

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC**

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

## **The Beauty of Reconciliation**

(2 Corinthians 5:11-21)

Study #9

### **Introduction:** More than a cease-fire...

In 1994, the little African nation of Rwanda exploded with radical violence as an estimated eight hundred thousand members of the Tutsi tribe were killed by the majority Hutu tribe.

This genocidal massacre occurred over the course of only one hundred days. And when the violence stopped - it stopped as suddenly as it had started - Rwanda was a completely shattered nation.

Tens of thousands of those who were guilty of participating in the massacres were put in prisons. But these imprisonments, while just, did nothing to bring healing to the nation or to the survivors.

However, something is happening today in Rwanda that is as radical as the 1994 killings. Reconciliation is breaking out, and where it is breaking out, healing is taking place.

This phenomenon is not occurring in a vacuum. News outlets have been reporting on it for some time. But it may have been documented most poignantly in As We Forgive, a book by Catherine Claire Larson.

Larson describes scenes in which accusers stand before the guilty and offer forgiveness. In trials taking place in villages throughout the country, those who have suffered heart-breaking loss are turning to the ones who inflicted the pain and embracing them.

It is rare in this world to experience true reconciliation with a former enemy, but it is a beautiful sight to behold when it happens.

Most all of us here have experienced conflict, of one kind or another, to one degree or another. We can rejoice if our conflicts have not risen to a Rwandan level. We can mourn if we have not - or not yet - had the joy of embracing our foe after the conflict. Fractured friendships are common. Less common are wholesale reconciliations.

But if you have ever had the pleasure of reconciling with an enemy - not just a "cease-fire" but a genuine, heartfelt embrace of a former foe - then you know, firsthand, the beauty of reconciliation.

Scripture says that a reconciliation is needed on a grander scale than a handshake between you and your neighbor. Grander even than what is needed in Rwanda. The Bible says that you and Almighty God were enemies - and then goes on to assure us that Jesus changed all of that.

Our first time together in Scripture in 2011 finds us looking at a passage that is all about what Paul calls "*the ministry of reconciliation.*"

### **Glorious Reconciliation! (vv. 18-19)**

#### **JESUS' Reconciling Work (vv. 18a, 19a)**

*[18] Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ...[19a] namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...*

There are two undeniable realities that make reconciliation between each one of us and God necessary. One, God is holy. Two, we are not.

Our sin separates us from a holy and righteous God and makes enemies out of the Creator and His creation.

And our every violation of God's commands - every lie and every lust; every gossiping or slanderous remark; every drunken binge and every judgmental thought, every unfaithfulness and every hypocrisy - is one more slap in His face, one more brick in the wall of separation.

In response to our rebellion, God, being holy, turns away from us, just as we have turned away from Him. And the result is a cosmic logjam, an impasse between us and God.

But, as Paul says here, that logjam has been broken by Jesus. He effected a reconciliation between us and God by His death on the cross.

Here is the picture: Because of what Christ did for us, God's anger is turned away and He has turned back toward us, arms open wide. And we, having placed our trust in Jesus, have turned back to God.

Formerly back to back, we now find ourselves in a face to face relationship with God - enemies reconciled! How fantastic is that!?

And the follow-up to the truth of our reconciliation with God is a New Year's present, direct from our new Father. God has given us who have been reconciled to Him the privilege of telling others how they, too, can be reconciled to Him.

### **OUR Reconciling Work (vv. 18b, 19b)**

*[18b]...and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, [19b]...and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.*

We who are no longer at odds with God are now to share it with others. We - His people - are His chosen method for getting the word out. We are His Plan A, and there is no Plan B.

What a great way to kick off 2011, affirming that we are all called to present the message of reconciliation to our loved ones, friends, acquaintances, even our enemies.

THAT is the central theme of the passage before us - and Paul surrounds that theme with life-changing truths.

For instance, he speaks to the issue of motivation. What motivates us to share the glorious message of reconciliation with others?

Try this one on for size: Fear.

