



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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God's Initiative and Invitation 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

He had grown up in Pharaoh's palace as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter.

When he was about 40 years old, knowing that he had been born a Hebrew, he went out one day to see how his people, who were slaves in Egypt, were faring. Seeing an Egyptian taskmaster mistreating a Hebrew slave, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

The next day, knowing he had been found out and that Pharaoh wanted to kill him, he fled to the wilderness in the land of Midian. He spent the next 40 years tending sheep.

Then one day, God appeared to him in the burning bush, and said, "I have seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry . . . So I have come down to deliver them . . . So I will send you to Pharaoh so that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7-10, paraphrased). After many excuses and much hesitation, he went, and God delivered the Israelites from their bondage with a mighty hand!

Moses made a mess when he tried to deliver one Hebrew; but when God did it *through* him, he led his people out of bondage!

We often go about the work of the kingdom of God in the wrong way, don't we? We try to use our own strength and abilities to "do something for the Lord," rather than yielding ourselves to Him and joining Him in what He's *already* doing.

This morning, we're continuing on our journey through the themes of Henry Blackaby and Claude King's study, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*.¹

So far we've looked at what it means to know God, and how knowing His nature is related to doing His will. We've focused on how God is always at work around us, and how He pursues a real and personal love relationship with us.

This morning, we're focusing on the third of what Blackaby describes as the Seven Realities of Experiencing God: *God invites you to become involved with Him in His work*. What we're talking about here involves both *God's initiative and His invitation*. Our text for today is 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, where *Paul described God's initiative and his own involvement in the ministry of reconciliation*. Listen carefully to what he said. *Read text . . .*

The ministry of reconciliation

As Paul writes to the Corinthians about his involvement in God's ministry of reconciliation, he says that the basis of his seeking to persuade people to turn to Christ is that he knows what it is to fear the Lord (5:11a).

He was trying to give the Corinthians something with which they could respond to those false teachers, those super-apostles who were attacking and belittling Paul and his companions

and their ministries among the Corinthians. Paul was confident that God knew who and what he and his colleagues were. He was hoping that the Corinthians did, too, and would defend him and his associates against the false teachers' accusations (5:11b-13).

To help them be clear about Paul's motivation and methods, he described his ministry to them. He said he was compelled by Christ's love—he reasoned that Christ died for all, so all who live in Him should live no longer for themselves but for Him (5:14-15).

He was talking here about living from a different point of view: the old person vs. a new creation. He emphasized that all this comes from God, **who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation** (5:16-21).²

Here's how this ministry of reconciliation works. God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ. After Christ's death on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension, God has committed the ministry of reconciliation to us as Jesus' followers. So we are Christ's ambassadors, as though God is making His appeal through us. We join God in what He is doing in Christ, urging people on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God. The basis of the appeal is what God has already done in Christ—He made the sinless one sin for us, so that in Him we might become God's righteousness.

So in Paul's description, we see how God has taken the initiative in accomplishing His purpose, and how He involved Paul in what He was doing.

God initiates, then invites

Paul's description of God's redemptive work and his own involvement in it shows us several important truths about how God involves us in His purpose and work.

First, *God initiates His work in us and around us.*

This involves the love relationship He pursues with us, as we saw last Sunday, as well as His redemptive purpose He's working out around us! As God works around us, He reveals His purpose. Then He waits for our response, and for us to adjust our lives to His will.

George Mueller was a good example of what I'm talking about here. He was a 19th century pastor in England who prayed for God to lead him to a work that could only be explained as an act of God to encourage people's faith.

As God called him to particular areas of work, he would pray for God to provide the resources. But he wouldn't tell anyone about the need, so that when God answered, it would be clear that it was God providing those resources!

By the time Mueller died, God had used him to build four orphanages that cared for 2,000 children at a time. Through this ministry he provided for over 10,000 orphaned children—or rather, God provided for them through him!

How did Mueller seek to be sensitive to God's initiative? He described his approach this way.³

1. I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter
2. Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions.
3. I seek the Will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it

according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.

4. Next I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God's Will in connection with His Word and Spirit.
5. I ask God to reveal His will to me aright.
6. Thus, (1) through prayer to God, (2) the study of the Word, and (3) reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly.

You see, at the very heart of the matter it's about whether we are living *God-centered* or *self-centered* lives. It's about watching God and what He's doing, then joining Him, rather than trying to do something we want to do for God. When God is at work, He initiates it! We need to be sensitive to what He's doing! That's true for us as a church as well as for us as individual disciples.

