

THE WORD FOR THIS HOUR

by Ray C. Stedman

The Apostle Paul has been painting a picture for us in Chapter 5 of Second Corinthians. Line upon line, and stroke upon stroke, he has been drawing a portrait of a Christian living in the midst of a dying world. We have been learning what a Christian ought to be like in a world like ours today, which is comparable to the world of the 1st century, filled with despair, hopelessness, corruption, deceit and darkness.

As we have seen through this chapter, a Christian is to be someone in whose eyes there is a great light of hope as he looks to the future. He is to know that there is a "weight of glory" awaiting him that his present trials and difficulties are preparing him for, and "preparing for us," as Paul puts it. He is to know that this "light affliction ... is but for a moment [but is] working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}.

So a Christian living today ought to have a light in his eye as he looks toward the future; and he ought to have a flame in his heart, a passion born of two tremendous motivating forces that we have already seen in this passage:

First, he should have a great respect for the fact that he cannot fool God; he cannot hide anything from him. He is to have an awareness that one day all the hidden motives, all the inner secrets of his heart will be unveiled and manifested at the judgment seat of Christ, when we will see our life exactly as it was, as God saw it. "Then shall we know even as also we are known." The effect of that upon the apostle was to continually motivate him to guard what he was doing, to see that it was right, and to be filled with the right attitudes and right actions. "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men," {2 Cor 5:11a RSV} he says.

A little later on in the same passage we have the second motive. Paul says, "The love of Christ controls us," {2 Cor 5:14 RSV}. It constrains us; it drives us out. The awareness that Christ loves him, has forgiven him and dwells in him and cherishes him, always supports and sustains him in whatever he is going through. He is never alone. That is a tremendous power to motivate the apostle, as it ought to be with us.

The third thing Paul has pictured here is the change of viewpoint that comes to a Christian. He says, "We do not look at people anymore from 'a human point of view.' We don't judge them by outward standards; we don't value them because they are wealthy or influential or famous. We see everyone as made in the image of God but having lost the likeness of God. Yet they are able to be restored to that relationship," {2 Cor 5:16 RSV}. Any life, no matter how dissolute, wasted, empty or lonely, can, by the touch of the divine life, be restored to usefulness, joy, peace and power, can be part of a new creation that God is working out.

We are to live like that. We are to have that in our thoughts every day. We are to be renewed in our minds by the Spirit of God so that we always look at life that way because that is the way it really is.

Having said all that, the apostle goes on to describe the ministry that God has given us. These words are among some of the most remarkable in the Scriptures. They are a description of the greatest, the most powerful, the most effective work going on in the world today. I do not hesitate to say that, yet this is a description of your ministry and mine, what Paul calls, "the ministry of reconciliation."

Listen to these words from Second Corinthians, Chapter 5, Verses 18-20:

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, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. {cf, 2 Cor 5:18-20 RSV}

What a tremendous ministry that is! How fitting it is that we should be considering it during this Christmas season when we are celebrating again that initial breakthrough of our Lord into time and space, coming to reconcile sinners unto himself.

We need to understand this "ministry of reconciliation" very carefully, because this is our ministry.

This is what God has called each one of us who knows Jesus Christ to do. That is why he has left us here in the world. This is not merely Paul's ministry, or an apostle's, or even a pastor's ministry. It is *our* ministry.

Notice how Paul uses the words "we" and "us" all through this passage. He shared it with those Christians of that early day in Corinth, and he shares it with us today. This is what God has given us to do.

There are five things in this passage I would like to call our attention to:

Notice, first, that this ministry comes to us from God himself; it originates with him:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; {2 Cor 5:18 RSV}

Now if this ministry comes from God, that means that you and I are responsible to him to do this, not to anybody else. When Paul went around the Roman world he did not have to check in with the twelve apostles in Jerusalem to get permission to go into another country. They did not give him his commission; God did. He did not send them monthly reports on how he was doing. He had no board or authority over him, and neither do we in this regard.

As I travel around the country, in some churches I find that the pastor thinks it is his responsibility to control everything that goes on, all the ministry of the people, if they have any at all, etc. They have to get permission from him or from the board of the church to have a meeting in their home. Now it is certainly true that the knowledge of any ministry going on in a home ought to be shared with the staff of a church. They ought to be allowed to help, to give counsel, but no one is responsible for that ministry except God himself.

You do not have to get permission from the pastors or the elders here at PBC to have a ministry in your home, to reach out to your neighborhood. That is your responsibility unto God. He gave you the home; he put you in the neighborhood; he asked you to reach out to those around you. He has given you the "ministry of reconciliation" so you do it as unto him.

