

## “Ambassadors for Christ!” (Part 1)

2 Corinthians 5.11 – 6.2

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It sure is interesting reading correspondence that was written nearly two thousand years ago. Here we have a letter, sent from a wandering missionary who had experienced a major conversion from the faith he had been born in, raised in, and trained in, to a somewhat similar but radically different faith because of a remarkable experience he had which he could only attribute to the hand of Almighty God. He had previously been vilifying the sect to which he now belonged. He had seen the light, he had come to realize the error of his ways, he had spent some considerable time in solitude and prayer, re-thinking absolutely *everything* he thought he knew about God and God’s dealings with humanity, and he emerged from that experience with a burning passion to share this new faith with as many people as he possibly could – at tremendous personal risk to himself, as he faced anger and hatred from many quarters. He traveled all around the known world, he formed communities devoted to this new faith where none had existed before, he taught and trained and inspired in town after town, city after city, region after region. Periodically, he wrote letters back to some of the faith communities he had formed or helped to shape – like that fledgling community in that great metropolitan city of Corinth – clarifying certain points of his teaching, challenging them to grow in their faithfulness, and sometimes calling members out for behavior that was unbecoming of the faith to which they now belonged. The fact that *any* of this happened is truly remarkable. What’s even *more* remarkable is that these letters were so valued, so treasured, that they were preserved, and shared in other towns and cities and regions, and continually copied, generation after generation – by hand, for the first fifteen centuries. This letter, originally intended to reach just a small group of people, has now reached *billions* around the world. There are timeless messages in this man’s words. Yes, Paul was writing to a certain group of people in a certain place at a certain point of time. But what people realized, very early on, is that so much of what Paul wrote transcends the boundaries of space and time, of race and class and culture, of language and nation. There are messages here, from the Holy Spirit, *to us*, for our faith and life today.

A few weeks ago a few other pastors and I were looking at this passage in some depth. We had a lengthy conversation about it, finding all sorts of treasures we’d not seen before. Some of us walked away thinking, “We’ve *got* to share this with our congregations.” As our fall programs get underway, we’re going to take a few weeks to dig around in this passage. Consider today an introductory overview.

“So we try to persuade people,” Paul begins. That’s an important verb. Not just *teach*, not just *explain*. *Persuade*. He has certain convictions in his heart that he feels *compelled* to share with other

people. No, not just share. *Persuade*. He's trying to move people from *one* way of thinking to a *different* way of thinking. He believes – and believes strongly – that his understanding of God and God's dealings with humanity is so much better, so much richer, so much truer, so much more wholesome and life-giving than other understandings that people were holding, that he *has* to share it with them.

Some people think he's crazy. He responds: "If we're crazy, it's for God's sake." Other people notice how rational he is, using *logic* and *reason* to make his case. He responds: "If we're rational, it's for your sake." Crazy for God, rational for others – what he wants to do is *infect* his hearers with his love and passion and devotion to Jesus Christ, and the best way to infect them is by talking, and talking, and talking some more, trying to use as many persuasive arguments as he possibly can, using language and concepts and terms and metaphors that people can hopefully understand. He does this because Christ didn't die just for *him* – Christ died for *everyone*. Everyone, including that random stranger walking down the street who has never *heard* the gospel and has no idea what kind of positive, transformative life-change he could experience if he were to stop long enough to listen, and let the Holy Spirit move.

What happens is that when that man, or someone like him, hears the gospel of Jesus Christ, and has a real experience of the Holy Spirit – like Paul himself did – amazing things can happen. Marriages can be healed. Addictions can be broken. Relationships can be mended. Illnesses can be healed. Depression can be overcome. Money can be raised. Mountains can be moved. None of that necessarily happens easily, and most of the time it doesn't happen overnight, but I've seen the transformative power of the gospel at work, I've seen the fruits when someone is truly *inspired* by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul saw it too, time and time again. There is, in his words, a "new creation." The old things have gone and new things have arrived. You are simply *not* the same person you were before.

