

We are Ambassadors

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Christianity is fundamentally about having **a new identity**. Jesus called it being “born again.” In our passage today we hear this powerful truth, *“If anyone is IN CHRIST, he is a new creation, the old has passed away; behold the new has come.”* When you became a Christian it was not just your future that was transformed but your present. Your essential identity was completely and eternally changed.

If you look at our **baseball diamond pathway**, you can think of each base as a different aspect of your new identity in Christ.

- You can reach first base and love God because He has adopted you as His son or daughter. In Christ, ***you are a child of God***. You were a stranger, an outsider - now you are a family member, a son or daughter of the King.
- You can move on to second base and grow in Christ because ***you are forgiven in Him***. You are no longer defined by sin, you are not DEAD IN SIN anymore now that Jesus is your Lord and Savior. You are ALIVE IN CHRIST, dressed in His righteousness and filled with His Spirit.
- You press on to third base because ***you are a servant of Jesus Christ***. You are no longer enslaved to sin since Jesus is your Lord and Savior. You belong to Him and all that is His is now yours.
- And you complete the cycle by running for home plate since ***you are an ambassador for Jesus***, sent out to reach the world with the Gospel. You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.



Think about each of those as **personal declarations of identity**.

- I am a child of God.
- I am forgiven and righteous in Christ.
- I am a servant of Jesus Christ.
- I am an ambassador of Christ.

This is who we are. Loving God, growing in Christ, serving in the church and reaching out in the world are things that we do as followers of Jesus. But all of them are rooted in and motivated by a new IDENTITY. Who we ARE is what drives what we DO. It is vital that we don't reverse that and believe that what we DO determines who we are. That would be a works based approach that undermines the Gospel.

- You could become a child of God after you work hard enough for Him.

- You could earn forgiveness and right standing before God once your life has played out and everything is weighed in the balance.
- You could be found to be a servant of Christ after we see how well you serve our church.
- You might one day be called an ambassador of Jesus once we see how much you give to our missions fund.

You see how that turns the Gospel upside down and makes it about what WE DO, rather than about what Jesus has DONE for us. ***A new Identity is central to the Gospel - and that's why we put the cross at the center of our baseball diamond.*** At the center of who we are as individual believers and as a church is the cross of Jesus Christ. That is what defines us. We have resolved to preach nothing here but Christ and Him crucified so that God gets all the glory and we get none of it. It is all about Jesus and our work depends entirely on His.

Today and over the next five Sundays we will talk about home plate and **our commitment to reach the world with the Gospel**. That commitment flows from this identity statement: we ARE ambassadors of Jesus Christ. And we have that declaration directly from God through this passage in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 20 - ***"We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."*** [w/ baseball diamond image]

Do you notice that nowhere in this passage does Paul exhort the Corinthian believers to "Go and share the Gospel"? That exhortation is certainly implied but it doesn't need to be stated because ***if we get the Identity piece right, the Activity piece will flow from it naturally.***

Once you know WHO YOU ARE, it becomes very clear what you are expected TO DO.

I went to college enrolled in the pre-med program because that is what my older brother had done and it was sort of what my parents always figured I would do. I didn't think much about it until - at a Challenge Conference - a youth leader asked me two important questions:

- ***What is your passion and what is your vision for your life?***

I hadn't really thought about either question but I quickly realized that studying human anatomy and spending the next eight years of my life in a lab, library and hospital fit neither my passion nor my vision for my life. I wanted to work with people but not with their icky internals. Some of you are called to that and praise the Lord for that. I was not. I wanted to make a difference in the world in another way, and so I set out to study political science.

I later realized the political realm was not my calling either - but praise the Lord for those who are called into that area as well. About midway through college, as I was leading small groups and serving in different kinds of youth ministry, the Lord made it clear that I was a pastor. ***Once I realized, "I am a pastor," it became very clear what I was supposed to do.*** During seminary a few years later I wondered, "am I a professor?" and it was clear - no, I am a pastor - I am called to work with God's people and help them become fully devoted followers of Jesus.

