



# The Power to Change

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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I attended a Baltimore Orioles game at Camden Yards on May 2, 2001. I had been to hundreds of major league baseball games but had never caught a foul ball. That night, I caught a foul ball. Chris and I were invited to another game at Camden Yards the following evening. The Orioles were playing the New York Yankees. You know something, I caught another foul ball off the bat of Cal Ripken. I had never caught a ball in a hundred games and now I had caught two in consecutive games. Chris brought me down to earth by telling me that I knocked a considerably older man out of the way to get the ball.

Greg Van Niel did one better. He's a season ticket holder at Progressive Field where the Cleveland Indians play. The Indians offered their season ticket holders a ticket exchange so they could change seats for a game. So, on July 16<sup>th</sup> Greg was reassigned to Section 160 down the third base line.



Greg is a diehard baseball fan who never before caught a foul ball. But that day, July 16, Greg caught four baseballs by the 5<sup>th</sup> inning. He caught three with his glove and picked the fourth off the ground. The odds of catching a foul ball at a Major League game are a thousand to one. The odds of catching four foul balls in a single game are a trillion to one.

What's the moral of the story? Change is inevitable, so we might as well make the most of it; whether it's changing seats at a game or making needed changes in our lives.

Change is difficult for us. We prefer routine. We resist change. Mark Twain said the only person who likes change is a wet baby.

Let me take you back to Newton's first law of motion: "An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an outside force." In other words, objects keep on doing what they are doing unless forced to do otherwise. We resist change until the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain that accompanies change.

God can change people. Our Scripture lesson is emphatic on this very point. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone; behold, the new has come" (5:17). The word "behold" functions as a demonstrative particle to draw attention to what follows in the sentence. "Behold! The new has come!"



The concept of reconciliation is central to this Corinthians passage. It's referenced five times in a span of three verses. It means to change or restore. We learn four things about the change God brings to people through this passage.

First, God initiates reconciliation with us. We do not reconcile ourselves to God. God takes the initiative to reconcile us to Himself. We read in verse 18, "God reconciles us to himself." Verse 19 declares, "God was reconciling the world to himself." God is always the subject of reconciliation and we are its object.

Second, Jesus Christ serves as God's agent of reconciliation. Christ is God's mediator; the one who brokers our reconciliation back to God. Verse 21 spells out how this reconciliation happens: "God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God.” Jesus Christ becomes sin for us, meaning he takes into himself our penalty and judgment for sin. This is what Christ does for us on the cross. He becomes our sin-bearer. We, thereby, take into ourselves his righteousness. John Calvin called this verse “the Great Exchange.” Christ takes our sin and we take his righteousness.

## BeReconciled

3. We are the beneficiaries of Christ's reconciliation

Be reconciled to God 5.20

Third, we are the beneficiaries of Christ's reconciling work. At the end of verse 20, we read, “Be reconciled to God.” *Be reconciled* is written in passive voice meaning God is the one initiating the action. But since it also appears in imperative mood, we are also expected to do something. While reconciliation is entirely God's doing, it must be embraced on the human side. Change is possible; God can make people new, but we must be willing to receive the gift. Have you received God's gift of reconciliation? The first step in this change process is to open ourselves to God's gift of reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

Does God really change people? I can vouch for it. One advantage of being in a church for so long is witnessing the change God brings in people. Some of you are virtually unrecognizable from the time I first met you. Your attitudes and behavior are being changed by God's power working cooperatively with your will.

You may not recognize this change, especially as you battle the same persistent sins in your life. Don't become discouraged if you don't recognize this change in you. Change is a gradual process of being conformed into the image of God.

