

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-21

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

In the desert of Arizona, north of Tucson, is the site of an interesting environmental research project.

There sits a sealed terrarium, the size of 2.5 football fields - it covers more than three acres. The enclosure is more airtight than the international space station.

The compound is known as **Biosphere 2**.

Inside the glass structure, scientists *simulate* five of earth's ecosystems: *desert, ocean, marsh, savannah, and rain forest*. The dome is totally self-contained, and recycles its own air, food, water, and waste.

Today Biosphere 2 is an earth science laboratory, but in the early 90s it was an experiment. Eight scientists entered the glass bubble in 1991, emerging in 1993.

The eight people spent two years together - with no personal contact other people or the outside world.

For the scientific community Biosphere 2 has been a novel experiment, *but sadly, many Christians have been living in a self-contained, isolated dome for years.*

Christians, *even the born-again type*, are notorious for constructing artificial environments where they can seal themselves off from the rest of the world.

All our friends are Christians... All our activities are at church or with church members... We work and live around non-Christians, but we keep our contact to a minimum... We recycle relationships, and socially interact with the same people over and over... We've got little time to reach out to those who need us most...

Don't misunderstand, I pastor a church, and I'm all for Christian fellowship - but I'll live with you forever.

There is a world out there that'll spend an eternity on the lake of fire if we don't get them the Gospel.

In our text we learn that God has not only reconciled us to Himself, but He's given us *"the ministry of reconciliation."* We are *"ambassadors for Christ."*

If you've been wondering what your ministry is, look no further. Each of us has been given *"the ministry of reconciliation."* We've been given the glorious task of placing the *hand of men* into the *hand of God* - of leading broken, empty, shipwrecked, wandering souls into a meaningful relationship with their Savior.

The word translated "*reconciliation*" means "to exchange." It's the Greek word for exchanging coins.

We as Christians are to be exchange agents....

Our job is to arrange swaps: *royal robes* for *sinful rags*, *forgiveness* for *fear*, *fulfillment* for *frustration*, *love* for *loneliness*, *hope* for *hollowness*, *peace* for *pain*. Our job is to get the good news to those who need it most!

Realize, God created human beings for fellowship. He wants to have a close relationship with you and me.

In the Garden of Eden, the first man and woman enjoyed just that. Adam and Eve knew God. The Bible says, God "*walked with them in the cool of the day.*"

Like best friends taking a walk, living life together - that's the kind of wonderful relationship Adam and Eve experienced with God. Imagine, having the God of the universe as your BFF - your walking and talking partner - someone you *spend time with* and *share hearts with*...

Yet this friendship (*or fellowship*) didn't last forever.

Adam and Eve made a choice. They cozied up to the serpent and rebelled against their Creator. They believed the lie that they *could know more*, and *be happier*, and *live better* without God than they could *with* Him.

The heavens and earth still shutter at their decision. Like a rock thrown in a lake, the splash still reverberates. Ripples keep emanating from that tragic decision.

Someone referred to the first sin as **the Adam bomb**.

Adam and Eve bombed all right. They blew it. Life before they sinned was *harmony in paradise*. Sadly, the fallout of their rebellion is still wreaking havoc today...

Just look at our world and the mess we've made...

Crumbling marriages, broken homes, violence in our schools and streets, racial tensions, the hungry and homeless, conflicts brewing all over the world... and the reason for it all can be traced back to the decision made in the garden. Adam and Eve broke fellowship with God.

They struck out on their own. They decided to do life their own way... The Bible calls their independence "sin."

Like a boat tied to the dock they cut anchor and began to drift. The entire *Adams family* - Adam, and Eve, and their descendants - have been lost at sea ever since.

What do you do with rebellious kids?

Do you wash your hands of them, and let them get what they deserve? Do you turn your back to them, and make them figure it out on their own? Do you let them flounder for a while, until they've learn their lesson?