My identity clarified my activity, even as my activity informed and fulfilled my identity.

Look at it this way. ***At the center of what we do as followers of Jesus is the truth of who we are in Jesus. [Messenger Image.]*** We have a mission to fulfill - to make disciples of all nations. We have a ministry we've been called to, serving and building up the church. And we have a message to proclaim. But all of that flows from and centers on the reality of who we are. Identity precedes and directs activity.

Notice how this was true for Jesus. He had a mission from the Father to save sinners. He had a ministry to fulfill and a message to proclaim. But the mission, the ministry and the message all depended entirely on The Messenger.

The Work of Jesus would be valueless apart from the Person of Jesus. Apart from His Identity as the fully divine son of God and the fully righteous Son of Man, Jesus could not have accomplished His mission and we would have no gospel message to proclaim. The Father spoke twice from heaven to say, "This IS my beloved son. Listen to Him." **We believe in Jesus and have confidence in the Gospel of His great salvation because of WHO HE IS.**

That is our outline for this morning. We'll talk first about ***our identity as Messengers for God*** - His ambassadors. Then we will talk about ***the three parts of our calling*** - our mission, our ministry and our message, which all flow into each other and flow out of our identity in Christ.

First - we are messengers of God. Look at verse 14.

The Messenger

- **Motivated by the Love of Christ**

"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died." 2 Corinthians 5:14

Here is our motivation: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son." Jesus died for ALL. There is no greater act of love than to give up your life for another. Jesus paid it all. He gave Himself freely and completely. And it is His love that controls and compels us.

- Why do you serve with children in our TreeHouse ministry? The love of Christ compels you.
- Why do you hold the door open and help welcome people to Oakwood? The love of Christ moves your heart to do that.



- Why do you invite people into your small group? You want them to experience the love of Christ through the love in that group.
- Why do you reach out to your non-believing friends and neighbors? It is the love of Christ that moves us, motivates us, drives us to press on, to persevere in this difficult and usually thankless task.

We are motivated by the love of Christ and DEFINED by our new identity in Christ. Verse 15 *“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. 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 Messenger

- Defined by our Identity in Christ

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17

There are **only two conditions** a person can be in. Either you are a new creation IN CHRIST or you are still dead IN YOUR SIN. The old has passed away for the believer - your old self, called the FLESH. At the moment that you called on Jesus to save you, you took the old YOU and nailed it to the cross ONTO the very body of Jesus. He took the entirety of your sin upon Himself - v. 21 says, “he became sin.”

You are not defined by your old self anymore. “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Isn’t that wonderfully good news? “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us!”

The believer is no longer defined or controlled by sin. You are defined as a new creation in Christ and that is why the love of Christ controls you - that is why the Spirit of Christ now leads you and empowers you - because you belong to Jesus. “You are not your own - you were bought with a price.”

Consider: what defines you? What makes you who you are? What would happen if certain ACTIVITIES in your life were suddenly removed?

- **What if you had an accident and you couldn’t work anymore?** You couldn’t say anymore, “I’m an electrician or I’m a financial planner or I’m a teacher or I’m in Advertising or I’m a nurse, or I’m a pastor, or I’m a stay at home mom...”
- **We often define ourselves by our work** - and that’s why unemployment can be so devastating, because work is so closely tied to our identity. But should work be our most defining characteristic?
- What happens when **your kids leave home**? You say, “I’m a mom.” or “I’m a dad.” And you still are when they leave home, but it’s no longer part of your day to day life. Does that change who you ARE?

- What happens if there is **a fracture in a key relationship**? So many people have been through divorce and a big part of the pain from this is how it seems to define you - "I am divorced." It's like a huge scarlet D that people feel they have to wear around wherever they go - like a big Red "F" on a school assignment that you have stapled to your forehead. "I am a failure."

