

Ambassadors for Christ

2 Corinthians 5: 11-21

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

Have any of you ever known someone who struggles with insecurity? Let me ask that a different way. Have any of you ever known someone who *doesn't* struggle with insecurity? The fact of the matter is, we *all* do, don't we? We all have our insecurities. It comes out in different ways in different people, but it's certainly something we all struggle with. The problem is when we live out of that insecurity—it affects what we do and why we do it. Over the years I've observed this over and over and over again. My conclusion would be: The number one issue that has rendered leaders ineffective, whether it's in the church or in the marketplace, is their insecurities and the effect that has on their behavior. It ruins marriages; it makes us ineffective as parents; it messes up our lives as Christians. So what do we do? How do we somehow rise above our insecurities and not let them define the course of our lives?

Well I think Paul helps us with that. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5. Last week I mentioned to you that this part of Corinthians has a lot of “therefores”. You know the adage: Whenever you see the word *therefore*, you stop and see what it's *there for*. So you have to keep developing the argument: Because *this* is true, therefore *this* is true, therefore *this* is true...and there's a bunch of them in the text this morning, so we just kind of have to keep the thought process rolling along. We pick it up in Chapter 5, Verse 11, which starts with a

Therefore...I think in reference to the judgment seat of Christ—or the bema seat. Knowing that we'll give an account to God, Paul says...knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance, and not in heart. (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 5:11-12)

We've talked a lot about the fact that Paul had critics back in Corinth. They were the religious legalists and they were trying to discredit his message by discrediting the messenger. So Paul has constantly been dealing with their criticisms. It appears in this text that they're questioning his motives—why does he do what he does? And he's talking about his call to persuade men, in other words, to proclaim the gospel. He reminds them that, not only is he *manifest*, which means *made known* to God, to Christ—probably talking about the bema seat—but he's also been made manifest before *them*. He lived among them for eighteen months. When Paul says that he's giving them an *occasion*, he's saying, “I'm not commending myself. This is not self-promotion.” But this is an occasion by which they can answer the critics. The Greek word that is translated *occasion* is a military word. It means a platform, a base of operation. So Paul is saying, “I'm giving you a base of operation out of which you can answer the critics.” What is the base of operation? It is that he lived with them for eighteen months. He made himself manifest to them so they can answer the critics by saying, “Wait a minute, we know this guy. He lived among us. Are these criticisms true or not?”

We have seen this consistently in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians that Paul's main defense—his number one defense—is that, “Hey, I lived among you. You know who I am. You know how I lived my life. That speaks for itself.” He's going to the fact that the credibility of the messenger gives credibility to the message. I think this is interesting to think about in this day and age in which we live. One of the great blessings of the time in which we live is, because of technology, we can beam the message of the gospel around the world through radio, through television, through the internet—all kinds of ways—and that's a good thing. God has done a lot of significant work through that. But there's a flip side to that and the flip side is the fact that you don't know these people. You don't know who they are. You don't know how they live their lives. You don't know how they treat their spouses. You don't know anything about them. And over and over and over again we have learned that oftentimes who a person is on stage is not who they are in private. That affects the credibility of the message.

I think one of the biblical values that the Church needs to really hold on to—not just Lincoln Berean Church, but the *Church*—is that the primary teachers and shepherds need to be the people who live among you. They need to be the people who have credibility among you—where you do know how they live their lives. I think it's important that you know how I treat my wife. I think it's important that you know how I raise my children. I think you need to know how I spend my money. I think you need to know how I treat my coworkers. I think you need to know who I am on a daily basis. Now you might say, “Well I don't know that.” But you can. I'm very accessible and what I'm saying isn't just for me; it's for all our ministry staff. We live among you. We have over a hundred employees. I've told you before—you're free to talk to any of them. You're free to ask them, “What is he like when he's not on stage? How does he treat you? How does he conduct himself?” You can know how I treat my neighbors. You can know how I treat my wife and raise my children. That information is accessible to you. I think there's great accountability in knowing that you can know that. It causes me, or any of our other ministry staff, to seek to live true to the message we proclaim. But that isn't just true of the ministry staff. It's just as true of you. Out in the marketplace, in your school, in your neighborhoods, what gives the message credibility is how you live your life on a daily basis. We're all in this together and, for the message to have credibility, we have to conduct ourselves in a way that gives the message that we proclaim integrity. And that's Paul's defense: “Hey I lived with you for eighteen months. You know exactly who I am.” That's the basis by which they can respond to the critics.

