

# “Seeing Others in a Different Light”

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:11-21

3/12/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

## Introduction Before 11-15 Text is Read

Second Corinthians is actually Paul’s third letter that he had written to the troubled house church in Corinth. Paul was angry and he was concerned that the congregation was being torn apart by people questioning *his* credentials. Here is what had happened.

Some church elders had come to that church from Jerusalem with letters of certification from the main church. These people said Paul was not a “true” apostle. When Paul heard about it, he wrote them such an angry letter that no one bothered keeping a copy of it around. The real 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Corinth was lost or thrown away. Paul refers to this letter in the third letter he wrote that we call “2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians.”

After Paul settled down emotionally, he wrote again but this time he more calmly gave several arguments for why they should continue to respect his leadership. At one point, he flatly says that “I don’t need any paperwork; you and your faith are all the certification my ministry needs.” As you hear the paragraph (defined by verses 11-15), listen to the tone that comes through. He is continuing his discussion about what he is doing – obviously speaking to a group of his critics.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:11-15 is read here

Paul is essentially saying that *God* knows him and approves of his work. He is frequently defensive in this letter but he ultimately hopes to win back their confidence in his work.<sup>1</sup>

Paul was what we call, today, an influencer. He had a personality style which depends on people liking him in order to go about his tasks. Putting it another way, when Paul felt that people were tuned into him and liked him, he did well at his work. When he felt that he was not liked, however, it troubled him so much that he was almost unable to function until he could straighten out the relationship.

While we see this personality pattern of a gifted but very human individual with weaknesses,

<sup>1</sup> He wants this for the sake of spreading the gospel.

his point was that all he wanted to accomplish in his career was a ministry of reconciliation. Paul considered that to be the central theme of his teaching. With that, we hear the most important paragraph in the passage for today.

## Verses 16-21 are read here

In the first reading, Paul had been talking about people who take pride in *appearances* but who do not pay attention to what is within them. These people, in Paul’s mind, are in it just for the show. Paul says that Christ died for everyone and that should free church leaders from getting overly concerned with appearances. He was suggesting that Christianity has brought with it a new way of looking at others and at life. Have you ever met people too concerned with appearances and credentials?

Over a decade ago, the singer “Sting” recorded a song entitled “The Russians” and I think it illustrates the concept about which Paul talks. The song criticized the politicians of both the Soviet Union and the United States. The central message the composer had in mind was the apparent inability of the two most powerful nations to respond to each other in a humane way – regardless of which administration was in power.

The lyrics are these:

*In Europe and America there’s a growing feeling of hysteria,  
Conditioned to respond to all the threats, the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets.  
Mr. Kruchief said “We will bury you.”  
I don’t subscribe to his point of view.  
It’s such an ignorant thing to do, if the Russians love their children too.*

*How can I save my little boy, from Oppenheimer’s deadly toy?<sup>2</sup>  
There is no monopoly of common sense, on either side of the political fence.  
We share the same biology, regardless of theology.*

<sup>2</sup> Inventor of the atomic bomb.

*Believe me when I say to you, I hope the Russians love their children too.*

*There is no historical precedent, to put the words in the mouth of the president.*

*There's no such thing as a winnable war,*

*It's a lie we don't believe anymore.*

*Mr. Reagan says "We will protect you."*

*I don't subscribe to this point of view.*

*Believe me when I say to you, I hope the Russians love their children too.*

*We share the same biology, regardless of our geology.*

*What might save us, me and you, is if the Russians love their children too.*<sup>3</sup>

When I was a child I lived in Washington D.C. and I played near the bomb proof governmental buildings. I remember seeing the telecast of Nikita Khrushchev pounding his shoe on his desk during a meeting of the United Nations. For years I thought of the people of the Soviet Union as "them" – the sinister people who were out to get us. But in my Sunday School classes, we were talking about how Jesus sacrificed Himself for them. They loved their children as we did.



In the early 60's, I lived in a predominantly Protestant part of Baltimore Maryland and I was taught to feel that the people who were Roman Catholic were "the other." Each of you can remember that this was the time when similar things were thought of those of us who were in the Protestant tradition.

