



Sermon – March 04/02/2023
Dr. Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week
2 Corinthians 5: 16 - 21

As you grab your seat, let's open our Bibles together. We're going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 today. Second Corinthians 5 as we continue our Easter series focused on God's heart for mission. If you're a guest with us this morning, welcome home. It's a perfect Sunday to be with us for the first time, Palm Sunday. We're recognizing the fact that Jesus is King. And if He's King, then He has governance and authority over every part of our life. And as we launch into Holy Week, I just want you to remember a few things. For the first time, this Friday night, right here in the worship center at 6 o'clock, we're going to have our first Good Friday service. And I hope you bring the family along and let's fix our hearts on what Jesus does for us in the cross. In addition to that, as we look ahead to next Sunday for Easter Sunday, we'll have our one worship service at 9:30, but all our other Sunday activities will not happen as we mark the moment. No life groups, no Sunday night stuff. Just come here for that 9:30 worship and let's fix our hearts on Jesus.

You might notice something different behind me right now. You'll see this chicken wire display right here. And what you'll find on this display is all of the prayer cards that have come in over the last few weeks as we filled this out. Hundreds and hundreds of them on display. And I want to encourage you to keep filling those out and bringing those as we take the Lord's Supper elements during the response song to get ready for the Lord's Supper. You can keep bringing those forward. But what you would find on those cards. If you could go through and read 'em and pray over 'em just like our team did earlier this week over every single one of them is you would see our hearts broken for the lost around us. You would see our hearts longing that all things would be made new. On those prayer cards, I came across some this morning, this week, one, a couple in our church who's wrestling with infertility and praying that God would provide. And not long after that, another person on our team came across a prayer card with a previously infertile couple in our church who had been praying for children for 10 years and God provided. Just amazing. There's a prayer card in there of a man in our church who has somebody in their workplace who doesn't yet know Jesus and it clicked with him earlier in this series that he had been showing the Gospel through his actions. Now, it's time to step up and speak the Gospel with his words. You'd also see some answered prayers. There is one where two siblings wrote down the name of a younger sister on their card praying that she would come to faith. They turn

it in on Sunday, the very next day on Monday, her parents led her to faith in Christ. Isn't that amazing? There was father and a mother who were praying for a son. That he would come to know Jesus. And the dad not long after that took him off on a retreat, just a getaway, camping, Him and his son. And through that time together, he was able to share with him the Gospel and he repented of his sins and trusted Jesus for salvation. God is on the move right here in our midst. And in a moment after we read our passage this morning, we're going to pray over these requests. And I want you to know now that if you're physically able and you're willing to do it, I'm going to ask you to join me in a second by praying on our knees as we lift up these requests.

But before we get there, we live in a culture that is facing an identity crisis. And it doesn't take long for us to become convinced of that. I mean, right now, the depression rate for teenage girls is through the roof, higher than it's ever been in history. There's more overdose deaths than we've ever seen before. There's more suicide taking place. There are people so confused about their identity that they storm into Christian schools in Nashville and do unthinkable things. We see it right here all around us; this identity crisis in our midst. And what we're going to find this morning in 2 Corinthians 5 is that Paul is going to give us a picture of our true identity as it was intended to be. And if we can grasp that reality, it will change our mindset. And if it changes our mindset, then it can change our mission. So, let's pick up now with where we're going to zero in on. 2 Corinthians 5, beginning down in verse 16. We'll read through the end of the chapter. And then we'll pray on our knees this morning.

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.

And as I said, if you're able to join me on your knees in prayer, let's get in that position now as we prepare our hearts to go to the Lord.

Father in heaven, we kneel before You declaring that You are King. That You are the Lord of the universe, the creator of all things, the Lord of our hearts. And God we're crying out to You on this Palm Sunday. That Your kingdom, that You've established in heaven would be made more fully known on earth. Lord, we stand before these and we kneel before these hundreds of prayer cards. We lift them up to You in this time, Father. There's so many names on these cards of people that don't yet know You. Who are lost without their way in the world, trying to make their own path to You in a hopeless endeavor that would never succeed. And we're praying that You would open blind eyes today. That You would soften hardened hearts. That You would reconcile wayward sons and daughters and bring them back into Your family. Lord, I lift up our church to you especially this Easter week, God. The devil rages all around us. He hates the celebration of the resurrection. He wants us to take our eyes off of Jesus. But I pray instead God, our hearts will be fixed on Him. That we would do whatever it takes to make Him known