It's also interesting, at the end of verse 12, he talks about the contrast between **those who take pride in appearance** and those who operate from **the heart**. In other words there are two different motivations. One is the motivation of the external, pride in appearance—“Check me out, I'm really spiritual.” The other comes from within; it flows from the heart. The religious legalists had set up a system that was all about taking pride in personal appearance, because legalism is *always* about personal appearance. Legalism is always about, “Check me out. See how spiritual I am. Look at me follow the rules.” That's the whole point. So Paul is going to contrast the difference between an external selfish motivation and an internal godly motivation.

Verse 13:

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.

That phrase...**beside ourselves**...basically means “out of his mind, crazy”. It's the exact same Greek word that was used to describe Jesus early in His ministry, when even His own family thought He'd lost His mind: “We need to take Him away for awhile.” When Paul was persecuting

the Church he was a bit of a madman, and then overnight, suddenly he becomes a missionary of the Church. It is possible that the critics were saying, “Hey this guy’s crazy.” But it’s more likely what they’re referring to is the way Paul lived his life. If you remember in 1 Corinthians, Paul said that the religious legalists had set themselves up as kings. They had created an environment where they set themselves up as the *best of the best*. They were the kings; they were living it up. Meanwhile Paul is getting imprisoned; he’s getting beat up; he’s getting stoned and all of those things that we talked about last week. Paul has lived a very difficult lifestyle for the sake of the gospel, so the critics are saying, “Man, this guy is nuts! He’s crazy!” When Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians he even said that the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Probably most of us this morning could identify people in our lives that just think we’re not quite right because of what we believe: “I don’t understand why you do that with your money.” “I don’t understand why you do that with your time.” “I don’t understand why you live the way you live.” It just seems crazy. Sometimes God does call us to do things that seem a bit crazy. A couple of years ago we commissioned Matt to go into the Sudan, which is one of the most dangerous places in the world for a Christian. This summer one of my daughters got on a plane all by herself and went into the heart of Afghanistan for two weeks. I’m going to tell you—“That’s crazy!” Right now, as we speak, there’s a whole group of people in the prime of their lives who are settled in Poland for the next five years. “That’s nuts!” And there’s another group going to Spain a year from now.

Paul’s answer is...**it’s for God**. “They may think that we’re crazy, that we’re out of our minds, but the answer isn’t difficult. It’s for God. It’s because God called me to do that. But,” he also says **...if we’re sober minded, it’s for you.**” He’s reminding the Corinthians that the only reason they heard the message of the gospel is because Paul chose, by the calling of God, to live this crazy lifestyle, to risk his life to get the message to Corinth so that they could hear it and their lives could be changed. So he says, “OK, if they think we’re crazy, it’s God. But if we make some sense, it changes your life.” He goes on and says:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this... (Vs. 14a)

So he’s saying that the reason—the motivation—is from the heart. It’s **the love of Christ**. That’s why he does what he does and it’s based on what he has concluded. That word, where he says **...having concluded this...** that Greek word means to judge or to sift, and to arrive at a conclusion. In other words what Paul is saying is, based on the historical facts of the gospel which he’s about to lay out again, that he has concluded—he has judged, he has sifted through them—and determined them to be true. And it’s out of that truth that this love flows. One of the reasons that’s important is because today there are critics who seek to convince us that this whole idea of a resurrected Jesus is a legend that has just kind of taken on a life of its own over the years. In other words the original Christians didn’t believe that, but over time the stories of Jesus got bigger and bigger and more and more legendary to where they’re at today. But the fact of the matter is that this is written about twenty-five years from the historical facts of the gospel. Paul told us that in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15: “Jesus was crucified, buried, rose again and appeared to over five hundred witnesses and, if you don’t believe me, just ask them. They are still alive today.” Well this letter is only a few months later. So there’s no question that this is not a legend that grew over time, but the core disciples that lived within the lifetime of the historical facts clearly believed in a resurrected Jesus. And that’s what Paul is saying, that, *based on this conclusion*,

...that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all... (Vs. 14b-15a)

Now that seems to me to be quite clear. There are those who would seek to convince you that Jesus only died for the elect—He only died for *some*. But the text says what it says: **He died for all**. That's not complicated. So does that mean that everyone is saved? He says... **He died for all, therefore all died...** What does that mean? It means that Jesus died *my* death. Therefore, in essence, I died with Him. He died for all. Does everyone believe? No they don't.