Well, **God went on an elaborate rescue mission!**

With great passion and determination God made it His goal to reconcile His broken relationship with us. He set out to restore us to Himself, and renew our friendship.

Here in 5:18 Paul states, "all things are of God." In other words, He had a blank slate - an empty canvass.

God can do anything! *So, who will He call? What tool will He use? What means will He employ to save us? How will God repair the breach? Remove the wedge?*

Paul tells us in verse 18, He **“has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ...”** God reconciles us, or puts us back on friendly terms with Him **“through Jesus.”**

From the beginning God warned us **“the wages of sin is death.”** God told Adam if he ate of the forbidden fruit he would **“surely die.”** *And die he did...* physically he died later - but spiritually he died the instant he sinned.

But God sent Jesus into this world... *to die in our place, and pay the penalty for our sin.* Jesus was born of a virgin bypassing *inherited sin.* He lived a perfect life, not once guilty of a *merited sin.* Jesus was sinless.

Notice verse 21, **“For He (the Father) made Him (the Son) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”** Having no sin Himself, Jesus could make amends for our sin.

On the cross God took *every grimy act* done in *every slimy place* and thrust it on Jesus' sinless shoulders. He paid the penalty for our sin. He was made sin who knew no sin - so we could be the right-ness of God.

At Calvary Jesus made the grand swap! Jesus took on *our twisted-ness* to gave to us *His right-ness.*

And when I give my life to Jesus...

Inside, God transforms. He gives me His nature: to love and to obey. I become a new creation in Christ.

In heaven, God pardons. He blots out my sin and credits me with His virtue. I'm cleared of all my guilt.

Sin twists and warps, but there's none of that in Jesus - He's *righteous* in every way. Now He makes us *right*. **In Him we get a right heart and a right standing.**

Notice, our text doesn't say God is the one who needs to be reconciled to us. It's always vice versa.

We're the ones who need to be reconciled to God.

Verse 19, **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself..."** God has already buried the hatchet.

God isn't angry with us. His fists aren't clenched. His arms are open. His nail-scarred hands reach out.

There's no *reluctance* in God's *acceptance*. His willingness to forgive was decided on the cross, long before we rebelled. All that had to be done for us to be forgiven was accomplished by the blood of Jesus.

Some people assume God is a condemning god. He loves to stoke the flames of hell with human kindling. *Not so!...* **"God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them..."**

Did you hear that? God no longer imputes sin. He no longer keeps score, or tallying up our sins. At the cross, God stopped looking us over for flaws. He isn't scrutinizing us to see if we measure up. Now He's willing to forgive us and accept us for His Son's sake...

The only question left is, “will we bow to Jesus?”

We can *do nothing* to deserve God’s favor - but to **receive it** we have to submit our lives to His Son.

Remember the story Jesus told of the boy who ran away with his dad’s inheritance and partied it all away.

He finally decided to return home and see if he could sign on as one of his father’s hired-hands. Instead of extracting payback, his dad ran to him, forgave him, kissed his neck, welcomed him, threw a celebration.

And God’s forgiveness of us is just as lavish! All we have to do is *come home* - come to Jesus and receive.

Our tendency is to withhold forgiveness - at least long enough to watch the offender squirm. But this isn’t how God thinks. He forgives freely and extravagantly.

And this is how we should represent Him to others.

For according to our text we’ve been given “***the ministry of reconciliation.***” This is what God is doing in our world today! God is reconciling lost sinners to Himself. And He wants to use you and me to do so!

I’ve heard it said, “If a man has a soul - and he has. And if that soul can be won or lost for eternity - and it can. Then the most important thing in the world is to bring that man to Jesus Christ.” This is our ministry.

Put verses 19-20 together and they read, *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself... (Now) God is in us pleading and imploring for people to be reconciled.”*

Tori Matthews once worked for the Southern California Humane Society. One day she got a frantic call from a child who's pet iguana had drowned.