So Paul was convinced: he needed to *keep sharing the message*. *Keep talking about the faith*. *Keep trying to persuade*. It's not the words themselves that have any power to change people, and Paul would not claim any credit for himself. There's something that can happen, when the *right* words are spoken in the *right* way at the *right* time. There's an *impact*, an *effect* that can take place. It's not the *words* that do this – it's the *Holy Spirit*, living and breathing and acting. A message comes across in just the *right* way, and something happens *internally*, inside a person's *heart*. Suddenly, they begin to see with new eyes, they begin to hear with new ears. They're willing to consider possibilities they've not considered before, they're open to new ideas in ways they weren't previously. Suddenly there's some room for *Jesus* in that stone-cold heart. God has room to *breathe*. It's the Holy Spirit at work, all right – but the only reason why the Holy Spirit has room to work is because *somebody* was willing to be a *vehicle*, a *vessel*. *Somebody* was willing to *talk* and *talk* and *talk some more*. Like Paul. In town after town, city after city, region after region, he *talked* and *talked* and *talked some more*. Some of the time, it was absolutely fruitless. Some of the time, it made people downright mad. And some of the time, the Holy Spirit moved, and moved *mightily*. Faith was shared – and *received*. The Word of life was poured into a new vessel. A new creation. The old has gone, and in its place is something altogether new.

The church of Jesus Christ only grows when there are people willing to speak. Willing to share. Willing to promote. People willing to be vessels, vehicles, for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in this broken, fragmented world that is desperately in need of hope and healing and gospel truth.

What happens when a Christian decides that they have nothing to say? Nothing to share? Nothing to promote? In a word – *nothing*. Every time a Christian concludes their faith is between them and God and they don't need to share it with others, God has one less vehicle to use. If *enough* Christians decide that they have nothing to say, nothing to share, nothing to promote, eventually the whole ship breaks down, and people wonder: "How come our church is shrinking? (It must be the pastor's fault.)" Despite the fact that *you* can reach people that *he* can't, that *you* know people *he* doesn't, that *you* have an "in" with some groups *he'll* never have access to. There comes a point in your Christian journey when you realize: "It's not just *him* who's supposed to share the gospel. It's *me*, too."

"We are ambassadors who represent Christ," says Paul. He's not tooting his own horn. He's tooting *Christ's* horn. He is representing Christ's interests, here on this earth. He is Christ's *ambassador*.

And so are you. Once you join the church of Jesus Christ, once you commit yourself, body and soul, to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, once you start calling yourself a "Christian," you have an opportunity to share in that ministry. You get to become an ambassador. In fact, you already *are*. Once you bear the title "Christian," you are representing Jesus Christ to the world. People start learning about Jesus *through you*, whether you realize it or not, whether you're ready to talk about him or not. That's an awesome responsibility. Don't take it lightly. Everything you say, everything you do, says *something* to the non-Christian world about what kind of a person, what kind of a Savior, Jesus truly is. Whether you want the job or not, *you've got it*. The question is: *what kind* of an ambassador are you?

Consider the way you interact with other people. Do you spout off opinions all the time? *You're an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Are you constantly negative? *You're an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you have angry outbursts on a regular basis? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you belittle your spouse in the presence of other people? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you boss other people around, always having to get your way? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you trash talk other people? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you sit on the sidelines and criticize the people who are doing the hard work? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you distort the truth to try to influence the way people will vote? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you ignore what other people are saying when you're debating with them? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you avoid taking risks, because you are afraid you might fail? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you chase after quick fixes instead of making hard life changes? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you keep silent when you should speak up, or speak when you should keep silent? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you manipulate things behind the scenes in order to get your way? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you self-medicate rather than dealing with your pain? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. Do you seriously think you can be a Christian without spending quality time in God's Word? *You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ*. What kind of an ambassador *are* you?

People are watching. People are watching and learning from *you*. How you live your life matters. How you represent Jesus Christ to other people matters. We're all ambassadors. We all are called to represent him here on this earth. What's the one thing you need to do, the one critical change you need to make, to be a more faithful ambassador of Christ, to represent Jesus better to the world?

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