

# KISSING LIZARDS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-20

**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.**

In the desert, north of Tucson, Arizona sits a sealed terrarium, the size of 2½ football fields. It covers more than 3 acres. It's known as *Biosphere 2*. In the early 1990s it served as an environmental research laboratory.

Inside the glass structure, scientists simulated the earth's ecosystems. The dome was supposed to be totally self-contained. The intention was to recycle its own air, food, water, and waste. It was **the Earth inside a bottle**.

Eight scientists entered the bubble in 1991, and emerged in 1993. They spent two years together – with no personal contact from the outside world. Unfortunately, Biosphere 2 had problems. A totally, sealed environment was difficult to maintain... *They should've consulted the Church...*

Sadly, Christians have mastered the art of living in self-contained bubbles. We're notorious for constructing artificial environments where we seal ourselves off from the rest of the world. Here's what happens...

*All our friends are Christians.*

*All our activities are either at church, or with church members.*

*We work around non-Christians, but keep social contact to a minimum.*

*We recycle relationships. We see the same people over and over.*

*We're so busy **in church** we've got no time to **reach out**.*

Hey, I pastor a church. I'm all for good, Christian fellowship, but I'll live with you guys forever. There's a world out there that'll spend eternity vacationing on the lake of fire, if we don't get them to Jesus.

Granted, it's not easy getting involved with people mired in sin.

It's messy - and taxing - and awkward at times. It demands a lot of *effort*, and *thought*, and *patience*, and *prayer*, and *empathy*, and *love*.

But never forget that none other than our Lord Jesus was called "**a friend of sinners.**" Jesus hung out with people who had hang ups.

And you and I have been called to follow in His footsteps.

We're called to be "fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium." It's a lot easier to *build walls* than *bridges* - to *reach in* than *reach out*.

We forget that we were once lost without Christ ourselves, yet someone made the effort to care for us! Remember, "The Gospel is not something we go to church to hear; it is something we go from church to tell."

In our text Paul tells us that God has given each of us a ministry!

If you've been trying to discover your ministry - look no further. Each of us has been given *the ministry of reconciliation*. Ours is the glorious task of placing the *hand of men* into the *hand of God* - of leading broken, empty, shipwrecked souls into a meaningful relationship with the Savior.

The word translated "*reconciliation*" means "to exchange." It's an old Greek word for exchanging coins. As Christians we're exchange agents....

We arrange swaps: *royal robes* for *sinful rags*, *forgiveness* for *fear*, *love* for *loneliness*, *fulfillment* for *frustration*, *hope* for *hollowness*, *peace* for *pain*. Our job is to get good news to folks who've had only bad news!

The work of reconciliation is the reason God sacrificed His only Son. It's the reason Jesus endured the horrors of the cross and spilt sinless blood.

Reconciliation is God's work, and it's our privilege to participate.

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." Vance Havner use to say you can cut Christianity anywhere, and it will bleed reconciliation.

This is what God is doing in our world! He's reconciling sinners – and He wants to use you and me! If we want to be strategically involved in a high stakes mission we need to become a **“minister of reconciliation.”**

Notice our text never says God needs to be reconciled to us. *We need to be reconciled to God.* God isn't angry or hostile toward you. He doesn't carry a grudge. His fist isn't clinched! God is ready to bury the hatchet.

We're the ones who've been stand-offish to God, not vice versa.

God's issues with you were satisfied by Jesus on the cross. Today, His desire toward you is to forgive and restore – if you're willing. Paul tells the Corinthians **"God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...."**

Understand *God loves the people you despise.* He takes no pleasure in their pain or failure. God's only intention is to pardon, and help, and bless!

Some of us enjoy watching our enemies *squirm a little - sweat a little - suffer a little.* We don't just want to beat an

opponent we want to give them a whipping – run up the score. *This isn't how God thinks!*

*And this is NOT how we should represent Him.*

When the prodigal son returned home with a repentant heart his Father didn't make him do penance or serve probation. The boy didn't even have to pay back the money he had wasted. The Father's forgiveness was full and free! And God's forgiveness toward lost humanity is just as lavish!

Tori Matthews works for the Southern California Humane Society. One day, she got a frantic call from a child whose pet iguana had drowned.

A dog frightened the iguana up a tree. He climbed out on a limb, and fell into a swimming pool. When Officer Matthews arrived the little boy was next to the pool crying. His pet lizard lay motionless under the water.

Tori dove into the pool and emerged with the lifeless iguana. She thought, "Well, you can resuscitate a person, and a dog, why not an iguana?" She locked lips with the lizard, and revived the pet.

Afterwards, Tori commented, "It's a pretty ugly animal to kiss, but the last thing I wanted to do was tell this little boy that his iguana had died."