...so that they who live... (Vs. 15b)

That's a subset. Now Paul's purpose here is not to lay out all the details of the gospel. He's done that over and over again in Corinthians. He said in Chapter 4 that it's those who believe in the resurrection. Those who *believe* are they who live, those who apply the death of Jesus to their own sin. The point is this:

...that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (Vs. 15b, c)

Paul is saying that what motivates him is the love of Christ and the love of Christ comes from his understanding of what Jesus did for him. Therefore he no longer lives for himself but lives for the One who died for him. This is the great divide. If you take pride in appearance, if you're driven by a performance-based value system, if you try to get your sense of security, your sense of self, on the basis of your performance—competing and comparing with everyone around you—your orientation, by definition, is selfish. From the moment you get up in the morning to the moment you go to bed at night, there's one thing on your mind: Me, Me, Me, Me, Me. And our insecurities thrive on that orientation. Every moment of every day is about *Me*. What about *Me*? Poor *Me*! What will people think of *Me*? How does this affect *Me*? That orientation is guaranteed to destroy your life. What Paul is offering is a complete change in orientation: *“Yes, at one time that is how I thought, because I was stuck in this performance-based orientation value system. But now, having understood the truth of the gospel, I realize what I couldn't do. I'm not a high performer; I'm not Somebody! Don't check me out. I don't have anything to offer—other than the reality that Jesus died for me and whatever of value I now have in my life, flows from what He did for me. Therefore I no longer live for myself but I live for the One who died for me. So I can completely reorient my life every single day around something other than myself. My security now is rooted in Christ, not myself. Therefore, from the moment I get up in the morning to the moment I go to bed at night, I can think about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, rather than Me, Me, Me.”* It's a whole new way to live. “But,” Paul says, “this doesn't just affect the way I view myself. It also affects the way I view others.”

Verse 16:

Therefore...in light of this...from now on, we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.

Paul says, *“Not only does it change the way I view myself; it changes the way I view others. I'm no longer viewing others in this performance-based, pride-in-appearance value system. But now it's according to grace; now it's according to Christ. I view other people differently now.”* What's staggering is Paul's admission that, at one time, that's how he viewed Christ. Now what he's saying here is not that he viewed Jesus in the flesh. These are parallel statements grammatically. In

other words he judged Jesus based on His ability to keep the religious performance and, based on that conclusion, he agreed with His execution and was seeking to stop the movement.

Now think about this. What Paul is saying is this: That when God Himself became flesh and walked among us, He did not measure up to the religious legalistic standard of the day and, for that, was condemned. Now let that sink in a minute. That is staggering! Even God Himself didn't measure up to the system. Now obviously the problem is the system was wrong. The system was corrupt; the system was off-base. But Paul is saying, "*When that was my orientation, even God in the flesh didn't cut it. But,*" he says, "*we don't think that way anymore.*" He's obviously been exposed to the realities of grace.

Verse 17:

Therefore...in light of that...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature...that Greek word could be translated "creation." I like that better. ...he is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold new things have come.