The fourth dimension of the change God brings is that we are transformed into God's reconciling people. We read in verse 18, "He gave us the ministry of reconciliation." The same thought is expressed in verse 19: "He has committed to us the message of reconciliation." Paul writes in verse 20, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

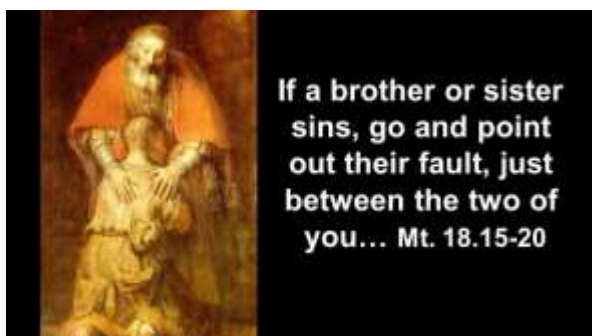
Ambassadors are expected to know the position of their government on any issue. They are not at liberty to make up policies as they go along. It's their job to represent their government fairly on the issues. The same is true for ambassadors of Christ. We're not free to make up Jesus' gospel as we go along. We're expected to know what Jesus teaches and how he expects us to live.

It's not going to work to invite people to become reconciled to God if we renege on Jesus' call to be reconciled with each other. Sometimes I wish Jesus talked about forgiveness less so I wouldn't have to talk about it so often in sermons. But there's no avoiding it. Nearly every passage deals with forgiveness. If we are serious about following Jesus, there's no getting around it. Forgiveness is one of Jesus' big ideas. Nothing undercuts God's message of reconciliation faster than our unwillingness to reconcile with each other.

Paul begins our passage by reminding us that "we regard no one any longer from a worldly point of view" (5:16). What binds us together as people of God is not a common race, common income, common politics, common jobs or anything else of the sort. What holds us together is our common allegiance to Jesus Christ.

I commend to you an excellent article on forgiveness and reconciliation I read this week. Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Church in NYC has written a helpful article

entitled “Serving Each Other through Forgiveness and Reconciliation.” He writes about our calling as Christians to seek reconciliation with people we have wronged and who have wronged us. Let’s suppose there is someone we have wronged. This is not merely conjecture on my part. There are actual people in this church and wider community to whom we owe an apology. This is hard for us to recognize since we’re waiting for the other person to take the initiative. Keller directs us to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:23-26. If in worship someone comes to mind whom we have offended, Jesus instructs us “to leave your gift at the altar, be reconciled to this person, and then come and offer your gift.” What would happen if we were to take Jesus at his word? This place would empty out in a hurry! All of us need to apologize to someone. There is so much power in the simple words, I am sorry. I apologize. Keller offers helpful counsel in his article on how to offer a sincere apology to someone.



Later in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus addresses what to do when someone wrongs us. We read in Matthew 18:15-20, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just

between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over...” The goal in such confrontation is restoration. If this person refuses your gentle rebuke, then and only then do you involve others in the dispute.

Whether we are at fault or someone else is in the wrong, it really doesn’t matter “who started it.” It’s always our move. Jesus invites us to move toward reconciliation.

Reconciliation is crucial to any church committed to God’s renewal. What good is it to preach reconciliation with God if

we are derelict in our duty to seek reconciliation with one another?

One common ingredient in great renewal movements of history is a deep sense of repentance. I don't mean a quick, breezy prayer of confession, but genuine repentance leading to forgiveness and restitution. According to one pastor's account of the 1727 Moravian revival in Germany, "The people quit judging one another because they became convinced of their own unworthiness in the sight of God." If that's what happens in revival, bring it!

Speaking about renewal movements, I was reading this week about the Welsh revival in 1906. For years, workers at the shipyards in Wales had been pilfering tools, everything from hammers to wheelbarrows. When revival broke out, the workers felt convicted to return what they had stolen. So many stolen goods were returned that the shipyards were overwhelmed. A sign was posted at a shipyard, "If you have been converted and are planning to return something you have taken, please do not do so. Keep what you have stolen. We have no more room for stolen goods."

Now we're talking—revival leading to lasting moral change is the best kind. Change our critical attitudes and hard hearts. Be reconciled to God. Be reconciled to each other. Renew me. Renew our family. Renew our church. Renew us, O Lord.

