

“Now Is the Day of Salvation”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2; Isaiah 49:8-19

Many of you have heard the revivalist preaching that I have. When Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:2, “today is the day of salvation,” revivalists interpret this to mean that right now, at this very moment, the time has come for you to repent of your sin, and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. Paul’s words from 2 Corinthians 5:17—“the old has passed away, the new has come”—are taken to mean that if you truly did accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you instantly become a new creature and all former bad and sinful habits should immediately cease. But if these bad habits don’t go away immediately, either you didn’t really surrender all and are holding something back, or else you love your sin more than you love Jesus. But this is not what Paul means. In fact, this peculiar reading of Paul’s discussion about the greater glory of the New Covenant robs us of the confidence of trusting in a merciful Savior who has reconciled us to God, precisely because we live in the New Covenant era and the age of the Holy Spirit. Those living under the Old Covenant could only look forward to that final sacrifice which would take away sin. But as beneficiaries of the New Covenant, we can look back to the reconciling death of Jesus, which once for all, establishes peace with God. The war is over. The day of salvation has come.

We are making our way through that section of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians in which the apostle is contrasting the fading glory of the Old Covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, with the much greater glory of the New Covenant which has been ratified in the blood of Jesus Christ. Whereas the Old Covenant was written on stone tablets, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the New Covenant is written upon human hearts. Whereas the mediator of the Old Covenant was Moses, Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New. This is why the New Covenant has a greater glory, and will not fade away as did the Old Covenant which was superceded, and is now rendered obsolete by the coming of Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 3-6, Paul has made a running argument (in which he contrasts the old and new covenant) in defense of his apostolic authority which has been challenged by a group of self-proclaimed “super apostles” (as Paul calls them). In Paul’s absence from Corinth, these men complained that Paul was not eloquent enough, too weak and lacking in charisma, and not present frequently enough in Corinth, to properly serve as an apostle. Paul is not as capable as they are. And so despite his own weaknesses and lack of personal charisma, Paul points the Corinthians back to the power of the gospel and to the greater glory of the new and better covenant. This isn’t about Paul’s personality, or how to attract an audience.

In the previous section of 2 Corinthians, Paul pointed out that in light of the contrast between the fading and temporary glory of the Old Covenant, and the greater glory of the New, Christians must walk by faith and not by sight. Although Paul speaks of fallen humanity as “tents” and “jars of clay” (temporary dwellings because of our human weakness and frailty), Paul reminds us that we must live our daily lives in the light of eternity. Paul knows what it is to have given himself completely to the cause of Christ—in fact, to the point that death shadows the apostle constantly. Yet Paul exhorts us that even as we wear out physically (due to age, illness, and the wear and tear of life), we need not lose heart, or despair because of our circumstances. Paul reminds us that we have been given new life in Christ (regeneration), we are presently being sanctified (being renewed day by day), and one day, we will be raised from the dead (in an eternal dwelling not built by human hands—the resurrection of our bodies).

In verses 9-10 of chapter five, Paul points us ahead to what awaits all of us currently living in tents and

jars of clay. “*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*” No doubt, Paul’s warning that each one of us must appear before Christ on judgment day is intended to remind us that this life is not all that there is. If we walk by sight, we see our fading glory and eventual death. Just like the fading glory on Moses’ face, we will fulfill God’s purpose for our lives, and then we die. If we walk by sight, we think of the deeds we’ve done in the body, and how those deeds are not enough to remove the guilt of our sin and make us right before God. When we walk by sight, we have every reason to fear the day of judgment.

Yet Paul exhorts us not to walk by sight, but to walk by faith. Paul has been directing us to the greater glories of a greater covenant, and to an unshakable hope that God will raise us from the dead in imperishable bodies not made by human hands. And so as we make our way through the balance of 2 Corinthians 5, Paul now directs our attention to the means by which the New Covenant has been established—the death of Jesus. The proclamation of Christ’s cross serves as the basis for the Christian ministry, as well as the primary content for any who engage in evangelism—the ministry of reconciliation.

We now turn to our text, 2 Corinthians 5, beginning at verse 11.

Having brought to mind the fact that we will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, Paul reminds us to have a proper fear of the Lord. This is an important point given that false apostles “sell the gospel” and skillfully adapt their message to please their audiences—people who were fond of the flowery and lofty rhetoric so popular in the Greco-Roman world. As Paul states in the first part of verse 11, “*therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.*” Knowing that we will appear before the judgment seat of Christ should give us the proper motivation to persuade others of the glories of the New Covenant, and not to attempt to dazzle people with eloquent speech and a watered down gospel.