"If anyone is in Christ, he has become a new creation." One day God is going to redeem *all* of creation back to Himself, but He's already started and He started with us. We are, in essence, a glimpse of the future today. Paul talked about this last week—that it's already started in the inner man and one day we'll have an outer man that will match the inner man. But the new creation, as of the moment of the resurrection of Jesus, is already begun. When you trust Christ as Savior you become a new creation. I think one of the challenges that we have is, because many of us have been exposed to the language of the gospel—the language of the New Testament—for so long, we fail to hear how radical the terminology is. When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, He said, "Nicodemus, you have to be born again." That's radical language! Nicodemus didn't need a tune up; he needed to be *born again*. It was so radical that Nicodemus said, "Whoa, I don't even know what You're talking about. How do you do that?" In my opinion the only way you could possibly maintain a theology where you can lose your salvation is to believe that salvation is nothing but a ticket to Heaven—and if that's all it is, "Yes, you can lose your ticket". But the language of the New Testament is not that. The language of the New Testament is unbelievably radical. If you have been born again, you can't go back and be un-born. That was exactly Nicodemus' point: "Whoa, how does *that* work?" You have become a *new* creation; old things are passed away. You can't go back and be that person again; that person doesn't exist...gone...dead! You can't go back. That's the whole point: You are a *new creation*!

Even the language that Paul used in 2 Corinthians when he said, "You are being metamorphosized, transformed by the Spirit of God." That's the language that's used to describe a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The whole point is that the butterfly can never go back and be a caterpillar again. That option doesn't exist. The change has been radical. And that's what Paul says: "You are a new creation. Old things are passed away." What are the old things? The old things are a performance-based mindset. The old things are the appearance—taking pride in our appearance, a lifestyle of competition and comparison, of constantly thinking about myself, of viewing others according to their performance. Those are the old things. You know those things are gone. At one time in your life that's how you thought. You know you *walked that dog*, but it didn't work! Let it go! Give it up! You are now reoriented to the fact that Jesus did for you what you could never do for yourself. Old things are passed away. New things have come. Therefore I don't spend every day thinking about myself. I think about the One who died for me. I don't view others according to their flesh. I view others according to grace. It's completely, radically changed my orientation.

Verse 18:

Now all these things are from God,

I love that statement. One of the reasons why I think we struggle to fully embrace the concept of grace is because it's foreign to every experience we'll ever have in this life. Nobody gives you grace like God gives you grace. Nobody cuts you a deal like God cuts you a deal. So it's contrary to everything we've ever known, which makes it sometimes hard to believe it's true. But on the other hand I would use that same argument to defend the fact that grace is so radically, scandalously different from everything we've ever known. You could not possibly convince me that a man or a woman somehow, somewhere along the way, made up the concept. No way...because it isn't even on our radar! We couldn't imagine such a deal. Every single world religion, at its core, is exactly the same and they are exactly the same because they flow out of what makes sense to *us*. You perform and you perform well enough and maybe somehow you get God's favor. They are all performance-driven because they all flow out of the minds of men and women—except one. That one is radically different. When people say to you, “All religions are the same,” please don't let that statement go unchallenged. Say, “I don't know which religions you've read but the fact of the matter is they are all the same except one and that one couldn't be more the polar opposite from the rest. One, at the core, is so unbelievably different—because it's driven by this scandalous thing we call *grace*. The story is told that one time a group of educators that were C.S. Lewis' peers were sitting around and kind of philosophizing and talking, and they were talking about what makes Christianity unique. C.S. Lewis walked into the room and they posed the question and he said, “That's easy. The answer is *grace*.” Grace makes Christianity scandalously different—so much so that we would conclude that the concept could only have come from the mind of God. And that's exactly what Paul is saying here:

...all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...what is that?...namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (Vs. 18-19)

Paul is saying that God has reconciled us, as sinners, to Himself through Christ. What is that message? That God has made a way, through Christ, whereby people's trespasses are not counted against them, but rather they are reconciled into a relationship with Christ. And then he says, “Therefore He has given you a **ministry of reconciliation**,” which means you are the mouthpiece. You speak for God. You take this message to the streets—to reconcile a sinful world to a holy God. The fact of the matter is, on the basis of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, that no matter what your past, no matter what you've done, no matter how much you've messed up, no matter how bad it is, that God has made a way, through Christ, where those sins, those mess-ups, those trespasses will not be counted against you—whereby God has made a way where you, as a sinful man or woman, can be reconciled to a relationship with God. That's the message of reconciliation and our calling is to take the message to the streets.

Verse 20:

Therefore...in light of all this...we are ambassadors for Christ...