There are people in your life just as ugly, nasty, scaly, and repugnant as an iguana. Their lifestyle and attitudes stand for everything you're against.

Extending love and concern to them would be like kissing a lizard.

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

Lizard kissing is the ministry of reconciliation!

In our text Paul calls us **"ambassadors for Christ."** An ambassador is a spokesman for his *homeland*, living in a *foreign land*. He represents the interests of home in an alien culture. And we too are ambassadors.

Your citizenship is in heaven, yet you're serving on earth. You represent the will of your King, while occupying a foreign post. A Christian is God's spokesperson. The church is His embassy. We're all *divine diplomats*.

And understand, two traits make for a good ambassador...

*First, he represents only the will of His King.* He's just the microphone not the singer. When he speaks he doesn't interject his own opinions.

*Second, he relates well with the people to which he's been sent.*

Paul says God is in us pleading with humanity to be reconciled. The term **"pleading"** means *"to come alongside"* – to slip into someone else's shoes. God does more than shout at mankind to toe the line. He identifies

with our struggles - empathizes with our weakness. He relates to us.

This is the reason Jesus left His box seat in heaven and joined the ranks of humanity. He wanted to feel our struggle from ground level.

When Jesus communicated He spoke only the words His Father gave Him - but those words were always packaged, and couched in ways that appealed to hungry hearts, and stirred up an interest in 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 for Christ packages the *will of heaven* in a way that *appeals to men*.

He or she relates to the culture around them, and makes the message as clear and attractive as possible. A good ambassador presents the truth, but in ways that increase the likelihood of its acceptance.

Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States is Said Jawad. **(pic)**

Notice he's not wearing a traditional Arab headdress **(pic)** – nor does he have a beard – nor is an AK-47 slung over his shoulder. He looks like a typical American businessman – not a nomad off the back of a camel.

*His image* is designed to encourage us to buy *his rhetoric*.

An ambassador is shrewd - *not deceptive, but shrewd* - he knows his audience, and deliberately appeals to its tastes, needs, logic, and style.

In 1Corinthians 9 Paul reveals his diplomatic strategy, "To the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), 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 people...

If he was with a Jew he would talk the Torah, and eat kosher food.

If he were with Gentiles he'd discuss Greek philosophy or the Olympics.

If Paul was with a person *fraught with fear* he would open up and share his own insecurities... To a *proud person in need of humility* he would confess the foolishness of the self-confidence he once flaunted...

Paul was not deceitful, just flexible. He knew his audience. He looked for common ground. He could *adjust his interests to reach his listeners*.



All too often, Christians focus on their differences with non-Christians - as if there were no commonalities - as if we lived on different planets.

It's true, our spiritual state is as different as night and day, but we both have *a mortgage to pay*, and *a lawn to mow*, and *cars to repair*, and *kids to raise*, and *a less than perfect marriage* that we're working on.

By focusing on *our similarities* we can build a relationship with people that will ultimately produce an opportunity to explain *our differences*.

Paul was always looking for a shared interest around which he could develop a friendship. He tried to *blend in to speak out!* If he could relate *culturally* he stood a better chance of reaching that person *spiritually*.

Over the 31 years I've been a Christian, I've noticed it's usually the biker who wins his fellow biker to Christ - and the yuppie who wins his fellow yuppie. Seldom do you see a biker win an yuppie to Jesus, or a yuppie win a biker. It can happen, but it's not very likely.

*It's the electrician who wins the electrician... The hip hop homeboy who wins the hip hop homeboy... The jock who wins the jock... The housewife that wins the housewife...*

Folks open up to the person they believe understands their situation, and can identify with their perspective.

Ironically, Christians will fly to another country – or drive to a different part of town to witness for Jesus - but the folks most likely to listen to you are the people who live on your block – or go to your school – or play on your team –

or work at your job. *Understand the people with whom you have the most in common* are those you're most likely to reach.

An ambassador's job most closely parallels the job of an interpreter.

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, or the other his communication is muddled. And **a Christian is an interpreter**.

It's your job to interpret heaven's truths into the language of earth.

And to do an effective job you have to be proficient in two languages. You've got to speak the language of heaven, but in an earthly dialect.

This is what we want to do at Calvary... *with the music, the teaching, the building, the children and youth ministries, with all our interactions...* we want to be contemporary and relevant to the people within our culture.

Sometimes people complain, **"We never sing hymns."** I understand your desire. Hymns are rich in theology. But here's the problem, you have to be a Christian for a while to learn the terms and concepts that fill the hymns.

In the beginning, hymns are just old-fashion songs with stuffy lyrics.

Here's my point... if we're all about making Christians comfortable, then fine, sing hymns. But if we're about

relating to lost people - and presenting truth in a relevant manner – we will want to use more contemporary music.

