



## **The Ministry of Reconciliation**

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

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This morning, we will be continuing in our studies in Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians. We're going to be looking once again at chapter 5, specifically verses 16-19. Then next week, we'll finish up chapter 5 with perhaps one of the most famous verses in all of the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 5:21, which speaks of the great exchange of how Christ became sin for us. He bore our sin.

But this morning, we look at verses 16-19, as Paul will be speaking to us about reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 5, beginning at verse 16:

*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, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 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.*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we ask this morning that you would thrill our hearts with a love for the Savior, that as we hear your Word we would know what Jesus has done for us and we would long to give him all the glory. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

It can be important to get the right perspective on something. Often, we don't know what we can't see. We don't know what we don't know. Sometimes it's just a matter of getting the right perspective. I remember when I was much younger than I am now, 7 years of age, I was in school, and I thought it was completely ordinary that as the teacher would teach and write on the chalkboard, I would get out of my chair, go out from my desk, walk right up to the chalkboard, and read the words that were written on the board. I thought that was just what everyone would do.

As I looked around at the world around me, I thought that's what the world looked like and that's what it was. Thankfully, I had a compassionate teacher who contacted my parents, and my parents knew I had quickly developed the Greco gene of not being able to see. So at 7, I had glasses fitted for myself. All of a sudden, I could see. I didn't have to get up to go to the blackboard, and everywhere around me, things were crisp and in focus and the colors were vibrant.

The world was completely transformed for me, because now I could see. Needing glasses was all the difference to get a different and right perspective. Paul is dealing with a bigger change for the Christian. It's more than just

getting new glasses. The Christian is a whole new person. Paul tells us about his experience and what should be *our* experience and how we are to bring that experience to others. He sets our perspective right.

So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, *rejecting the world's view*, rejecting the false perspective of the world around us. Secondly, *seeing the Lord's view*, understanding that the right perspective we should have comes from the Lord. Then thirdly, *reconciled in Christ*. We can only have the right perspective, we can only see the Lord's view, if we are reconciled to God in Christ. Rejecting the world's view, seeing the Lord's view, and reconciled in Christ.

## **Rejecting the World's View**

Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul teaching us how we are to reject the world's view. Just before this passage, in verse 15, Paul has summarized what Jesus has done, that Jesus has died for sinners and that there was a purpose to his death. The purpose was that they would be dead to sin and be freed from sin. There was also an effect of his death. The effect of his death was that sinners' lives would be changed, that there would be a radical reorientation in the life of a sinner.

Now Paul tells us what that effect looks like. As we begin with verse 16... I warned you about this last week. A good friend of ours is going to make not one but two appearances: the word *therefore*. You should know by now that when we see a *therefore* in the text, Paul is pointing us back. He's giving us cause and effect. Paul is putting together a very logical, consistent argument, building upon point upon point. The change has taken effect because we are not the same.

"From now on..." Paul says. From this point forward, there is no going back. There is a change that comes to us because of what Jesus has done. "...therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh." We regard no one from a worldly perspective. When Paul talks about not regarding someone according to the flesh, that's what he means. The *flesh* is Paul's way of talking about the worldly way of thinking, the way we see others around us thinking, the way the world speaks and understands things.

Jesus has transformed believers so that they no longer look at the world in the same way. This is true of the whole of the world, but Paul wants to emphasize the way believers are to look at other people. By "according to the flesh," Paul means a non-spiritual perspective. A non-spiritual way of looking at people means one that does not take into account God's values, one that does not look past the world's standards. So, what are the world's standards? How do people around us judge other people?

I think, first and foremost, we see people judging others by their social position. In America, we don't have dukes and duchesses. We don't have kings and queens. We don't have landed nobility, but that doesn't mean we don't judge people by their social position. We have political royalty, like the Kennedys. We have film, actor, and actress royalty. We have sports royalty. Somehow, we look at these people as being better than others because of their position in society.

In a similar way, many in our world today place people on a pedestal because of how famous they are. They judge people according to how famous they are. The more famous are better than the less famous. Then, of course, there

is the matter of money. Those who are wealthy are somehow thought to be more important than those who have less. In all of these things, the world clamors to hear from the famous, from the socially privileged, from the wealthy, as if somehow their opinions mean more, and others are told to be quiet. "Go off to the side. We don't need to hear from you."

When we do this, we treat someone as being valuable because they have something practical to offer us: the excitement of fame, the advantage of privilege, the resources of money. So really, what is happening here is we are treating ourselves as supreme. Others are important to us or have value only inasmuch as they can benefit us. That's why we value them. But that is not how God values people. His value system is based on people's relationship to him. He is the Creator. He is the one who has put value on each and every person.

