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**What the Christ of Christmas Came to Do**  
**2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

Whenever Christmas or the season we call Advent comes around, the focus of most Christians and local churches turns to the birth of Jesus. And rightly so. We talk about the doctrine of the Incarnation, the biblical truth that God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He who was entirely spirit, entered into time and history and took upon himself a human nature, together with flesh and bones and skin and kidneys and kneecaps and knuckles!

We often hear sermons or devotions on his mother, Mary, and the way that she so humbly submitted to the declaration by the angel Gabriel that she was the one who had been chosen to give birth to the Messiah. And we talk about other angels who appeared to the shepherds. We talk about the shepherds, and how they reacted to the multitude of angels who showed up unexpectedly on the night Jesus was born. We talk about the wise men from the east and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We talk about Herod and his barbaric attempt to kill the baby Jesus. And there are any number of other important truths that we focus on at Christmas.

But today I want to do something slightly different. I want to talk about *what the Christ of Christmas actually came to do*. I want us to think deeply and reverently and with profound gratitude on what Jesus accomplished for sinful people like you and me.

Let's be clear about one thing. Simply believing that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin does not put you in right relationship with God. Affirming that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with the news of the miracle that would happen in her body does not save you. The fact that you believe and take delight in the story of the wise men bringing gifts to Jesus does not mean your sins are forgiven. The fact is, you can believe everything associated with the Christmas story and not know God or be reconciled to him.

What saves you and me is our confident trust and belief and faith that the child who was conceived in the womb of a virgin lived a sinless life for us, a life we should have lived but never could, and died a substitutionary death on the cross for us, a death we should have died but now never will, and literally rose from the dead and was exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven where he rules and reigns and will one day return. That is what you and I must believe if we are to be saved.

So, today I want to focus on four things that the Christ of Christmas actually did by coming, living, dying, and rising from the dead. And they are found here in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

*(1) The Christ of Christmas has forever changed how we See and Value other People*

Probably the first things that come to mind when you think about the death and resurrection of Christ are the forgiveness of sins, the fact that in his death the wrath of God was satisfied, the truth that we are redeemed and Satan is defeated and heaven is secured, and so on. Surely, all these and countless other truths are the consequence of what Christ accomplished on our behalf.

But what are the implications of his atoning work for how we relate to *other people*? What are the *horizontal* effects of what he achieved at Calvary? ***Does the cross have any meaningful influence on how we think of others and how we relate to them?*** My reason for asking this question is what Paul said here in 2 Corinthians 5:16.

The word “therefore” in v. 16 directs our attention back to v. 15 where Paul declared that Christ died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Christ who died for them and was raised again. And here it is:

“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” (v. 16).

Christ’s redemptive sufferings on Paul’s behalf have done far more than simply alter his relationship with God. Yes, his sins are forgiven and all guilt is washed away. He is justified, adopted, and destined for eternal bliss. But it is also the case that, because of what Christ has achieved in his atoning death, Paul has experienced a radical and far-reaching transformation in his relationship with other people. And so should we.

“Therefore,” says Paul; because of the love of Christ revealed in his death for me I no longer regard or evaluate or assess people “*according to the flesh*” (v. 16a). What does the apostle mean by this?

The phrase, “according to the flesh,” has been interpreted in countless ways. The consensus today is that it has nothing to do with the so-called *sinful nature* or sensual passions, but rather means *on the basis of the values that come from living as if this physical world is all there is*.

Before his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul (then Saul) evaluated other people on the basis of *external and worldly standards*. Of greatest concern to him were such things as: “What is your nationality? Are you a Jew or a Gentile? Are you educated or ignorant? Are you wealthy or poor? Are you male or female? Are you circumcised? Are you “barbarian, Scythian, slave, [or] free” (Col. 3:11)?

Let’s be honest. We all have our own personal standards of judgment. We unconsciously appeal to certain criteria to evaluate the worth of people in our world. It may be the color of their skin or their financial portfolio. How often do we draw conclusions based on physical attractiveness or style of dress or the make of car one drives? Other criteria that inform our assessment include such things as political party affiliation, social influence, educational achievement, nobility of birth, bloodline, verbal eloquence, athletic prowess, and the list could go on.

For Paul, perhaps the most important distinction that governed his pre-Christian value system was whether one was a Jew or a Gentile. But the blood of the cross has forever obliterated any spiritual significance in that racial difference (Eph. 2:11-22). While one’s ethnicity remains (in that sense I will always be a Gentile and Paul will always be Jew), it has lost any value in determining one’s status with God or place within his kingdom. The only relevant factor is one’s relationship with Christ. Indeed, “if *anyone* is *in Christ*,” as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” And one critical element of the “old” that has passed away is the appeal to external, worldly, physical, or ethnic standards for determining what is worthy of our devotion or who is qualified to inherit the promises of God.