### **Dual Motivations (vv. 11-15)**

#### **A Healthy, Wholesome Fear (vv. 11-13)**

*"The fear of the Lord" is not...*

*[11] Therefore, 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. [12] 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.*

I'm not going to play games with you and I'm not going to engage in semantic gymnastics. When Paul says "fear" he means "fear." At the same time, there is "fear" and then there is "fear".<sup>1</sup>

*"The fear of the Lord"* is not the fear of a beaten dog cringing in terror before a cruel master. It's not a fear that God will let us down. It's not a fear that paralyzes.

From beginning to end the Bible speaks of *"the fear of the Lord"* as a healthy, energizing fear.

*"The fear of the Lord" is...*

It's the awe that a small child has for his or her father. It is the respect that an employee has for a boss who's got integrity, or a serviceman has for an officer who leads well.

*"The fear of the Lord"* is respect - on steroids.

And interestingly enough, this theme of the fear of the Lord comes to Paul's mind right after he has just finishing telling us about the Judgment Seat of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that Paul is speaking to Christians. When he speaks of the fear of the Lord, he does not have in mind the terror those will experience who have never trusted Christ when they stand before God's judgment. (See Revelation 6:15ff; Rev. 20)

*“The fear of the Lord” is prompted by...*

We know that there is a tie-in between “fear” and the Judgment Seat because of the **“Therefore”** that begins his comment about fear.

The Judgment Seat of Christ awaits all believers. You and I will face Jesus as Judge when we step out of time into eternity. And Paul was deeply sobered by the thought that he would give Jesus an account of how he had lived.<sup>2</sup>

He takes the Judgment Seat of Christ seriously. THEREFORE, he is moved to persuade men. That is, knowing that he will give account of his life to Jesus, he is moved to zealous involvement in the ministry of reconciliation.

He was really passionate about the ministry of reconciliation - passionate to the point where some people wondered if he had gone a bit overboard.

*“The fear of the Lord” results in...*

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

Let’s admit it. When we are in the grip of some passion, we can appear unbalanced (“a bubble off plumb”) to those who are not caught in the grip of that passion.

Today, people may think that you are unbalanced if you are really “in to” computers, exercise, certain foods, music - you name it.

To outsider observers, it appeared that Paul was “beside himself” for Jesus. Or, to put it more bluntly, they thought he was out of his ever loving mind.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ parables often contained the idea of giving an account (for instance, Luke 16:2), and Paul stated explicitly that each one of us will give an accounting to God (Romans 14:12).

<sup>3</sup> Some years after he wrote 2 Corinthians, the Roman ruler, Festus, charged Paul with madness because of his zeal for Christ (Acts 26:24).

*“That Paul. He’s such a fanatic!”* (My favorite definition of a fanatic remains, *“Somebody who loves Jesus more than you do...”*)

Well, when we fear the Lord, we are passionate about Him. And that passion drives us to engage in the ministry of reconciliation!

So, Paul was moved by the fear of the Lord to persuade men. And, surprise, he was also motivated by the love of Christ.

### **Captured by His Love (vv. 14-15)**

***[14] For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; [15] and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.***<sup>4</sup>

There is something extremely motivating about realizing that we are *totally* and *completely* and *outrageously* and *extravagantly* loved. Paul understood a bit of how perfectly Jesus loved him and it moved him to share the message of reconciliation everywhere he went!

When you get a vision of the enormity of Christ’s love for you, you, like Paul, will be overwhelmed. And overwhelmed, you, too, will be moved to tell others the Good News. Boldness to share our faith is driven by Christ’s love for us.<sup>5</sup>

So, if your zeal and fire has dimmed and the sharp edge on your passion has dulled and obedience has become a chore, don’t just grit your teeth, “buck up” and “do the right thing because, well, it’s the right thing to do.” No!

Remember who it is who has given you commands to obey. It’s Jesus, the One who loves you best!