As Paul goes on to say, “*but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.*” Just as he did earlier in 2 Corinthians (the opening verses of chapter 3), Paul appeals to the Corinthians to simply consider the obvious. Paul’s track record is self-evident to all, certainly known to God, and surely sufficient to convict the consciences of those in the Corinthian church who have listened to the false apostles run down Paul, and who have accepted their specious arguments about Paul and his preaching. Paul’s efforts are known by God, and should be known to the Corinthians.

Just as he stated in 2 Corinthians 4:2, in verse 12, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the ministry of the New Covenant is not about outward appearances, flowery speech, or any such thing. “*We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.*” In the New Covenant what matters is content, not a speaker’s eloquence. What matters is the truth of what is proclaimed, not how many flowery words the preacher can use to impress others—again, something typical of the Greeks, which, no doubt, the Corinthians loved. What matters is that the law is now written on hearts of flesh by the Holy Spirit, not merely on tablets of stone with no impact upon the heart (which, Paul says, remains veiled until Christ lifts the veil). Appearances are not important. Everything will be made public on the day of judgment.

Although there were some in the Corinthian church siding with the super apostles because they loved to be entertained, and love to have their ears tickled by the lofty speech, Paul now challenges these people. Like the men who duped them, their followers were probably convinced that it was only so much foolishness to preach the message of Christ crucified, which was a scandalous message to first century

audiences. Why would Christians want to preach about a Savior who was crucified and suffered such a shameful death? Remember, crucifixion was a form of capital punishment reserved only for the most despicable of criminals. No doubt, those who were convinced by the false apostles, thought Paul was crazy to preach such a message, because it was so controversial and offensive to many.

Paul's reply in verse 13 to those who complain about him is direct and to the point. "*For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*" If certain of the Corinthians think Paul crazy ("beside himself") because of his message, well then, so be it. Paul is preaching the message that Jesus Christ himself gave Paul to preach. If these people don't think Paul is crazy, then they should see that Paul preaches this scandalous message for their good—to proclaim the glories of the New Covenant founded upon the shed blood of Jesus Christ, liberating them from the so-called "wisdom" of Greco-Roman paganism, or from the fading glory of the now superseded Old Covenant.

In fact, Paul speaks directly to the question of the content of his messages in verses 14-15 when he writes, "*for the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*" Unlike the false apostles who seek the approval of their audience, Paul's mission is constrained by the love of Christ. It is hard to say if Paul is speaking of his love of Christ, or Christ's love of him, because the language is ambiguous.¹ But either way, the point is clear. Christ's love for sinners is found in a particular message—the preaching of the cross. So, Christ's love for sinners, (or Paul's love for Christ) constrains him (or compels him) to tell the truth about the human condition (that we are sinful, weak and destined to perish). Christ's love for sinners is also the basis of that reconciling sacrifice through which God saves us from our sins. Jesus Christ was crucified for us and in our place. Because of Christ's love for us, Paul cannot engage in ear-tickling merely to appease Greeks.

For Paul, everything centers upon Christ's love for sinners. Paul is convinced (he has "concluded"), that even as all have died (because of Adam's fall into sin—which is the reason why "our tents" wear out), Jesus has died for all. The fall of Adam brought a horrible calamity upon our race—sin and its wages, which is death. But the death of Jesus saves us from what Adam did to us. And because Jesus died for all (those for whom he is accomplishing his redemptive work, over-turning the curse), those for whom he dies no longer live for themselves, but they live for that one who died for them.

There are two theological issues here. The first issue is the question, "how can you as a Calvinist hold to the notion that Jesus didn't die for all (each and every person who has ever lived in each and every age), when Paul says Jesus did die for 'all'?" The answer is found in federal headship (those represented by Adam, and those by Christ), as well as in the nature of Christ's redemptive work. As we will see shortly, through his shed blood, Christ's death truly accomplishes reconciliation between God and sinners—Jesus establishes of a bond of peace for all those for whom he dies.

The answer is as follows; "whom does Adam represent?" Adam represents all of humanity. This means that "in Adam's fall, sinned we all." But whom does Jesus represent? All of humanity? The same group which has fallen in Adam? Or does Jesus represent those in the New Covenant, who have the law written upon their hearts, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Obviously, it is the latter, or else everyone (the "all") is forgiven and reconciled to God through the cross. Adam represents all of humanity. Jesus represents all of those in the New Covenant of which he is mediator. He reconciles those he represents.

¹ Martin, 2 Corinthians, 128.

And then, there is the matter of the nature of Christ's death upon the cross. Given the fact that Jesus' redemptive work effectually accomplishes reconciliation for sinners (it does what God intends it to do), do we really want to say that Jesus died for someone, reconciled them to God, but then the person whom Jesus reconciled to God, and has forgiven, perishes anyway? I don't think so.