A dog had frightened the iguana up a tree. He'd climbed out on a limb, and fallen into a swimming pool.

When Officer Matthews arrived the little boy was beside the pool crying as his pet lizard lay motionless under the water. Tori dove into the pool and emerged with the lifeless body of the iguana. She thought, *“Well, you resuscitate a person, a dog, why not an iguana?”*

So she locked lips with a lizard, and was able to revive the boy's pet. Afterwards Tori told a reporter, *“It was a pretty ugly animal to kiss, but the last thing I wanted to do was tell this little boy his iguana died.”*

There are people in your world just as ugly, and nasty, and scaly, and repugnant as an iguana.

Their lifestyle and attitude stands for everything you, as a Christian, oppose. Extending compassion and love to them would be like locking lips with a lizard.

But if the last thing Tori Matthews wanted to do was tell a little boy his pet died - think of what it'll be like to have to tell God, the people He loved - the folks Jesus died to reconcile - drowned because you were afraid to get close to them. We've

been called by God to kiss lizards. Lizard kissing is the ministry of reconciliation!

Notice, verse 20, Paul refers to us as "ambassadors for Christ." And with the time remaining this is where I'd like to camp. *What does it mean to be an ambassador?*

An ambassador is a spokesman for his *homeland*, living in a *foreign land*. He represents the interests of home in the context of his surrounding culture.

And you are an ambassador, a spokesman for Jesus! Our citizenship is in heaven, but we're serving in a foreign post - representing the will of our King. The church is an embassy. And we are *divine diplomats*.

Realize, two traits make for a good ambassador...

First, he represents only the will of His Sovereign. What he speaks isn't laced with his personal opinions. He says only what his King would want him to say.

And **second**, he tries to relate to the people to whom he's been sent. When Paul says God is in the Christian "*pleading with men*," the word "*pleading*" means "to come alongside someone - to slip into their shoes."

God does more than shout at people to toe the line. He identifies with our struggles - empathizes with our weakness. He takes the time to understand and relate.

This is the reason Jesus left His throne in heaven and joined humanity. He wanted to taste our plight.

When Jesus spoke, it was only the words the Father gave Him to say - but those words were always couched in ways that appealed to hungry hearts, and stirred up an interest in the minds of His listeners.

The job of an ambassador is not just to represent heaven. It's more than uttering cold, matter of fact declarations. A good ambassador packages the *will of heaven* to *appeal to men*. He or she relates to the culture around them, and makes the message clear and attractive. A ambassador presents the truth, but He in ways that increases the likelihood of its acceptance.

The Saudi Arabian ambassador always looks slick and polished - he looks and speaks American. Forget the fez, the robes - he wears a Brooks Brothers suit.

He looks like a Western Diplomat, not a nomad off a camel. *His image* is designed to encourage his listeners to buy into *his rhetoric...* A good ambassador is shrewd. He knows his audience, and deliberately tries to appeal to its tastes, and needs, and logic.

And this was Paul's diplomatic strategy. In 1 Corinthians 9 he tell us, "To the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win Jews... to those who are without law, as without law... that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.." Paul built bridges. He looked for ways to identify with the people around him.

While with Jewish friends he'd talk the Torah, and eat kosher foods... In a Gentile crowd he'd discuss Greek philosophy, or jaw about the latest Olympic Games.

Paul wasn't deceitful, just flexible. He knew his audience, and tried to find common ground. Paul was willing to *adjust his interests to reach his audience*.

Too often, we focus on the differences between believers and unbelievers as if there were no commonalities - as if we occupied different planets.

It's true, our spiritual state with the person who doesn't know Jesus is as different as night and day, *but we both have a mortgage, a lawn to mow, a car to repair, we get sick, we have a less than perfect marriage we're working at...* We have similarities too.

In your interactions try to focus on *the similarities* and work to build a relationship that will ultimately yield an opportunity to explain *your differences*.

