

As most of you know, I had a career in business before transitioning to vocational ministry, and during that time, I was heavily involved in the North Dallas Chamber of Commerce. Specifically, I was a Chamber Ambassador and even led the committee for a year. Ambassador work was the work of representation. We were the welcome committee at events, we championed the cause of the Chamber to visitors and let them know how they could get involved, and we brought in new members by orienting them to the mission and work of the Chamber. We were given authority to represent the interests of the Chamber to the public and invite others to participate.

This morning we continue in our series called *To Be Continued* where we're taking a look at biblical images of the Church in the New Testament to understand who we are, what we are called to do, and why we are called to do it. We have turned our focus outward over the last couple weeks and we do so again today. This morning we will look at a passage that makes it clear we too have been given the work of representation.

In 2 Cor 5, Paul summarizes it this way: **[2 Corinthians 5:20a] Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.**

Followers of Christ are ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador is someone who officially represents a government or kingdom to those outside of it. They are sent as a sign of friendship and bring a message of goodwill. Their purpose is to establish peaceful relations between entities or reestablish peaceful relations after a time of conflict. The US has dozens of ambassadors across the globe who reside in embassies in each of those nations. They represent our nation to those people and work to establish or maintain friendly and peaceful relations.

The Church is the embassy of the Kingdom of Heaven, and each citizen of that Kingdom is God's authorized representative to the people of this world. Our purpose is to announce God's desire for a renewed relationship with creation, to announce the day of salvation. But before we can do that, we must own for ourselves the motivation, the mission, and the message we carry.

[2 Corinthians 5:14-16] ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 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.

For many Christians, myself included, it's very tempting to pick up the Bible and start writing down all the things it says you should do, and then go do them. With that approach, our faith becomes performing a checklist of activities that neither honor God or help us know him more. Our ambassadorship is a lofty calling, but it can easily become one more thing we must do for God if our motivation is misplaced. It's only when we comprehend God's love for us and his love for others that we can live out this calling with the proper motivation.

Have you ever said, "You'd do that for me?" It's quite an experience to see someone sacrifice for you because of their love for you; giving of time and energy, money in a tight spot, forgoing something so you could have it. There's a good chance you'll be so moved by that love you'll

want to “return the favor”, do something sacrificial in return because of the gratitude and care you have for them.

We moved this past summer and, if you’ve ever moved, you know how awful it is. We had a couple friends help on multiple days. They said “Don’t tell anyone we helped you move. We don’t do it for everyone. But we love you guys.” Their love for us resulted in generous (and sweaty) work. We were so moved by their love for us that we look forward to an opportunity to do the same for them. It’s not “you do for me, I do for you”, and it’s not a guilt and pride-induced inability to accept help, so I have to make things even. It’s a humbling experience that someone would love us so much that they’d pour themselves out on our behalf. And that love elicits a deep love and gratitude for them, out of which comes a desire to reciprocate.

The love Christ showed in dying for Paul instilled in Paul a deep love for Christ. That love now controls him. The word literally means “to seize”. As 1 John 4 says, “We love because he first loved us.” Paul wants to honor the life given for him by giving his own life for Him. This is not some reluctant or begrudging sense of “Well, I guess I owe Jesus now.” It’s the only way you can live when you are truly captivated by the love of Jesus. **Jesus’ love is not a taskmaster that demands you live that way. It is the inspiration that makes you not want to live in any other way.** When we grasp the magnitude of Christ’s love in giving his life for us, we will be thrilled to give our lives back in return.

We’re also motivated by how God feels about others. Paul uses an interesting phrase “We regard no one according to the flesh.” It means that we no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view but, instead, a spiritual one. It means we see each other as God sees us, as spiritual beings with a standing before God. We no longer see each other based on superficial criteria the world values. Our primary concern is what someone believes about Jesus. This leads to humility, because sin renders us all equally dead, and the only reason any of us are alive is because of God’s grace. We have nothing to boast about on our own. We can only boast about Jesus. It also leads to compassion. If you are a follower of Jesus, you should grieve for those who are not.

God sees all of us as lovable enough to send his Son to die for. When he looks at someone who has not entered into a saving relationship with him, he sees them as a long-lost love whom he’s eager to be with forever. If we see others as God sees them, it means we’ll be spiritually rooting for everyone, irrespective of worldly things like political party, class, education, influence, religious background, or even if they’re an Aggie. **When we see people as God sees them, we’ll not only be controlled by the love God has for us, we’ll be controlled by the love God has for everyone else too.** That’s the fuel we need to live out our calling as ambassadors.

Once we have the proper motivation, what is our mission and message? What is it exactly that Christ has done for us, and what are we calling others to experience?

[2 Corinthians 5:17-19] ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ 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.

The work of Christ is the work of transformation. His work changes us forever and it changes our relationship with God forever. That's the message of an ambassador.