The word **ambassador** means *one who represents the interests of another*. I'm no longer living for myself. I'm living for the One who died for me. Therefore it isn't about Me, Me, Me every day. I'm now an ambassador. I don't represent my own self-interest anymore. I represent the interests of another, of the One who died for me.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us... We're His mouthpiece. What do we do?... we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (Vs. 20)

Just in case you didn't get it, one more time:

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him. (Vs. 21)

Paul is talking about what motivates him, what causes him to do what he does. He says, *"It's not taking pride in appearances. It's not an external, 'Hey, check me out!' motivation; it's an internal motivation that comes from the heart.* And it comes from the heart because the love of Christ compels him. And where does the love come from? From the realization of what's true—that Christ died for us. Therefore I no longer live for myself. I've been reoriented and my life now is the life of an ambassador and I now live for the One who died for me. Not only that—not only does it change how I view myself—it changes how I view others. I'm now a new creation in Christ. The old way is gone. New things have come and I've been called to be an ambassador, to represent the interests of Christ, to be the voice of God in the streets, to tell people today that are living lives of despair—people that know deep inside they will never measure up and they feel the sense of hopelessness—to tell them, "Do you know that God has made a way through Christ by which your trespasses, your sins, your mess-ups, whatever's there cannot be counted against you? But, in return, what you receive is reconciliation, a change in relationship from enemy to friend to God, because He who knew no sin became sin for you in order that you might become the righteousness of God in Him. The fact of the matter is, "Yes, we all struggle with insecurities," and, if we're going to get stuck in a performance-based value system, our insecurities feed on that and it will destroy your life. But if you can come to grips with the fact that Jesus did for you what you could not do for yourself and change your orientation—that now it's no longer about me; it's about the One who died for me. I'm His ambassador. I'm His voice. I'm His mouthpiece, and the calling is—with the right message and with the right motive—to take the message of hope into the streets and change the world.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You love us. Lord, we're thankful that You sent Jesus to die for us. When we were lost in our sins, Jesus did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Lord, we have become new creations in Christ. We're called now to be ambassadors, to be Your mouthpiece in the streets. Lord, I pray for each one of us that have trusted Jesus as Savior, that with the right motive, with the right message, we would take this message of hope into the streets that others might know that which has changed our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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Opening Discussion

1. Do you ever struggle with insecurities? In what ways do they manifest themselves in you? Why is that?
2. In what ways do our insecurities limit us in our work, marriage, family, relationships and especially in our faith?
3. Often when people struggle with insecurities the remedy we offer (the world offers) is to try to focus on something we're good at. In the end, does that approach make things better or worse? Why?

Bible Study

1. This section of 2 Corinthians is filled with the repetition of the word "therefore." Go back to chapter 3 and see if you can track the "therefore" statements up to 5:10. This should be a review of where we've been in 2 Corinthians.
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-16. The word "occasion" in 5:12 is a military term that means a platform or base of operations. Paul's behavior when he lived among them gives them a basis to respond to the critics. In what way does the behavior of other believers either give you credibility or in what way does your conduct give other believers credibility?
3. Paul says there are those who take pride in their appearance and those who operate from the heart. According to 5:14-15 what is the difference?
4. Paul states in 5:14 that "having concluded." The Greek word for concluded means "judged and sifted out". What does that mean? See I Corinthians 15:1-8. Knowing Paul is making this statement approximately 20 years after the historical facts of the Gospel took place, how does this help us respond to the criticism that the resurrection of Jesus grew up over time as a legend?

5. There are 3 key “therefore” statements in 5:16-21. See if you can reproduce the logic of Paul’s thinking. In other words, because this is true, then this is true then this is true. What’s the conclusion?
6. How does this text address our insecurities? What are the “old things” that have passed away?
7. Paul refers to us as “Ambassadors of Christ.” What does that mean? Revisit 5:11-21 and try to identify all the characteristics of a good Ambassador.

Application

1. List the key truths in this text (5:11-21) that help you address your insecurities. Brainstorm as a group some ways you can keep these truths in mind in order to behave as a good Ambassador of Christ.
2. Based on the discussion around the previous question, map out your own personal strategy to address your insecurities, recognize no one according to the flesh and be rightly motivated as an Ambassador of Christ.