That is the whole point of this. It begins with God. He sent us; he commissioned us as he commissioned Paul. Paul makes clear that God reconciles us first, so that we do not go with something that we do not know anything about. We go with what we ourselves experienced. That helps a lot. You are the world's greatest authority on what has happened to you. Nobody can tell you differently. When you go with the word about how God has reconciled you, and healed the breach, how he crossed the gap between you and him, and you find yourself now enfolded in his divine arms, supported by his divine grace, and forgiven by his divine love, you can share that with someone else. That is the "message of reconciliation."

The second thing to notice is in Verse 19. This is a powerful ministry which reconciles the world:

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. {cf, 2 Cor 5:19}

This is the message, above all else, the world needs to know. The problem with people everywhere is they have no security, no sense of acceptance, no sense of worth. The universal problem of our day is one of poor self-image. Everybody has a poor self-image. Even the blustering people who try to make out that they are self-sufficient have one. Deep inside they know that is a cover-up; they know they do not really feel that way. They are scared and frustrated oftentimes. They have to pretend that they were able to handle everything, but at the end of the day they know they did not.

The reason people feel that way is because they feel an alienation, an estrangement, from God. They live in a universe they obviously know does not belong to them. They did not make it; they do not run it. This whole world was running long before you and I showed up on it. People know that, therefore, they feel uneasy. Estrangement and alienation is the supreme problem of our day. Any psychiatrist or psychologist will tell you that.

Well, that is what this message is addressed to. We are lost, we are alienated, we are cut off from the God who runs everything. This is a message, therefore, that strikes home to human hearts everywhere. It does not make any difference what color your skin is, what is your background, or how you grew up. You can say this to a savage in the jungle; you can say it to a business man in the trade marts of San Francisco or Wall Street; you can say it to a craftsman, a plumber, a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever. They all need this universal word sent to the world.

Notice there are two ways by which it comes:

First, the characteristic of this message, if it is really the right message from God, will be that it does not come talking about the judgment of God over sin. When I graduated from seminary some 30 years ago, I came out here with the idea that my job as a preacher was to make men aware of their sin, and to tell them of the judgment of God upon evil. I was brought up in a theological generation which was taught that you have to scare people before they will become Christians -- to make them believe they are going to hell so that, when they see the flames burning beneath them, when they feel the singeing of their hair, then they will repent of their evil.

Then I began to learn from verses like this. I saw, from how the apostles, and how the Lord himself, approached it that *that* is not the message. (That is ultimately what you may have to say to some people who refuse this message of grace, but that is not where you start.) This is a message where God is saying, "We do not need to talk about judgment. I've taken care of that." As Paul puts it here, "God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

I learned after a few years that all I need to do is go to people, taking for granted that they are hurting inside from their sins, just as I was hurting from my sins, and talk about a God who understood that, who wanted to relieve them from that hurt, and had done something about it. Therefore, he was not ready to throw me into hell; he was opening his arms, and inviting me to come to a loving Father and be restored. That is the message. That is the word we go with.

Somebody said to me after the first service this morning that he felt the same way I did back then as to what the message of the gospel was. He said it was like that song, *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*, which we hear so much at this time of year:

"He knows when you are sleeping,
He knows when you're awake,
He sees when you are good or bad,
So be good for goodness sake."

No, that is not the way God looks at us. This message is that he sees our hurt, our loneliness, our emptiness, our struggles and hungers to be something different than we are. He sees our sense of frustration that we cannot seem to get it all together. He comes with a word of release that says, "I know that. I know you can't make it and I've done something about it. I've taken care of the whole problem of sin. Now let's just talk about relationship and appeal to people to come."

Do not read this as though it means God is not concerned about human evil. Some people do read it that way. They think this means that God is so loving he does not care whether they sin or not. He will just forget it all and you can come. But no, that is never the word of the gospel. God takes sin very seriously. Anybody who assumes that the "good news" is that God does not care about sin has misread the Scriptures entirely. God cares very, very much about sin. He sees it as a very hurtful thing. The only thing is that what this passage says, and goes on to say very clearly (in Verse 21), is that God has done something at tremendous cost to

remove that problem of sin. He cared so much about it he was willing to pay that cost.

The second way by which this works is that God sends people to be reconcilers. He sends you and me to be peacemakers; he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. That is why God put you in the neighborhood where you live, in order that you might be an island of light reaching out with the message of reconciliation.

It helps to know you do not have to go to your neighbors and friends, and tell them that all they are doing is wrong. Most of them are living gross lives which offend us. We cannot help but feel that, but some of the things we are doing offend them too. We have to face that reality. We go to them and talk about the fact that we are no different. Our inner lives and our thought lives are often as gross as anything they are doing. But we are dealing with a God who has done something about that, who understands that problem and who will deal with us in love and grace and forgiveness. That is a different message entirely. It is with that healing word that God sends us out to all those around us. That is what we are here for, that we may be messengers of reconciliation.

