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“Realistic”

Sermon Series: “Getting Past the Past,” No. 2

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2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2

5:11 Because we understand our fearful responsibility to the Lord, we work hard to persuade others. God knows we are sincere, and I hope you know this, too. 12 Are we commending ourselves to you again? No, we are giving you a reason to be proud of us, so you can answer those who brag about having a spectacular ministry rather than having a sincere heart. 13 If it seems we are crazy, it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit. 14 Either way, Christ’s love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. 15 He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

16 So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! 17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

18 And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. 19 For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. 20 So we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, “Come back to God!” 21 For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

6:1 As God’s partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God’s kindness and then ignore it. 2 For God says, “At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.”

Indeed, the “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation.

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[holds up vehicle’s rear-view mirror]

I have a new one this week...a different one, so I wouldn’t have to keep taking it off my bike and putting it back on. [remembering previous week, congregation laughs]

I just took this one from one of the cars in the parking lot out there... [more laughter]

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Seriously, since last Sunday, have you thought about this? Are you spending too much time staring into life's rear-view mirror...dwelling on the past, or something in your past?

Humanity's sin-nature pushes people toward that...toward dwelling on either past *goods* that we've done...or on our past *not-so*-goods.

But please understand – that sort of dwelling on the past...that's a tool of the enemy.

Satan tries very hard to keep you and me focused on *ourselves*...on either how *remarkably good* we are...*or*...on how *unforgivably bad* we are. Neither of which is true; but if he can keep our attention on *us* and on our *pasts*, he keeps us from doing much for God in either the *present* or the *future*.

Now, I was going to say here, "If you don't believe that dwelling on our past affects our ability to move ahead, when you leave here today, try to drive your car out of the parking lot while staring at the rear-view mirror and see how far you get." I was going to say you should try that, but you shouldn't...at least not in the church parking lot [*congregation chuckles*] ... or out on the road. Try it in your own driveway if you want. If you do, you'll find out: you can't go forward with any success while looking backward.

We said last Sunday that the first step in getting past the past is to *recognize* that we need to *do* it...to be *intentional* about it.

Until we recognize that we're chained to this ... [*again, holds up rear-view mirror*]  
...we'll never know what freedom is.

If we recognize we're dwelling in the past in some way, we have to, like the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3, forget it...whatever that may mean for us. Maybe we need to give up our quest for glory or credit or justification or whatever it is we think we're owed...*or*...maybe we have to *accept*...we have to *embrace* the forgiveness of God for something we did.

Whatever it is that we keep an eye on there in our mirror, with the help of God's Spirit, we have to *choose* to *forget* it, and then, as Paul says, "*strain toward what is ahead;*" move forward and do what God is calling us to do.

And doing all this is entirely *realistic*.

That's what I want to say today: getting past our past *is realistic*.

That's important to declare, because there's a lot of pop psychology in our society that tells us that we are irrevocably chained to our pasts...that our pasts will affect us for the rest of our lives, and that the most we'll ever be able to do is learn to *manage* our injuries or learn to *cope* with what we've experienced.

But I'm here to tell you...God says otherwise.

God's record on this sort of thing lets us know that He's about *more* than just putting *band-aids* on our *cuts*.

God is able to heal us fully...He's able to make people *different, fundamentally*, from the *inside out*.

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Now, does He always do that right when we ask Him to?

No, He doesn't.

Why doesn't He? In the moment we ask Him, why doesn't God take away memories, addictions, consequences, harmful feelings and pains? That's a good question that lots of people wrestle with, and I want to take a moment with it here.

The reason is because God always does what's ultimately best and most helpful to fulfilling His purposes in us and in our world...and you and I...at any given time...we don't always know exactly what those are and how they all work together.

So there are times when God does not immediately answer our prayer.

There are times when two people pray for the same thing, and God seems to answer one but not the other.

That is troubling to us, but we have to remember that our perspective is finite...limited. We can't see as far as God sees, so we can't see what good will come...what greater purpose will be accomplished, from what God **does**, or does **not** do, right now.

The life of faith is about trusting God's wisdom...God's vision...over our own...trusting Him to work out His good and perfect purposes in us and in our world.

The wisest thing we can do is to give Him room to do that.

But that means there are inconsistencies to life, doesn't it?

Three people were taken to the hospital this week – why do Jennifer Fairbairn and Timothy Thomas live, but Ron Welling die?

Why does a bullet miss President Trump but hit Charlie Kirk?

At the moment, we don't know, but we understand that God sees around life's corners and that He'll somehow redeem all this for His Kingdom purposes.

And let me say: the fact is, those who won't embrace that perspective...those are the ones who wind up **confused** and **angry** and even **enraged** about the world's apparent inequities. That's why those who reject God are so often so mad...and that also why Christians **can** be...**ought** to be...**peaceful** and **joyful**...even in **confusing** and seemingly **unjust** and **chaotic** situations.

From day to day, we may not know why God does and allows what He does and does not, but we **do** know that God **can** and **does** change people, and certainly, the Apostle Paul is a tremendous example of that.

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There were lots of problematic things in the Corinthian church, but one was a true hang up some there had on appearances...looking striking and sounding impressive and all the other marks of worldly success. They wanted all that in their spiritual leader.

Paul though, in their opinion, did not measure up.

He was not as **flashy** as they wanted him to be.

He was not as **entertaining** as they expected...

not as *convincing* as some hoped...

not as *impressive*...not the *showman* that some others were.

And the Corinthians...they let Paul know that, in their estimation, he was falling short.

That's the context of this passage...Second Corinthians chapter five – if you'd like to turn back there.

That's what's happened to Paul, and so, here, Paul is explaining to them that there is far more to him than what meets the eye, not because of anything *he's* done, but because of what Jesus has done in him.