At that time, in my youth, I was generally afraid of African Americans and people from the Pacific Rim countries because of the polarization of the races and my outright lack of experience in relating to them. I had been raised to think along the stereotypical and prejudicial lines about people of other races. So looking back to the ignorance of my youth, I sadly realize that I was raised to be alienated from other people who did not fit within my limited

<sup>3</sup> The group "Sting" in the album "Dream of the Blue Turtles" 1986.

white Anglo-Saxon Protestant suburban subculture. Somehow I landed in my young adult years having had little or no experience in relating to the poor, laborers, people of other nationalities, Catholics, Jews, people with alternative life-styles and door to door salespeople.

When I was a carpenter, later in my young adult years, I was working one day with a crew on the roof of a large New England house. One of my colleagues mumbled something negative about Jewish people. It happened that the evening before, I had just finished reading the book of Luke. So I stopped hammering, sat down on the roof and looked out over the village and said to the other carpenter, "Did you ever stop to think that Jesus was a Jew?" All the other carpenters stopped working, looked at me as if I had two heads and then they started laughing, partly at themselves.

By now, even after the last two decades of television sitcoms that have raised the American consciousness about discarding these old prejudices, each of us still tend to limit our social circles. At least we know that it is not "fashionable" or socially acceptable to appear to be sexist, racist or to speak in pejorative terms about minorities or other peoples who have traditionally be marginalized by society. It is not even fashionable to speak abusively about the Arabs or those of other nations. We think that kind of talk comes only from the loud mouths at the bars who are looking to split someone's head open because their own lives are so frustrating to them. We sense that they are just picking on the minorities in their talk in order to vent their intense frustration with their own lives.

Studies have been conducted in the area of prejudice and sociologists conclude that people who are oppressed themselves tend to exhibit prejudicial behavior. The studies summarized that people who feel relatively powerless about their own lives tend to vent their frustration out on women and minorities. They depersonalize and stereotype others – making others somehow less than human in order to more easily forget that they might be parents who love their children as well.

But *we church goers* are often too polite and sophisticated to be prejudiced. Instead, we use our

social skills and give lip service to principles of equality and fairness and yet we often find ourselves living out our years, making most of our judgments by appearances and not someone's inner qualities (as Paul recommends).

Perhaps because of the predominance of the media, we are all too image-oriented. We praise the gods and goddesses of youth in our culture. We all have, in one way or another, bought into the shallow surface values of our culture.

At the same time, we all have sensed its lack of spiritual depth in our society. We are at the point now where we are sometimes feeling jaded and skeptical about our culture.<sup>4</sup> And like you, I'd never trade our standard of living with anyone in another country but we all watch our televisions and say in response to the commercials, "Come on, what can you really show me that I haven't seen before." With a similar sense of frustration over the shallowness of much of life, Christians sometimes sit back in their church pews, arms folded in front of them and their heads cocked, they mumble to themselves: "come on Rev., give me an experience that will make me transcend all this foolishness."

But a church and a minister are not going to cause transcendence. The transcendence will come within us as God's Spirit totally changes the way we think about life – particularly the way we think about other people.

Paul puts it like this: 'From now on, we're not going to rank anyone by human standards. We just don't think of people that way anymore. It's all because when anyone lives in Christ, they're a new creation. The old ways of thinking are gone and we become new beings.

God does this to us. God reconciled us through Christ and gives each of us a new world view which seeks to reconcile others to God and to one another. So you and I are ambassadors for Christ.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Those of us who have gone abroad and have gotten away from our American culture, upon our return, have been shocked. When we experience other cultures with more tranquility and centeredness, we are awed when we return by some of the crass things that continually bombard us (things to which we had become accustomed but see anew after being away).

<sup>5</sup> Obviously a paraphrase here to restate Paul's words in our own

This is the foundation on which Christian fellowship is built. This is the basis for our forgiveness and acceptance of others – through which our relationships can be created. No genuine or lasting community can be created that is based on social status, intellectual interests, nationality, race or mere sentiment. If a group of people unites by one or more of these factors, they may temporarily *appear* to be strong but sooner or later, pride will destroy them. All pride is antisocial. What unites you and me as a church community, and with other Christians all over the world, is this different way of viewing every person we encounter.

It is true that we are beautiful creations of God with innate worth and a preciousness that demands to be nurtured – no matter what our surface or external appearances portray. It is also true that all of us are faulty, stumbling and sometimes laughable creatures. But we are held together by an all-powerful and very personal God. God is so personal, that God entered our human sphere in Christ, lived among us and showed us exactly how we are to relate to people. If you and I treated others as Jesus did, it would radically change every day of our lives in and outside of our homes.

