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 2 Corinthians 5:11-21
 Ninth Message
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CONVICTION FOR THE NEW COVENANT

In the movie “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” Jimmy Stewart plays a young senator who, although naïve, attempts to fight political corruption in his state. Trying to block the passage of a bill, he stages a filibuster and holds the floor for about 24 hours in spite of great opposition. He speaks with great passion and conviction. The scenes and speeches are marvelous. The actor portrays the kind of conviction that the apostle Paul had for the new covenant. This is the kind of passion that we find in our text this morning.

As we come to the second half of 2 Corinthians 5, Paul changes topics once again. For the last three weeks the predominant subject has been how the new covenant works through suffering, how life comes through death. But now in 5:11, the apostle returns to describe his apostolic ministry, defending it against the counter-apostles who were seeking to discredit him in Corinth. In our text, Paul amplifies and fills out the understanding of the new covenant. In the process he interleaves some wonderful truths about the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.

I. Paul’s Passion for New Covenant Ministry

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. (2 Cor 5:11-13)

Paul was a man on fire, a man with a mission: “we persuade men,” he says. Some commentators think the word refers to his defending his ministry, but I believe “persuade” is connected to evangelism and sharing the new covenant. So convinced was he of the truth of the gospel and the power that it makes available, he burns with an inner passion to convince others of this truth. He is so personally convicted that he spends every waking moment telling others of the glory of the new covenant in Christ.

One thing that motivates Paul in his mission is that he knows the fear of the Lord. This refers back to verse 10, where the apostle says that we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The fear of the Lord is a common theme in the O.T., this idea of relating to God with awe and wonder. The certainty of a future judgment is a sobering reality. The stakes are high. The consequences are serious. The choices are essen-

tial. It is a matter of life and death. Doing business with God is of the utmost importance. Therefore Paul is motivated to tell people about Jesus. John Bunyan said: “No fears, no grace. Though there is not always grace where there is fear of hell, yet, to be sure, there is no grace where there is no fear of God.” Paul knew the fear of the Lord well because of his personal encounter with a holy God on the road to Damascus.

Paul’s confidence comes from his integrity. He lives an open and transparent life in the sight of God. Everything he does, thinks and says is made manifest or visible before God. He has no hidden motive or agenda. His ministry is accountable to God alone.

Paul now returns to his concern over the painful situation in Corinth, where he was under criticism and threat. He hopes the Corinthians will see clearly what God sees—that everything he is, does and says will be plainly revealed to them. He hopes that their consciences, their moral understanding, will be illuminated fully so that they will see the difference between him and the peddlers and super apostles who claimed his ministry was inferior.

Paul isn’t trying to commend himself, to be a self-proclaimed apostle, as his opponents charged. He said the same thing in 3:1. Rather, he is explaining himself so that they would have an occasion to boast in him, to take pride in him. The word “occasion” is a military term that means a base of operations from which to launch an attack. He wants the Corinthians to have an answer, to have firing power for those who take pride or boast in appearances, not heart, in externals rather than internals.

Then he adds this curious sentence: “if we are beside ourselves, it is for God, if we are of sound mind, it is for you.” The reference to “being beside ourselves” might refer to being perceived as crazy or mad due to zeal. But it may be connected to ecstatic gifts or religious phenomena. The super apostles took pride in their abilities and accomplishments, such as demonstrating ecstatic gifts like speaking in tongues. This was a way of claiming superiority over others and boasting in appearances.

If Paul is in his right mind, then it is for the Corinthians and others as he seeks to persuade men and women to turn to the Lord. In public, Paul acts with self-control; this is what commends him. Any sort of religious phenomenon that is of an outward nature is reserved for the private realm; it’s a matter between himself and God. Basically, Paul will not rely on

any outward show or demonstrations of power to validate his ministry. He relies on truth, sincerity, integrity and the Spirit of God. What he does is either for God or others, not himself, in contrast to his opponents, who are only seeking personal gain through whatever means possible, even if that involves adulterating the word of God.

The same confusion that existed in Corinth is often seen today in the church. Many spiritual leaders claim superiority and effectiveness through outward appearances. Too many people are in the business of religious consumerism for their own personal gain. The church doesn't need to win political battles or build bigger, more elaborate buildings. We simply need passion for the gospel, a conviction for the truth of the new covenant ministry that changes the heart.

Paul was an amazing man. He faced many obstacles. He might have easily given up the fight or dropped out of the race. He was persecuted, misunderstood and discredited. He might have thought the new covenant was a lost cause. But he never quit. He believed in a cause worth dying for. He had a deep conviction to persuade men and women to turn to Christ and embrace the new covenant. Do we have the same conviction and passion?

One of the most edifying and encouraging things we can do is read the biographies of saints down through the ages who had passion and conviction. I think of William Wilberforce, who was passionate to bring an end to slavery in England and never quit in the face of obstacles. Hudson Taylor relied solely on the power of prayer for the provision of his needs. In China he lost his wife and children; when he returned to England he became paralyzed. Yet he never lost his passion for the gospel, for leading people to Christ. These stories and so many others can inspire us and help us to be disciples filled with compassion and conviction.

