

THE GREAT EXCHANGE

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2 - Series: Ministers of a New Covenant
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 3/8/19, Matt Heerema

Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 5. And while you're doing that, I have a question for you all. Let's start this morning with an unusual question. Maybe don't answer out loud, but in your head:

What does it mean to be a Christian? How often have you stopped and given that any thought? Think about this for a minute: ask yourself, do you consider yourself to be a Christian? Think on that for a second here. Actually answer the question. Yes. No. "You know I'm not sure now that I think about it..."

If you consider yourself to be a Christian. What do you mean? What does it mean that you are a Christian? If you aren't one, or maybe if you aren't sure, ask yourself what you think it means to be a Christian.

As I read books and articles and listen to the news and other social commentary I think there is a lot of confusion about this question. I hear a variety of answers given. Sometimes it is in the range of "someone who believes in God" to which I ask, which one? Lots of different religions and non-religions believe in a god. Be more specific. "Okay, someone who believes in Jesus." But what does that mean? And who, specifically was Jesus? One of the most popular answers to the question in our day, I think, is that there is no one right answer. Christianity is what you feel it is.

Maybe you have in mind someone who is generally a good and decent kind of person. Someone who tries to live like Jesus did, which was in a way that was kind and helpful to many people. Or something like that.

Maybe some of you in here are graciously accompanying your Christian friend or significant other, or parent, but you yourself are not a Christian. And a Christian is a well-meaning but deluded person who believes in this fairytale about the way the world was created and a tall tale about a man named Jesus as recorded in this book of fiction called the Bible.

What does it mean to be a Christian?

I think there is only one right answer to the question, I think most people outside the church, and even many inside it don't understand it.

Possibly some of you here this morning don't understand the answer, (some of you realize this, and some of you don't.) And I think our passage today gets right to the heart of this question.

Read with me.

2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2 (ESV)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

18 All this is from God, who **through Christ** reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, **in Christ** God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that **in him** we might become the righteousness of God.

6:1 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day salvation.

Let's dig in here. Verse 17 says that When you become a Christian, when you are finally "in Christ", your old way of looking at the world changes fundamentally. We realize we have become something other than what we were previously. Our motivations change. Our desires change. We are an entirely new creation, and the old thing that we were, is gone.

There is a whole sermon here, but I want to actually pause on verse 18, which is at the heart of the passage today. All that new creation, the gift of grace, Christ's death on the cross in our place, all this is from God. Verse 18 says that God is up to two things here, these things are inextricably related, but we are going to take them one at a time. First, God is reconciling us to himself, and second what flows from that is that he is giving us a ministry, a work to do, the ministry of reconciliation. He is saving us for a purpose. We're going to focus on the first part this week, and the second part next week.

Let's take look at what it means that God has reconciled us to himself.

THE GREAT EXCHANGE

In verses 18 and 19 Paul repeats these two things: reconciling us to himself, and giving us a ministry of reconciliation. Let's look at how Paul talks about this reconciliation. See verses 19 and 21. These verses spell out an important part of a larger thought that protestant theologians have called "The Great Exchange." This idea of "exchange" comes from this word "reconciliation". It is an accounting term. It has to do with the clearing of debt.

Look at verses 19 and 21, what is God doing for us: "Not counting their trespasses against them." And making "him to be sin who knew no sin".

- I think of two sides of an accounting ledger if any of you have any accounting experience. Or maybe similarly two sides of a scale, or two sides of a math equation.
- On our side, we have broken God's law, we have been unfaithful and unbelieving, in a word, we have trespasses, or sin.
- On Jesus's side: he is righteous. He knew no sin.
- See how the "math" works in the passage here. He does not "count" (there's that accounting or math term again) our trespasses against us. Instead, verse 21 says, that God places that sin on Christ. Because God wants to reconcile with us, and will not simply dismiss sin, it must be paid for, and so he places it on Christ for us. What mercy and grace! What a beautiful savior Christ is!

- But it does not end there. Verse 21 says “so that” we might become the righteousness of God.
- The historic understanding goes like this, in the great exchange, Christ takes our sin, and gives us his Righteousness, God’s righteousness.
- So not only are we cleared of our sin, our debt forgiven, but we actually get God’s righteousness as a gift as well!
- Our balance is not simply at zero, and then we have to do things to earn God’s favor: we have a full bank account! God has given us abundant grace and mercy, so much that it is all we could ever need!
- What a relief! We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, Ephesians 1 says. What joy!

RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM CHRIST AND IN CHRIST

There is a key word that keeps showing up in our passage today and in many of these supporting verses: and that is this word *in* Philippians says clearly that we have a righteousness *from* God. Romans says clearly that the righteousness is *counted* to those who believe. (There’s that accounting term yet again.) And our passage along with several others here say that we are righteous *in* him.

This is key, and it changes our illustration up slightly and in an important way. We are righteous *in him*. So it’s not simply that Christ takes our sin and we get his righteousness. We have righteousness *from him* but it is not then ours to take and walk away with. Christ takes us, and we get all of him.

And it is no abstract sin, and no abstract righteousness. Christ’s righteousness is because he obeyed all of God’s law, and made atonement for the sins of the world through his death on the cross. Our sin is that we have all disobeyed God’s law and have all lived in unbelief.

When we are in Christ through faith in his perfect obedience, and his work on the cross in atoning for our sin, that faith is credited to us as righteousness. *In him* we are righteous.

Pastor Dave sent me a quote from John Calvin along this line. Calvin put it this way:

“We observe here that Paul situates our righteousness not in ourselves but in Christ, and that righteousness is ours for no other reason than that we share in Christ, for in possessing him we possess along with him, all his riches.” John Calvin, Institutes, 1541 edition.

Now, you might be thinking, “how did he get all of that out of this verse?”

I’ll admit that this concept stretches the plain meaning of verse 21 when it is all by itself, so it is important to see that Paul is alluding to something he’s already taught the Corinthians, and something he makes very plain in other passages. Some examples:

1 Corinthians 1:30 (ESV)

“And [from God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption...”

Philippians 3:9 (ESV)

“...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

Romans 4:5 (ESV)

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

Romans 5:19 (ESV)

“For as by [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by [Jesus’s] obedience the many will be made righteous.”

Ephesians 2:4-6 (ESV)

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”

CLOTHED IN CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

The prophet Isaiah, looking forward to the day when God's promise to rescue his people would finally come true, sees this coming, and writes this about that day:

Isaiah 61:10 (ESV)

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

This gives us the perfect illustration of what we get in this great exchange. Beautiful, new, unusual clothes!

I have here some photos of various cultures traditional wedding dresses. It makes me think our culture is a little boring when it comes to these things! Isaiah is prophesying the day when we will put on Christ like a garment. We will be "in him", and so will be covered with salvation and righteousness.

Just like a bride and her groom put on garments and become beautiful and distinct on their wedding day: a Christian has been clothed in Christ and his righteousness. We become beautiful, new, and distinct.

And to wrap up today's passage, chapter 6:1-2, Paul goes back to that prophecy of Isaiah, when he looks forward to "a favorable time", and a "day of salvation", and Paul says "that day is here!"

We're now in that time period that Isaiah looked forward to! Christ, the suffering servant, has come! Now is the time to respond!

So this is what a Christian is. One who has been reconciled to God by believing not just in some notion about Jesus, but believing that Jesus has taken all their sin, and has given them abundant grace and mercy and righteousness! And this realization, that the great exchange has happened, now fills us with such joy that we go and spread the news to everyone we come into contact with!

APPLICATION: THE RESULT OF THE EXCHANGE

What does Paul say is the result of this exchange? Look back up at verse 15. And we'll find our application for day. "He died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

So let's ask again: What does it mean to be a Christian?

A Christian:

- Has been reconciled to God. Their sin no longer counting against them, and having been given the righteousness of God.
- Realizing this fills us with such joy that we no longer live for ourselves, but we live for Jesus. We follow him, we obey him, we want to do what he wants us to do!
- And so we become messengers of reconciliation, appealing to those we come into contact with to be reconciled to God. Because this is the ministry he has given us!
- This is what was meant all the way back in Genesis 12, God's promise to Abraham that he will be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the nations. God's people spread the message that God has made a way for us to be reconciled with him. He has made a way for forgiveness and restored relationship with him.
- This is what we've been made for, and this is what we've been remade for.

Reflect for a bit. What are you communicating your coworkers, classmates, neighbors, friends, and relatives about what you think is the most important thing in the world? Think of the way you spend your time, think of the conversations you have. Who are what would they say you are an ambassador for? Pray about this for a minute.

As you reflect you might start feeling your need for God's grace in this area. Good news, it is available to you! God's mercy and grace extends to us in our failures and sin. He looks at you and says "I will not count your trespasses against you." "I have made Jesus to be that sin for you, so that you become my righteousness. Believe in Jesus's work for you, and be considered righteous. And get up, I have work for you, a ministry, the ministry of reconciliation."

And hear Paul say:

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (ESV)

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Let's pray.