NO! None of that defines you. You are not defined by your job, by your life stage or by your human relationships. You are defined by your relationship with God. That is what centrally and essentially makes you who you are.

Do you see the wonderful security and comfort this provides?

- **You are not defined by your failures.** Not any of them. All of your sins and foolishness and mistakes - every last shred of them - has been nailed to the cross and you bear it no more! Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, oh my soul.
- **You are not defined by the sin of other people.** Maybe you were abused in the past and you are tempted to think that you are permanently "damaged goods." Not so. Don't believe that for a second. You are a new creation in Christ - created IN CHRIST to do good works which God has prepared in advance for you to do because you are God's WORKMANSHIP - His masterpiece.
- **You are not defined by the world.** It doesn't matter what anyone thinks of you, how they measure you. If people think you are smart or dumb, skinny or fat, beautiful or ugly, successful or a failure - it doesn't matter what anyone thinks of you. It only matters what GOD thinks of you.

And if you belong to Jesus then **you are fully and eternally DEFINED by Him**. You are loved. You are alive. You are victorious. You have value. You have purpose. You matter. You have power and influence. You are filled with the very Spirit of the living God. You are a child of the King. You are righteous in Christ. You are a servant of Jesus Christ and you are His ambassador to the world.

If you understand and live out the truth of who you ARE in Christ, then ***all that you DO for Him will naturally follow***. If you get this wrong and center your identity on something else - your work, your relationships, your appearance, your achievements - then everything you do will be off kilter, sending your whole life off target according to the will of God.

[Messenger image again with 2 cor. 5:20 on screen with it]

Identity is at the center. This is who we ARE. We are ambassadors for Christ. We are witnesses called to testify about Him. We have been sent out as representatives for God - God Himself is making His appeal through us. We speak for Him because we are His.

Now let's look at our mission, our ministry and our message.

The Mission

- To join God in His work of Reconciling the world to Himself in Christ

*“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.” 2 Corinthians 5:18-19*

This is the work God has been doing since the fall of mankind. He is a merciful, gracious, reconciling God. As soon as Adam and Eve fell into sin, God sought them out and called them back into relationship. He has been doing the same thing with all people on earth ever since.

Notice the key phrase **“in Christ.”** How has God been doing this work of reconciliation? In Christ. Before Christ there were prophets who spoke of a future King and a coming sacrifice, a Savior and Messiah who would restore the nation of Israel as God had always intended it. After Jesus the apostles expounded the significance of who He was and what He accomplished.

We might wonder how God is at work in the lives of people we care about and in the world. How is God actively seeking to reconcile people to Himself? The answer is IN CHRIST.

- What about people who have lost everything in a **California forest fire**? God has loved them infinitely in Christ.
- What about **people who died in the hurricanes** last year? God was reaching out to them through the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus.
- What about **Muslims in Afghanistan** who have never heard the Gospel? Since before Mohammed and ever since Mohammed started this religion, God has been seeking to reconcile arabs to Himself through Christ. And tens of thousands of Muslims are responding to the Gospel every day, all throughout the middle east.

That is God’s work and He never stops seeking to reconcile sinners to Himself through Jesus.

The Mission

- *Transforming Separated Sinners into Forgiven Sons and Daughters (v. 19b)*

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” 2 Corinthians 5:19

Here is what it means to be reconciled: to not have your sins count against you. **To trespass is to cross a line.** God has drawn the line on what is right and what is wrong - and even summarized it very helpfully in the ten commandments. God has embedded in the human conscience a deep and unavoidable sense of right and wrong. We learn at a very early age how to start justifying our sin and hardening our hearts to those twinges of conscience, but deep inside we know where the lines fall and we know very well when we cross them.

That’s what a trespass is: a crossing of a moral line. When your mouse hovers over something and you are tempted to click on it - whether it’s an image you shouldn’t see (guys) or an item you shouldn’t buy (girls), you can see the line and you know when you have crossed it.