Paul was always looking for a shared interest - a commonality - around which to develop a friendship. Paul tried to *blend in* so he could *speak out!* If he could relate to folks *culturally* he could reach them *spiritually*.

Over the 38 years I've been a Christian, I've noticed it's usually the biker who wins the biker to Christ - and the business executive who wins the business executive - and the electrician who wins the electrician.

It doesn't have to occur this way, but it often does.

It's odd, I meet Christians who'll fly to other countries to witness for Jesus, but the folks they're most likely to reach are those closest to them - the guy just down the street - people with whom they have a lot in common.

Realize, an ambassador's job most closely parallels the job of an interpreter. Obviously, an interpreter has to be fluent in two languages - **the language of the speaker**, and **the language of the listener**.

If he's deficient in one language, or the other, the communication between the parties gets muddled.

And as a Christian you're an interpreter. It's your job to interpret heaven's truths into the language of earth.

And to do the job effectively you too must be proficient in two languages. You've got to speak the truths of heaven, but in an dialect understood on earth.

This is what we try to do each week at Calvary Chapel. We worship with contemporary music. I teach practically and apply God's Word to modern ears.

It's been said, **"The world has more winnable people than ever before... but it's possible to come out of a ripe field empty-handed."** That's what happens when the Church gets stuck in a rut, and caters only to *the sanctified*. We need to present God's truths in compelling ways that'll appeal to contemporary tastes.

Again the job of an ambassador is to be fluent in two languages - [the language of heaven](#), and [the language of earth](#). And yet, this is not as easy as it might seem.

Some Christians know very little of the language of heaven. They've lost touch with God's truth and God's perspective. Their Bible has been accumulating dust.

Their message is a legalistic gospel, or a prosperity gospel, or a social gospel, or a politicized gospel, or a watered-down feel-good gospel. They don't preach the gospel of reconciliation - of God's amazing grace!

And the methods they use are more man-made, than spiritual. Pressure rather than love, hype rather than holiness. They're more into marketing than ministering.

Some Christians have neglected heaven's language, *but others have forgotten how to speak the language of earth*. They live in the bubble. They like the comfort of hanging out with people who believe the way they do.

There're so socially isolated they now have trouble relating to non-Christians. There's an awkwardness.

As a foreign ambassador you've got to stay in touch with home, but you also have relate to the trends and dialect of the land where you've been dispatched.

Don't barricade yourself in the bubble. Some Christians haven't had a conversation with a lost person about spiritual things in years. In fact, if given the opportunity they've forgotten how to relate.

Pentecostal preacher, *Donald Gee*, once wrote, "It's possible to live such an other-worldly life, to get into an unearthly, abnormal condition, where you may be very spiritual but you are not a scrap of good as an interpreter. You have gotten out of touch with men."

Then he gives an example, "I was attending a street meeting... listening to a fine young woman give her testimony. She was full of the Holy Spirit, on fire for God - had a real desire to win souls. (But) she was talking to a bunch of coal miners and drunkards, and (saying)... *"Dear ones, this..."* and *"Dear ones, that..."*"

They were not "dear ones" by a long way, and they did not like being called "dear ones"! You see she had lived in the sugary sweet atmosphere of Pentecostal prayer meetings, and had lost contact with the world."

And this can happen to us. When the church retreats into a spiritual bunker, and closes itself off to the rest of the world, we stop coming across authentic to people. We might be sincere, but we seem plastic and phony.

In Titus 2:14 Paul calls us a "peculiar people." The word "peculiar" is an Old King James word which means "different or special." We're to be different, but in an attractive way... *in how we treat each others - in our outlook on life - in our business practices - in our values - in the joy that radiates from our lives.*

We're NOT to be "peculiar" in the sense of being weird, or odd, or eccentric. Yet some Christians use Titus 2:14 to justify being a cultural geek. Church-folk hold on to traditions that

alienate them from the mainstream, and think they're being holy and separate from the world. In reality, they're being just plain weird!