II. The Love of Christ

What was the source of the apostle's passion and conviction to persuade men? We have already mentioned knowing the fear of the Lord. Our text goes on to list three more major reasons why Paul was a man on a mission. Firstly, the love of Christ.

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (5:14-14)

Paul says that the love of Christ, i.e., Christ's love for him, is the source of his passion. This is what controls him, compels him and urges him on in his pursuit of the new covenant ministry and living selflessly for others. "Control" implies that which confines or restricts—to "hold in custody." Christ's sacrificial love restrains Paul from self-seeking. Basically, the apostle is saying that the evidence or demonstration of love was the cross, and the result of this love is death to self-cen-

tered living and a resurrected life to live for others. Christ is both Judge and Savior.

Paul's words are brief but powerful: "One died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all." Notice the contrast between "one" and "all." The "one" in the first phrase and the "He" in the third phrase refer to Christ. The "one" implies that Christ was unique. There was only "one" who could die for all; there needed to be only "one" because Jesus was the right one. The "all" does not mean that the cross is effective for all, but rather that it has the potential for all. The cross affects all who are "in Christ." (Later, Paul uses the word "world.") The point is that Jesus didn't die just for Israel. He died for all, i.e., the world, Jews and Gentiles, all nations.

In the phrase, "therefore all died," we hear an echo of Romans 5:12. As a result of the sin of Adam, all have sinned and therefore all have died. But the cross has the potential to reverse the curse of Adam. In Christ, we die to death as the penalty of sin. In the resurrection, we are made alive. What Paul means is that we die to living for ourselves. The reason that Jesus died was so that we no longer live for ourselves. The cross sets us free to live for Christ and for others. "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you." If someone laid down his life for you and loved you in a sacrificial way, how would you feel? You would do anything for that person, wouldn't you? That is the way Paul feels about Christ, because Christ laid down his life for him.

Christians are to serve and minister to others, but the source of our passion for serving cannot be external. If we are motivated by guilt or duty, our ability to live for God and others cannot be sustained. If we say, "I should do more to be a good Christian," we will serve selfishly, in our own strength. But if we are motivated by the cross, by the love of Christ, then the fire of our conviction will not go out. We will maintain our passion for others even in the midst of great opposition.

What controls you? What passions drive you? What convictions determine the course of your life? The key to living selflessly is to never stop looking at the cross, to become overwhelmed and saturated with the love of Christ. We continue to gaze on the one who died for all. Until we know the love of Christ deep down in our gut we will not be motivated to live for him. But the person whose passion for life is fueled by the cross will live for God.

III. A New Creation

A second reason why Paul is a man on fire is because the new covenant means a new creation.

Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (5:16-17)

The cross divides history from “no longer” to “from now on.” There are old things and new things. There is the old covenant and the new covenant. There is the old creation that is temporal and the new creation that is eternal. The cross ends one way of life and begins a new way. Life is never the same. Isaiah’s words come true in the cross:

**“Do not call to mind the former things,
Or ponder things of the past.
Behold, I will do something new...” (43:18-19)**

The old covenant is a religion of the flesh, a way of relating to God through our own efforts. Law is a way that we seek to control the flesh that is hostile to God. The flesh is part of the old creation, that which is corruptible and passing away. The peddlers in Corinth wanted to maintain the old covenant. They even wanted a fleshly Jesus, not a resurrected Jesus. They wanted to keep the law. They wanted to show their godly living through appearance.

Paul says that all of that is “no longer,” because the resurrection changed everything. This change is so dramatic that Paul doesn’t even “know Christ according to the flesh.” Christ was raised from the dead and appeared in a resurrected body that was physical but not corruptible. The new covenant is a religion of the Spirit, not the flesh. If anyone is in Christ, he is a brand new creature. We don’t yet have our resurrected bodies, but we will. Once we are in Christ, however, we enter into the new creation through the Spirit. The new covenant means the new creation has begun and will be consummated some time in the future when Christ returns. The new creation is “already, but not yet.” We are now living in the age to come. We no longer see ourselves or anyone else through the lens of the old creation.

I was reminded of this truth recently. A couple of weeks ago, I got an e-mail from someone asking me if I was the John Hanneman who was a member of Beta Theta Pi at the University of Nebraska in 1972. I didn’t recognize the name of the sender, but I responded, saying that indeed I was that person. I expected to hear an explanation from him, but none came. Finally, I wrote and asked him for more information as to why he contacted me, and he replied. It turns out he was a freshman in my fraternity when I was a senior, and I spent time helping him with math. He was surprised to learn that I had become a pastor because he knew me before I was a Christian. He even remembered my nickname—one that no one here has ever heard. I was reminded that my life now is new compared to the former things. There was the John Hanneman who was according to the flesh, the old creation, dead in sin. But now there is the John Hanneman who is according to the Spirit, the new creation, alive in Christ. If you are in Christ, then this is true of you.