Here is the reconciling work of God: **through Christ he chooses not to count our trespasses against us.** He takes sinners who deserve to be forever banished from His holy presence and

pronounces all of our sins forgiven. He can only do this because Jesus was pronounced guilty. And so God can be both just and the justifier of all who believe in Jesus.

That is God's work in the world. It has been since sin entered the picture. And it will be until Jesus returns and this chapter in the story ends. As ambassadors of Jesus we have the wonderful privilege of joining God in His work of reconciling the world to Himself through Christ.

Our mission is accomplished through our ministry - just as Jesus accomplished His mission through His ministry.

The Ministry

- To Represent God as He Invites people to make Peace with Him through Jesus.

"Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." 2 Corinthians 5:20

Ben Franklin is one of the heroes of the American revolution - not because he fought in any battles, but because he was **our ambassador to France**. By representing the virtues and potential of the emerging nation for nearly 10 years on foreign soil, Franklin achieved a critical military alliance with France in 1778 and then negotiated the Treaty of Paris that ended the revolution just five years later.

Franklin negotiated with King Louis the XVI and the other leaders in France, speaking on behalf of George Washington and the developing government of the American states.

As significant as that was, brothers and sisters, ***we speak with an infinitely higher authority and with eternally higher stakes.***

- Franklin lobbied for the independence of a nation. We preach for the freedom of souls.
- Franklin worked for the support of the French Empire. We labor so that sinners can have access to the resources of heaven.
- Franklin helped accomplish one of the great victories of the modern era. We are connecting people with the greatest victory in all of history - the one Jesus achieved through His death and resurrection.

This is our ministry. ***We represent God to people.*** God is making His appeal through us. We are His voice. We speak with His authority. We have the unfathomable privilege of pleading with people to be reconciled to God. We talk, reason, pray and exhort people to consider the claims of Christ.

The Ministry

- We Implore people to Repent and Believe in Jesus

"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." 2 Corinthians 5:15

The essence of our ministry is INVITATION. We implore people - we plead with them - to consider what God offers them in Christ. Jesus compared it to **a wedding feast**. He said it was like hosting a great banquet and sending out lots of invitations. And your friends, one by one, send in their excuses. "Oh, I'm so sorry - but we have plans that weekend." "Apologies, friend, but my Aunt just died!" "Wish we could come, but our car has broken down."

One after another, **the invited guests refuse the invitation**. So the host throws it open beyond his friends and sends his servants out to invite anyone at all in the area - out into the streets and alleys so the seats at the banquet will be full. That's what the Gospel invitation is like. We invite everyone we can. Most will make excuses and end up turning it down.

But we press on to others and continue to invite.

Don't be discouraged if you invite someone to church and they make some kind of excuse. Jesus knows exactly what that feels like. It's a narrow road that we follow, and the way into it is a small gate that only a few will find. Most people will refuse our invitation. But that doesn't mean we stop inviting. We continually plead with people to repent and believe.

We invite them to look down the road they are following and see where it is taking them.

- Do you feel like you are at peace with God?
- Do you feel like your life is everything it could be?
- **Have you ever sensed that something is missing?**

One of our teens asked me the question last week - ***Can you believe in Jesus without repenting?*** The Bible gives a clear answer: no. Repentance and faith are bound together. They are two sides of the same coin - inseparable. Look at v. 15. In order to start living for Jesus, you must stop living for yourself. In order to take hold of Jesus' hand so he can save you, you must first let go of your own life.

It's like being on a ship that is sinking. As long as you stay on that ship, you are in trouble. Your only hope is to get off of that ship - your own life - and get onto another one - the S.S. Jesus Christ. His ship is the only one that will never sink. But you can't keep one foot in your own boat and have one foot on board with Jesus. It is all or nothing. Don't kid yourself into thinking that you can have a little Jesus - just enough to be saved.

