind of an earthbound way to measure and evaluate and define and relate to the world around them.

[5 : 40] And in particular, they list two things here they used to view only according to the flesh. People and Jesus Christ. If you remember before his conversion, Paul considered Jesus to be a false messiah.

An imposter. And he violently opposed the followers of Jesus. That's what Paul used to do. This man saw Jesus as a despicable poser and viewed his followers as if they were cockroaches in the kitchen of Israel.

So what happened? How is it that Paul ended up giving his life to the spreading of the news of Jesus? To planting churches and strengthening Christ followers, including those from this letter that we're talking about in Corinth?

What happened to Paul that so radically transformed his perspective here? Well, he had what we might call a Copernican shift. If you remember for thousands of years, people thought that the earth was the center of the solar system.

And people saw the moon and the sun travel across the horizon. And they believed that everything was basically circling around the earth. And then Copernicus shows up and jacks it all up, doesn't he?

[6 : 57] He comes along and he explains that the sun was actually the center of our solar system. Everything doesn't revolve around us. Everything revolves around the sun. Well, Paul had a similar shift when he encountered Jesus Christ.

Everything in his life was dramatically reoriented when he realized that far from being a blasphemous imposter, Jesus Christ was the divine son of God.

There was this paradigm shift. He no longer viewed Christ according to the flesh. All of a sudden, Paul rightfully understood Jesus to be the sun around which all of life revolves.

He encountered Jesus Christ and he became a new creation. As verse 17 says, the old had passed away.

His previous nature was gone. His previous grid for interpreting the world around him was gone. Paul was a new creation with a new perspective. All things and all people had to now be understood in relation to Jesus.

[8 : 06] Everything. When he was judging according to the flesh, he was trying to snuff out Christ followers. That's what he was doing before. But when he became a new creation, he realized that to attack Christ's people was to attack Christ himself.

He could no longer view people according to the flesh. Verse 17, if you look at it, it says, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

What kind of anyone's are eligible to be made new? Is it based on ethnicity here? Or bank account? Or pedigree? Is it based on personality or social connections or academic achievements? Is it based on church attendance or Bible reading? Or any good works?

No. If you look at here, the essential ingredient to becoming a new creation does not rest with the person. Anyone is pretty all-encompassing.

[9 : 11] Anyone. The commonality of these anyones is their collective need for a Savior. That's who he's talking to. Anyone in Christ.

In Christ is the part we should underline and think about. Believing Jesus is who he says he is and placing our trust in him as our sufficient Savior is the all-important factor.

So this paradigm shift that has happened for Paul, and it is what is animating the rest of his life. All things, all thoughts, all actions, all people are now filtered through the grid of spiritual relationship to Jesus Christ.

That's how he can write in Galatians 6, 14 and 15. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. No longer delineated by the flesh, but by belief in Christ.

[10 : 21] You see, the old standards for understanding the world have passed away. They have been crucified. Now all of life and all relationships must be viewed through the cross. And this is not just something simply for Paul.

This is characteristic of the Christian life. Commentator David Garland helpfully writes, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, are all on the same level before God.

When we see that we are all sinners dead in our sins and needing reconciliation from God, and when we accept Christ's shameful death on the cross as our death, then all previous canons, measurements, grids for understanding the world must be scrapped.

If Jesus Christ truly is the centering reality by which we understand every aspect of life, our view of the people God places in our lives will be transformed.

Reflecting on the spiritual significance of our everyday interactions, C.S. Lewis once quoted this, He urges us to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

[12:04] All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, our friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. An incredible vision to see all people around us in relation to Christ.

Perhaps one of the most provocative stories I can think that captures this new creation perspective, lived out, is out of a man named Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf.

How's that for a name? Zinzendorf was born in the early 1700s into Austrian nobility. And as a count, he was expected to follow his father's footsteps into government, which he did for a short time.

[13:10] However, as a Christian, he was a new creation, and his priorities began to shift when he heard of some Christian minorities being persecuted and forced from their homelands.

Compelled by love for God's people, this count leveraged his wealth to purchase a large estate to allow oppressed Christians to find refuge.

And within a year, over 300 persecuted Christians from different languages, cultures, backgrounds made their way to Zinzendorf's estate.

Zinzendorf was captivated by Christ, and it had an effect on how he viewed people. It's clear that he believed in the leveling effect of the cross.

He did not view himself as superior because of his great wealth. Instead, he leveraged his wealth to do something for the diverse group of Christ followers in need.

[14:11] The common denominator he had with them was not social status or cultural background. It was being in Christ. This was the grid through which he saw the whole world.

Are you gripped by the same grid? The letter before us calls us to see everything in relation to Jesus and live as a new creation with a new perspective?