It means something to speak of a person as being made in the image of God. That's where the value of people comes from. They are made in the image of God. That's why we say even the unborn have value. The unborn can't do anything for us. Your unborn son will not be able to mow your lawn this week. Your unborn daughter will not be able to wash your dishes or get good grades in school, but they have value because they are made in the image of God.

That is also true of everyone all around us. We must remember that even though the world does not see people as being made in God's image, we who follow the Lord Jesus Christ must. We must value people not as the world values them but as God does. In fact, God actually delights to show the greatest attention to those who are weak, small, and ignored by the world. The Bible is full of it.

I hope that encourages you if you think, "Well, I don't have a million dollars in the bank. Nobody knows my name three states over. I don't have societal privileges." That's okay, because God values the weak, the small, the overlooked. He chose Israel as a people, not because they were the greatest of people but because they were the smallest of people. He delights in showing the poor and the widow and the orphan blessing, not because they can do anything but because he has chosen to put value upon them.

If you are a Christian, if Christ has died for you, then you no longer look at people the way the world does. People have value because they are made in the image of God, not because they are useful or famous. That should radically change the way we interact with others. It should give us more patience with others, more compassion for others, more love for others. We set God's value on them.

But the work God has done is more than just changing our perspective on people and the world. Paul wants to emphasize a very particular person who is part of the "no one" of verse 16. The most important person our view is changed about is Jesus. Paul says, "Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer."

Paul is willing to admit that in his past life he regarded Jesus the way the world regarded Jesus, but he no longer does that. That's no longer the place of the Christian. So, what is the worldly view of Jesus? It can vary, but there is one strong commonality. The world refuses to see Jesus as he claims to be. Jesus describes himself over and over again as the Son of God, as God himself.

He states that he is from eternity, that he is the only one who can save men and women from their sins. He calls himself a *ransom for sinners*. He calls himself *Lord*, one to be worshiped. The world will have nothing of that. For some, Jesus is a figment of our imagination. He never existed. He's a good idea, but he's not real. He's like a fictional character in a movie or a book.

Others see him as merely a good teacher. He teaches good things and is helpful in his lessons of life. In this way, he serves as a support for ideas that I like, because if Jesus teaches something I like, I emphasize that. If Jesus teaches something I don't agree with, I merely let that fall by the wayside. I disregard that. I pick and choose who Jesus is. Surprisingly enough, those who find Jesus to just be a good teacher find that Jesus teaches everything they believe.

Some see Jesus as a crazy person, and they see his followers as madmen. "How could you possibly think that this person was God? How could you possibly stake your life upon what he teaches? How could you follow him? How could you waste every Sunday getting up and going to church? How could you possibly give to the Lord and to church? Why aren't you saving your money or using it for things you would enjoy? You're crazy," is what the world thinks.

Some go even further and say that Jesus is a criminal, he's wicked, and that Jesus and his followers support injustice and limit human self-potential. They're limiting upon people in society. They hurt people because they command from the Scriptures. Paul was gripped by that in the past. He tells us it directly. He dismissed Jesus as a blasphemer and as a fool. He wanted to stop people from telling others about Jesus. He hunted them down and killed them. That's who Paul was, but no longer. There has been a change.

There are two small words in our text this morning that are not explicitly translated, but they are there. They are important words. They are the words *but now*. You can see this in the end of verse 16. "We once regarded Christ according to the flesh, but now we regard him thus no longer." This is one of the great declarations of the Bible, that you are not limited by who you were, that God can transform you and bring a "but now" to your life, that you need not continue down the path of the world.

You need not reject Jesus the way the world rejects Jesus. You can believe upon Jesus and no longer think the way the world thinks. Do you see this in your life? Does believing in Jesus change the way you look at Jesus? Because if it doesn't, then you don't really believe. Faith means seeing Jesus as he is: God himself, the one who made you and redeemed you, the one who loved you enough to die for you. When you see Jesus that way, your life will never be the same.

### **Seeing the Lord's View**

Now, how can there be such a change in perspective? How can we look at people around us and see their value and worth? How can we submit ourselves to Jesus and see him as he really is? Paul goes on to explain here in verse 17 using *therefore* again. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The only way to have this new perspective is to *be* new, and this is vital. The new perspective comes from a new being. The order is important.

So often we think that if we have a new way of thinking, that will change who we are; that if we can just think in a different way, it will change us and modify our lives. We see this, for example, in those who espouse the power of positive thinking. "If you can imagine it," they say, "you can live it. You just need to think positive thoughts, and your life will change," as if positive thoughts have form and power in themselves to change our lives. "You need *you* to change you," they say.