The implications of this truth are staggering. The former things are “no longer”: law as a means of relating to God, Israel alone being the people of God, taking pride in external appearance, living selfishly for ourselves. The “from now on”

is relating to God through the finished work of the cross, the people of God being those in Christ from all nations, experiencing life in the Spirit, living in the new creation, growing in the inner man, living selflessly for Christ and others, seeing ourselves and others in Christ as new creatures.

IV. The Ministry of Reconciliation

The third major reason why Paul is a man of conviction is because the new covenant is the ministry of reconciliation.

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (5:18-21)

“All things are from God.” This is referring to what Paul has just said about the death and resurrection of Christ ending the old and beginning the new. And all of these things are possible through the ministry of reconciliation. Obviously, reconcile/reconciliation is the key word in the text, occurring five times. You can see how verse 19 basically repeats what is said in verse 18 for emphasis. The new covenant is the ministry of reconciliation.

“Reconciliation” comes from a word meaning “to make otherwise, to alter, to give or take in exchange.” Webster’s defines the word as meaning to make friendly again or settle. The implication is that there exists a hostile relationship or non-relationship. Reconciliation is the process of changing a relationship that is polarized, severed or opposed to one that is harmonious and friendly; whatever was creating the separation or tension is removed or settled. We use this word often to refer to human relationships such as marriage or friendships.

The parties involved in our text are God and man, though man was in need of reconciliation with God, not the other way around. The alienation of man from God was caused by sin, by mankind disregarding God’s design for living, by wanting to be his own god and run his own life. God was the aggrieved party, yet it is God who is the author, initiator and provider of the reconciliation.

The means of reconciliation took place on the cross whereby the one who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. God took the payment required for our sin and placed it on his Son who was sinless. The fact that Jesus knew no sin made his sacrifice efficacious. As a result of this exchange, sin is not taken into account. The debt we accrued in our account is removed and transferred into Christ’s account. It is not just erased like a banking error, but rather is paid by Christ. What is credited to our account is the righteousness of God. Our sin is exchanged for God’s righteousness. We are both the demonstration of God

being righteous to his character and promise to bring salvation to mankind, and the recipients of a justified status before God. The new covenant is the ministry of righteousness. Reconciliation reverses condemnation and grants forgiveness. We have peace with God and access to him. The cause of separation has been eliminated. We note that the potential for reconciliation applies to the world—again, meaning all nations. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. God did it all.

Imagine you have an overdrawn account at a bank and are in a deficit situation. The bank is continually sending you statements and warnings about your balance. They call you on the phone and leave messages, but you are helpless to change it. In fact, it just keeps getting worse. Then one day the bank president calls you and asks if you want to exchange your account that has a negative balance with his son's account. He'll take yours and you take his. His account is unlimited. You can draw on it at any time; the money never runs out. When you ask if there is any catch or requirements, he tells you that nothing is demanded of you.

So you accept. Suddenly you find yourself in great favor with the bank president. You hang out at the bank all the time. Every day you get a new handful of money to use in helping others. Later, you learn that it was the bank president himself who bailed you out. Someone had to pay, and he took it on himself. How could you turn down such a deal? How could anyone turn down what God offers to us in Christ?

James Denney writes in his classic, *The Death of Christ*: “‘Reconciliation’ in the New Testament sense is not something which we accomplish when we lay aside our enmity to God; it is something which God accomplished when in the death of Christ he put away everything that on his side meant estrangement . . .”¹

God's act of reconciling is the first action that Paul mentions in verses 18-21. The second is that God gave to the apostle the ministry of reconciliation, the word of reconciliation. He was given an assignment, and a title, “ambassador of Christ.” An ambassador acts in the authority of the one who sends him. He represents the king in a foreign location. To reject the ambassador is to reject the one who sent him. Paul served the King of the new creation, Jesus Christ. His message from the King was, “be reconciled to God,” receive reconciliation as a gift from God. This was the message God himself gave to Paul and the message that the apostle now preaches to the Corinthians and to others. This is what Paul persuades men and women to do. With a sense of urgency he begs and pleads for people to hear the voice of God coming through his mouth.

Now we do not have the authority of the apostle Paul as ambassadors of Christ. But we share in the same ministry, persuading men and women to be reconciled to God. As ambassadors we live in a foreign country. We aren't always comfortable, we would rather be back home with family and friends, but the message we have for people is fantastic: Be reconciled with God and become a new creature in Christ.

Seeing ourselves as ambassadors of Christ changes the way we live. As a young Christian, I moved to California and began my engineering career. At first no one knew that I was a believer. I kept it secret. But eventually I went public—and that changed everything. Each day I went to work, knowing that I represented Christ.

The new covenant is centered in the cross, and it is the cross that causes such great opposition to the gospel. But it is the cross that reveals the love of Christ that results in a new creation, that secures reconciliation with God and gives us a new purpose for living.

We live in the “from now on,” no longer living for ourselves but for the One who died and rose again on our behalf. We are a new creation in Christ and we live in the age to come. The debt for all of our sin and failure has been paid. We are the forgiven and redeemed people of God. And we have a new assignment: to be ambassadors for Christ. If we keep our eyes on the cross, then we, like Paul, will be people of conviction and passion.

¹ Quoted by Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 308.