Are your relationships with people fundamentally informed by their spiritual relationship to Jesus Christ? When you think of your closest friends, would those friendships make sense apart from Jesus Christ?

As you look around this room, and I invite you to do so, do you see other new creations for whom Christ gave his life?

Are your relationships with these people prioritized and characterized in here by an otherworldly love? Do you see people for whom you would sacrifice sacrifice so that you can make sure to build them up?

[15:28] Well, it seems that Paul's words to the Corinthians would point those of us who are new creations in Christ to think this way and to live this way. Point two, we are reconciled through Christ.

Verses 18 and 19. If you hone in, Paul continues by saying in verse 18, all this is from God. What all is from God?

What's he talking about? He's speaking of this new life he just mentioned. All of this new life is from God. God is just as much the author of the second creation as he was the first creation.

He alone is able to bring forth something out of nothing. He alone is able to bring forth life from death. And that's exactly what he did with Paul.

That's exactly what he did with the Corinthians. That's what he did with us if you were in Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to elaborate about how this has happened. God, through Christ, reconciled us

to himself.

[16:32] So this idea of being reconciled is an expression of God's saving activity in Christ that's really unique to Paul. The English word reconciliation is made up of two parts.

The first part you recognize is the prefix re, which means again, re-explain it, again, re. The second part is made from the core word, reconcile, which means together or to gather, maybe like a council or a conciliar movement, a gathering.

This is where we get our word for council. It's a gathering of a people for a purpose. So to reconcile means to bring people back together. But don't think of this like, Beau out there, the huddle, people just physically coming together and then going back apart.

It's more than just a physical reunion. Reconciliation carries this idea of coming back together after a season of strife and opposition. Wayne Grudem defines reconciliation as the removal of enmity and restoration of fellowship between two parties.

The definition is a little bit tricky because we don't really use that word enmity. At least I don't. However, enmity, it comes from the same root as that word enemy, which we do understand is typical.

[17:49] So enmity is something that drives a relational wedge between two people, two parties, and they become enemies. For reconciliation to happen, the enmity must be removed and then the fellowship can be restored.

So I'm reminded, whenever I was a kid playing with magnets, maybe you've tried this experiment, you push the two magnets and as hard as you can, if they're facing outward from each other, the opposite charges, it won't go together.

You just keep pressing them and it won't do it. And you can't see it. There's a rift between those two magnets. Well, getting them physically close to one another does not actually connect them, as hard as you might try.

There's enmity between them. However, if you flip them over, what happens? They just pop right into place. It's amazing. Well, in a similar way, reconciliation requires the removal of the relational barrier in order for true reconnection to be made possible.

Our greatest problem does not consist of enmity between fellow sinners. Our greatest problem is our sin causing enmity with God.

[19:01] When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the creatures were essentially committing mutiny against the Creator. They wanted to live as if they were in charge. It was the ultimate act of treason.

Adam and Eve turned God into the enemy and all humanity, including us, followed suit. Paul tells us that in Adam we all sinned and therefore we are all made enemies of God.

So in order for anyone to be made right with God, the enmity must be removed. The relationship must be reconciled. This is the main meaning of reconciliation in the Bible.

Salvation is God ending the enmity between himself and us through the life and death of Jesus Christ. In Romans 5, 10, Paul captures the work of Christ on behalf of sinners.

He writes this, for if while we were enemies, there it is, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

[20:08] God flipped the magnet over by sending Christ to die on our behalf. Through Christ, God made it possible for us to be forgiven of our sin, removing the enmity between us and him so that we can experience restored fellowship with God.

We can have peace with God. Not only does God reconcile us through Jesus Christ, he gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

But who is the us here when he says he gave us the ministry of reconciliation? Is Paul only talking about the apostles, all the leaders in the church? Are those the ones who are responsible for this ministry of reconciliation?

Well, since he's explaining what it means to be a new creation in Christ, it would make more sense that this ministry is a core job description for the anyone's who are in Christ.

So, if you're a Christian, this job description is for you. So what is it? This word ministry is typically, in this time, it was always associated with the humble servant who waits on tables.

[21:19] That's what ministry was a word for. There's no pride or superiority in this job. It's not just for the super leaders.

It's one simply of humbly bringing good news. In fact, if you look at verse 19, it expresses this ministry of reconciliation as a message of reconciliation entrusted to Christ's followers. So, it's interesting that there's both a ministry and a message. It's both of those things. Commentator David Garland rightly concludes that the ministry of reconciliation, therefore, involves more than simply explaining to others what God has done in Christ. It requires that one become an active reconciler. Like Christ, a minister of reconciliation plunges into the midst of human tumult to bring harmony out of chaos, reconciliation out of estrangement and love in the place of hate. Christian reconciliation is characterized by intentional pursuit. Why? Because it's patterned after the very act of reconciliation that saved us.

