



2 Corinthians: Serving from the Heart
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Messengers of Reconciliation

2 CORINTHIANS 2:5–17; 5:14–21

From our first moments of life we are weighed, measured, and scored. It starts in the hospital minutes after our first breath. As our life goes on, we learn, almost by osmosis, that rewards follow good behavior. By the same token we come to understand that poor performance, in almost any area of life, will bring scowls rather than praise from peers, teachers, coaches, and sometimes even parents.

Trained rats run through a maze as fast as they can because they have learned they get a food pellet as a reward. Human beings play their own game of “rat-race.” We perform, we strive, we work, we study, and at the end of each maze we push a little lever and out comes our reward pellet. It is just the way life works. “There is no free lunch.” “You get what you deserve.” “We pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.”

Then God comes into our cause-and-effect world and messes with the whole program. We believe people should get what they deserve, and Jesus dares to offer freely what we could never earn. The Bible is filled with reminders that the way of Jesus is radically countercultural:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we

might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9–10)

All those who want to be messengers of reconciliation must be ready to abandon the “cause-and-effect program” instituted by the world and taught to us from childhood. Instead, we need to freely embrace God’s “grace program.” When we do, we become Christ’s ambassadors in a world filled with people who need the grace that God freely offers.

Making the Connection

1. How were you initiated into the “cause-and-effect program” that makes people feel like they only get what they earn and deserve in this life?

How does God’s “grace program” fly in the face of conventional wisdom that says we only get what we earn in this life?

Knowing and Being Known

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14–21

2. According to this passage, what is God’s part in the ministry of reconciliation?

3. God wants his people to be messengers of reconciliation. What does God want to do in us and through us to bring the message of reconciliation to the world?

Compelled by Love

I was not being nosy. I could not help but see the large picture of a little boy taking his first steps. The gentleman sitting next to me on the plane had fired up his computer and the screen saver popped up. I politely asked about the picture and this invited an avalanche of information, stories, and parental praise about his gifted and only child. I exhibited self-control and refrained from telling him that all of the amazing exploits of his son were actually quite common. The truth is, he loved his little boy and everything this little guy did brought joy to his daddy.

I am confident that when this loving father walked through the door of his home later that day, his son walked to him as fast as his wobbling young legs could carry him and embraced his daddy fiercely. We can all picture a little one moving toward their daddy or mommy with arms stretched upward. In that last step they do a lunge-fall into the embrace of a loving parent.

It is love that was compelling that father to hurry home to see his son. Love would move that little boy to throw himself into his father's arms. It is this same exchange of love with our heavenly Father that compels followers of Jesus to receive and pass on the message of reconciliation. It all starts with love. When we receive the amazing grace of God offered in Jesus, love overflows and moves us to raise our arms upward toward our heavenly Father and outward toward a world in need.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14 – 15 and Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

4. Jesus lived, suffered, died, and rose again for us. He willingly took the punishment we deserved for our sins. What images and messages of God's love come through these passages?

5. How have you experienced the love of God in your life and how does this compel you to do *one* of the following:
 - Respond back to God as a loving child
 - Live and walk in obedience to his purposes for your life
 - Be an ambassador of his love and grace to others

A New Creation

Flower markets and meat markets have one thing in common: a unique smell. Of course, it is not the same smell. If you have ever walked into a flower market you know the stunning aroma of hundreds of flowers. The fragrance is amazing, a mixture of scents that can be quite powerful. A meat market also has its own distinct aroma, a smell that is pungent and sometimes overwhelming. It does not take a trained nose to distinguish between a rose and a pork roast.

God wants us to know that followers of Christ have a fragrance for all the world to smell. Our scent is more powerful than bouquets of flowers or slabs of meat. We bear the fragrance of Christ wherever we go. Like a pine-scented car freshener dangling from the mirror, Jesus is in us and on us wherever we go. What is interesting is that various people we meet will “smell Jesus” in very different ways. To some the scent of Jesus on us will smell like life; to others it will smell like death.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–17 and 2:14–17

6. Every follower of Christ is a new creation who bears the aroma of Christ. Imagine a pollster was to ask your family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, “How is (your name) a new creation because of Christ in their life?” (This could be new things that have come or old things that have gone away.) What kinds of answers do you think these people would give about you?