This is why verse 14 says, "One has died for all, therefore all have died." Jesus died for you. ***But for his death to apply to you, you must die too.*** You must let your old self die. You must give it to Jesus and let it be nailed to the cross with Him. That's the deal. There is no other Gospel - no other way to be saved. "The old" has to pass away. It has to be buried with Jesus so a new creation can come to life with Jesus. **For a baby Christian to be born, an old sinner must die.**

That is our ministry - and you can see how it ties directly to our message. "We have concluded this":

The Message

- Jesus Died as the Once for all Sacrifice for sinners

“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.” 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

If you've been wondering for whom Christ died, you can stop wondering. **He died for ALL**. Jesus died for everyone who ever has lived and ever will live. ***His death was sufficient*** to pay for the sins of all people, from all time, all over the planet. Now, you could quibble over a theological technicality that Jesus' death only applies to those who believe in Him and you could call that group the elect and in one sense you would be right.

I generally agree with those who talk about a DEFINITE atonement - that Jesus died for a specific group of people, chosen by God before the creation of the world. But passages like this make it clear that ***Jesus's death was not LIMITED in its concern or its potential impact***. His death was INFINITE in potential. He gave Himself as the once for all sacrifice for sin.

Before Jesus the Jews would offer **daily, monthly and yearly sacrifices**. Every day - morning and night. Every new moon. Every year on Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement - sacrifices were offered. Animals were killed. Blood was shed to *temporarily* cover sin. But that's all animal sacrifice could do - because the one paying the price was not the perfectly fitting substitute and the price paid had limited value.

Until Jesus. He gave Himself as the fully human substitute for human sinners. And He gave Himself as the fully divine Son of God whose sacrifice had infinite value. Two more wonderful gospel truths as we close:

The Message

- The Perfectly **Righteous** One became Totally **Sinful**
- So the Wretchedly **Sinful** could become Perfectly **Righteous** in Him

“For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus became sin. He not only BORE sin on His body on the cross, He effectively became sin. The sum total of all the sins of mankind before and after Jesus were piled on top of Him and - hear this - infused into His very being.

We started this morning talking about our being - our identity. ***Jesus took your sin and mine into the very center of his being***. He BECAME sin. God the Father made it so. The perfectly righteous one became totally sinful. The One who from eternity past was defined by glory and holiness and absolute obedience to the Father's will was plunged into the agonizing abyss of wrath and judgment. The full cup of God's righteous fury was not only poured onto Christ but He took it into Himself. He drank the cup down to the very last drop.

Jesus did this so that wretched sinners that we are, we can become perfectly righteous in Him. Do you see that? Jesus BECAME sin so that we can BECOME “the righteousness of God.” That is what defines us. That is the center of your being right now if you belong to Jesus. You are no longer defined by your sins or your past. ***You are defined by Jesus and in Him you ARE the righteousness of God.***

That is the mystery of the Gospel. The righteousness of God has been made known. The mystery long hidden has been revealed. God’s righteousness does not need to fall on you in judgment for it could fill you in Jesus. You can have that reality in the depths of your soul today. In Christ we ARE perfectly righteous even as we are, day by day, becoming more righteous in Him.

Brothers and sisters, ***do you feel the power of the Gospel?*** We are the beloved children of God. We are forever free from the penalty and power of sin - no longer defined by our old lives, no longer driven by our old desires. Now we belong to Jesus and are One with Him. We are His servants. We are His ambassadors - sent out to represent Him in a world of deep and increasing darkness. We implore people - be reconciled to God!

Peace with God is available now, but that offer will not be available forever. It will soon be withdrawn and there will be no more time to respond. So brothers and sisters, let’s remember our mission. Flowing from our identity as messengers of God, let’s devote ourselves to the mission Jesus gave us, let’s zealously carry out our ministry here at Oakwood and boldly proclaim the message of the Gospel!

Let’s pray and then we will gather around the Lord’s table.