I grew up in the 1960s and went to a church that frowned on guys with long hair and bell-bottom jeans. A buzz cut and white shirt was more spiritual, *but says who?* The Bible doesn't have a Christian dress code!

It was just a man-made tradition... and it prohibited our church from reaching kids who needed the Gospel.

And today, I wonder what traditions do we stubbornly hold onto?... What personal biases are we allowing to hinder us from reaching this current generation?

Jesus told us to be **in the world, but not of it.**

We're *in the world* - that means we're to fit in culturally, and dress fashionably, and speak normally.

But we're *not of the world* - which means we need to have godly priorities - stand up morally and spiritually.

Of course, where the culture violates our convictions; we have to take a stand for God. But we should be fluent in two languages - **of heaven** and **of earth.**

Years ago I ran across a story that illustrates what happens when believers in Jesus isolate themselves in their Christian compound and become in-grown.

They even develop their own vocabulary that no one else understands. It's a form of *Christian-ese*. Listen to this funny article, "**They Speak with Other Tongues.**"

It's too long for the screen, so you'll have to listen.

"Have you ever been saved?" A rather wide-eyed young fellow startled me with his question as we waited for the bus. He handed me a booklet with a picture of hell on the front. "Sure," I replied, "Once when I was nine years old I was swimming at Jones Beach, and a strong undertow began to drag me out to sea. My uncle heard my call for help and..."

"No, no," he interrupted, "Redeemed! Have you ever been redeemed? You know, reborn - washed in the blood?" I responded, "What, in the world are you talking about?" "Convicted. Have you ever been convicted?" "No, I've never been in any legal trouble."

He looked at me square in the eye. "I think you need to be delivered." "Delivered? I was just waiting for the bus. I think I'll stick with that, but thank you very much."

He looked at me as if I were speaking another language. "Can we have lunch sometime?" he asked. "That would be fine." He looked harmless, but he was an unusual fellow, and quite difficult to understand.

That Wednesday I had lunch with Ed. He was a little late but explained he was having some quiet time.

"Quiet time?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Each day just before lunch I have some time in my prayer closet," he responded. I was puzzled. "Do you pray in a closet at work?" He answered, "No, it's in my car." "A closet in your car?!" He changed the subject.

Like the first day I met him, again he left me confused. This Ed is quite a unique fellow, I thought.

As we parted that day, Ed gave me a little booklet that explained how someone could come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I read it and understood it and knew that was exactly what I needed. That night I submitted my life to Jesus, and I was "born again" as it stated in the booklet.

Two days later I told Ed. He was overjoyed.

The following week we got together again, and Ed strongly urged me to find a good body. I was surprised at his suggestion, but it sounded good to me.

I took his advice and proceeded to comb the local health clubs for an attractive woman.

When I met Denise, I knew she was the one. We began to date and soon she became a believer, too. Ed rejoiced and told us that it was crucial that we get planted so that we could grow together.

"Sometime it's hard to understand this guy," I confided to Denise. I told Ed I wasn't quite sure what he meant by planted. He responded, *"Committed! You both need to be committed now that you know Jesus."*

"Now wait a minute," I protested. *"Just because I don't understand what planted means doesn't mean I'm nuts. Anyway, I think that trusting Jesus is the most sane thing I've*

ever done." It was obvious that Ed's patience was growing thin.

He explained, *"Bob and Denise, you have to get plugged in. Don't you understand?"* No, we didn't! But I did wonder if getting plugged in had any connection with *"going out under the power,"* something I'd heard Ed mention but hoped would never happen to me.