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<sup>4</sup> There are some who say that Paul means here, *“I love Christ so much that I want to share the good news with others.”* But, the truer sense seems to be, *“Christ loves me so much that I am constrained to live for Him and spread the Gospel as far and wide as I can.”*

<sup>5</sup> In our church’s Mission Statement, we quote Romans 5:8, which says, ***“...God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** We go on to say, *“In response to His love....”*

### Thinking about it...

Now I'm suspicious that we hear "fear" and "love" we may instinctively think that they are contradictory motives.

But I've wondered this week if *the love of Christ* and *the fear of the Lord* are really such different concepts. Might it not be that the two motives, when properly understood, are two ways of saying the same thing?

Isn't our fear at the prospect of judgment born of a dread that we not offend the One who has showered us with love?

I'm more of a mind that *the fear of the Lord* and *the love of Christ* are not contradictory, but complementary.

So, we engage in the ministry of reconciliation (evangelism), motivated by fear AND love. And we engage in the ministry of reconciliation because that message changes everything.

For instance, it changes the way we view the people around us.

### Reconciliation's Fruit (vv. 16-17)

#### **Seeing Others through Different Lenses (v. 16)**

*We look at others differently*

**[16a] Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh...**

It is tempting for any of us to view people on the basis of well-defined castes, colors, and divisions. This man is rich, that one is poor. This woman is a Democrat; that guy is a Republican. There is an Anglo, an Hispanic, etc...

Categorizing people is common and can be convenient, but there is a problem with doing so. When we pigeonhole people on the basis of demographics, we have identified them on the basis of the most trivial things about them.

People are so much more than their demographics. You are more than your color, class, clothing, height, weight, athletic and musical ability, intelligence, and wealth - and so is everyone you know.

Now that we know Jesus, we are free to view people in a much more helpful way and no longer **"according to the flesh."**

When we look beyond the flesh we see that every man, woman and child we meet is a person made in the image and likeness of God. Every one of them is an eternal being. Every one of them is a person for whom Christ died. Every one of them is a victim of the devil's lies. Every one of them is fallen. Every one of them is a glorious wreck.

Jesus wants us to see people as He sees them, to look below the surface.

We can now see people with different eyes, can have a vision for what they might become if they were touched by God. Those with whom we daily rub shoulders can be awakened to LIFE by the power of God!

So, as we approach the people who come into our world, our orientation toward them changes. We see people and instinctively think, *"They need a Savior!"* And seeing them in this light, we share with them the message of reconciliation.

Paul says that we also think about Jesus waaaaay differently than we ever did before we came to faith.

*We certainly look at Jesus differently!*

**[16b]... even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.**

Some Bible scholars believe that the Apostle Paul might have actually known Jesus, personally. I see that as a definite possibility. But even if he didn't, he certainly would have known OF Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes seems convinced that Paul did know, or see, or have an opinion about Christ and His ministry formed through personal contact prior to His death.

Because of what Paul knew of Jesus, he did his best to exterminate the faith community that gathered in His Name because Paul regarded Jesus as a charlatan.

Prior to coming to faith, Paul would have thought of Jesus as a troublemaking rabble-rouser, a tub-thumping street preacher from a dirty little town in Galilee - "*Jesus? He's just a no-good. No political standing, no family position or connections, no training, no education.*"

Yet NOW, Paul regarded Jesus differently. He has come to see Him as King, Messiah, Savior, Son of God.

The same change in orientation has occurred for anyone who has placed their faith in Jesus. We view Jesus differently. In fact, that is what becoming a Christian is all about!

It is fundamentally changing our thinking about Jesus. And understanding who Jesus is - King, Messiah, Savior, Son of God - brings about a fundamental, core change in who we are.

### **Jesus Makes New Creations (v. 17)**

***[17] THEREFORE<sup>7</sup> if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.***

I believe that there is a hunger and a thirst in every heart to be made fresh and clean and new. One of the reasons we enjoy January 1<sup>st</sup> is that it speaks of a new beginning and a fresh start. Brand new resolutions are just around the corner.