I want to be perfectly clear. I am an American citizen. I love my country. I cherish my heritage. I am as patriotic as the next guy (perhaps more so). And if the need should arise, I would happily fight in defense of this land and the freedom that it affords. But I have a deeper connection with and a greater commitment to Christians in Russia and Iraq than I do to non-Christians in America. My primary, foundational, and fundamental allegiance is to the universal body of Christ, the church. I am first and foremost a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20). My greatest allegiance is to “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22), and only secondarily to Washington, D.C.

The apostle Paul was born a Jew, “of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5). But that was of absolutely no importance and carried no weight when it came to his relationship with God or his inheritance within the kingdom of the promises that God had made. All that mattered, said Paul, was whether or not you are “in Christ Jesus” by faith (Gal. 3:26). And “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to

promise” (Gal. 3:29), regardless of your ethnicity (“Jew or Greek”), your social status (“slave or free”), or your gender (“male or female”).

Everything must now be viewed in light of the “new creation” that has come with the redemptive work and resurrection life of Christ! Conversion for each of us entails a radically transformed standard for assessing what is valuable and true and deserving of our allegiance and sacrifice.

In the second half of v. 16 Paul extends this principle to his relationship with Christ himself. “Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh,” says Paul, “we regard him thus no longer” (v. 16b).

Did Paul know of Jesus prior to his conversion? He had undoubtedly heard of him. Jesus spent considerable time in Jerusalem during his years of public ministry, as did the young rabbi, Saul of Tarsus. Whether or not he met him personally prior to his Damascus Road experience is not stated (but is doubtful, in my opinion). But v. 16 has nothing to do with whether or not Paul had personal knowledge of Jesus during his earthly life or whether or not he was interested in the historical facts concerning Jesus’ existence in Palestine. Nor is Paul referring to knowing “Jesus” in his humanity as over against knowing him in his exalted and supernatural status as risen “Christ”.

Rather, here (v. 16b) Paul is repudiating his pre-Christian evaluation of Jesus. Before conversion he saw him as a blasphemer, a deluded messianic pretender, and a heretic who deserved to be crucified for his crimes (Acts 22:3-4; 26:9-11). He now sees him as the Son of God in human flesh whose death on a cross is the power of God unto salvation. Do you?

To what extent do worldly or merely human standards still govern and shape how you evaluate other people? What criteria do you employ: ethnic, financial, and physical, or spiritual, biblical, and moral? Whom do you admire: the self-centered, “successful” reprobate, or the humble and rarely recognized servant of others? Why are you attracted to them (or, conversely, repulsed): is it the color of their skin or the character of their soul? What matters most: the flag that flies over their country or the faith that resides in their heart?

If you are “in Christ” then all things are new (v. 17), including how you think, feel, and choose, as well as the basis on which you judge, assess, and evaluate. May the truth of the cross and the principles of the Spirit govern our perspective on others, rather than the warped ways of this fallen world.

## *(2) The Christ of Christmas has Created us Anew*

Few things are more frustrating than the gradual erosion of meaning in Christian language. For example, I often wonder if the people who applaud the hymn *Amazing Grace* have any idea of what they are singing. Do they know what it means, biblically speaking, to be a “lost” “wretch” in need of “salvation”? Sadly, the notion of divine “grace” that redeems from sin and delivers from eternal wrath, apart from human works, has been domesticated, secularized, and emptied of its theological significance.

Much the same is true of being “*born-again*”. Those who claim to have experienced the “new birth” often equate it with the regret they feel for their most recent DUI or arrest for drug possession. When faced with public reproach and possible jail time, professional athletes and morally degenerate pop-culture icons find it useful to affirm they’ve “found God” through some ill-defined “new birth” religious encounter. How far and away different that is from the imagery employed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17 –

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Although he doesn’t use the terminology of being “born again”, he surely has in view the same concept as Jesus

(John 3:3-8) and Peter (1 Peter 1:23) and John (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:1) when he speaks of a “new creation” for those who are “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17).

There is a strong likelihood that Paul's language here of a "new creation" is also an allusion to the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation 21-22. If so, his point would be that our experience of the new birth is a personal prelude to the corporate and cosmic dimensions of the new creation that will come when Christ does. Simply put, the glory of the age to come has impinged upon or broken into the present. ***We are re-born microcosms of the eschatological macrocosm!***

That being said, we can't escape the individual and personal focus that Paul has in view in this text, as seen in his emphasis on “anyone” who is “in Christ” being a new creation. Earlier in 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul portrayed the conversion experience as a creative act of God comparable to the original creation of light out of darkness. Here he returns to that theme with added emphasis on the transformed nature and newness of the person who is the object of his saving action.

