

Partners in the Great Reconciliation **2 Corinthians 5:11-21**

I read a powerful story of reconciliation this week in an article on the Prison Fellowship website... <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2021/07/joe-amy-story-reconciliation/>

In 1992 a man named Joe Avila was driving drunk on the freeway when he collided with another car and killed a teenage girl named Amy Wall. He fled the scene before anyone got there and had no memory of it even happening. For Amy's family it was the complete opposite – it was a nightmare that didn't end. Amy was a beloved daughter, granddaughter, sister and friend whose life was cut way too short because of the careless decisions of an alcoholic. Imagine how you would feel if that was your daughter, or your sister...Imagine how you'd feel toward that drunk driver.

After being arrested, Joe was put in jail and charged with second-degree murder. He was overcome by what he had done, afraid, angry, and sad, and was looking for a way to kill himself. But while awaiting trial he got connected with some people in the Salvation Army who explained the gospel, reconciliation, and forgiveness to him. It was life-changing. He ended up changing his plea to "guilty" and was sentenced to the maximum of 12 years in prison.

While in prison, Joe served with hospice and in the chapel and shared the gospel with fellow prisoners. He served 8 years of his sentence but was then released to go back home to family and friends. He was also returning to the community where Amy's family lived. I've heard people talk about what it's like when a drunk driver who killed a loved one moves back to the area. Deep anger, even hatred boils to the surface. There are times when family members have to move so they aren't tempted to seek vengeance.

But with Amy's family, it was different. It was very hard, but they reached out and wanted to meet with Joe. When Amy's dad, Rick, met with Joe, Prison Fellowship says, "Something miraculous happened. Rick told Joe about the two days a year when he visits Amy's grave—on her birthday and the anniversary of her death. And then Rick said, "Joe, I know what you've been doing for a long time now, even when you were in prison, and I approve of it."

Joe's prayers for reconciliation were being answered: "Rick Wall, Amy's father, forgave me before I even asked him to forgive me."

Joe's relationship with the Wall family continued to grow, and at one point he and Amy's dad were asked to participate in a Restorative Justice Council event in front of hundreds of people. At that event, Amy's dad approached Joe, hugged him, and said, "I love you, Joe."

That's an awesome story of reconciliation. It's a powerful thing when people who once were enemies are able to come together in peace. We love to hear those stories and one of the reasons I think we do is because there's something deep inside us that knows we need the same thing.

We have an awesome Creator who gave us life and many blessings. He created us to know him and glorify him and enjoy him forever. But ever since the first humans, we have turned from him in various forms of rebellion and gone our own way. Refusing to worship him, we've worshipped other things instead. Rather than thanking him, we've neglected him and put the spotlight on ourselves and other created things. And as we've done this, we've built a massive chasm between us and our God. We have brought his righteous anger and holy wrath upon ourselves. Our greatest need isn't protecting our borders or decreasing the national debt or poverty or pollution... it's being reconciled with our Creator.

Today we're going to study a passage of Scripture that's going to have a lot of familiar things in it, but these familiar things are the greatest things that have ever happened in history and the greatest news we've ever heard. So I don't want the significance of what we're studying to be lost because it's so familiar. My prayer is that God's Spirit will use it to astonish us once again with the deep, deep love that the Father has for we who were his enemies.

Paul is writing to the Corinthians and in the section we've been studying he's been focusing a lot on his ministry as an Apostle – the proof of his apostleship, the awesome privilege of it, the reasons for pressing forward in gospel ministry despite all kinds of suffering and the reality that it might cost him his life. Now today Paul will be defending himself once again but also explaining his partnership with God in the greatest reconciliation story ever known.

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 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.

Paul starts by stating the core of what they're doing in ministry – seeking to persuade others to believe in Christ and follow him. He says this comes from knowing the fear of the Lord, which has to do with what he wrote in verse 10 – that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due for what we've done in this life – whether good or evil. For Christians there will be varying degrees of reward depending on our faith and obedience. But for unbelievers there will be the terrifying reality of condemnation and righteous judgment. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God while still bearing the weight of your own sin and guilt. Therefore, it is this reverent fear that motivated Paul and his associates to persuade others. That's what they were doing in their ministry.

Paul is going to get back to that later on in the chapter, but first he makes a few comments related to those in Corinth who were trying to discredit his ministry as an Apostle. That's what we find in the rest of these verses. In verses 11-12 he says essentially this: *“We persuade others – that's what we do as Apostles – God knows this and I hope you do too. We aren't just commending ourselves by saying this (which some would accuse us of doing), but we are giving you reasons to be confident in us and defend us against our opponents who are pointing to external things to try to discredit our Apostleship rather than looking at the heart.”*

One of the external things his opponents were looking for to prove apostleship was “being beside themselves” or, more literally, ecstatic experiences. He mentions this in verse 13. They thought ecstatic experiences proved the presence of the Spirit of God and thus confirmed apostleship. But Paul didn't

demonstrate that in his ministry, and they were trying to use that against him. Paul says in verse 13 that if he was “beside himself,” it was something between him and God – not for public show. While ministering to the Corinthians, he was not like that, he was in his right mind for their benefit.