Paul says that way of thinking is all wrong. In fact, it's thinking according to the flesh or according to worldly wisdom. Instead, there is a chain we must follow. Not living for yourself follows from not thinking in a worldly way, having a completely different view of the world and Jesus. That follows from being in Christ, Paul says.

*In Christ* is one of Paul's favorite concepts, his phrases to use. He uses the term *in Christ* more than 80 times in the New Testament. It is a rich phrase that describes our relationship to Jesus. It describes the benefits we receive from Jesus. In Christ we have hope of eternal life, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. In Christ we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins, Paul says in Romans 3. In Christ there is no condemnation, but there is rather freedom from sin, Paul says in Romans 8.

In Christ we are God's workmanship, Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2. To be in Christ means to be united with him. It means to have him as your covenant head, to have Jesus as the one who has died for you. When you are united with Christ, you are transformed. Who Jesus is makes you new. Paul is almost giddy about it. The Greek is almost Paul shouting, trying to get the words out as quickly as he can.

We translate it much smoother in the English. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." What Paul actually says is, "If anyone in Christ, new creation." He leaves out the verbs. Some translations have an exclamation point here. He's as excited as you can possibly get. The idea of being a new creation is something that is unimpaired, something that is uncontaminated, that is new or fresh.

Do you notice the difference between something new and something repaired? If I offered to give you a 10-year-old vehicle that had some dents in it that I banged out, and maybe I put some new belts in the engine area and got it so it was tuned up and working well... I offered you that car, and then I gave you a choice between that and a brand-new, just-off-the-lot SUV. What are you going to pick? You can tell there's an obvious difference between something new and something repaired. Something new is better.

That's what Paul wants us to see. You're not just reformed in Christ. You're not just repaired in Christ. You are new in Christ. What comfort and hope that is. Are you depressed or discouraged or do you worry because of the way your life has been up until this point? You think of all of the ways you failed yourself, your family, your employer, in school, and you think things will never be right because you can't go back and relive the past.

What Paul tells you is you don't need to relive or repair the past. You are a new creation in Christ. Jesus has transformed you into his image. You are in Christ, and you are new. Paul wants you to see that when you come to Christ, Jesus changes you forever. You have a new perspective because you are a new you. Faith in Jesus is not just a new system or a way of thinking. It is a result of being transformed by the mighty power of God. It is being

brought from sin and death to life and righteousness. It is what God does for everyone who believes in Jesus. New creation.

Now, being a new creation has another effect we must consider. This is the second part of verse 17. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." We might be tempted to view the new as simply being put on top of the old. Have you ever repainted, refinished a piece of old furniture? Maybe a piece of old furniture that was a little bit rickety, and you tried to tighten down the screws or add a new clamp or two.

You sand off the old paint and slap some new paint or varnish or stain on it so that it looks new, but you know it's really not new and that if you sit on that chair, it might not hold you, or that if you try to pick up and move that nightstand too quickly, it might fall apart. It's not really new; it just looks new. What Paul tells us is that the new is really new.

We could do a study of the Greek word for *new* here. It would tell us that the word *new* means fresh, unused, or remarkable, but we don't need to do a study of linguistics here. Paul tells us explicitly what's happening. Even the youngest among us here will get the point. Paul says the old is gone; the new is come. Where once there was old, there is old no longer. The new has taken its place. The old is not even noticed anymore.

When Paul says the old has passed away, he means it has disappeared. You don't even notice it. You can't look for it. It's gone. And the new has arrived. It is what is real. The word here for *to come* is also used in the Bible to mean existing or even *is*. Paul says the new has not only come; it is your new reality. It will not change again. The new is reality. Your old life of sin is gone. You are no longer under its control. All that burdened you is gone.

Now, that doesn't mean all of your circumstances have changed, but something even better has happened. *You* have changed. The you in your circumstances is new. You are in Christ. Hodge puts it so well. He says, "Old opinions, views, plans, desires, principles, and affections are passed away; new views of truth, new principles, new apprehensions of the destiny of man, and new feelings and purposes fill and govern the soul."

Does this excite you? It certainly does Paul. You can see it here in verse 17. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." *Behold* is a good Bible word, but it's not a word we use every day in our language. We don't see someone walk down the street and say, "Behold, a Chick-fil-A. Behold, a fire truck." They just don't do that. But the idea here is something we *do* see every day.