The Ministry of Reconciliation

When we think of reconciliation our minds often race to what we need to do or how we need to act to deserve restoration in a relationship that has been broken. Being reconciled to God, and showing others the way to a right relationship with their Maker, is not about what we do, but what God has done through Christ. Scott J. Hafemann writes:

“In our day of self-help and age of technology and technique, it is important to keep in mind that God is both the initiator and object of this reconciliation. Our propensity is to view the gospel as our opportunity to reconcile God to us by showing him how much we love him, rather than seeing it as God’s act in Christ by which he reconciles us to himself by demonstrating his own love for us. The gospel is not our chance to get right with God, but God’s declaration that he has already made us right with him. The gospel does not call us to do something for God that he might save us; it announces what God has done to save us that we might trust him.” (*The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*)

7. Those who know Jesus and who carry the fragrance of his presence into the world bear both the “smell of death” and the “fragrance of life.” What does it mean to bear the “smell of death,” and how have you seen this happen?

What does it mean to bear the “fragrance of life,” and how have you seen this?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18 – 19

8. What are some of the logical consequences and conclusions we will face if we believe that reconciliation to God comes because of how good we act or how much we prove our love for God?

What are some of the logical consequences and conclusions we will experience if we are confident that reconciliation comes because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and that this is offered to us freely as a gift?

Ministers of Reconciliation

Most of us identify with the term *ambassador* primarily in a political context. This significant role normally places a person in a foreign land to represent their home country. An ambassador from the United States who lives and works in Japan is there to speak for America. When the Japanese people look at this ambassador, evaluate his actions, identify his motives, and investigate his lifestyle, it reflects substantially on how they view all Americans.

Christians are God's ambassadors in this world. It is as if God is speaking his words through each of his followers. What a staggering responsibility! What an honor! God has already done everything that needs to be done for lost and sinful people to be reconciled to him. Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, has paid the price. As his ambassadors, we are called to invite people to accept this amazing work of reconciliation and be restored to a healed and whole relationship with God.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 21 and Ephesians 6:19 – 20

9. Each of us has relationships with people who have not yet received the reconciliation God offers through Jesus. Who are one or two of these people, and how has God connected your life with theirs?

10. The hard work of reconciliation has already been done by God. What are some specific and daily ways we can invite people to be reconciled to God?

11. How can your group members pray for you and encourage you as you seek to be God's ambassador right where he has placed you?

Celebrating and Being Celebrated

The introduction to this session (pages 15–16) includes three passages that remind us of the Father's love and the sacrifice of Jesus. Read these passages and also 2 Corinthians 5:21. Spend time offering prayers of praise and celebration in response to the amazing spiritual truths revealed in these portions of the Bible.

Loving and Being Loved

When we become new creations in Christ and live as ambassadors of reconciliation, this passion for reconciliation pours over into every relationship in our lives. Yes, God calls us to invite others to be reconciled to him. But he also teaches us to seek restoration with family members, in our friendships, and with anyone else with whom we may be at odds.

Take time this week to read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. Once you have read the passage a couple of times, reflect on the questions below:

- Who needs to receive forgiveness from me?
- What steps can I take to extend forgiveness?
- Who needs to hear me reaffirm my love?
- What could I say or do to express love to this person?
- When we refuse to forgive and allow God to restore broken relationships, how does this play into the hands of Satan's schemes?

Serving and Being Served

One of the best ways we can serve the people God has placed in our lives is to help them discover the reconciling power of God's love and Jesus' grace. Make a list of people you know who need to experience the reconciling power of God. On your list, place their name, relationship to you, and specific prayer needs you know they have at this time in their life:

- | Name: | Relationship: | Specific Prayers: |
|-------|---------------|-------------------|
| 1. | | |
| 2. | | |
| 3. | | |
| 4. | | |
| 5. | | |

Commit to pray in the following ways for these people during the weeks you are part of this small group study:

- Pray for the needs each person is experiencing in their life.
- Pray for each heart to be soft and receptive to whatever God wants to do.
- Ask for God to use you as an ambassador of his message of reconciliation to each of these people.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to give you boldness to find some way to let each of these people know that they can be reconciled to God.