God. That You would help us to be faithful in carrying out this ministry of reconciliation that Your word calls us to. And that above all else that Christ would be glorified as we celebrate Him high and lifted up, seated at Your right hand, victorious over all rulers and authorities and demonic forces and powers that wage war against us, that stands against us, and deception and accusation, Father. We stand on that promise. We stand on that blood. And we stand so that we might follow Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

As you return your seats, I wonder, have you ever wondered who the dirtiest person in the world is? And maybe some of you thinking, I don't need to wonder because they live in my house. Come down and see my teenagers room. He's the kind that doesn't want to take a shower even after he plays two baseball games. Or you say, walk into my roommate's bedroom and look at how messy it is. Or come over to my Aunt Mary's house and see how much hoarding she's doing because she's collecting antiques for the future just in case she needs 'em. I know who the dirtiest person is. Look up here on the screen. I want you to see who is actually been declared the dirtiest man in the world. This is a 94-year-old Iranian hermit who goes by the name Amou Haji or Uncle Haji. 94 years old. And the way the story goes is that for the last 60 years or more, he's never taken a bath. Never showered. The locals would tell you he doesn't eat fresh food because he thinks it's dangerous. He only eats roadkill and other things like that. He smokes a pipe using animal excrement. He lives in a hole. That's the kind of person this is. Covered in the filth, the dirt. And what I found fascinating when I came across Amou Haji's story is the way the community around him has responded to him. They didn't shun him. They respected him. They didn't treat him as a problem to be avoided but as a community member to be loved. And so when they found him living in a hole, they built an open-air brick shack for him to live in. They tried to provide for him, to care for him, to come alongside him. They even gave him an affectionate nickname in order to support him. There was even a time a few years back where some of them loaded them up in a van to take him down by the river to try to wash himself. And in that process, he was so afraid of the water, he jumped out of the moving car just to escape them. And I want you to think about as you hear this story, the way it reflects the spiritual reality of the world around us. Because what 2 Corinthians 5 is making clear is that apart from Jesus Christ, all of us stand in the filth of our sin. We are dirtied by our misdeeds. That picture you saw of him with the stains and the soot is a picture of who we are spiritually apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And in the way the community around him didn't turn their back but they leaned in, that's the picture that Paul is calling us to this morning. To care for those who are dead in their sin. To love those who are soiled by the stain of their sin. It's a, to seek to reach them even if they reject us over and over again. And where we find this is right here in the middle of the second letter that Paul writes to the Corinthian church. And if you know anything about the Corinthians, their church was a mess. Sin, rebellion, discord, disagreement, and as Paul writes to address those superficial issues, those symptoms that you can see in the dysfunction in their church. Now, in chapter 5, he gets to the heart of the matter. That they're facing a crisis of identity. And that if they want to live on mission, they've gotta change their mindset by understanding their identity. In other words, when they more clearly see who they are in Christ, they'll be more faithful in living out their lives for the sake of Christ.

And so, what we're going to find this morning as we work our way through this passage is 2 Corinthians 5 gives us two ways that Christ transforms our identity in a way that reshapes our mission. And if we truly understand what He's done for us and who He is for us, it will transform how we live for Him. Alright, so let's look at the first one. Back in verse 16, it says,

our new identity gives us a new mindset. We'll see that in verses 16 and 17. It speaks about this new identity. Look at how it describes it there at the start of verse 17.