Again, an ambassador has to be fluent in both *the language of heaven*, and *the language of earth*. And yet, this is not as easy as it may seem...

Some Christians know very little of the language of heaven. They've lost touch with God's truth - God's perspective – and God's passion for people.

They've forgotten the **message of heaven**. They preach *condemnation* not *reconciliation*. Their message is a legalistic gospel, or social gospel, or a politicized gospel. Their emphasis is no longer Christ and His cross!

Others lose touch with the **motive of heaven**. There's no love, no grace in their voice. Their *words are right*, but their *tone is harsh*.

Still other Christians have lost touch with the **methods of heaven**. They *manipulate* rather than *minister* - *pressure* rather than *serve*.

It's easy to lose our connection with home! We get so busy *serving the Lord* we can get out of sync with the heart of the *Lord we serve*.

Once an 8 year-old big sis was witnessing to her little brother.

She barked at him, "**Now sit still because this is scary. When you die, do you want to go to heaven to be with Jesus, God, the apostles, the angels, your mom, dad, and**

big sister - or do you want to go to the lake of fire to be with the devil and the bank robbers?" The little boy thought it over for a few seconds - then responded, "*I think I'd rather stay right here!*"

Sometimes our approach can be a little heavy-handed. We lack love. Folks are moved by our message all right... *they get up and walk out.*

But while certain Christians forget the **language of heaven**, others forget how to speak the **language of earth**. They're so isolated in the Christian bubble they have trouble relating to the lost people around them.

Some of us are so use to living in a *Christian compound* we lose touch with the struggles of those who don't know Jesus and lack His resources.

As an ambassador I need to stay in touch with home, but I also have to relate to the trends and ideas of the land to which I'm dispatched.

So what if I stay squeaky clean - keep all my spiritual ducks in a row - if I don't reach folks, what have I accomplished? **As a Christian don't just be good – be good for something.** The goal is to reach the hearts of people.

The Gospel is to be shared - not just dissected for theological fun. God is pleading through us. It's up to us to get the message across.

Donald Gee was a godly, Pentecostal pastor who had a heart to reach people. He remembers a church meeting where a young Christian lady spoke to a group of rowdy, rough-neck thugs. She kept calling them, “Dear Ones...” when these men were anything but “Dear Ones...”

Gee writes, “She had lived in the sugary sweet atmosphere of Pentecostal prayer meetings, and lost contact with the world.”

In reference to Christians like this woman, Don Gee writes, “It’s possible to live such an other-worldly life, and be very spiritual... but not a scrap of good as an interpreter because you’ve gotten out of touch with men.”

It happens! When church becomes a spiritual bunker, and we close off to the rest of the world - we stop coming across real to the people around us. We seem plastic and artificial to outsiders. The church loses its voice.

In Titus 2:14 Paul calls us a “peculiar people”. The word, “peculiar”, is an Old King James word which means “different or special.”

Christians are to be different, but in an attractive way - *in how we treat each other - in our outlook on life - in our business practices - in our priorities and values - in the joy we possess.* The Bible doesn’t tell us to be “peculiar” in the sense of being *weird, odd, or eccentric...*

Yet some Christians use Titus 2:14 to justify being a cultural geek. They hold to traditions that alienate them from society’s mainstream. They say they’re being a “peculiar people” but in reality they’re just plain *weird!*

I grew up in a church that thought being “**holy**” and “**separate from the world**” involved how you *dressed, looked, talked* – physical distinctions.

So while all my friends grew their hair long, and wore bell bottom jeans, I walked around with a crew cut and peg-leg slacks.

I was *told I was being spiritual*, but I *looked weird* - and worse, I was so out-of-touch, I effectively alienated the folks I should've been reaching.

Jesus told His disciples, be **in the world, but not of it.**

We're **in** the world. Stylishly and culturally we should **fit in not stick out**. Don't be **of** the world. Morally and spiritually we should **stick out not fit in**.

As a kid, I also had the impression Christians distinguished themselves by the lingo they used. In the church I grew up in people always referred to each other as "**brother or sister so and so.**" Even as a child I can recall how strange and unnatural that sounded on the street... "*Hey, Brother Bob.*"

I believe in the brotherhood of believers, but at home I never called my *natural* brother - "**Brother Ken**" - it would've sounded *unnatural*.

Trust me my kids never walked around the house... "**Hi, Brother Nick.**" "**Well hello there, Brother Mack.**" As a Father, there's no satisfaction in my sons calling each other "*brother*", unless they love each other and treat

each other like brothers! And God feels the same way about his kids.