I had to miss worship the next Sunday, but Ed and I had breakfast Monday morning, and he filled me in on what happened. *"God moved!"* He said with excitement. *"God really moved yesterday!"*

"Where is He now?" I pleaded. *"I was just getting to know Him - now He's gone?"* *"No, no, Bob, God hasn't gone anywhere."* I was relieved. *"It's just that so many people were stepping out and moving in the gifts."*

"You mean people were leaving during the meeting? And what's this about presents?" *"No, it's the gifts. The gifts were really flowing,"* he said. *"That's beautiful, people were giving gifts to each other. I wish I'd been there."* Now Ed seemed confused.

"Anyway", he said, changing the subject, *"Denise was there, and boy, was she on fire." "Fire? Denise got burned? What happened? Is she OK?"*

"No, Bob, you don't understand." (That is sure an understatement, I thought) *"Denise is just fine. It's just that I believe she is really called, and that God wants to use her."* Things were not getting clearer. *"Did Denise mention that*

she's getting too many phone calls? And what's this about God taking advantage of her?"

Ed sighed, "Can I walk in the light with you?" "Where do you want to go?" I answered. "Or course, we can walk in the light. It's daytime, Ed."

He just shook his head. I don't know what it is, but Ed and I have a tough time communicating.

Well, it's been over two years since I was saved and delivered. Now I'm plugged in, planted, and committed to a good body. God has been moving, and I've been stepping out in the gifts. I can hardly believe how God has been using me!

I have developed one new problem, though. It seems all my old friends just don't understand me anymore.

When I share about my redemption - that I've been washed as white as snow - and that I desire to follow the Lamb - they seem to tune me out. I guess they're just convicted when they see that I'm on fire.

In a multitude of ways Christians can alienate themselves from non-Christians. Whenever we speak to unbelievers we should try to avoid religious clichés and buzz words. Speak in ways they can understand.

But it's not just our lingo that alienates unbelievers.

Sometimes we engage in practices that are only understood in-house. When we act on them in front of non-Christians they can draw the wrong conclusions.

I once had a pastor friend who I hated to eat lunch with in a public place. Every time he saw me, no matter where we were, he would greet me with a huge hug.

Now, don't misunderstand, I'm not against members of God's family hugging. In church, where a hug is properly understood, it's a meaningful communication.

But trust me, in mid-town Atlanta at a crowded restaurant where people are watching... if two men are hugging each other - those who see it are definitely not thinking, "**My, look at that sweet Christian fellowship.**"

Its okay to hug in church. Christians appreciate the gesture... but even at church be careful who you hug.

There was a time in my life when I was trying to be so macho, if you'd hugged it would've turned me off!

My point is, just be natural around people, and respect the social mores that govern normal behavior. When we do stuff folks interpret as "*weird*" it drives them away from the Gospel they desperately need.

It's interesting to me that in verse 19 Paul says God "***has committed to us the word of reconciliation.***"

God reconciling the world involved the coming and cross of Jesus. God's salvation plan was excruciating, and costly. It required great effort from the Savior.

How ironic, that God now uses something as simple as a word to finish the deal. He could've used a giant lasso from heaven to now corral us... Or a cosmic shepherd's staff to grab us by the neck and yank us into the fold... Or a stun gun

to drop us and drag us back... Or human flypaper to catch us against our will.

But God uses a word - *a simple word*. An invite.

God restores us to friendly relations by speaking to us a simple word. It can come from a preacher, or a friend, or a random person... but God arrests us with a word, we wrestle with that word, we can't escape it, it makes sense, it rings true, finally we act on that word.

We open our heart and give our life to Jesus!

And this is what makes our ministry so crucial. To us God has committed ***“the word of reconciliation.”*** We've all been called to share the Gospel with lost people.

This is why you can't just sit back in your Christian biosphere - insulated from the needs around you - sealed off from people's pain - and not speak up!

God loves the lizard-like folks in this world. You could say God has literally been dying to save them! And now He's in you pleading for them to be saved...

Are you giving Him a voice? God has given you and me ***“the ministry of reconciliation”*** - **of kissing lizards.**

How many lizards have you kissed lately?