¹⁷If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

I mean, just think about the whole way the whole Bible pictures this from all the way back in the garden. God establishes His creation without flaw. It's a new creation made after His design but sin enters into the world and shatters it. It brings brokenness and a curse that corrupts everything. And from that moment forward, the people of God have been longing for a day when God would make all things new. Amen. Longing for a day whenever a new creation would come. They patterned it in the events that took place in the Old Testament. They promised it through the prophets that one day, God would make all things new. Which is why on this Easter Holy Week, this is why on this Palm Sunday, we stand here recognizing what Jesus has done for us. Because He comes and takes on flesh. He enters into this broken world. He lives that perfect life. He dies to death we deserve. He is raised three days later. Why? So that He can bring in this new creation. He is the pilot of that new creation. He is the first foothold of the reality that God is making all things new. And what Paul is saying here is that that is our identity. That if we're in Christ, then the new creation is done in us. What's broken, soiled, destroyed, is now set apart and now we are bought with the price. All things are made new in us. We have a new identity as new creations. And how does that happen? It happens, you'll see back there in this passage in the phrase in verse 17, if anyone is in Christ. If you like marking up your Bible, that's one you need to circle or to highlight, in Christ. Because Paul uses it in his letters more than 150 times. You could say that the idea of being in Christ is at the center of Paul's theology of salvation. This idea of union with Christ. And the picture is that when we put our faith in Him, then now what is true of Jesus is now true of us. You think about this picture of union like a bride and a groom coming together as one in that wedding ceremony. They walk the aisle this summer, there's all the flowers, all the pomp and circumstance. And as they say, I do, and that minister declares them, husband and wife, those that were two, now become one. And we would never think it was okay for the bride to marry the groom just for the sake of getting what he has. We call that being a gold digger. We want the money. We want the property. We want the prestige. But Paul is warning us there's a danger that we might see ourselves as Gospel gold diggers, if you will. That we want Jesus for His benefits, for His provision, what He provides for us. But instead, Paul is showing us that the heart of our salvation is not Jesus's provision but His presence. We get Jesus. We're united to Him. And when we get Jesus, we get everything else we need for life and godliness. New creations in Christ. And here's what happens. When we see our new identity, it changes our mindset. And it changes our mindset in a couple ways. It changes our mindset about the people around us. That's why Paul says there in verse 16, from now on, we regard no one according to flesh. Even though we once were regarded, we regarded Christ according to the flesh. We regard him no longer that way. You and I know we live in a culture that is constantly evaluating people according to the flesh. We're looking at the exterior, at the size of their bank account, at the quality of their car, at the color of their skin, at any number of factors in judging by the external. And Paul's saying, I used to be the same way too. I mean, think about it. This was a man who persecuted the church. Who wanted to see the Gospel fail. He was judging according to the flesh, both Christ and His followers. But now Jesus changes everything. It changes his mindset about the people around him. And that's what He does for you and I. He gives us a new way of seeing other people.

But you'll see here back in verse 17 in the second half. It doesn't just change our mindset about other people. It changes our mindset about our past. That's why the end of the verse says, the oldest passed away, behold the new has come. And what Paul is showing us here is that our new identity doesn't just change how we see others but also how we see ourselves. That who we were is not who we are. When we celebrated those five baptisms today and they go through those waters of judgement and they're raised to walk in newness of life symbolically, it's this picture that the past is gone. And that same thing is true for us if we found Jesus this morning. Your guilt, your shame, your sin, your shadows, your darkness, your skeletons, even that one thing that nobody else in the world knows. It's gone. The past has passed away. Behold, He has made all things new. We are no longer defined by our past but we are defined by Jesus's past and what He's done for us so that we don't live on the basis of who we were but we live on the basis of who God has designed us to be. That's the way it changes our mindset. And that has everything to do with what we've been talking about these last few weeks about how Easter fuels our mission. Because part of what it looks like to take the Gospel to those who don't yet know Jesus is to be able to speak about the way He's changed our own lives. That we can talk about, as it says there, that my past has passed away and behold, the new has come. So, one of the most powerful ways you can reach others with the Gospel is talking about how Jesus has changed your life. I was reminded that this week in our monthly deacon meeting, we're in the final stages of working our new deacon candidates through the process. And we're having each of those candidates share their testimonies. And one of them, Jay Griffin, was talking about how he met Jesus as a college student right here at A&M. He was in school during when bonfire fell. He didn't know Jesus. He was running from God, living for himself. But he went out there to the bonfire site after it had fallen. And there was a memorial set up, flowers, cards, all sorts of things. And right as he got out there, rain began to fall all around him. And as he looked down, he saw a Bible sitting there. He had no interest in that Bible. He didn't care anything about God. But for some reason, it dawned on him, "Man, it's starting to rain and this Bible is going to get destroyed. You know what? I'm just going to pick it up and take it home with me." He brought that Bible home and guess what happened? God brought him home. He started reading through that Bible and it changed his life forever. The old has passed away, the new has come. And that story that God has written in your life could be part of what He uses to reach someone else. That's what happens when our identity changes our mindset.