We could just as easily translate the *behold*, "Hey, look at that! Look over here." We *do* do that, don't we? "Hey, look at that storm. Wow! Look at that rain. Look at the sun, how brilliant it is." We do that all the time when we get excited about something. Children are especially good at this. If you are a parent, you know the long tradition of being told, "Dad, look! Look at me, Dad! Mom, Mom! Look over here. Look at me!" Something exciting is going on. You have to look.

That's what Paul is telling us. He's excited. "Look! You're a new creation in Christ." When you look at yourselves, when you look at other believers, what you see is new, what God is doing. How wonderful is that? How could we possibly look at other Christians the way the world does when we see God at work in their lives?

## Reconciled in Christ

That brings us to a third thing today. How could this possibly be true? How could it actually happen? I can reject the world's view of people and the world's view of Jesus and have the Lord's view. I can do this because I am a new creation in Christ, but how do I become a new creation? How can I be in Christ? Paul tells us the source of this, the means of bringing this about, and the continuing results of this.

First, the source of us being a new creation in Christ is God. Look with me at verse 18. It begins with the transitional phrase "All this is from God." This phrase is transitional because the *all this* describes the content of verses 16-17. Everything Paul has just said...having a proper view of people, having a right view of Jesus, being in Christ, being a new creation, having the old pass away...all of that is from God. It doesn't come from us. God is the source of that change.

The preposition there is very clear. It means it comes *from* God. It comes *out of* God. Paul wants us to be sure to give God all the glory for this...not him, not ourselves, but God. Then we see the means by which God brings all this about: reconciliation. This is perhaps the greatest passage in all of the Bible about reconciliation. Five times in our passage down to the end of the chapter, the word *reconciliation* appears in one form or another. That's not quite but almost half of the occurrences of this word in the New Testament.

What does *reconciliation* mean? It means to restore a broken relationship. Here, the broken relationship is between man and God. When a relationship is broken, there are difficulties that ensue from it. You might think about a break in a relationship you've had with your spouse or a friend or a loved one or even a coworker. You can be apart from them. You won't even speak to them. The relationship is fractured and needs to be healed.

Now, how does this reconciliation or healing normally happen? Well, if your life is anything like my life, the one who is offended or even who believes he is offended is not the one to do the reconciling. You have two spouses sitting on opposite sides of the house, waiting for the other to come and apologize and reconcile. "Well, *I'm* not going to do that. That's *my* fault. That's *their* fault. *They're* the ones to blame. *They* need to apologize. *They* need to make things right."

We see this all the time with children. "I'm not going to ever apologize. I don't care if I ever talk to you again." This is the way we stand our ground. This is the way we live life. It's the way we even treat politicians and governments. It's the way we treat workers and clients. We expect the one who has done the wrong, the offender, to be the one who reconciles. So, what we would expect here is for God to wait for us to come to him to reconcile with him. After all, we are the offending party. We are the ones who have rebelled against God. We are the sinners, not he.

But that is not what happened. God himself reconciles with his people. God comes to us through Jesus Christ, Paul says. Through the work of Jesus, we are restored to fellowship with God. What grace, what mercy. The God who has never offended, who has never done any wrong, who has borne our offense, is the one who brings peace. In Christ, Paul tells us, our sins are not counted against us; rather we are counted as righteous in his sight because of what Jesus has done.

Jesus reconciles sinners to God through the blood and the death on the cross. Because of Jesus' reconciling work, God continues to reconcile people to himself. The act of reconciliation, Jesus' sacrifice, Jesus' payment, is once and for all. You'll notice that Paul treats it as a past-tense verb: *reconciled*. But the result of that reconciliation continues to be experienced by sinners. Paul explains this result in two parallel ways in verses 18 and 19.

In verse 18 he says, "Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." He says God has committed to us a ministry of reconciliation. Then, in verse 19, he says God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. To be reconciled in Christ means to be committed to being a reconciler; that is, to be a Christian is to be one who brings the message or, as Paul says, the word of reconciliation to others.

The message here is clear. The good word of the gospel is ours to bring to others. We who have been made right with God are to tell others that they can be as well. There is no such thing as a silent Christian. There is no such thing as a non-missionary Christian. If you are a believer today in the Lord Jesus Christ and you have been reconciled to God, then you have been made a messenger of reconciliation to tell others the good news of the gospel.

What the world needs today is a proper perspective, and that includes you and me. We need to see the world and to see Jesus the way the Lord sees them. We need to see that Jesus changes everything when he brings us to God. He not only changes our relationship with God, but he changes who we are and what our purpose in life is. Do you know this Jesus? Has he changed you? You can be reconciled to God. You can know your true meaning and purpose. You don't need to wander and worry. Come to Jesus. He will make you a new creation.