In verses 14-15 he says that what controlled him in ministry wasn't some strange, supposedly spiritual thing going on that resulted in an ecstatic experience. It was the love of Christ and the compelling truth of the gospel. Because Jesus died, Paul died with him to his former way of life and he wasn't living for himself any longer, but for Jesus.

So that's a little bit of a side-thought that Paul includes because of the situation at Corinth and in verse 16 he gets back to his main subject. But before we get to that, I want to make a few comments about this side-thought and what I see happening among many Christians today.

Many Christians are drawn to preachers and pastors who demonstrate ecstatic experiences and claim that it's the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. People think the bizarre things that are happening are proof that the Holy Spirit is present. The ones I think of first are Benny Hinn and Bill Johnson, but there are many more. There are plenty of videos and articles you can look at to see the kinds of things that are happening – people being slain in the spirit, holy laughter, barking like dogs, bodies convulsing on the ground, glory clouds, gold dust, and more. But you will also find plenty of videos and articles exposing that these are a scam to draw people in, get them to believe the preacher, and get them to give a bunch of money to their ministries.

Don't get drawn in by them. Ecstatic experience doesn't mean it's the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In a lot of cases it's simply human manipulation and might even be demonic influence. Paul says the Holy Spirit manifests himself when sinners put their faith in Jesus, when they believe the gospel and repent of their sins, when they bow in subjection to the authority of Christ, and demonstrate sacrificial love for others. These were the kinds of things Paul was looking for. There were also miracles that happened – mostly healings and speaking in different tongues, but Paul wasn't using these things to manipulate people into following him, they simply accompanied and confirmed the preaching of the gospel. So don't get drawn to the bug zapper.

Now back to our text and the main subject in this passage, which was Paul's ministry as an Apostle and his efforts to persuade sinners to turn to Jesus and be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶From 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. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

These are precious words, so let's walk through them and meditate on them for a few minutes. He begins by saying that he and his team no longer regard people according to the flesh. I think that stems from the previous section and verse 12 where he talks about the importance of what happens in the heart, not just external experience. Since God works in the heart, Paul doesn't look at outward appearance in people like false teachers do. He used to do that, even with Christ (which is why he initially rejected him), but not any longer. Now he regards people according to the spirit and focuses on what's going on in the heart.

In verse 17 he writes of the transformation God does in the heart for those who put their faith in Jesus: If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old person they once were, has passed away (dying with Christ on the cross), and the new person has come (born of the Spirit). This all takes place in the heart – at the spirit level. And, he says in verse 18, this is what God is doing, making people new. Through Christ, God reconciled Paul and his team to God and gave them the ministry of reconciliation. He restates this in a general sense in verse 19: In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he entrusted to Paul this awesome message of reconciliation. This was Paul's calling as an apostle and why he was seeking to persuade others like he first mentioned in vs. 11. So in verse

20 he says that he and his team were ambassadors for Christ – God was making his appeal for reconciliation through them. God was reaching out to the rebellious world, through Paul’s preaching, beckoning them to come to him to be reconciled!

God went so far as to make reconciliation possible by sending his son in the likeness of man, and made him to be sin, when he transferred all our sins upon him on the cross, even though he knew no sin, and he did that so that our sins could be paid for and forgiven so that we could become the righteousness of God.

I get to the end of this passage and all I can see is our glorious Creator, after being rebelled against by every human he ever created, sending his precious Son to die in our place, and then reaching out through his ambassadors, pleading with us to come to him... “I’ve made the way for your sins to be forgiven, for you to be made new, for you to be at peace with me and a new life of righteousness. Won’t you come?!!

That’s what we need more than anything else in the world and God has done it for us through his Son. That’s what God is inviting us into. Restoration, forgiveness, peace, adoption, harmony – Total Reconciliation. Have you answered this invitation? Rejoice in it! Have you not? Why don’t you come?! Come to your Creator, to your Savior, to your Father and your friend.

And then, when you come, join with him and with all the saints in the great global mission of reconciliation. Become an ambassador for God in your home, and school, and work, and neighborhood. Become part of the greatest reconciliation story every told.

We have some time now for worship and reflection as we take the Lord’s Supper together. Let’s eagerly invite him to come and eat with us.