**“Everyone a minister” – 2 Cor. 5:16-21**

**Intro**

 What’s the very first thing that comes to your mind when you hear someone talk about somebody “doing ministry”? Or, put it another way: what’s the first image that comes to mind when I say the word “minister” or talk about a “group of ministers”? Well - if you’re like me – when you hear the word “minister,” you often immediately conjure up images of pastors and church leaders or dudes dressed in black robes with white collars. But I’ll tell you what /// look at the person sitting beside you right now. Now look around you at the people sitting all through this church. My goal – so you know – by the end of this message, is to have you - from this day forwards - hear the word “minister” and immediately think of the people you see all around you this morning; to see the doctors and the teachers; the students and the stay-at-home moms, and see *them* when you hear the word “ministers.”

 Now the specific terminology Paul uses in our passage this morning - if you look with me at vs. 18 – is that we are; all of us, “ministers of reconciliation.” And we’ll talk more about what he means by that as we get into this. Later on, he subs in the term “ambassador”/a representative of a given king or country, sent for the express purpose of delivering a message of peace to a hostile country from that king.

And I don’t know what comes to your mind when you think of the word “ambassador.” Maybe you think of a guy in a suit that has special pins on it or who’s wearing a sash across their chest. For me, when I think of an ambassador sent with a message of peace, I think of that opening scene from the film Gladiator, with the armies of Rome camped on one side, and the armies of Germania camped on the other. And this poor ambassador has been sent by the Roman army to the armies of Germania to present an offer of peace should they surrender. And, as the Roman ambassador then rides back to the camp on his horse minus his head, the Roman general Maximus quips at the refusal of his offer of peace, “He says, ‘No.’”

Now, maybe you already knew that God tells us in His word that *all of us*, as reconciled Christians, are to be Christ’s ambassadors in the world. But – just like the Corinthian church – maybe your fear in being obedient to that call, is that you too will seek to minister to the hostile culture around you, and be sent away with your head taken off as well! And recent history has shown that this fear is not simply an irrational over-exaggeration, but a clear and present danger for Christ’s ambassadors.

So what’s the answer? How do we find hope and motivation to begin (or continue in) our call to be minsters/Christ’s ambassadors *today* in a culture that is no less hostile to this message of reconciliation than it was in Paul’s day?

Well, as we look at this passage today in 2 Cor. 5, I think we’re going to see three ways that God has already planned out, to help us to continue to be obedient to His call to be His ambassadors in this hostile culture. And I want to show that to you by looking at **the grounds f*or* ministry, the call to ministry,** and **the how of ministry. (x2)**

So if you’ve closed your bibles, please open them again to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians and chapter 5:16, and we’ll get after this together.

Ok, so let’s begin by looking at:

1. **The grounds for ministry – vs. 17,19, 21**

Now, I don’t know how many of you grew up in north America; some of our British friends here today can tell us if this is as prevalent in the UK as well. But, growing up in North America anyways, there was – and continues to be – this pervasive humanistic, Oprah Winfrey, Walt Disney message that we tell our kids, and it’s this: you can be *whatever* you want to be! If you just study/work/train hard enough, you can be anything you want to be when you grow up. Have you encountered this?

I think much of that finds its origin in a secular humanist worldview that really believes in, and champions, the indomitable power of the human spirit. Your kids will hear it at WE day conferences, and you often encounter this in Ted Talks and in the self-help section of Chapters.

But – without trying to earn myself the title “Crusher of children’s dreams” – I think we’d all have to admit that it’s just not that simple; that there is *not* this easy, one-to-one correlation between effort and success; that, no, sadly, your 5’4” 110 lb. teenager is probably *not* gonna play in the NFL.

The reality is that there are certain pre-conditions that must be in place before we can achieve the goal we’ve set. And while effort/trying really hard can certainly help, they will *never* – on their own – be the determining factor of success.

And I say all that to answer the question that may be on your minds right now, which is: why would we start out by talking about the grounds for ministry before looking at the ministry God is calling us to do? Why talk about how we’re gonna do something before talking about what it is we’re supposed to do?

And the reason is, there is no point in talking about the ministry God is calling us to first b/c effort/work/determination/even desire are never going to be enough to succeed. No, w/o the necessary preconditions being met (or in this case the necessary precondition) describing what we’re being called to only becomes a crushing, unattainable pipe-dream.

And I think the apostle Paul has this same understanding, which is why I think he precedes his description of God’s call on all of us to be His ministers, with a description of how it is that God qualifies us/enables us to do that.

Look with me at vs. 17. Paul writes here **(READ vs. 17)**. To be “in Christ” says Paul, means that we are now radically transformed from one thing to another. Now, we could be here all day describing even a fraction of all the implications of those two words, “in Christ.” But for our purposes this morning, I want to simplify what is meant by “in Christ” to mean simply, “*someone who has been reconciled by God*.”(X2). If you look at the beginning of verse 19, Paul says there, **(READ vs. 19a).** So God the Father had a plan to reconcile people back to Himself through Christ, with the implication being that: when someone is “in Christ” they are now reconciled. Do you see that? Reconciliation, if you didn’t know, most often shows up in the context of relationship;[could be individuals or people groups i.e. “truth and reconciliation”] particularly a relationship that has been broken. And reconciliation, then, is the bringing together of those two broken parts.

Two natural questions that come out of that:

1. **Why did we need to be reconciled back to God I the first place?**

Well, the message of the bible is that, although God made the world and everything in it, and was in perfect relationship with us; mankind rebelled against God’s loving rule and, in so doing, brought sin into the world. When that happened, our relationship with God was severed b/c God – being holy (which means perfectly spotless and w/o sin) could not be in the presence of sin, but we were now covered with it.

1. **How did God reconcile us back to Himself in Christ?**

The good news of the gospel is that, in the very same moment that mankind rebelled against God and severed our relationship with Him, God made a promise to one day send someone who would deal with the sin problem that was bringing about the separation between them; that Someone – vs. 19 just told us - was Jesus Christ. And God reconciled us together in Christ – look again at vs. 19 – Paul says by “not counting men’s sins against them.”

Now maybe that sounds great at first. But if you think about it, it actually makes God wicked and unjust if He simply looks at all the ways we’ve sinned against Him and each other and just says, “It’s all good. I’m just wiping the slate clean on all that stuff.” No, in order for God to be good and just, someone must make a payment for that sin that was no longer being credited to us.

Like when Greece was no able to make payment against their national deficit, other nations couldn’t just say, “You know what, it’s fine. You just don’t owe that money anymore.” No, the money to pay the debt had to come from somewhere, right?

And the way God makes payment for our debt that we owed, we see in vs. 21 of our passage; look with me there. Paul writes **(READ vs. 21).** Now, here again like with those two words “in Christ”, there is so much here in this verse that we couldn’t possibly deal with it all this morning. But the bottom line here is that, the *way* God dealt with our sin problem and reconciled us back to Himself, was by taking all of the debt that we owed; everything that was keeping us from being in relationship with Him, out of our account // and crediting it to Jesus’ account. And in His voluntary, sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus paid in full and for all time that debt that we owed.

So that’s *how* God reconciled us back to Himself in Christ. But that’s not where the good news ends. Look again at vs. 21. The second half of that verse tells us that God didn’t just remove the debt from our accounts and say, “Ok, now we’re good again.” No no. What we read here is that – in Christ - God also takes the perfect record and unlimited funds of Jesus’ account, and credits it to ours!

All of this is what theologians refer to as “the great Exchange” where – in the death of Jesus Christ - all of our disobedience is credited to and punished in Jesus //and all of Jesus’ perfect obedience is credited to us.

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*This* is how God has reconciled us the world to Himself in Christ. And *this* is also the necessary precondition for any of us to be ministers or ambassadors for God. Paul begins this way b/c he want us to see clearly that without first being reconciled, there is no way we could ever be ministers of reconciliation. Or, to put it another way, being reconciled is the grounds for us being ministers of reconciliation.

And one big thing that means for us this morning is that - once we truly understand that it was God in Christ who did everything that was necessary to reconcile us – and not *any* of our own efforts /// now we can simply seek to serve God out of the joy of what He has accomplished for us /instead of continuing on the endless treadmill of religion that believes we still need to earn/attain our reconciliation somehow. What we see here is that – if you have been reconciled to God through your relationship to Christ – then you/ are/ *reconciled*! It’s done! The preconditions have been met in full. Those who were formerly unable to achieve what was being asked, have now been enabled by the transforming, re-creating work of God in Christ into those who now *are* able.

The question to ask now, then, is: “Since I’ve been reconciled/enabled what does God now ask of me?”

Which will lead us to our second point now:

1. **The call to ministry – vs. 18-19**

So here, now, is where Paul will connect the grounds for what we’ve been called to do with what we’ve been called to do.

But he begins in vs. 18 – look with me there – by reminding us again **(READ vs. 18a)** This is all God’s doing and all according to His perfect plan to reconcile us to himself in Christ. My guess is, we cannot be reminded of that truth enough times, b/c our sinful hearts are hard-wired presently towards self-righteousness, and we often slip back into trying to work to attain what has already been accomplished for us in Christ.

So then, only after this reminder, does Paul connect the grounds/enabling to the call in the second half of verse 18. Look there with me again. Paul writes **(READ vs. 18b).** So, Paul is saying two things here:

1. God’s reconciling of us is the thing that enables us to be His ministers of reconciliation
2. If you have been reconciled to God in Christ, this *is* now *your* calling. Reconciled people are now God’s reconcilers.

**App**

And I need you to see something really really clearly. So look again at verse 18 with me to start. Now really, I’m asking for your help here, b/c I wasn’t able to find it anywhere. In verse 18 Paul says God “gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation” in vs. 19 he says God “committed to *us* the message of reconciliation” and then in vs. 20 Paul says “*We* are therefore Christ’s ambassadors.” //// Can *anyone* show me where it is that Paul says that God ministers/ambassadors are pastors? Church staff? People who “get paid” to do that sort of thing?

No. It’s not there. And the reason is b/c God’s call to His reconciled children to be His ministers and ambassadors *includes* pastors/church workers – yes - but it is in *no way* limited to them!

And in the same way that once you become trained in first aid, you now have a duty to act if you come across someone in need of medical help, now that we have been reconciled to God, we all now have a duty to act when we come across those who have not yet been reconciled. I love how blunt Paul is here in vs. 20 about all this. He lays out the connection between God’s reconciling work in us and our call to ministry and then just says, “We *are* therefore Christ’s ambassadors.” We are! He doesn’t say, “If you feel like it” or “If you have the gift of evangelism” – he just says, “If God’s reconciled you, that’s what you *are* now.”

Now maybe that sounds exciting to you, but I know for a lot of us, that sounds incredibly intimidating. Or maybe we’d feel like God must have made a mistake in reconciling us b/c we feel like there’s no way we could do this.

Well, fortunately, Paul doesn’t just say, “You’re Christ’s ambassadors now so get out there and minister!” He also gives us some direction here in our passage as to how it is that we are supposed to carry out this calling we’ve been given. Which lead us to our third point:

1. **The how of ministry – vs. 16, 20**

I see here three ways that Paul lays out for us to begin doing this ministry of reconciliation that we’ve all been called to. The first is in vs. 16, look with me there. Paul writes **(READ vs. 16).** So what I see Paul telling us here first of all, is that one of the ways we are to be ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors for Christ is to change the way we regard people/the way we see them.

Now, I’ve spoken about this before, but it’s worth repeating in this context. It’s very easy to look at people on this surface level - with all their flaws, idiosyncrasies and imperfections – and decide, for God, who is worthy of being ministered to and who is worthy of receiving the message of reconciliation. You know, letting God know who it is that He should pick for His team, completely forgetting and arrogantly assuming that – of course – *you* were a natural pick for the team yourself. Like I’ve said before, if you’d met me in the past, you simply would *never* have picked me as someone God could use on His team.

And Paul – of course – totally understands this b/c the same could have been said for him. Look again at vs. 16. Paul says he even regarded Jesus according to a surface assessment, which is why he assumed Jesus was a fraud and a fake and that anyone who followed Him needed to be killed or imprisoned. I mean, what: a guy who hates Jesus passionately and is seeking to kill or imprison all His followers /// that sound like a guy you would have chosen to minister to? Me neither.

So what Paul is getting at here is that, part of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation, is that we see people and minister to them - not according to where they are now - but according to where they could be; imagining what they could look like once they’ve encountered the transforming, re-creating power of the gospel. B/c we treat lost causes very differently than we do those in whom we see potential, don’t we?

The next way Paul lays out for us to be ministers of reconciliation is in vs. 20. Look with me there. Paul writes **(READ vs. 20a)** As I said at the start, Paul subs in the term “ambassador” for minister; really, equating them as one and the same thing. And the point here is that, seeing ourselves as ambassadors for Jesus is going to (or at least it should) change the way we live out our lives before a watching world. It means you need to be able to honestly answer the question, “Am I living in such a way that I am rep-ing Jesus in a positive, attractive light? Or am I ‘severing ties with other nations’ by the way I live as a reconciled child of the King?” That doesn’t mean for a moment that God’s saving someone is conditional on our behaviour. No. But it does mean that we are called to live out lives that actually demonstrate that the gospel truly *is* transforming and that also doesn’t make us hypocrites; calling people to a biblical standard that we don’t live out ourselves.

Finally, I see Paul here showing us that a part of what it means to be ministers of reconciliation, is that we have a genuine care and concern for them and their eternal destiny. Look again at vs. 20 and the kind of language Paul uses to describe our ministry and ambassadorship. He speaks of God “making His *appeal* through us” and then later “imploring people” to be reconciled to God; the word “implore” in the Greek literally means “to beg or plead for something that is indispensible or necessary.”

You know how in hospital dramas, there’s always that scene in the ER or beside a car crash or wherever, where the doctor or emergency working is pushing with all their might on the chest of a lifeless man or woman; breathing into their lungs and calling out to them, “Common! Breath!!!”

In a very real sense, part of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation is that we are seeking to apply the transforming message of the gospel to spiritually lifeless men and women; calling out to them, “Breath! Please breath!!!” //// Any of you with unsaved friends or family members know exactly what I mean when I talk about that kind of intentionality and concern in the way we seek to minister.

 And the question we have to honestly ask ourselves here is, “Do I really believe that apart from being reconciled to God in Christ, this person/people will spend an eternity separated from God?” If you do, then the need could not be greater or more urgent.

Now, if you’ve grown up in church or been a Christian for a while, maybe you’ve heard messages like this before. And so I want to be really careful here b/c there can be this overwhelming sense of guilt or intimidation; where you start to believe that “if I just cared more/tried harder/prayed more/etc. that person in my family would come to faith in Jesus.” And that is not at all what I want you to hear me saying.

You need to remember that, in the same way that you could not earn or accomplish your own reconciled relationship with God, neither can you earn or accomplish it for anyone else. What God is calling you and me to here in this passage is to be ministers and ambassadors; messengers really - delivering an offer of peace to those currently still at war with God; and that is what we are before we’re reconciled to God. So God is calling you to deliver that message of reconciliation; He is *not* calling you to reconcile people /// that’s His job. Nobody but God is qualified/equipped for that.

**Conclusion**

 When you boil it all down, this ministry of reconciliation that we’ve all been called to, is really just about living a life of gratitude and service to a God who has accomplished our reconciliation. Have you ever noticed how attractive grateful/thankful people are? It’s one of the reasons we’re often so baffled when we look at people in third world countries who have nothing by our affluent, Western standards, and yet are still filled with such joy. Part of the reason they can be that way is b/c they know – first hand - what it is to be in want/poverty and so each meal, each rainfall, each friendship, each day they’re healthy and not sick brings about this joy within them.

 And the same should be true for us: we who know what it is to be in spiritual want/poverty should also live out our lives every day // *grateful* for the life we now have in being reconciled back to God. And also grateful for each gift God provides; each relationship, each bite of food, each breath of air we borrow from Him. That’s a big part of what it means to be a minister of reconciliation and an ambassador for God, and it’s also where the core values we’ve already looked at of “Everything is worship” and “Everyday mission” come into play as well.

 Well - as we’ve said – we continue to want to apply these core values to our purpose statement which says that we exist as a church to renew our city and world by demonstrating and declaring the transforming power of the gospel.

After my message two weeks ago on “Everything is worship” I had a number of people come up to me afterwards and say that they felt like they had a pretty good idea/handle on how to demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel, but that they had a much harder time figuring out how to declare it. Well, as we think about how “Everyone is a minister” this morning, I want to spend these last few minutes giving you a few ideas about some simple ways for you to add declaration to your demonstration of the gospel. I think these are really simple and non-offensive ways to do this and you could easily implement even one or two of these this week. I selected a few of these from a longer list/article that I can share with anyone who wants it from a lecture Tim Keller gave at the Lausanne conference in Switzerland a few years back.

1. **Let people around you know that you’re a Christian.** There are a lot of simple ways you can do that. Include “going to church” or “spending time with some friends from church” when someone asks about your week/weekend will immediately trigger to most non-Christian people that you have – at least – a faith you hold to, and many will follow up with a question about the church you go to. Also, reading your bible or a Christian book in public and not trying to shield the title so no one can see what you’re reading. That’s is one easy way you can connect your demonstration of the gospel with the message of the gospel. Can you do that this week? Can you let one person know you’re a Christian in one of those ways?
2. **Listen to your friend’s problems/hard situations.** Show genuine care and concern for them and then, simply ask if it would be ok if you prayed for them. I’ve tried this one a few times now and I have yet to encounter anyone who’s said, “No!” Now, they may say, “Not right here/now.” But most are happy to know you’re praying for them, even if they don’t yet believe in the God you’re praying to themselves.
3. **Share your own problems/struggles.** This has two benefits in that **a)** it helps people to see that Christians are not immune from the same kinds of struggles everyone has **b)** this is then a perfect opportunity to talk about how your faith in God has helped you/is sustaining you through that difficulty. You could share a truth (“I know God has a plan for me in this”) or even a verse (your own paraphrased version of a verse that gives you hope in trials).
4. **Ask someone to tell you about their faith.**  Then just listen. Don’t try to argue or prove where they’re wrong based on what you believe. Just interact based on what you believe and let the comparison speak for you. So maybe you say, “Oh okay, so you believe God judges us based on our behaviour (again, you’ll have to be listening to now that). What does that mean then if you don’t obey or you mess up over and over again?” This gives natural opportunities to then share what you believe about God.
5. **Be willing to not change the subject.** If we’re honest, there are times when an opportunity to talk about the hope of the gospel comes up – maybe someone says something like, “Man, why do Christians think they’re so much better than everyone?” - and all of a sudden that panic-dude from the movie “Inside Out” feels like he’s running your control board and you begin to look for any opportunity to change the subject. A simple identification and alternative way of seeing things here could be an easy way to declare the gospel. Maybe say, “Yeah, I dunno. I mean, I’m a Christian and I’ve seen people acting like that for sure. But I definitely know I’ve got my own issues that other people could point out. That’s why I’m always so amazed by God’s love for me.”

Now, those are just a few quick examples, and in no way am I saying that there’s this “A + B = C” kind of magic combination that if you just do these things, and in this way, then all your friends and family members will become Christians. Not at all! What these are are just starting points; that can lead to conversations that can lead to gospel opportunities. Honestly, the best thing you can pray for in any of these situations is simply for the willingness and the courage to speak up when God grants you the opportunity.

B/c – remember – someone understood their calling as a minster and ambassador of God based on God’s reconciling of *them,* and then demonstrated and declared the gospel to you; that’s the whole reason you know, and have been transformed by, the gospel today. Do you really believe that cycle is supposed to end with you?

Again, this isn’t about you being some master apologist, or whatever, with all the “answers” – this is about you recognizing that God’s reconciling of you to Himself is not meant to be the end of the story /// that you’ve been reconciled for a purpose, which is to, now, demonstrate and declare that same hope to all who God places in your path. You’ve been called to the ministry of reconciliation by the same God who reconciled you. *Everyone* who’s been reconciled by Him is called to be a minster: in the jobs, the schools, the homes and the communities where He has placed you. And if I may be so bold: now that you know that everyone is a minster /// let’s get on with the work of the ministry. ////Let’s go.