What matters here is not *Paul*...the person they *see*.

What matters is the *new creation* that *Jesus* made *Paul* to *be*.

You see, God changes people. God makes people new; that's what matters here.

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Now, there are statements that Paul makes in this passage that are bold and provocative; they make theology fun...and challenging.

Like where he says, in verse 21, that *"believers become the righteousness of God."* What all does that mean? That's several chapters in a theology book, right there...working that out.

Or where Paul invites these Corinthian *Christians*, in verse 20 there, to, *"Come back to God;"* or when he warns them in chapter six verse 1, not to accept the gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. How are we to understand that?

That takes some figuring out, doesn't it? You see, that gives theologians work to do.

But Paul doesn't just present theological puzzles here. In verses 14 through 21, he gives us pretty clearly his theology of atonement...he explains what happens when a person is converted in Jesus and reconciled to God.

Paul says that this is how it works:

First, Jesus died for our sins.

Second, our faith in Jesus saves us from God's wrath.

Third, that faith involves dying with Jesus, which means,

Fourth, the Christian...the Christ-follower no longer sees, estimates, or judges people from a worldly point of view, but rather from Jesus' point of view.

You see, this dying with Jesus causes a deep, deep change...in us...in how we think and feel and make our determinations. We no longer operate like we used to. Now we operate like Jesus.

Now, there's a lot that could be unpacked about that, but for today, what I want us to see is that, as Paul says there in verse 17, if we are really in Christ, we are nothing less than *"a new creation; the old is gone and the new has come."*

The change God wants to do, and can do, in the life of a believer is way more than some band-aid-on-a-wound sort of thing.

This is an “*all-things-new...in us*” sort of thing.

A real change that happens in *here*...that *then*, both *immediately* and more and more over *time*, flows out of us in how we *think*, how we *see*, how we *live*, how we *treat others*, how we *understand* things like *life* and *suffering* and *blessing* and *time*.

It’s a radical change to the spring inside us that makes the water that flows out of us pure and holy and good.

That is the work that God’s Spirit does in the life of a Christ-follower.

And Paul doesn’t just talk about it here.

He speaks of this to the Roman Christians...that the old self was crucified with Jesus in order that we can live in *newness of life*.¹

To the Colossian Christians, Paul says our old selves are taken off and a new self put on.²

And of course, Paul ought to know.

Few people had more to be proud about, and also more to be sorry for, than the Apostle Paul.

But Jesus *forgave* Paul...and *remade* Paul into a person vitally instrumental in the remaking of the whole world.

So, you see, Paul could be someone totally hung up on himself, on his knowledge, on his education, on his ability to do miracles, on his capacity to understand the finest details of God and life. Paul could be someone like that.

Or, Paul could be someone immobilized by sorrow and fear because of the way he’d treated others...Christians...in days past...persecuting them, imprisoning them, torturing them...and worse.

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All that was in Paul’s rear view mirror.

But God had changed Paul, to the point that, in the same way He’d remade and reconciled Paul, Paul was now helping to remake and reconcile the rest of the world.

Paul writes there in verse 18, “*All this change...all this new life stuff, it’s all from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ. And now, God has given us this task of reconciling people to him.*” Verse 19, “*God’s given us this wonderful message of reconciliation, making us Christ’s ambassadors...pleading, ‘Come back to God!’*”

You see, that’s why it’s so important for Christians to not dwell in the past: God wants to use us to help people find new life in Jesus, and so to gain a present and a future with Him, but we’ll never do that if we’re staring backward ourselves.

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¹ Romans 6:4-6

² Colossians 3:9-10

Take it from the Apostle Paul – God is fully able to break whatever the chain is that keeps us dwelling in our past ... that keeps us staring in our life's rear-view mirror.

God wants us to ask Him ... and trust Him ... to do that, because He has this urgent work of reconciliation for us to do.

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There are lots of things that keep the Church from the work of reconciliation that Paul talks about here...squabbles within the Church...between Christians, too much concern with our own personal spiritual development...

But the big thing, it seems to me, is Christians dwelling in the past ... staring at some past version of themselves ... unable to put down the mirror.

But it's all but impossible to move forward while looking backward.

So would you let God's Spirit help you do put down the mirror?

He can, and he will.

It's not impossible.

It's entirely realistic.

God has done all that's necessary for us to be reconciled...to live at peace, not just with Him, but also with others ... and with ourselves.

We just need to trust that it's possible.

Will you do that today?

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If the Lord is pointing out something in your mirror that needs to be forgotten, why not come and leave it at the altar today?

Whatever that might be in your life, would you just bring it and lay it down here...leave it with the Savior so you can move forward with a new freedom, and you can be God's ambassador of reconciliation?

Fully.

Completely.

Unencumbered.

Unchained to something in your past.

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**Closing Prayer:** Jesus, would you invite to yourself anyone here today who needs to get past the past in some way? Would you, first of all, convince them of your deep love for them? And then, would you convince them of your power to free them...to break the chain that keeps them looking backward...bound to the past?

Holy Spirit would you come and do a freeing work in our midst, so we all might be more and more effective as Your ambassadors of reconciliation? We ask you to do this, Lord, for the good of us all, but for the good too of those who need yet to be reconciled to Jesus.

Break the chains that keep us looking backward, whatever those might be. In your name, amen.

**Song of Response:** “Jesus is Lord of All”

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

All my tomorrows ... all my past ... all my past ... Jesus is Lord of all”

If you need to leave something at the altar for Jesus to pick up and take far away, would you do that this morning. You can do that in your seat. You can do that – just quietly come on up after we dismiss. But leave ... leave ... those things that hinder you with Jesus. Leave them with Him.

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Thank you for coming to worship this morning. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen.

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