This kind of God-centered living prepares us to be used by God in His work. When our way of life is God-centered, we focus on His purpose and ways rather than our plans.

You remember Joshua and Caleb, don't you? Moses had appointed them and ten other men (one from each Israelite tribe) to go into Canaan and spy out the Promised Land. This was not long after the Exodus and the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. Ten spies brought back a report that said, "It's a great place, but there's no way we can take it! The towns are fortified, the people are large and strong—we were like grasshoppers beside them! We just can't do it."

Joshua and Caleb gave a minority report: "Yes, the land is great, and yes, the people are strong. But God will give it to us. Let's go up and conquer." The people believed the ten, and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Forty years later, when Joshua sent two spies into Jericho in preparation for an attack, Rahab, who hid them, reported that 40 years earlier—when the Canaanites heard about God's delivering Israel from Egypt and bringing them through the wilderness, their hearts had melted! If they had trusted God to work, they would have long been in the land!

Now when God is going to do something, He always takes the initiative. But He usually doesn't just do it. No, most of the time to accomplish His purpose, *God invites and calls His people to join Him in His work in the world.*

He does this according to His timing, and His call is to take part in what He's doing. It's not a matter of doing what we so often do—you know, we have a brief prayer, make *our* decisions and plans, then pray for God to bless them.

No, He calls us *to join Him*, not vice-versa! But how can we know that it's God's work that we're seeing?

According to Blackaby, we know God is working when we see things happening that only He can do—things like drawing people to Himself, stirring someone to seek after Him, bringing conviction of sin, things like that.

When we see God moving like this, we should pray and ask how He wants us to be involved. Then, as Blackaby puts it, we should watch what happens, and make the connection between our prayers and what happens next, asking probing questions and listening carefully to God and to others in the situation where He is working. Then we should make the adjustments necessary to join God!⁴

A couple of weeks ago when we talked about how God is always at work around us, I shared

the story about how one church I served as pastor started a ministry to Latino seasonal farm workers during our time there. That was only part of the story. Let me tell you a little more about it.

In the first year we were at that church, God repeatedly drew my attention to the number of Latino people who were living in our area. I also saw the abundant facilities God had blessed our church with, and began praying about whether God might be leading our church toward a ministry with Spanish speaking persons.

On Wednesday evenings we worked through T. W. Hunt's *In God's Presence* prayer study. In the last session, as members shared what they sensed God was wanting to do through our church, one of the things that was mentioned was a ministry to Hispanics.

Shortly after that, Dr. Charles Allen, my former teacher who was then a retired missionary to Guatemala, preached at our church while I was on vacation. In that sermon, he challenged the congregation to see if God might be leading us to minister to Hispanics.

Then in the fall, we'd been working through the themes of *Experiencing God* in our Sunday evening worship services, as we're doing now on Sunday mornings. That was when the lonely, hungry Latino farm worker came in one Sunday morning and I told the deacons that evening, "I believe God's invitation for us to join Him in Hispanic ministry walked in through our front door this morning!"

From all this, after much prayer, study, and preparation on the part of some folks who sensed a calling to this ministry, the church's Hispanic ministry came into being.

Only God could have brought together this string of events! Only God could use a ministry to Latinos to reach out to an Arab family and a Chinese family! But He did!

God was at work with Latinos in our community, and invited our church to join Him in that work. By His grace and help, we made the adjustments that were necessary, and look what God did!

But that wasn't all. The fact that we had a Hispanic ministry also opened the door for us to have a Rotary Group Study Exchange team from Mexico that the local Rotary Club hosted for a day come and tour our church. In that tour, I had the opportunity to witness to them and to give them each a Spanish New Testament. One in the group also asked for an English Bible for his wife, who was learning English. Who knows what kind of fruit that encounter has borne or will bear in the years to come?

It wasn't my doing—I was simply along for the ride!

Just as Paul described it, *God initiates His work in and around us, and invites us to participate in it*. But if we're not giving attention to the love relationship that God pursues with us, we won't be sensitive to what God is doing around us, and we'll miss out on responding to His invitation to join Him in His work. What a sad thing to have God working all around us and never know it!

But it doesn't have to be that way! As we nurture our relationship with God, we'll be more sensitive to His work and His invitation. And when we are, we'll share in the joy of being a part of what *God* is doing around us in Christ and through His Holy Spirit.

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¹ In this sermon series, I am relying heavily on Blackaby's ideas as presented in Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

² Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

³ Blackaby and King, 71-72.

⁴ Blackaby and King, 79-80.