[22 : 36] God did not passively wait. He intentionally pursued us even in our rebellion while we were still enemies at great cost to himself.

It's an amazing vision. Fundamental to the ministry of reconciliation is a humble, eager pursuit of peace.

So, who is this message to be delivered to? Is this only a message for the unconverted? Is this just how people get saved? In verse 20, though, it says, we implore you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God.

Who is that message intended for? Well, there may have been some non-believers in the midst. You know, there were these super false apostles, so there might have been unconverted people amongst them.

However, this is a letter written to the whole church, including believing Corinthians who were in Christ. So, it seems best to think of reconciliation as a message that both converts unbelievers and conforms believers.

[23 : 50] It does both. Being reconciled to God through Christ is primary. Yes, you gotta have that peace. In one sense, we are given the ministry of proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers so that they will repent of sin and have the enmity removed between them and God.

That's vital. But the reconciliation that brings us peace with God vertically is also the basis for our reconciliation with each other. The reconciliation that motivates us to share with unbelievers should also compel us to be ministers of reconciliation amongst the believing.

Jesus himself commands this intentional reconciliation for the sake of unity and pure worship when he says in Matthew 5, so, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there, remember that your brother, a believer, has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Well, it probably comes as no surprise that it was not very long before there was strife within the community of these Christian refugees on Zinzendorf's estate.

Even though they had foundational convictions about Jesus Christ and they all had in common that they were experiencing religious persecution, that's about where the commonalities stopped, right there.

[25 : 22] Conflict soon erupted across the community and now Zinzendorf, you would think, would be pretty peeved, you know? He was already being extremely generous with his property at great cost to himself, bringing all these people in.

You'd probably think that he would be cantankerous toward these ungrateful refugees that he let in. However, Zinzendorf did not withdraw to his castle.

No, he was entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Instead, Zinzendorf literally moved out of his castle and into the refugee community so that he could live amongst the people.

He left the comfort of his castle and in all humility intentionally pursued reconciliation at great cost to himself. And over time, he was able to unify the believers within this community by centering around the gospel of Jesus Christ.

They began what would become a prayer meeting that lasted day and night for a hundred years. A hundred years, day and night, revival broke out.

[26 : 46] Christians are bound to fight. It's just facts. Christians are bound to fight, but we have a choice on which direction we fight.

We can fight and splinter and be disunified and give one another the cold shoulder or we can fight for unity.

we can fight for peace. We can fight for reconciliation. What we see in Zinzendorf is modeled after the humble, eager pursuit Christ displayed for sinners like you and me.

We are to take on the same ministry of reconciliation with one another. Do not mistake silence for harmony.

do not mistake avoidance for unity. I want to plead with you to humbly fight to remove enmity.

[27 : 59] Forgive those as Christ forgave you. to do so is not just a matter of individual reconciliation to make yourself feel better.

Our unity as a body of believers, our unity as a body of Christians proclaims a supernatural hope to a watching world. It's more than just you.

It's not just about you. If it ever was just about you, then this all would be a sham. It would be a waste. Pursuing this kind of reconciliation unites the church and it honors Jesus Christ.

Is there anyone you need to humbly pursue for the sake of reconciliation? I'd like to invite you to do that today. Fight!

Fight in the right direction. Fight for unity. Point number three, we are ambassadors for Christ.

[29 : 04] verse 20 begins with therefore, therefore, since, since we are new creations in Christ with a new perspective and we've been reconciled to God through Christ and we've been given the ministry of reconciliation, therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ.

God making his appeal through us. Paul's switching over here to use this well-known political term ambassador. An ambassador is a representative messenger of a kingdom.

That's what it is. Well, this is very striking that he's using this here for a number of reasons. For one, to be an ambassador, you must understand yourself to be in the service of a king.

king. They exist to represent a message from the one that has authority over them. To act independently of the king would be treasonous and stupid.

To put it simply, ambassadors do not make sense independently. There's no ambassador ever that tried to do that. If they did, they'd be ousted very quickly.

[30 : 27] their whole purpose for existing would be nullified if they did not operate on the assumption that they have both a king over them and a message in them.

They don't choose the message. They are chosen to be the messenger and then they are commissioned by the king. In this case, Christians are ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

Christ. The message is, be reconciled to God. If all of life is centered around Jesus Christ and all things are understood primarily in relation to him, then it makes sense that he would be identified as our king and we his ambassadors.

That makes total sense. However, we live in an area where the assumption is everyone is a Christian if they prayed a prayer or have ever stepped into the shadow of a church building.

That is not an appropriate measure of biblical Christianity. Have you trusted in his rescuing grace for the forgiveness of your sin?

