

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

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

THE PROPERTY BROTHERS

There's a TV show on the Home and Garden channel called the Property Brothers. Every show is the same. The brothers, one a real estate expert and one a home renovation expert take some potential buyers to a home that meets their extensive wish list.

Unfortunately, the home is way more expensive than the couple can afford. And then the Property Brothers say something like:

“You have champagne tastes on a beer budget. What you need to do is buy a house that needs some renovation, and you can get the house of your dreams for a price you can afford.”

This is where the show gets interesting. The “fixers” that the brothers show the couple are very shabby. The brothers see potential, but the buyers do not.

Finally after many discouraging showings the brothers take the couple to their office and show them computer simulations of what can be done, if they are willing to wait a few months while the Property Brothers do extensive renovations.

The reaction is predictable when the couple sees the computer drawings.

“Wow! That doesn't look like the same house. I can't believe you can do that!”

The decision to buy is always difficult. They have the vision of what can be done, but they also have to believe that it can be done. They have to trust the Property Brothers to make that transformation a reality.

They have to own the vision.

TRUSTING GOD'S VISION

In a more profound way the Christian life requires the same kind of vision. Instead of seeing people as they are, we are called to see people as they can be.

Instead of focusing on all those things that are broken in our lives and in the lives of others, we focus on what can be changed by the power of God's grace.

To put it in the words of our text, instead of looking at things from a human perspective we look at things from God's perspective.

And God's perspective is revealed most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus.

Paul admits that at one time he viewed Christ from a human point of view. Paul thought that Jesus and his followers were dangerous heretics. You may remember that before Paul became a Christian, he was the chief persecutor of the church.

Paul would become the church's greatest missionary, but before that could happen his life would have to be changed completely. He would have to look at Jesus in a new way and he would have to look the world in a totally different way.

An encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus took care of that. But, it took a long time before Saul became the apostle Paul who traveled all over the world on behalf of the church.

A literal rendering of the phrase the NRSV translates "from a human point of view" is "according to the flesh." We should not look at any human being "according to the flesh."

When Paul uses the word "flesh" it refers to a power that is utterly opposed to the work of God's Spirit. In his letter to the Romans Paul tells us that to live according to the flesh is to have a mind that is hostile to God and a life that displeases God.

Living according to the flesh leads to death. (Romans 8:1-17)

When we look at people "according to the flesh", we doubt the power of God to change hearts and minds. We doubt the power of forgiveness. We think that the good news is too good to be true.

In order to change us God needs to change our vision of what is possible.

A TOTAL MAKEOVER

This is not a quick fix. It is a total makeover.

Referring to our home renovation illustration, the house we live in needs more than just a new roof and an updated kitchen.

We need a whole new house from the foundation up. We need to have our lives totally rebuilt.

Fortunately, when we are “in Christ” such a transformation is possible. Verse 17 tells us that if we are “in Christ” we are a “new creation.” The old has passed away and the new has come.

We believe such a transformation is possible for us and for others in Christ Jesus. We do not have to remain trapped by past sins and fears about the future.

Paul told the Corinthians to remember what they were before they became Christians. Not many of them were wise. Not many of them were rich and powerful.

But, God took those “foolish” and powerless Corinthians and changed them into something special. It was God’s way of demonstrating his grace and love. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

OH MY GOD

Another important part of those home renovation shows is the “reveal”. The viewer is shown footage depicting what the space looked like before the renovation. And then the viewer is shown the amazing new creation.

The owners close their eyes and then come into the new space for the first time. The most common reaction to this transformation on the part of the owner is to cry, hug the contractor and then say, “Oh my God.”

I’m not sure there’s anything divine about home renovation.

But, when it comes to human renovation that response is absolutely accurate. “Oh, my God” is the right response to the miracle of human transformation.

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

According to Paul, that’s what God in Christ is all about. He is in the human renovation business. The Creator of heaven and earth is in the process of recreating and restoring the world.

And, praise God, He has chosen to begin with us. We are God’s model homes. God has decided to start the world renovation process with us.

CHANGED FOR A PURPOSE

But, why does God do this? Are we just the lucky ones who get to have our lives changed while others are left to suffer in their brokenness?

No, we are changed for a purpose. We have been given a job to do.

We are a part of something that is bigger than just our own personal change. Paul said that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” God is making His appeal through us. We are God’s spokespeople.

Ambassadors, of course, are official representatives sent on behalf of one country to another. And the work of an ambassador is often difficult.

For example, ambassadors from our country may be called upon to live in places where the customs are strange and the resources are few.

Sometimes in these foreign countries there is even hostility toward who we are and the values we represent. As we saw in Libya ambassadors can even lose their lives.

But, there are people who are willing to take these difficult assignments because they believe the interests of our country should be represented all over the world. The existence of our embassy in a foreign land is, in a way, a statement about who we are and what we believe.