So Paul goes on to point out, in Verse 20, the third thing about this: This message requires a voluntary acceptance. It is not true that everybody is automatically saved. Some people today teach that God in Christ paid the debt of sin and, therefore, everybody is saved; they do not know it, but they will find out when they die because all of a sudden they will wake up in glory. They will say, "We don't deserve to be here," and God will say, "Well, surprise! Christ paid for your sins and that is why you are here; everybody makes it."

No, that is not true. Look at what Verse 20 says:

**So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you
... {2 Cor 5:20a RSV}**

Actually the word "you" should not be there. Paul is not addressing these Corinthians; they were already reconciled. He is telling them what he preaches to others.

We beseech on behalf of Christ, he reconciled to God. {2 Cor 5:20b RSV}

There would be no reason for that kind of a pleading entreaty on God's part if it were true that everybody is automatically saved by the death of Christ. There is no universal salvation. It is as you receive this word and accept it for yourself, as you come into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus so that the benefit of his death is applied to you that you are saved; it is when your neighbors and friends receive it. That is why God sends us as ambassadors.

You know how ambassadors and embassies are very much in the news. In the last five years three American ambassadors have been brutally murdered in the course of their duties. We are struggling today as a nation over the fact that our Embassy in Tehran was besieged and captured along with some 50 hostages. This has precipitated perhaps the greatest world crisis since the Cuban missile crisis.

Why do we send ambassadors? Well, because countries do not always relate to each other very well. Things need to be explained, need to be approached with diplomacy and caution and carefulness. That is what an ambassador is to do. He is to be a representative of a government, handling himself with such care and confidence that the message that his government seeks to convey is given in the most painless and least offensive way possible. Now that is dangerous. You can get yourself killed or taken captive as an ambassador in this world today.

Paul saw himself as that kind of a person, as an ambassador for Christ, pleading in the name of Christ, as though Christ himself was there pleading with men to become reconciled to God, to accept and relate to this forgiveness that God was offering. "We beseech," he says, "we plead with men. We don't command them to be saved. We don't condemn them. We plead with them to turn and respond to a God of love."

There is no more beautiful picture in the Bible than this one Paul draws of God in his almighty power, the God

who can do all things, who can carry out his will any time he chooses to, nevertheless, coming and pleading with guilty men and women to turn and be forgiven. Nothing is more descriptive of this than those words of Jesus as he wept over the city of Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}.

I find that often the case with us is that we face a possibility of rejection and we are afraid of that. Yet if we understand the message with which we come, it would make it so much easier. Years ago when I was in Dallas Seminary, I remember Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the great founder of the Seminary, illustrating in class one day this message of reconciliation in a way that I have never forgotten.

He said that in the beginning when God created man in the Garden it was like this -- and he put his hands together, palms inward, man and God face to face, in perfect fellowship with one another. Then came the Fall; man turned his back on God. Dr. Chafer turned his hand around so that it was clear that man had turned away from God. That is what Isaiah says, isn't it? "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way," {Isa 53:6a KJV}. So because God is a God of justice, his justice required that he respond. He turned his back on man and man has been alienated from him ever since.

But in the work of the cross (and, of course, this was available to man before Christ appeared because the cross is an eternal event) God is reconciled to man. He turns back so that his face is toward man again, and now the message goes out to all men everywhere, "You turn around now and 'be reconciled to God'." When that happens peace is restored. This is the "message of reconciliation." We are to go to men everywhere and say, "Be reconciled unto God."

The fourth thing about this is that the result is that it achieves the "righteousness of God," the very thing that men want to be. Men want to be right with God. Have you ever noticed how sensitive we are about whether people think we are right or not? Let somebody accuse you and what do you start doing? You start justifying yourself, don't you? And justifying is the word for righteousness in the Bible. You start saying, "Well, I did it because of this," or, "Well, this is what I had in mind. I think I was right in doing that." We long to be right. Everybody does.

Well, this is the great message we have. There is a way to be right with God, and it is set forth for us here in Verse 21:

For our sake he made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. {2 Cor 5:21 RSV}

That is one of the most magnificent verses in the whole Bible. It is describing, of course, that mysterious transaction that took place upon the cross when Jesus, the sinless One, the One whose whole life was lived righteously, without failure, without fault, without evil, who never did wrong, was made to suffer for all the sins of you and me and the whole world. I do not understand it. "He took our place," it says, and God agreed to it. It was something they planned between them. God sent his Son into the world to do that very thing and made him, on the cross, to be sin for us.

What that meant to him, none of us can really imagine. Years ago, when I was a new Christian, I remember a song that was often sung in churches in those days, based upon the parable of the one lost sheep that the shepherd went out to find. One verse in particular has stuck in my mind ever since:

None of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night
Which the Lord went through,
Ere he found his sheep that was lost.