This brings up a bigger issue... Over time Christians develop their own vocabulary that only they can decipher? It's like our own language. Call it "*Christianase*." I like this article, **"They Speak with Other Tongues."**

*"Ever been saved?"* A wide-eyed fellow startled me as we waited for the bus. *"Sure,"* I replied, *"When I was nine I was swimming, and a strong undertow drug 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 said, *"What, in the world are you talking about?"* *"Convicted. Have you ever felt convicted?"*

*"Of course not,"* I replied. *"I've never been in trouble with the law."*

He looked at me square in the eye. *"I think you need to be delivered."*

*"Delivered? I'm just waiting to ride the bus home. I'll stick with that, thank you."* He looked at me as if I were speaking another language.

One day this fellow invited me to lunch. He seemed harmless, so I agreed. But he was definitely unusual, and difficult to understand.

That Wednesday I had lunch with Ed. He was a little late but explained that he was having a quiet time. *"Quiet time?"* I asked. *"What do you mean?"* *"Each day just before lunch I go into my prayer closet."*

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, he left me confused. This Ed is quite a unique fellow...

As we parted, 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 this was exactly what I needed. That night I gave 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. I started combing the local health clubs looking for an attractive woman.

When I met Denise, I knew she was the one. She soon became a believer. Ed told us we should get planted so we could grow together.

*"Sometimes it's hard to understand this guy,"* I confided to Denise. I wasn't sure what Ed meant when he told us we needed to be planted.

He replied, *"Committed! You both need to be committed now that you know Jesus."* *"Now wait a minute,"* I protested. *"Trusting Jesus is the most sane*



*thing I've ever done."* It was obvious Ed's patience was growing thin.

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

*"Where is He now?"* I pleaded. *"I was just getting to know Him, and now He's gone?"* *"No, no, Bob, God hasn't gone anywhere."* I was relieved.

*"It's just that so many people were plugging in, and stepping out, and moving in the gifts."* *"You mean people left the meeting? And what's this about presents?"* *"No, it's the gifts. The gifts were flowing,"* he said. *"How beautiful, folks 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? Is she OK?"* *"No, Bob, you don't understand."* (That was an understatement) *"Denise is just fine."*

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."*

Ed just shook his head. Sometimes we don't communicate very well.

It's been over two years since I was saved and delivered. I'm plugged in, planted, and committed to a good body. God is moving, and I've been stepping out in the gifts... But I've developed one new problem...

My old friends no longer understand me. I share about my redemption, that I've been washed as white as snow, that I follow the Lamb – yet they tune me out. I guess they're just convicted when they see that I'm on fire.”

We can alienate folks by the lingo we use. When I speak to unbelievers I try to avoid religious clichés' and buzz words. I want to be understood.

We can also alienate unbelievers by weird practices. I had a friend once who every time he saw me he insisted on hugging me. Hey, I don't mind hugs. Christians hugging each other is okay. In the proper environment, where the practice is understood, a hug is a meaningful expression.

But in a mid-town Atlanta restaurant where people are watching – two dudes hugging each other - isn't interpreted as Christian fellowship.

My point is, as Christians, we need to be natural, and respect the social mores that govern normal behavior. When we do stuff people interpret as weird it only drives them away from the message they need to receive.

An ambassador is a bridge-builder. *We represent God and we relate to people* - we stand between two parties and provide a bridge. In the OT, the priests were

"*bridge-builders*" - they stood between God and man. The Latin word "**priest**" means "*bridge-builder.*"

Hebrews 2:17 tells us Jesus was the ultimate priest - for he was both "**merciful and faithful**". This is what makes a good priest. He's merciful - He feels *our troubles*. But he's faithful - He won't betray *God's truth*.

Our tendency is to go the extreme. At times we're so merciful we give the impression *God condones sin*. At other times we're so faithful they assume *He condemns sinners*. Neither is true – God isn't a legalist or a liberal. He's a lover. God loves humanity and He also loves truth.

At Calvary we bring "**the changeless Gospel to a changing world.**"

God's truth never changes. We want to be *faithful*. The world is always changing, thus we need to be *flexible*. We convey God's *timeless truth* in a *timely manner*. As heaven's interpreter, are you fluent in both languages?

Be biblical and relatable - in touch with God and in touch with people.

But perhaps there's a more basic question to ask, "**Do we even care? Do we give a hoot about the hordes of people dying and going to hell?**"

Or are we content to sit comfortably in *our Christian biospheres* – we're happy in the Christian bubble insulated from needs and oblivious to pain – just enjoying each other? *How many lizards have you kissed lately?*

God loves the lizards you work with, live with, go to school with, play ball with - and He's given you the task of getting out and reviving some iguanas! This is the ministry of reconciliation – it's about *kiss'n lizards!*

As Paul puts it, *God is in Christ* dying to save mankind - and *God is in you* pleading with men to be saved. Be a minister of reconciliation.