The moment we place our trust in Christ for salvation, several things happen to us (one theologian has a list of 33!). First, we are given the Holy Spirit. We've talked about that in this series in terms of how the Holy Spirit unites all believers in Christ as his Church. But the work of the Spirit goes beyond that. We are made new!

[Titus 3:5] ⁵ He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit takes us from spiritual death to spiritual life. We are born again. We are given a new heart and the mind of Christ. The power of sin and rebellion are broken in our lives and we can now live devoted to Jesus. We are forgiven, free of condemnation and shame. We can persevere because we have a hopeful eternity. It doesn't mean all our problems are solved. It doesn't mean we still don't wrestle with temptation. It doesn't even mean life won't be really hard. The Bible says we'll suffer. But you are renewed.

I'm not talking about a superficial change. Martha and her sister spent a good part of yesterday painting an old cabinet, and it looks great. But guess what? It's still the same old cabinet, just prettied up on the outside. **The Holy Spirit does not make old things pretty. The Holy Spirit makes dead things alive.** You have a new permanent identity because you are in Christ.

For us to persuade others to receive this transformation, it will likely require more than our words. Our lives must show evidence of the story our mouth is telling. If we are inviting others to become a citizen of heaven, we ought to show that there are great benefits to citizenship! If we are not living in our new lives in Christ, sharing the good news of the Gospel is like inviting someone to take a bite of a mediocre meal, to watch a movie you'd describe as "not terrible", or to buy a product that you claim has minimally impacted your life. But you tell someone the good news of Jesus and show them how it's changed you, you'll get people to listen.

How are you living in the old? We can be a new creation in Christ while remaining in bondage to who we were before him. How are you stuck in shame? Are you still trying to earn God's approval? What are you still trying to control? What struggles are you facing on your own, not bringing the power of the cross to? Where is fear diminishing your faith? These are symptoms of spiritual death, but that's not who you are anymore if you are in Christ. Ask God to reveal where you are still living in the old, then ask him to show you how he's made you new.

The Holy Spirit also changes our relationship to God. Paul says that God reconciled us to himself. Reconciliation is bringing back together. In the accounting world, reconciliation has to happen when two accounts are out of balance. They don't agree and must be brought back into harmony. If you get a speeding ticket, you are in violation of the law and must pay a fine as restitution to reconcile with the authorities.

Reconciliation also means to bring restoration to a relationship that was broken, to do away with enmity or hostility. There have been a number of times I have offended Martha. After eighteen

years of marriage, I'm getting really good at it. As the offender, I pursue Martha in the hopes of reconciliation and offer acknowledgement, apologies, and a commitment to change as the means of reconciliation, as a means of eliminating the hostility and restoring the relationship.

But that won't work when it comes to our relationship with God. Reconciliation is usually initiated by the offender. The problem is that we have nothing to offer as a means of reconciliation. We are fallen beings. Anything we offer to God falls far below his holy standards.

I know there are a lot of sincere people, both in and out of the church, who recognize something isn't right between them and their creator, and they are trying to do good things to reconcile with God. If they could just tip the scales ever so slightly by having at least one more plus than minus, they'd be good with God. But that will never be enough. None of that satisfies the offense our sin is to God. If you are here this morning and you have been trying to work your way into a right relationship with God either through coming to church or doing good things or doing less bad things or doing spiritual things like praying or reading a Bible, let me save your energy and tell you to stop (well, keep coming to church, praying, and reading your Bible!) None of those will do anything to heal your broken relationship with God. **But what you can't do, Jesus did.**

Here's the beauty of the Gospel. "All this is from God". The good news of the Gospel is that God, even though he is the one who has been offended, is the one to move towards us and offer us the means of reconciliation, which is through his Son, Jesus Christ. He paid for our offense on the cross. He removed the hostility between us and God. That means we can have peace with him. That means we can be free of his wrath. That means you can be called a child of God. Jesus' reconciling work on the cross makes salvation possible. It's simply a gift we must accept.

We are ministers of reconciliation because we first have been reconciled. Our God-given purpose is born out of our identity. Our story is what God wants us to invite others into. The son of Eugene Petersen, who died this week, said his dad preached only one sermon his entire life. There is a sermon God wants all of us to preach. It's the message of our reconciliation and the reconciliation God wants every single person to experience.

Two things:

Ruminate on the love of Christ. Remember last week we read Jesus saying, "rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Do not take your salvation, salvation made possible because of the love of Jesus, for granted. Let it fill your heart and let it inspire you to live your life for him. Who is your other? Who needs this message? Who can you invite this Christmas?

But before you can be an ambassador of the King, you must first be a citizen of the Kingdom. **[2 Corinthians 5:20b] We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.** Salvation is a gift made possible by Jesus. It requires nothing of you. You must simply accept it in faith. Confess to God you are a sinner, that there's nothing you can do to reconcile yourself to him and place your trust in Jesus as your Savior. When you do, you will be made new forever, and your relationship to God will be changed forever. Amen.