No, we will never understand it. We will never know how much agony of heart and mind and spirit pressed upon him, how the dark horrors of hell came upon his soul there on the cross.

We learn that God does not take sin lightly, that something has to be done to settle the problem of our evil. But it has been done. That is the point. God has settled the problem of all our sins, every one of them, by placing them upon his Son. He has paid the full penalty that justice demands so that when we come to God he is not compromised by being good to us; his justice has been satisfied. His love, therefore, is free and released to be manifest to us. He accepts us in love and gives us, according to this verse, the righteousness of Christ himself. I do not understand that either, but I believe it. What a marvelous sense of acceptance and forgiveness and being loved that gives to me.

Now do not read that wrongly. It says, "So that in him we might become the righteousness of God." I know a lot of Christians who read that as though it means, "That gives me a chance to start trying to behave. If I work hard all my Christian life to be a good person, then I finally become 'the righteousness of God'".

No, he does not say that at all. It is not something that you are going to become, according to the way you behave. It is something you are **right now**. You start your Christian life on that basis. You already have, instantly, when you believe in Jesus, the righteousness of Christ! You are righteous, you are forgiven, you are restored. That is the way God deals with us.

Because we have that righteousness already, we do not have to earn it. It is our delight then to begin to behave like it, and to start being righteous -- because we are righteous. I hope you understand that, because that is the "good news." It is no "good news" to come to somebody and say, "Christ forgave all your sins up to now, but from now on you'd better watch it. You are going to have to pay for all those." No, no, that is not the gospel. The "good news" is they are all forgiven, all your life long, including those you have not even done yet.

God knows your struggle. He has dealt with that. He is never going to take it back and he is never going to act in any different way toward you. Because that problem is settled, he can come right in alongside of you and help you learn how to act righteously on that basis. And he will -- lifting you up, forgiving you, restoring you, strengthening you and staying right with you until life finally ends.

So this is the glory of it. We learn here how a God of justice can come to a loveless, hard, self-righteous, selfish, hurting, and hurtful sinner like you and me, and not count his trespasses against him. That is the way he does it, because, "he who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

The final word in this section (ignore that misleading chapter division there) is addressed to the believers in Corinth:

**Working together with him then [this is a message now from God through Paul], we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,
"At the acceptable time I have listened to you,
and helped you on the day of salvation."
Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. {2 Cor 6:1-2
RSV }**

Do not accept the grace of God in vain, Paul says.

What does he mean? Is it possible to "accept the grace of God in vain"? The "grace of God" is a general term that covers all that God has done for us in Christ. It means being reconciled to God. So Paul is saying this to people who are already reconciled, "Now, don't let that be in vain, empty, worthless, in your life."

"Well," you say, "does that mean they can lose their salvation after they've got it?" No, Paul is not saying that at all. That is clearly answered by many other passages.

What he is saying here is, when you received Christ he came in to live within you to do two basic things:

- One, to show you the difference between right and wrong. (There are a lot of things that you think are right that are really wrong, and some of the things you think are wrong are really right. Christ has

come to show you the difference.)

- Second, to give you the power to do the right and to reject the wrong.

That is what, he has come for, and he intends to have you use that in every area of your life. If there are some areas where you do not listen to him, where you do not pay any attention to him, do not apply or draw from him the strength you need to act, then, in that area, you have Christ but it is as though you did not. He does not profit you anything. In that area of your life you have received 'the grace of God in vain.' Now God will help you, he is at work to change that, but until you agree with God in that area, Christ "has profited you nothing" {cf, Gal 5:2 KJV}, as Paul said to the Galatians.

So when do you do this? Well, that is the second word, he says. There is only one word on God's clock. It is now. "Now is the acceptable time." "Now is the day of salvation." When are you going to start acting in love toward the people you live with? "Well," you say, "I've been planning to do it after the first of the year. I'm going to make a New Year's resolution."

No, God says, "Now is the accepted time." The devil's time is always tomorrow. That is why we never get around to it. God's time is always today, *now* .

When are you going to reach out to your neighbors and become friends with them so that you might have an opportunity, hopefully, to share with them the change in your own life and heart? Well, now is the only time you have got. You do not have yesterday; it is gone. You may not get tomorrow. What you have is now; therefore, the Word of God always addresses us in this existential fashion. If you are going to act and you see something that needs to be done, do it now. Do not wait. Begin to live now. Enter into life now. That is God's time. Nothing else will avail.

So, as Paul contemplates this great message of a beseeching God reaching out to a dying, despairing world with a cure for all its troubles, pleading with man, he sees us as involved in the process with him. And his appeal to us is, "Don't wait. Do it now."

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