[31 : 37] Do you delight in living with all aspects of your life subjected to his authority? Can it be said of you that you are a representative of Christ at work with your friends, with your kids, with your spouse?

This isn't a question of sinlessness, so don't mistake me here. It must be nuance, but this does have to do with a posture of heart. Is there evidence in your life that you belong to Christ?

Is it your desire to live, to represent the king of kings and the lord of lords? Is he your king? If not, I want to invite you to submit your life to Christ as your king.

But you have to know, you don't, you do not become a citizen of this kingdom by doing more or trying harder. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, 3, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Paul shows us that the message of Christ's ambassadors is to be reconciled to God, but how can that happen? How can we actually be reconciled to God?

[33 : 04] How can we become a part of his kingdom? How do we get citizenship? What do we need to do? So, verse 21 sheds light on that. It says, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin.

This is a fascinating study in pronouns, a lot going on here, and I think it would serve us to see the three principal characters in this verse and what's happening.

the hour refers to us. Us. Those who are spiritually dead and unable to do anything in this whole verse.

We're just, we're there. We're sitting there. It does not refer to nice people who have obeyed God, but people who have rebelled against God. These are the enemies of God who have committed treason against the highest power in the universe and are rightly under his just wrath.

God cannot be a just judge and let sin go unpunished. He would not be just and he would not be good. His character is at stake here. But there are two other characters here in this verse.

[34 : 22] The he refers to God the Father. He is the actor in this verse. God the Father made, he did something, he made him to be sin.

Who is he talking about? God made who to be sin? The him refers to Jesus Christ. He is the object of the Father's action. So for the sake of the rebellious people like you and me, God the Father made Jesus Christ to be sin who knew no sin.

Jesus. At Christmas time we celebrate Emmanuel. which means God with us. Being both fully man and fully God, he was sent by the Father to live in perfect submission to God without sin.

And then he, Jesus, was made to be sin. Meaning God caused Jesus to bear the weight and the guilt of our sin.

Isaiah 53 6 puts it this way. All we like sheep have gone astray. That's our job in this to mess stuff up.

[35 : 46] We have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord, the Father, has laid on him the Son, the iniquity of us all.

To be clear, this was not just some plot twist that God tried his best to just work out. Over 700 years before Christ was born, Isaiah, this prophet, just a few verses later in Isaiah 53 10, says, it was the will of the Lord to crush him, the servant, Jesus Christ.

So does this mean that he's just cruel and sadistic? God's just up there? Is this just divine child abuse as it's been called by some?

No. It pleased God because God wanted to do something for us, for our sake. And Jesus did not go to the cross involuntarily kicking and screaming against his Father's will.

He went willingly saying in John 10, for this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

[37 : 05] No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it up again. This charge I received! from my Father.

And there on the cross as Christ was lifted up, he took upon himself all the sins, all of them that we have ever committed or ever will commit and he experienced the full just wrath of God for our sake and for all those that any ones who trust not in themselves but in the cross of Christ they have their sins replaced with Christ's righteousness new creations new citizenship that's how it happens it's as if it's it's as if a murderer on death row is released so another can take his place on the electric chair except that the one who dies in the prisoner's place also gives him all of his multi billion dollar estate and every medal of honor that he earned so that the newly released prisoner might receive upon his exit from the prison respect and honor as if he's earned all those things himself sounds good but it's better than that it's more scandalous than even that we are reconciled with the very one who made us no longer objects of his wrath but objects of his love new creations we are reconciled we are ambassadors after a number of years living together the Christians on Zinzendorf's estate became eager to share the reconciling message of the cross with others who had not heard why wouldn't they it's reported that two young men desired to minister to the African slaves on the island of St.

Thomas and St. Croix and the Danish West Indies they were told you can't do that it's for slaves we're sending slaves there you guys aren't slaves so when they were told that they would not be allowed to do such a thing the two men sold themselves to the slave owner and boarded the ship bound for the West Indies and it's reported as the ship pulled away from the docks leaving their loved ones and family and friends and home and everything behind it's said that they called out back to the shore may the lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering how could they say that how could they do that even though they were deemed slaves in this world they knew that they were ambassadors of the true king ambassadors and their anthem is exactly the same as ours be reconciled to

God through Christ the king and join the mission of the church to proclaim reconciliation let's live for the one who died for us let's proclaim this message in Athens and to the ends of the earth father in heaven we thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ that reconciles sinners for our sake Christ was made sin who knew no sin so that we can have the righteousness of God so we give you everything

because you already gave it yourself nothing that we received that you didn't already own so Lord it's a joy with gratitude with thanksgiving that we respond with our whole lives to declare this wonderful message of reconciliation Jesus name we pray amen you have been listening to a message at a

[41 : 34] Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us