This “new creation” or “new birth” or “regeneration” (cf. Titus 3:5) or being “born again” does not mean merely the mending of one's ways, the changing of bad habits, or embracing a new list of do's and don'ts. ***It refers to a radical, pervasive spiritual re-creation of the inner being.***

No wonder Paul calls for our undivided attentiveness to this glorious truth with the declarative: ***“Behold!”*** Be stunned, be very stunned! That you are an utterly new creation, the spiritual product of the gracious and life-giving power of God, is a breathtaking reality. Behold! Stop and consider this remarkable and triumphant truth. Don't pass it by with only a casual glance. Give it the focus it is due. Behold!

Could it be that many Christians struggle and languish because they fail to grasp the far reaching and spiritually radical implications of being a “new creation”? Could it be that some of you live unnecessarily enslaved to “old things” because the truth of v. 17 has never been given the weight it ought to bear? That's right, *unnecessarily* enslaved. You need not live in bondage to “old things”, be they stubborn habits or deceptive values or destructive relationships or wrong-headed beliefs. The God who was kind enough and strong enough to create you anew is equally committed to supplying you with the resources and energy to live consistently with what you are. You are now “in Christ”! You are now “a new creation”!

What are the “old things” that hold you back and keep you down? Are you still enslaved to false beliefs about your personal identity? Have you failed to realize that you are a child of God, not of Satan, and are adopted into his family, destined to reign with Christ as a co-heir in the kingdom of heaven? Have you failed to realize that you are reckoned as righteous in God's sight, fully and forever forgiven of all your sins, sealed and filled with the Spirit of promise and power?

***The “old” things have passed away. So stop living as if they had any claim on your life.*** “New things” have come: a new covenant (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:8), a new creation (Gal. 6:15), a new humanity (Eph. 2:15), a new name (Rev. 2:17; 3:12), a new city (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), as well as a new standing, a new power, a new hope, and a new destiny. Resist the temptation to reduce being born again to a momentary existential crisis or a convenient religious enlightenment, neither of which yields the fruit of the Holy Spirit and a passionate pursuit of Jesus Christ and his glory in all things. Behold! If you are truly in Christ, you are a new creation.

There is no escaping the fact that Paul has in view a complete and pervasive restructuring of your life, your values, and your agenda for the future, as well as your identity as a redeemed image-bearer. The conditions, relationships, worldly perspectives, and carnal principles that once dominated your life are the “old things” that have “passed away.” All thinking and willing and feeling and judging are now governed by a new and undying power.

Don't embrace the pernicious lie that life will never change or that sinful circumstances will always dominate your existence. The enemy would have you believe that spiritual growth is an elusive dream and the future is a dark and endless repetition of past failures. To that, Paul would say to you in no uncertain terms, "**Behold!** If you are in Christ, you are a *new creation!*"

I'm not advocating a "power of positive thinking" approach to life, as if by merely willing yourself to believe the best that all of life will automatically change. Don't mistake my exhortation for the gushing, semi-religious, feel-good nonsense that certain celebrity preachers deliver monotonously each week to millions of gullible viewers. I'm speaking about the grace-grounded, blood-bought power of a new life in Christ that enables you to embrace with joy the forgiveness of sins and to welcome with a cross-centered confidence the trials and sufferings that will inevitably come your way.

Countless internet commercials, roadside billboards, radio advertisements and more than a few deceptive TV evangelists compete for your attention every moment of the day, promising you an enticing but ultimately false future that will supposedly enable you to escape the rut of your past and present. Don't believe them! There is only one voice and one glorious truth worthy of your faith. "**Behold!** Take note of *this* one, marvelous truth! If you are in Christ, you are a *new creation*. The old, by the mercy of Christ, has passed away. The new, because of the cross and resurrection of Christ, has come!"

### (3) *The Christ of Christmas Saves Sinners from the Wrath of God*

We talk about Bridgeway being a "gospel-centered" church. But have you paused lately, especially during this season of Advent, to ask why the gospel is necessary? James Denney, a Scottish NT scholar who died in 1917, asks the question and then provides this answer:

**"What is it that makes a Gospel necessary?** What is it that the wisdom and love of God undertake to deal with, and do deal with, in that marvelous way which constitutes the Gospel? Is it man's distrust of God? Is it man's dislike, fear, antipathy, spiritual alienation? Not if we accept the Apostle's teaching. The serious thing which makes the Gospel necessary, and the putting away of which constitutes the Gospel, is God's condemnation of the world and its sin; it is God's wrath, 'revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Rom. 1:16-18). The putting away of this is 'reconciliation'; the preaching of *this* reconciliation is the preaching of the Gospel."