In the same way, we are the official representatives for the kingdom of God in this world. The church is a kind of embassy in a foreign land, and we are ambassadors for Christ.

We seek to embody the kingdom of God and so influence the world for Christ.

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

And what is our highest value? What is the message that we are trying to get across? It is the message of forgiveness.

We have been reconciled to God. Our sins are forgiven, and we have a new relationship with God. And we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

We are called to share the vision, to spread the good news that change is possible. A hopeless wreck of a life can be transformed by the power of God’s grace.

And that’s why we never give up on anyone.

Verse 19 spells out the message of reconciliation.

“In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

To put it another way, “God is not out to get us. God is out to save us. God is out to transform us.”

That’s the message we are called to proclaim. This good news, this vision of total

transformation is God's promise in Christ Jesus.

The world tells us, "The leopard can't change his spots."

That may be true, but the one who made the leopard can do that and more.

As Jesus put it, "All things are possible with God." (Matthew 19:26)

NEW CREATION IN THE BIBLE

The Bible is filled with stories that illustrate this hope.

The prophet Ezekiel said that just as God breathed life into creation the first time so God would breath life into his "dead" and defeated people again.

The valley of dry bones would become a host enlivened by the power of God's Spirit. (Ezekiel 37)

In the New Testament Jesus tells a story about a son who demands his inheritance, leaves his father, and wastes it all in a life of decadence. From a "human point of view" he deserved to be on the street begging for crumbs. He deserves to eat pig food for the rest of his life.

In desperation he decides to return home hoping that his father might be willing to accept him as a slave. From a "human point of view" that is all he could hope for.

But his father does not look at him from a "human point of view."

No, he looks at him from God's point of view and welcomes him home with a new robe on his back, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, and a fatted calf for dinner (Luke 15).

From the cross Jesus looks down at his enemies who had brutally abused him and ridiculed him. A crown of sharp thorns had cut into his brow. Nails had pierced his hands.

According to a "human point of view" those who had inflicted this suffering and pain on him were deserving only of anger and condemnation.

But Jesus did not look at them like that. Instead he looked at them through the eyes of grace. He saw people crushed by the weight of their own hatred.

This was no time for revenge. This was time for reconciliation.

He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

CORINTHIAN SAINTS

The church at Corinth was not a very good witness for the kingdom of God.

Instead of promoting reconciliation, they promoted division. Instead of being an example of holiness and righteousness they were an example of injustice and unrighteousness.

But, Paul never gave up on the Corinthians. He still thought that they were saints, people who had been chosen by God to proclaim His love in word and deed.

Paul believed that God would transform them. Paul believed God would recreate them, and make them into fitting vessels of His grace and glory. Paul believed that the Corinthians could be ambassadors for Christ, living examples of the Gospel.

And it was this vision of what the Corinthians *could be* that enabled Paul to be patient with them. It was this vision of what the Corinthians *could be* that motivated Paul's teaching and preaching.

I think it's vitally important that we believe in the promise of a new creation. We too need to believe that the old can pass away and the new can come. We too need to believe that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

We really are forgiven.

I say that again because sometimes we persist in looking at the world from a human point.

We look at the world from our perspective instead of God's perspective. And that discourages us.

LONGING FOR A NEW CREATION

There must come a point when we desire a new way and believe that a new way is possible. Instead of looking at the world from a human point of view we look at the world from God's point of view.

In the film, *Educating Rita*, Rita was determined to gain an education. She was determined to rise above her menial state and become an educated person.

But, it was no easy matter to move from the slums of London to the sophistication of university life. At one point she nearly gave up, but something happened that encouraged her to keep moving forward.

The family and friends were at the local pub singing along with the jukebox. She looked across at her mom and saw her crying. Her mom said,

"There must be better songs to sing than this."

The Bible tells us that there are better songs to sing. And this longing for a “better song” is more than just a desire for a better life. It is a desire for a life transformed by the power of God’s Spirit.

It is a God given recognition that we are meant for more. The Bible tells us that we groan inwardly (along with all creation) in anticipation of God’s salvation and our adoption into the family of God. (Romans 8:19-23)

We long for transformation. We long for the new life that can be ours in Christ Jesus.

Not only does God promise to recreate us; God gives us the hunger for that new creation. God gives us the desire to change.

The most powerful force in the world is the power to change a person’s perception. Patty Labelle used to sing about “a new attitude.” That’s what we need, a new attitude.

But, new attitudes are hard to come by on our own. In fact, some would say that we need divine intervention.

Fortunately such help is available. The one who created the leopard’s spots can change them. We can be changed. We can be recreated by the power of God’s salvation in Christ Jesus.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, and that changes everything. We are a new creation.

Amen.