But let's look at the other reality here. Starting down in verse 18, there's a second thing I want you to notice. That our new identity also gives us a new mission. A new mission. It doesn't just change our mindset. It changes our mission. And what is that? What is the picture that Paul is painting for us here? Here's the key idea I'm giving you today about this mission. Our mission is not just something we do, it's who we are. Our mission is not just something we do, it's who we are. And how do we know that? Look down at the start of verse 20 when he says, therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. Now, all of us know what an ambassador is in our day and age. But back then, the in the original language it would speak about an older, respected man in the community. Who the king personally identifies and commissions to be his authoritative representative to the world around them. And that's a picture that Paul is giving us here of who we are in Christ, that our mission isn't what we do, it's who we are. Because we are called by as ambassadors. The king of the universe has personally selected you. He set you apart so that you can demonstrate and declare His kingdom to the lost and dying world around you. That's the picture that Paul is giving us and that has everything to do with how we live out our lives on a

week-to-week basis. So, if we are called to be ambassadors of the kingdom, then what that means is the church is the embassy of the kingdom. This is that spot behind enemy lines where God has put His stamp. These are mine and the Gospel radiates out from there. And if you're an ambassador to the kingdom, that means you should reflect that reality not just when you're here at church on Sundays, not just when you're at home, but from 9 to 5 every day of your life. Whether in the workplace or the classroom. Do you see yourself as an ambassador? That you are representing king Jesus, demonstrating and declaring His kingdom with every contract, with every client, with every meeting with every group project, with every copy you're making, with every errand that you're running, you are reflecting a king. It's not what you do, it's who you are. Ambassadors for the King.

And when we recognize that identity, it changes our mission in several ways. You'll see back in verse 18, we are ambassadors whose new mission is rooted in the message of reconciliation. So, notice how he talks about that message at the start of 18. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciles us to Himself. Look at verse 19. That is in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. So, what is this idea of reconciliation? We know what reconciliation means. It means when there is a broken relationship, it is the restoration of that relationship. That what was once fractured is now restored. Where there was once hostility, there is now unity. That's the picture that Paul is giving us. And the way that happens is that God in Christ takes the initiative. We're the ones that caused the split through our sin. We're the ones that caused the division through the debt that we owe. And yet God pursues us. God invites us back in the family. God makes a way for us in salvation. And how does that happen? Well, look back at the beginning of verse 18. It tells us, all this is from God. In other words, the reconciliation that we long to experience doesn't happen because it's something we do but something that God has done for us in Christ. If you were to look at this reconcile in the original language, it gives the picture of exchanging coins. It's like making a settlement financially with somebody. It's settling up accounts. It's like when you receive that credit card bill at the end of every month. You're kind of going through the itemized list and making sure it's alright. Making sure it's paid off. You're looking at the debt you owe and exchanging coins in order to make it right, in order to reconcile yourself and make yourself whole financially. That is what God does for us through the cross. That's what we celebrate this Easter season. That on this Holy Week, we're reminded that no matter how great the debt of our sin, no death, no matter how deep the judgment we deserve. No matter how much we are buried by the guilt and shame of our failures that Jesus paid it all. He made the way. He reconciled the accounts. He paid the debt we couldn't and gives us eternal riches in heaven. That's the message of reconciliation. But it's not just the message of reconciliation.

We see here. We also see the ministry of reconciliation. So, look back at the second half of verse 18. It says, God gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Now, look at the end of verse 19. And entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Now, down in verse 20, therefore we are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. So, what is this ministry of reconciliation? What Paul is showing us is that as ambassadors of the King, God has entrusted us with the ministry. With the message. With the mission. That we are to go forward and take the reconciliation that we've received ourselves and declare that reconciliation to others. That we are inviting others be reconciled to God. In fact, not just inviting, imploring, pleading, longing. That's what Paul is saying there when he says that in this, in this reality, God is making His appeal through us. It is as if when