Here Denney touches on something rarely considered by most Christians. Let me put it in slightly different terms. **From what is it that we need to be saved?** Certainly not "from ourselves" (although one often hears such language, even in the church). Most Christians would say: from *hell*. In a sense, they are correct. But why is hell a threat, and what is it that accounts for the existence of hell and the experience of those who end up there?

The answer, as Denney points out, is divine *wrath*. **Our only hope is for God to save us from God!** This is the great glory of the gospel, that God in his grace takes action in Christ to save us from God in his wrath. God is not pitted against himself in this marvelous act of mercy, for God *honors* God when his love makes provision to satisfy the demands of his wrath.

Divine justice and its expression in divine wrath against sin, to use Paul's words, calls for the reckoning or "counting" of our trespasses "against" us (2 Cor. 5:19). So how is it that, instead, I am forgiven the guilt of these wicked deeds? The answer of the apostle, in v. 21, is that God "made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Don't ever think that the love of God means that the wrath of God was ignored. Because God is just and righteous, there must be a reckoning or "counting" of trespasses. But because God is loving and gracious, the "counting" or "imputing" and the punishment it entailed fell on Christ.

I've often said to people that the reason why the psalmist declares that God "does not deal with **us** according to our sins" (Ps. 103:10) is because God dealt with **Jesus** according to our sins! Grace and mercy do not mean that sin is not dealt with, as if to suggest God merely swept our sins under the carpet of his compassion and ignored the horrid offense of our rebellion. Far from it! God the Father "counted" our trespasses against God the Son and in doing so brought about the reconciliation.

This "counting" or "reckoning" of our sins against him is what he means in v. 21 when he speaks of Jesus being "made to be sin" on our behalf. Paul is talking about the liability to suffer the penal consequences of the law. Our guilt, incurred because of our trespasses, has been imputed to him so that we, through faith in his sufferings on our behalf, might have his righteousness imputed to us!

We must not overlook the fact that all this was achieved by him who "knew no sin". That *as God* he is without sin goes without saying. But if he was to accomplish our salvation and reconcile us to the Father, he had to live a life altogether free of sin in word, thought, or deed.

Becoming the "righteousness of God" (v. 21) is not simply a tall order, but an impossible one. Yet, there he says it: in Christ Jesus we have "become the righteousness of God"!

As inconceivable as it may seem, from a human point of view, this is what we are in the sight of God. Although we are not yet experientially righteous, the righteousness of the Christ of Christmas has been reckoned to us by the grace of God the Father.

#### *(4) The Christ of Christmas has entrusted to us the Message of Reconciliation*

And what are we supposed to do with these glorious truths of what the Christ of Christmas has accomplished? Just sit on them? Memorize them? Sing about them? No, we are to loudly and happily proclaim them and in doing so appeal to those who don't know the Christ of Christmas: "Be reconciled to God!"

As glorious as this gospel is, as wonderful as it is for us to contemplate what the Christ of Christmas has actually done for us through his sinless life and sacrificial death and bodily resurrection, we can never sit silently and not tell others that the same salvation is now offered to them. Look at how Paul says it in v. 18 – "[He] gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Note that he doesn't restrict this ministry to himself. It isn't that he only gave to "me", Paul, this ministry. No, he gave it to "**us**," the totality of those who by God's grace have been made new creations. He unpacks this in v. 20 –

"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (v. 20).

Is that how you think of evangelism, that it is God himself who is actually speaking through you, making his appeal to sinners to repent and believe the gospel and in doing so to experience reconciliation with their Creator? I certainly hope so.

You who do not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior; you who still regard people and Jesus himself "according to the flesh"; you who are not yet new creations but are still living in the darkness and bondage of old things; you who still have your sins being counted against you; you who to this very moment still lack the righteousness of God that alone will make you acceptable in God's presence; it is to you that we at Bridgeway Church make this appeal: "Be reconciled to God!"

God is speaking to you today, not me. It is "through" me that God is "making his appeal" (v. 20). And what he offers you is the Christ of Christmas. What he offers you today, through Christ, is new life, new hope, a new identity, new

power, and the joy of being reconciled with your Creator.

Back in 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul described how “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” That is my prayer for you right now. May the God of all creation shine the light of the knowledge of his glory as revealed in Jesus into your heart, giving you new life, and re-making you from the old into that which is altogether new.