These are the two powerful elements that unite us: ❶ our common experience of knowing our great worth in God's eyes and ❷ personally experiencing God's unconditional forgiving love for us. These two things change the way we think about other people who are different from us. They change the way we talk with others at the water cooler, on the rooftop while we're pounding nails, at the store and in the living rooms of our relatives. Prejudice, in any form, is the exact opposite of the way Jesus taught us to live. Prejudice is outright against God's will for our lives. It is evil and it murders. Dare to argue against that around others who are familiar with the life and teachings of Jesus. Remember that Jesus said, "I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."<sup>6</sup>

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language idiom.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 6

The final test, as Paul would say it, is love. People should know we are Christians by our love.<sup>7</sup> People should come into our presence and sense, within a few minutes of being with us, that we are different.

Luke 6 People with whom we work should be saying to themselves about us that ‘this person is not caught up with all the nonsense of the culture. This person really has something. This person cares about me and is looking to take care of the fragile little me (whom I keep hidden inside – protected by what I show everyone and pretend to be.)’

This ability to see ourselves and others as equals is not merely an intellectual belief. Our ability to see ourselves and others in the light of God’s love is a dynamic that is created within us by God’s Spirit.

When Paul said that “all this is from God,” he was reminding his readers that this new outlook on life is not our own doing – we don’t come up with this on our own. It happens like this. As we stay open to the power of God’s Spirit within us, we change inside – at the very core of our personality. There’s something magic that happens within us that we do not understand but it is a reality that is so definite and visible. You and I experience **a change in our personalities** from our Christian faith.

Sure we forget about this and out of weakness we cross swords and fire off cannons of angry words. Ultimately, though, God’s Spirit prevails within us and inner change causes us to back off and reconsider and eventually apologize – moving *toward* people instead of *running away from* them. Inside of us, God’s Spirit causes us to get out of ourselves, to shove our pride out of the way and to empathize with the other person (whom we remember is as beautiful and as frail as we). We wake up to what is really important in this painfully short life. The old way of devaluing others to try to feel better about ourselves gets thrown out with the trash. A new openness and acceptance of others’ differences becomes our new way of life.

But as soon as we forget, it isn’t long before God shows up. God has a habit of breaking into our lives and overturning our antiquated prejudice. As

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<sup>7</sup> As we sing in the song.

soon as we manage to make our life safe and predictable in our stereotypes, at the expense of others, suddenly God appears and dramatically upsets and reorders things for us. As soon as we feel snug in the world’s way of attributing value to people, God’s Spirit confronts that smugness and sometimes we’re embarrassed by what we’ve been doing. God makes us feel uncomfortable with our prejudices against those who are different. At times, God suddenly breaks through the old value system and shows it for the shabbiness that it is.

When this first happens, we’re mad at God and the people whom God has used to expose these things for their shallowness. In time, though, our anger turns to humor and finally to acceptance of the new. But sometimes God has to dislodge us from what we are used to and thrusts us out on to the dance floor of the real world – because it’s real people we’re hurting by devaluing them.

This struggle to change is what the Church is about. We are continually being transformed by the love of Christ. We continue to experience times when we learn to think and act different from the rest of the world. We risk, we change and we grow.

In the process of growth and change, we find that our raging doubts can become quieted and our cries of despair are calmed. Sometimes, with our new ways of looking at people, we find ourselves standing rather uncomfortably outside of the status quo of the social group (from which we have traditionally derived our acceptance.) But remember that it is better to fit in with God than to be accepted by society. Putting it another way, it is *easier* to live with the changes that enlighten and heal than to carry around the destructive alienation and judging that causes pain for everyone.

Think of the energy we put into being angry and alienated from others. Feel the feelings you get when you become estranged and alienated. It drains the life out of you.

So it is much easier and considerably less work to forget about trying to build up *our* egos. We can forget about ourselves and be open and inviting to others who are different. When we open ourselves to others whom God has put in our lives for learning and support – more of life becomes positive and connected. When we set aside pride and we take the

time to empathize with the other person, we become channels of healing. So it is actually *easier* to be accepting of others than to be living with that driving pride and criticism that always puts us on the offensive or defensive.

Life is so much easier for us when we let the flow of good within us prevail, looking at others in this new light of God's love. You have a new outlook on life that should really make you glad to be alive. So this week, truly be yourself and be an ambassador for God – representing the new foreign policy of the kingdom of God. ■