When you turn to Jesus and by faith receive Him, you are reborn. You begin a new life. And your new life does not remain new for a while, only to become stale and stagnant. It remains permanently fresh and new.<sup>8</sup>

Who you are fundamentally changes the instant you place your trust in Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added - it is because of how we now view Jesus that brings about the core change in us and makes us "new creatures"

<sup>8</sup> I love the way the Lord puts this truth in Revelation 21:5, "***Behold, I am making all things new***" NOT "*I am making all new things.*"

Instantly -

- your sin is forgiven;
- your eternal destiny takes a 180 degree turn for the good;
- you are no longer under God's condemnation;
- you are declared justified before God;
- you are reconciled to God;
- you can call God "Father";
- you possess the Holy Spirit;
- you are brother or sister to all who have placed faith in Jesus.

All of that - and more! - adds up to making you, in Paul's estimation, a "new creature."

It's not that when we trust Jesus we are instantly delivered from all struggle with evil, guilt, hate, and fear. No, that struggle will last a lifetime.

But it is that from the moment we turn to Jesus there is a permanent change in who we are at the center of our being.

So, given all of that, can you think of anything better that you could do than to tell your friend about Jesus? Can you think of anything more loving than to introduce him or her to life in Christ and give your friend a chance to become eternally brand new?

That is what the message of reconciliation is all about. It is about change - from core to crust. It's about understanding who Jesus is, our Savior King. It is about being re-made by God. It is about viewing people as the fallen image-bearers they are - and pointing them to the One who can remake them.

And, in fulfilling our stewardship to share the message of reconciliation, Paul gives us a new way to view ourselves. Tailor made for a new year's self-image refresh, Paul says that you are an ambassador.

### **A New Year; A New Self Image (v. 20)**

***[20] Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.***

The United States has many ambassadors scattered throughout the world. An ambassador is someone who lives on foreign soil while serving as a representative of his or her homeland.

Some of these postings are pretty cushy. I mean, who wouldn't enjoy being the US Ambassador to Fiji, or Sweden?

But sometimes, to take an ambassador's post is to be placed in a dangerous situation. In addition to having an ambassador to Luxembourg, the USA also has ambassadors in Angola and Slovakia and Yemen and Sudan.

Paul says that you and I are ambassadors *for Christ*. So what does that mean?

It means that you represent Jesus where you are. You are a citizen of Heaven, stationed on earth for the remainder of your life.

And no matter where you have been posted - USAA, Grey Fox Terrace, Leon Valley, Braun Station, Northwest Crossing, O'Connor High School, Stevenson Middle School, Lackland Air Force Base - you are an ambassador with a commission to tell those around you how they can be reconciled to God.

What a privilege!

This is the message that our Lord wants us to declare. It is the message that pinpoints what His coming to earth was all about.

And just in case there is any confusion as to the nuts and bolts of the message, Paul provides a Gospel nugget at the end that some have called the most profound statement in the New Testament.

### Conclusion:

*[21] He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

These words describe the transaction that took place on the cross.

Christ did not "*sin on our behalf*." He "*was made to be sin.*"<sup>9</sup> He took upon Himself all of His Father's wrath for us.

And now, we are not condemned because, having placed our faith in Jesus, He has taken our punishment - and with God, there is no double jeopardy!

We who were enemies of God have become His children. In the fullest sense of the word, we are reconciled.

*O, welcome all ye noble saints of old,  
As now before your very eyes unfold  
The wonders all so long ago foretold,  
God and man at table are sat down*

*Elders, martyrs, all are falling down,  
Prophets, patriarchs are gathering 'round  
What angels longed to see now man has found,  
God and man at table are sat down*

*Who is this who spreads the victory feast?  
Who is this who makes our warring cease?  
Jesus, risen savior, prince of peace,  
God and man at table are sat down*

*Beggars, lame, and harlots also here,  
Repentant publicans are drawing near,  
Wayward sons come home without a fear,  
God and man at table are sat down.<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> See also Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; Heb. 7:26; 1 John 3:5

<sup>10</sup> Lyrics by Robert Stamps