It is important to notice that those for whom Christ dies (for all—all those whom he presents), are said by Paul to come to life and to live for Christ, and not for themselves. Those in the New Covenant live for that one who died for them, and who was raised from the dead. This becomes the primary focus of Paul's argument against the false apostles. They are gospel salesmen. They pander in God's word, selling their message to any who will listen. The false apostles tweak their message (by removing the scandal) to make Jesus more attractive to their audiences. Paul's point is that they may gain followers by doing this, but they will stand before Christ on the day of judgment. They are not constrained by the love of Christ, so they live for themselves, and do not strive to please that one who died for them, and who was raised from the dead. Paul's point, it seems to me, is that those for whom Christ died, demonstrate that fact by not living for themselves, but by living for that one who died for them. We walk by faith, we struggle with sin, and we claim that promise which is just over the horizon (and beyond our sight).

That this is Paul's point becomes clear when he states in verse 16, "*from now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.*" The standards used by the Greeks and Romans to evaluate religious claims are pagan in origin. That which will gain an audience, is not an acceptable standard that can be embraced by a Christian. The end does not justify the means. We cannot regard the success of someone's ministry using worldly categories—categories such as whether or not the preacher had us on the edge of our seats though the use of humor or compelling stories, or even through his ability to perform sensational signs and wonders—something especially problematic in Corinth. God had opened the door for Paul to preach the gospel throughout Greece and Asia Minor—the implication being that whenever the gospel was preached, Christ will call his people to faith and cause his church to grow and thrive. But the size of the audience was not in itself the sign of the success of some's ministry. To view things this way, Paul says, is to see spiritual things through the lense of the flesh. Paul rejects this outright. The false apostles do not have any genuine apostolic authority merely because they are popular or compelling speakers.

Harkening back to the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, when Paul contrasted pagan wisdom with God's wisdom, Paul stated that pagans viewed Christians (and Jesus) as foolish and weak. Paul now admits that at one time that was how too he viewed a crucified Savior—because as a zealous Pharisee, Paul's mind and heart were veiled by sin. But now that Jesus has lifted the veil over Paul's heart and mind, Paul sees that what he once regarded as foolishness is actually the wisdom and power of God. Paul has seen first hand that it is the preaching of a crucified savior (however scandalous that message might be) which gives life to those whose minds and hearts were blinded by the god of this age, and who are wasting away without hope. It is the crucified Jesus who has reconciled sinners to God.

For Paul, there is an either-or contrast here. "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*" This contrast is identified by Reformed theologians as the "antithesis" – the contrast between faith and unbelief. According to Paul, all those in Christ (for whom Jesus has died and who trust in him through faith) participate in the new creation. This refers to the fact that we are regenerate (born again), we are currently being sanctified (renewed daily), and that on the day of resurrection we will be bodily raised from the dead. All of this is true, Paul says, because Jesus died for our sins and reconciled us to God, and was raised from the dead as the first-fruits of a great harvest at the end of the age. Because Jesus was raised, we too will participate in his redeeming work. In light of this, it is indeed proper to speak of Christ's resurrection as the birthday of the new creation.

This means that the Old Covenant (the old) has passed away, just as Paul has been telling us that it has. The New Covenant (of which the new creation is a part) has been ratified in the blood, and proven to be true by empty tomb of Jesus. Verse 17 then, is a description of the course of redemptive history—the Old Covenant being replaced by the New—not a promise that all who walk the sawdust trail, and then pray a prayer with an evangelist, will suddenly find every sinful habit instantaneously removed.

Instead, Paul is telling us that all who trust in Jesus Christ through faith, participate in his resurrection life, and will be renewed in the inner man even as our bodies give out and waste away. It is a false promise to tell people all their sinful habits will instantaneously cease, when the reality is for all who participate in the new creation through faith in Jesus Christ, that they will now struggle like never before with their sin (because they are regenerate and are being sanctified). Furthermore, the world will hate them (even as it hated Jesus), and that although Jesus’s resurrection ensures we will reach our goal, it will be a struggle to get there. We have been given life and are now being renewed in the inner man. This means that the power of sin over us is broken. The Christian life is learning how to live in the light of that new-found freedom, and then struggling to leave behind the *habitus* of sin (indwelling sin).