we take the Gospel forward, we are speaking the words of Jesus Himself to the lost world all around us. Which is one of the reasons why when our student ministry came back from Jerusalem Project doing local missions right here in the Brazos Valley over spring break, I was fired up out of my mind because they went to the Boys and Girls Club like they do every year. And when they got there, one of the kids at the Boys and Girls Club, looked over to one of his friends and said, "Who is this group that's here with us today?" And the friend who had been there in the past, when our group had been there before, said, "That's the group that comes every year and loves on us and tells us about Jesus." That's what it's all about. That's the ministry of reconciliation. Taking that vertical reconciliation we've been offered to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and making it known to others around us. But I believe that ministry of reconciliation doesn't end there. That's the central foundation. But what we're also trying to do is not just share that vertical reconciliation that we can have with God but to extend the horizontal reconciliation we need that so often happens in a broken world. Think about that broken relationship that is gnawing at your heart this morning. We got friends and people in our church. I can think of somebody who lost a best friendship, still unreconciled. I can think of a man in our church who hasn't talked to his mom in over a year. I can think of people who used to live together as roommates who were not even on speaking terms. I'm saying, think about that person. And here's the question I want you to wrestle with. If the God of the universe loved you so much, that sent his son to die for you so that you might be reconciled to Him, then how could we possibly be unwilling to pursue reconciliation with those we have broken relationships around us? To whom much is forgiven, much forgiveness should be extended. To whom you've experienced much reconciliation, much reconciliation should be on display. The question I want you to wrestle with is, how do you need to make things right today in those broken relationships? That's one of the ways we display this ministry of reconciliation. But it's also one of the reasons why I've been challenging us as a church to lean in to our generosity over these few weeks right around Easter to fund the \$640,000 of our budget that goes to missions and outreach activities. Because that is the fuel for ministry of reconciliation. That when we give, when we financially step up, it allows us to come alongside and reach the 5,000 international students on campus at A&M, most of whom don't know Jesus. It allows us to reach into some of the most difficult and diverse places in our community through our foster and adoption care ministry through our care portal. It allows us to step up and fill the gap, to stand for life by supporting our local crisis pregnancy center. It has all sorts of ways that we get to take the vertical reconciliation we've experienced with God and to extend it to the world around us that's in need. Why does all this happen? It's because this ministry of reconciliation is rooted in one last reality.

We see that it's rooted in the moment of reconciliation that you and I have experienced if we've met Jesus. That's what we find there in verse 21 when it says, for our sake, He made Him be sin, who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God. Have you ever heard of the term a scapegoat? Is that ring a bell to you? A scapegoat is somebody who gets the blame, often unjustly, when a failure happens. Well, that that term is not a modern term that goes all the way back to the ancient parts of the Bible. Leviticus 16 and the establishment of the Day of Atonement, one of the clearest pictures of the anticipation of the Gospel in the Old Testament. What would happen is once a year, the priest would bring two goats into the temple and he would do two things. One with each goat. The first goat, he would take his hands and he would lay his hands upon that goat. That goat was the scapegoat. And he would lay his hands upon that goat symbolically transferring the sin of all the people for the year onto that goat. And once that sin had been transferred, once that goat who knew no sin became sin, it would be sent out

into the wilderness and set free. Then he would take the second goat. And that second goat, he would not lay his hands on its head, he would lay its knife on its neck. And it would be sacrificed as an offering to make payment for the sins of the people. It would stand in as a substitute to suffer in their place so that they might be made righteous before God. The scapegoat and the substitute each year on the Day of Atonement was never enough to satisfy God for the sins of His people but they pointed the head to one who would. They pointed ahead to one that we celebrate this Palm Sunday. Because what Paul is showing us here in 2 Corinthians 5 is that's what happens for us in Christ. He is our scapegoat. He who knew no sin became sin for us and He is our substitute. He dies in our place so that when we trust Him in salvation, we might become the righteousness of God. I want you to see one more time that picture of the world's dirtiest man, Amou Haji. And what you see visually about his physical filth, I want you to picture that same spiritual reality for everyone in this room, in this community, and around this world that doesn't know Jesus. And as we step into our Easter week, we need to remember what God has done for us on the cross. He's made a way when we didn't deserve it. Through this great exchange that takes place where what happens is we exchange my guilt for His grace. We exchange our sin for His salvation. We exchange our evil deeds for His deliverance. We exchange our vices for His victory. We exchange our rebellion for His redemption. It's one of the reasons it's fitting that we're celebrating the Lord's Supper today on this Palm Sunday. Because if we remember that story, Jesus comes in as a king riding on a donkey and the first thing He does is He cleanses the temple as a priest. He is the victorious priest king. And we celebrate that through this family meal. And if you know Jesus and are walking with Him as a baptized believer, this meal is for you. And in just a moment during the response songs, we will hop up and grab the elements here at the tables, bring our prayer cards forward, and drop them in the baskets at the same time and we will ready our heart to partake of this family meal. What better way to start this Holy Week than to taste and see that the Lord is good?

And so let's go to Lord in prayer as we ready our time of response.

Father, what a gift it is to know of the way You've made a way for us in Christ, the way You set us free from sin, that all of our shame and guilt all of the sin that so easily entangled us, He's carried away. That He's died in our place. And I pray that as we step into this Holy Week that you would help us to be faithful in the calling. That in the mission to be ministers of reconciliation right here in the Brazos Valley and around the world. And as we ready our hearts to partake of your family meal, God, I pray that you would convict us of sin, that you would call us to that reconciliation we talked about today. And that You would give us a taste of how You're making all things new. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen