



POWER IN WEAKNESS | AMBASSADORS

October 19, 2025

We are in the midst of a sermon series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which I have suggested is the letter for our times because the church is currently experiencing a credibility crisis. The church and its leaders are no longer considered to be credible by many for a number of overlapping reasons, which we have previously discussed.

In light of that situation, those of us who consider ourselves Christian leaders, of course, certainly have to take responsibility for our actions, but I would suggest that all of us who consider ourselves Christians, who are part of the body of Christ, also have a role to play. It's not as if you could just say, "Well, yes, I'm aware of the fact that there are some people out there who are turned off toward the church, but that's not really my problem." No, you are the Church. You, and all of us, have agency. There's something that we can do. We can be part of the solution rather than contributing to the problem.

And that's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times, because as we've seen, Paul experienced a credibility crisis of his own, specifically in relation to the church that he founded in the Greek city of Corinth. And here Paul models for us not only how he should respond uniquely as an apostle, but also how all of us should respond to the challenges of our own day as followers of Jesus. Because all of us are called to be ambassadors. We are ambassadors for Christ.

Today we come to what is in many ways the heart and center of this letter: 2 Corinthians 5. And as we turn to this section of the letter, we'll see that Paul has a lot to tell us about his role as an apostle and our role collectively as ambassadors. So I want us to consider this theme of ambassadorship under three headings: 1) *the mouthpiece*, 2) *the message*, and 3) *the mission*.

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

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.

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Background

In the 2010 film “The King’s Speech,” Colin Firth plays the role of King George VI. After his father dies and his older brother abdicates the throne, George unexpectedly, suddenly is crowned king in 1937. Hitler is on the rise. England is facing the prospect of war and desperately in need of a strong, powerful leader. There’s just one problem: King George has suffered significantly from a stuttering problem since childhood. But he learns to manage his stammer through the unconventional methods of an Australian speech therapist. And despite his anxiety and his fear, he delivers a series of radio addresses leading up to the war which not only humanize him because of this apparent weakness in the eyes of his people but also unite his people and inspire them in the midst of uncertainty.

There’s one poignant moment where King George reflects on the fact that he doesn’t really have any power as a constitutional monarch. And yet, despite his weakness and his personal struggles, he recognizes that he speaks for his people. So at one point he says:

If I am King, where is my power? Can I declare war? Form a government? Levy a tax? No! And yet I am the seat of all authority because they think that when I speak, I speak for them.

So in “The King’s Speech,” you have a king who is called to be an ambassador for his people. But in 2 Corinthians 5, you have a people who are all called to be ambassadors for their King. Verse 20 says, “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” But what does it mean to be an ambassador? We’re rather close to the United Nations. Given our proximity, we might have an ambassador right here with us today. But what is an ambassador?

The Mouthpiece

An ambassador is someone who is appointed to represent their country in a foreign land. And wherever you go, therefore, you represent your president, you represent your king, you represent your country. You’re not there to share your own opinions or ideas. If you were to start doing that, you would probably be recalled because your personal politics, your private opinions, don’t matter at all. You are called to speak and to act on behalf of another. You are the mouthpiece for the highest leader of your country.

The important thing to realize, of course, is that no one appoints themselves to be an ambassador. Can you imagine if I walked over to the United Nations today and

stepped up to the front desk and said, “Hello. I’m here because I decided that I would like to be the ambassador to the United Nations on behalf of Italy.” Well, I’m sorry, it doesn’t work that way, first and foremost because I’m not a citizen of Italy. You need to be a citizen of the country for which you will be an ambassador. And besides that, I can’t tap myself and make myself an ambassador. No, you need to be called. You need to be appointed. You need to be authorized.

So it was for the Apostle Paul. We know from the book of Acts that when the early Christian movement first sprang up, Paul vehemently opposed the spread of Christianity because he believed that he was defending orthodoxy. And so he looked on with approval as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. He created havoc for the church, breathing threats and murder. He actively persecuted Christians by searching them out, house to house, dragging them to prison and approving of their executions. And so Paul, in a very real sense, set himself up as an enemy of Jesus because he was so zealously committed to the traditions of his ancestors... until the risen Jesus literally stopped him dead in his tracks on the road to Damascus.

Do you remember what the risen Jesus asked Paul, known then by the name Saul? He said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And why does Jesus say that? Paul’s not persecuting Jesus; he’s persecuting Christians. But no, Jesus says, followers of me — the body of Christ — are so intimately united to me that if you mess with them, you’re messing with me. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?” And that life-altering moment transformed Paul from being the greatest persecutor of Jesus to becoming the greatest ambassador for Jesus.

But how did that happen? How did that transformation take place? How did Paul turn from being a monster into a mouthpiece for Jesus? The answer is simple. The answer is love. Love literally rocks Paul’s world. He finds out that he’s been on the wrong side this whole time. But now finally, when he comes face to face with the risen Jesus, Jesus, rather than striking him down, embraces him. And Paul realizes that the one whom he has been attacking, the one whom he has been opposing, is willing to embrace him in love and turn an enemy into a friend.

And Paul will never get over this. He’ll speak about this here in 2 Corinthians 5. He speaks about it in Galatians 2:20.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Love transforms Paul from a monster into a mouthpiece for Jesus. And you see, that’s how the gospel works. God’s love for you is not conditional. God does not love you because of who you are or what you do. But God’s love is even better than unconditional. God doesn’t merely love you as you are. No, God’s love is contra-conditional. God loves you despite who you are, despite what you’ve done. And love, therefore, literally changes everything.

Now Paul knows that some of his critics there in Corinth are trying to discredit him and turn the church against him because of his personal struggles and sufferings. They're telling people that, not unlike King George VI, "Paul is a weak leader and a poor speaker, so have nothing to do with him." So Paul has to explain his motivation in ministry. And he asks them, do you want to know why I do the things that I do? Do you want to know the reason why I sacrifice so much? Do you want to know the reason why I am willing to suffer as I do? The reason why I refuse to put myself forward? Do you want to know why I don't fit your cultural expectations for a strong and successful leader? It's all because of love.

Beginning in verse 14, Paul says, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." So it motivates and propels Paul in his life and in his ministry. It's not guilt, but grace. It's not duty, but delight. By sheer grace, Jesus has utterly transformed Paul's life — and that's true of every single Christian. The moment you put your faith in Jesus, you are no longer who you once were.

When we kicked off our Wednesday night School of Discipleship, our very first teacher, Helen Holbrook, asked those of us who were present to consider what key passage of Scripture or meaningful verse had the Lord used to draw us to himself or perhaps to confirm the work that he was doing in our lives. And do you know what it was for me? It was right here in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

I was raised in a mainline Lutheran church. We went to church every Sunday without exception, without fail. So I was baptized, I was catechized, I was confirmed. And if you had asked me as a middle school student, do you believe in God? Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God? Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for sin? Do you believe that he rose again from the grave? I would've said "yes" to all of those questions, not because I had thought about them, but precisely because I had *not* thought about them; I simply took them for granted. Going to church on Sunday was simply something we did.

But then, when I was approaching the end of eighth grade, the beginning of ninth grade, my parents forced me to go to YoungLife. They forced me to go to this youth ministry for middle school and high school students, and I'm not sure they exactly knew what they were signing up for. What they observed was that I was being mean to my sister, and they figured that maybe a little extra dose of religion might straighten me out. So they forced me to go. And I actually liked it, but I wasn't going to give my parents the satisfaction of knowing that I was having a good time. So I'd go to YoungLife, and I was eating it up. I was enjoying it. Why? Because now, finally, for the first time, the gospel was being communicated to me in a way that a 14-year-old could understand.

What I came to realize was that it wasn't as if Jesus had merely died for humanity in general, but that Jesus had died and risen again for me in particular. Now, I may not have been a persecutor of the Church, but I realized that in my own way, I too had set myself up in opposition to God, not so much because of my active rebellion against

him, but rather because of my passive indifference toward him — which was just as serious, if not worse. But then through hearing the message of the gospel, I came to see that Jesus had done everything necessary to bring an end to the hostility, and it had an electrifying impact on my life. My parents just wanted me to be nice to my sister, but now my whole life had changed.

I started reading my Bible, and I locked myself up in my room to pray. That was the moment when I first sensed a call to ministry, and I started memorizing scripture. One of the first verses I ever memorized was 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.” I realized that I was no longer who I once was... and I was even nice to my sister.

This verse is one of the greatest little summaries of the gospel. And in the original Greek, it's even more tight and compact. I think the Apostle Paul is so excited about what he's saying that he doesn't even write in complete sentences. Literally, he says, “Therefore, if anyone in Christ, new creation” to describe not only the person whose life has been transformed but also to describe the world to which that person now belongs.

What all of this shows us is that the purpose of the gospel is not merely to make us nice. That might be a side benefit, but the purpose of the gospel is not to make us nice. The purpose of the gospel is to make us new. And before God ever gives us a new activity to do for Jesus, he gives us a new identity in Jesus. But once you receive this new identity, once you become part of the new creation, your citizenship changes. Your primary citizenship is no longer within the kingdoms of this world. No, now your primary citizenship lies in the kingdom of God. And as a citizen of his kingdom, he calls you to become an ambassador — an ambassador for the kingdom.

The Message

But what then is our message? An ambassador is always sent with a message. An ambassador is not supposed to relay their own thoughts or ideas or opinions or perspectives. No, an ambassador is always briefed. An ambassador is always told what to say. So what is the message that all of us are called and appointed and authorized to deliver? Our message is not a new moral code. We're not here to tell people how to clean up their act and embrace a new morality, to make some behavioral modifications in their life. And our message is not a new religious practice so that people might enjoy and experience a spiritual uplift. Our message is also not a new philosophical theory intended to stimulate our intellectual curiosity.

Of course, it's true that the message does have something to say about ethics and behavior. And it will lead to profound spiritual experiences. And it will stimulate the life of the mind. But that is not what it's all about at its core. No, the message is all about reconciliation. And of all the metaphors that Paul uses to describe the atonement, this without a doubt is the most personal and the most relational. Think about any relationship. If there's been a falling out between two people, if there's been a misunderstanding, if they're no longer on speaking terms, if they're no longer looking at one another, the only way in which that rupture can be healed is through reconciliation.

And that is what we human beings need in so many dimensions of our lives. The fundamental problem with the human condition is that we experience alienation in at least four different ways because of the dark power of Sin with a capital S. Sin first alienates us from God spiritually, but then Sin also alienates us from one another socially. Sin even alienates us from ourselves psychologically, and it alienates us from the physical environment. Even this created order is subject to corruption and decay. Why? Because of the power of Sin. What God has promised is, in the face of alienation, to bring about reconciliation, first and foremost with him, but then spreading out to all those other areas and dimensions of our lives.

So reconciliation is what it's all about, and what Paul tells us here in 2 Corinthians 5 is that God is the author of reconciliation, Jesus is the agent of reconciliation, and we are the ambassadors of reconciliation. First, God is the author. Verse 18 says, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself." Second, Jesus is the agent. Verse 19, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." And we are the ambassadors of reconciliation. Verse 20, "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

But here's the million dollar question: How can God get away with not counting our trespasses against us? When we think about human courts, we don't want to hear that justice has been compromised by bribes or that our courts are turned into political weapons. We don't want to hear about miscarriages of justice. In our own courts, we expect judges to declare those who are guilty, guilty, and those who are innocent, innocent. And how much more, therefore, with God. A God who does not uphold basic justice would not be a God worthy of our worship. Of course, if God were to hold us to account for the lives that we live, then if we're honest, we know that none of us could ever bear the scrutiny of a holy, infinitely righteous God.

So how can God get away with not holding our trespasses against us? How can he get away with not holding us responsible for the lives that we live? The answer is what theologians have referred to down through the centuries as "the great exchange," because the moment that you put your faith in Jesus, an exchange takes place. Everything that is true of Jesus now becomes true of you. If Jesus lived a perfect life, if Jesus died on the cross for sin, if Jesus has been raised to new life, and if you're united to him, then all of that is now true of you. You have now lived a perfect life in the eyes of God. You have died for sin. And you have already been raised to new life in him. You're a new creation.

In 1520, Martin Luther wrote a little essay called "The Freedom of a Christian," and in it he used the analogy of a bride and a groom. Now, when a couple gets married, unless there's a prenuptial agreement, everything that belongs to the one now belongs to the other. So let's use this analogy. Let's say that you've got no money, no job, but mountains of credit card debt. (Now, I realize this might be hitting close to home for some people, but just bear with me for a minute.) Imagine you've got no job, no money, and loads and loads of credit card debt, but then you meet someone who is fabulously wealthy — so wealthy that your poverty, all that debt, is like nothing. It's just a drop in the bucket. The moment that you get married, well, all those riches are now yours. Your debt is completely cancelled. It's swallowed up by this fortune. (Now,

I also realize some of you are hoping this will happen to you. But this is just an analogy, so stay with me here.)

You see, this is what Luther is saying. Through the gospel, when you put your faith in Jesus, you are so united to him that whatever is yours becomes his, and whatever is his becomes yours. People in New York City talk about marrying up, but consider Jesus. Jesus marries down. Jesus gets the bum end of this deal. In the analogy, Luther says that Jesus is our rich, faithful groom, and rather colorfully he says that we are the poor, unfaithful bride. But through the wedding ring of faith, Jesus takes what is ours, our sin, and he gives us what is his, his righteousness. Everything that belongs to Jesus now belongs to us. And that's what 2 Corinthians 5:21 is all about. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Let me put it another way. Jesus, the truly innocent one, was treated as guilty so that we, the truly guilty ones might be treated as innocent. Or let me put it a third way. Jesus became sin with our sin on the cross so that we might become righteous with his righteousness. What you need to understand is that the words justification and righteousness are actually the same word in Greek: *dikaíosynē*. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. It's a word that we've borrowed for the legal courts. To condemn means to declare guilty; to justify means to declare not guilty, innocent, or righteous. So the moment you put your faith in Jesus, you are justified. This is what it means to be justified by faith alone.

And what this means is that the verdict of the last day has now come down in the present. Imagine if you could time travel to the ultimate future, to the last day, and stand before the judgment of God. Even though you know that you are in fact guilty — you're guilty of violating his law, of scorning his love, of breaking his heart — nevertheless, the verdict comes down and he declares you not guilty, innocent, righteous, and acquitted of all charges. Not because of your record but because of Jesus' record. Not because of who you are or what you've done, but because of who Jesus is and what he has done for you. You are now treated as righteous because of his righteousness.

I actually love the way that this is paraphrased in The Message version of the Bible:

Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. ²¹How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

So this is what it means to be justified. This is what it means to be declared righteous. This is what it means to be put right with God, to be reconciled to God. And the point is that the hard part is already over. God has already done everything that needs to be done on his side. He has already made peace with his blood. All that is necessary now is for us to accept it.

So have you done that? Have you been reconciled? It'll change your life. "If anyone in Christ, new creation." And once you experience that life-transforming power of the gospel, you become an ambassador. Our job is not to craft the message, to write the message, or to create the message. Our job is simply to faithfully deliver it.

The Mission

So if you are now God's mouthpiece, and the message that you're called to deliver is reconciliation, then what's the mission? Very quickly consider verses 18-19. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself..." Now, notice Paul's not saying that God is claiming a world that he doesn't have any right to, nor is he saying that he's scrapping this old world, throwing it away and starting a new one. No, he is reconciling to himself this world — the whole world, the world that he loves but once lost. And what that shows us is that the mission is for you and me as individuals, but the mission is not individualistic. The mission is cosmic in its scope.

See, once God puts you right with himself, he calls you to be part of his plan, his mission to put the whole world right. In other words, there's a close relationship between justification and justice. There's a close relationship between righteousness and God's plan to put everything right again. N.T. Wright was saying much the same thing when he was here two weeks ago giving a lecture on the book of Ephesians. See, for those who pay attention to some of the current theological debates, this is actually how you tie together the so-called old perspective on Paul and the new perspective on Paul. It's not an either/or; it's a both/and. And here's why.

Based on passages like Psalm 72, Isaiah 11, or Isaiah 56-66, it's clear that God is on a mission to make the world right again. He's going to mend the world. He's going to heal it of its wounds. He's going to establish true justice. God will put right everything that once went wrong.

And of course, God doesn't need us. He doesn't need us weak, frail, flawed human beings. He's entirely capable of carrying out this mission without us, but he chooses to involve us. He gives us the privilege and the honor to join him in his work. And so the moment that you receive the gospel for yourself and place your trust in Jesus for your relationship with God, God not only puts you right with himself, he not only justifies you through the finished work of Christ and the power of the Spirit, but now he also calls you to be part of his putting-right work in the world.

Now that's not to say that being part of God's putting-right project will lead to some kind of utopia. That, of course, was the mistaken message of the social gospel a hundred years ago. Christians are not starry-eyed optimists. We don't think that we can create heaven on earth. We know we can't do that. Only Jesus can do that. But we're also not cynical pessimists either, who throw up our arms and give up on this world as a lost cause. No, Christians are called to be realistic yet hopeful. We're realistic because we know that this world is entrenched in the power of sin and evil, and there's so very, very little that we can do about it. Yet we're hopeful because we know how the story ends. We know that Jesus will get the victory. Jesus will fully and finally usher in the new creation and make all things new.

And that's why we're called to be ambassadors. That's why he calls us to participate in his putting-right project. We're not going to usher in the new creation, but we can anticipate what the world will be like through our words, through our actions, through our lives, through the community that we form. Because we're called to help implement

God's purpose and plan and policies for all the world to see, so that we might provide our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and colleagues a glimpse. It might only be a glimpse, but it is nevertheless a partial yet real picture of what the world will be like when Jesus does finish what he started and make all things new.

That picture is what is meant to fuel hope in other people and perhaps even draw them into a reconciled relationship with God. And that's what it means for us to be the mission, to be the righteousness of God, to embody in our individual and our corporate lives God's faithfulness to his covenant promises to rescue and renew the whole world.

So reconciliation is what it's all about. God is the author of reconciliation, Jesus is the agent of reconciliation, and we are the ambassadors of reconciliation, "God making his appeal through us." And you see, once you experience the new creation, once you experience that transfer in citizenship, once you know that now your ultimate place of belonging is the kingdom of God, you're called to be an ambassador. You could think of this place as our consulate. This is our diplomatic mission. This is our embassy. But you see, like any good ambassador, we're not supposed to remain safely behind the walls of the consulate. No, we have to get out there into the world with the King's message.

So let's speak it. Let's act it. Let's live it. Let's embody it in our homes, in our workplaces, in our classrooms, in our neighborhoods. "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Let me pray for us.

Father, we stand amazed at the thought that you have not given up on us despite our enmity toward you, caused either by our active rebellion or our passive indifference. Rather you have done everything that is necessary to turn enemies into friends. And therefore, help us, Father, to receive this reconciliation for ourselves. And as we do, give us the grace to live out our calling as your ambassadors. Make us your mouthpiece, entrust to us your message, and help us to embody your mission for the whole world until that day in which Jesus makes all things new. We ask in his name. Amen.