In verses 18-19, Paul now spells out the source and the precise nature of our redemption. “*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.*” There are a number of important points here. **First**, God is the one who initiates the salvation of sinners (all of this, i.e., our reconciliation) is from God. God does not help sinners help themselves as so many American Christians are apt to think. **Second**, Christ reconciled us to himself. We are estranged from God because of our sin. God is angry with us. But through the death of Jesus, God reconciles the world to himself. The death of Jesus removes the guilt of our sin (expiation) and turns aside the wrath of God (propitiation). Because the death of Jesus accomplishes these things, God is said to be reconciled to us through the death of Jesus. God does not count our trespasses against us. Again, if “world” here means “each and every” person then God cannot send people to hell because he **has reconciled** them to himself and taken away the guilt of their sins.

Furthermore, the death of Jesus establishes the both the ministry and the method of reconciliation—the preaching of Christ and him crucified. God did not entrust to his church any message other than this one—that gospel which reconciles God to sinners and sinners back to God. As Paul puts it in verse 20, “*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*” God sends us into the world as his ambassadors. As ambassadors, we must bring that message we are given by the one who sends us. We cannot make up our own message and proclaim it in the name of the government which we (as ambassadors) represent. And when we bring the message given to us by the king to the world, we are to implore people to believe it. “*On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*” The king commands that we renounce our sin and all attempts to be righteous in ourselves, and to trust that what Jesus did upon the cross will turn aside God’s anger toward us, and provide for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we might be at peace with God.

This becomes crystal clear in verse 21, when Paul defines the work of Jesus in securing our reconciliation. “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” To put it simply, the guilt of our sin is imputed to Jesus who was without sin. This is what Paul means when he says that Jesus “became sin”—our guilt was imputed (or credited) to Jesus who is now punished for it. Likewise, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law by his perfect obedience. So, his righteousness is imputed to us. Therefore he became sin, and we become the righteousness of God. This is what Martin Luther called “the great exchange.” Christ bears our

sin—and suffers for us and in our place—reconciles God to us, and us to God, then Christ’s righteousness (his perfect obedience) is imputed to us through faith, so that we become the righteousness of God. This is, in a nutshell, the gospel preached by Paul.

And this is why Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to reject the gospel that he had preached to them. As he states in the first two verse of chapter 6, “*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.*”

Again, there are three important points to consider in these verses. **First**, Paul points out that all Christians are in a sense, “ministers of reconciliation.” This does not mean that all Christians are ministers in an official sense, but that all Christians should act as agents of reconciliation (and minister to others) by sharing the gospel with non-Christians. That is what Paul is getting at when he speaks of “working together” with God. Through the proclamation of this message, God is pleased to save sinners. In other words, God uses means (us) to cause the gospel to spread. We should be aware of this, and co-operate with how God in this work. **Second**, as Paul points out, all of these wonderful blessings (reconciliation, the forgiveness of sins, being credited with the righteousness of Christ) come to us by grace. God sends Jesus to die for our sins, because he is gracious toward sinners.

Third, Paul cites from Isaiah 49:8 (part of our Old Testament lesson). When Isaiah predicts a “day of salvation,” and a time of God’s favor, he is looking ahead to the messianic age and the cross of Jesus Christ. To support his theological point—the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old, Paul appeals to Isaiah’s prophecy. That day of salvation anticipated by Isaiah, that period in redemptive history long promised, has now arrived. This is not an evangelistic appeal—“today is the day you are supposed to be saved.” Rather, Paul is making a declaration of fact—with the coming of Jesus, the promised day of salvation is now a reality for all of God’s people. Why cling to the fading glory of the Old Covenant, or a rely upon a message centered in human eloquence which tickles the ears? But this is what the false apostles have done, and this is why the Corinthians should not be duped by them.

What then, do we take with us, by way of application?

Paul’s point is that promised time of God’s favor has now come—the ministry and the message of reconciliation (the message of Christ crucified) is the proof. God has heard his people in their affliction. He has helped them on the day of trouble. Salvation has come because the fading glory of the Old Covenant has given way to the greater glories of the New. Today, Paul reminds us, we live in the age of salvation, the era of the New Covenant and the age of the Holy Spirit. Everything God promised has come to pass. The cross of Jesus and its benefits (forgiveness and reconciliation) is the proof! Now is the day of salvation!

And because now is the day of salvation, we must devote ourselves to the ministry of reconciliation. Unlike the false apostles of Paul’s day, and the revivalists of our own, the proclamation of the cross is not an appeal for us to become better people. It is the declaration that on a Friday afternoon two thousand years ago, about 3:00 in the afternoon, a short walk outside the city walls of Jerusalem, Jesus shed real blood on a wooden cross to reconcile God to us, and us to God. Because of what happened that day, the sinless Jesus became sin. We, who are sinners, are now the righteousness of God. And this is why it matters that “now is the day of salvation.” The war with God is blessedly over. We are at peace.