

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

December 31, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Blessed to Bless Kids

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

I. Introduction:

A. Thank you for generously blessing

Good morning friends. I'm going to sit on a chair this morning because I had a procedure done recently on my foot and was sick this week. So it's not been my best week. But thankfully God's Word shows that He often delights to work through weak things, so let's ask Him to work this morning...

Now as I reflect on the last day of 2017, I want to say a big thank you to everyone partnering with Northwest in service and financially! In 2017, your generous living and giving allowed us together to baptize English and Spanish speakers, bring meals to people recovering from health challenges, support local and overseas missionaries, share the gospel and disciple children and teens each week and through special events, host outreach events and blood drives, provide small groups with discipleship friendships, share our facilities with neighborhood groups and ministries, help people build faith at home, invite people from our church and community to hear the gospel, grow in God's Word, and worship Him each Sunday, give nearly 100 bags of groceries each month and provide space for Meals on Wheels to distribute even more food, teach and build relationships with English as a Second Language students, send a team to Houston after Hurricane Harvey, provide a place where you use your gifts to share the good news of Jesus, serve the poor, and disciple people in our church and community, bless kids overseas through Operation Christmas Child, serve friends experiencing homelessness, provide pastoral counseling, partner with a network of churches all the way in Chile, pay for things like bus passes, utility bills, and medications for people facing challenges, and continue to partner with Encuentro, our Spanish speaking ministry, you know, just to name a few things from 2017.

B. How we get to live as blessed people

So thank you Northwest, for generously blessing! And by God's grace, let's keep it up, and even excel still more. This morning, as we look forward to our opportunities in 2018, we're going to think about living as blessed people.

So if you've got a Bible I invite you to turn to the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5. 2 Corinthians Chapter 5. 2 Corinthians is written by the Apostle Paul to the church

in the ancient city of Corinth. The ancient Corinthians, like us today, need to remember our blessings and our opportunity to pass on our blessing, and the Apostle Paul does that here in chapter 5.

II. Remember our blessings (2 Cor 5:14, 17-18, 21)

A. Christ died to make us reconciled, righteous new creations

We'll start in verse 14 of 2 Corinthians Chapter 5. Please follow along in your Bible or on the screen as I read from God's Word:

¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The first thing we see in this passage is an opportunity to remember our blessings. Look back at verse 14. Here we are reminded that Jesus loved us enough to die for us, it's a compelling love. That Jesus, the Son of God Himself, came on a rescue mission for us. He took on humanity and experienced the horrors of living in a sin stained world, even being nailed to a cross and dying for all our sins.

We'll come back to verses 15-16, but now let's jump to verse 17 as we start see what Jesus' death and resurrection accomplished. In verse 17 we see that when a person believes in Jesus, God does a new act of creation, you become a new creation in Christ.

Look at verses 18 and 19. Notice that part of a believer's newness in Jesus is reconciliation to God. I looked up "reconciled" in a Greek lexicon, and it defined it the term as "the exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship."¹

¹ *BDAG* entry for καταλλάσσω.

You see, because of our ancestor's sin, and ours, there was hostility between us and God, our relationship totally broken. I know that's not a popular thing to say in our culture, that we all stand condemned before a holy God because of our rebellion, not just the worst people, but even the best person you know. But we want to be honest here about what God's Word teaches. And the good news of God's Word is that the story doesn't stop there, that Jesus came and acted on our behalf to utterly change the relationship.

So it's not that Jesus came and now if you believe in Him and read your Bible every day and serve at church every week and finally get your act together that you'll be reconciled to God. No, as verses 18 and 19 say, everyone who trusts in Jesus is now reconciled, all the hostility removed, our sins no longer counted against us. Let's see more in verse 21, the most amazing exchange of all time. It says:

²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." Here we see the first part of our great exchange. Jesus, the One with no sin, is treated as if He committed your sins and mine. He bore the penalty of our sin on the cross, taking on God's wrath in our place. Jesus took your sins on Himself, so they are totally removed from you, as the Bible says, "as far as the east is from the west."

And not only did Jesus take our sins, He also shares His righteousness with us. As the second half of verse 21 says:

"So that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

So it's not just that your sins are removed, and now you are in some sort of neutral state before God. No, not only have your sins been placed on Jesus, His righteousness has been put on you. You are now right in God's sight because of your connection to righteous Jesus. It's like Jesus lived a perfect life in your place, on your behalf. The great exchange, Jesus took our sin and gave us ability to share in His righteousness. What a blessing, it changed everything!

B. Adoption story shows our blessing and opportunity to bless kids

And it's changing people to this very day, people like Maria and Russell Moore. He serves as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Because of Jesus' work in the Moore's lives, they sought to adopt orphaned children, as they had been adopted by their heavenly Father.

So I want us to imagine stepping into the orphanage with Maria and Russell, seeing the hard things they see and also imagining what the orphaned children experienced. Moore says the following about their time at the orphanage:

“The creepiest sound I have ever heard was nothing at all. My wife, Maria, and I stood in the hallway of an orphanage somewhere in the former Soviet Union, on the first of two trips required for our petition to adopt. Orphanage staff led us down a hallway to greet the two 1-year-olds we hoped would become our sons. The horror wasn’t the squalor and the stench, although we at times stifled the urge to vomit and weep. The horror was the quiet of it all. The place was more silent than a funeral home by night.

I stopped and pulled on Maria’s elbow. ‘Why is it so quiet? The place is filled with babies.’ Both of us compared the stillness with the buzz and punctuated squeals that came from our church nursery back home. Here, if we listened carefully enough, we could hear babies rocking themselves back and forth, the crib slats gently bumping against the walls. These children did not cry, because infants eventually learn to stop crying if no one ever responds to their calls for food, for comfort, for love. No one ever responded to these children. So they stopped.

The silence continued as we entered the boys’ room. Little Sergei (now Timothy) smiled at us, dancing up and down while holding the side of his crib. Little Maxim (now Benjamin) stood straight at attention, regal and czar-like. But neither boy made a sound. We read them books filled with words they couldn’t understand, about saying goodnight to the moon and cows jumping over the same. But there were no cries, no squeals, no groans. Every day we left at the appointed time in the same way we had entered: in silence.

On the last day of the trip, Maria and I arrived at the moment we had dreaded since the minute we received our adoption referral. We had to tell the boys goodbye, as by law we had to return to the United States and wait for the legal paperwork to be completed before returning to pick them up for good. After hugging and kissing them, we walked out into the quiet hallway as Maria shook with tears.

And that’s when we heard the scream.

Little Maxim fell back in his crib and let out a guttural yell. It seemed he knew, maybe for the first time, that he would be heard. On some primal level, he knew he had a father and mother now. I will never forget how the hairs on my arms stood up as I heard the yell. I was

struck, maybe for the first time, by the force of the Abba cry passages in the New Testament, ones I had memorized in Vacation Bible School. And I was surprised by how little I had gotten it until now. . . .

Little Maxim's scream changed everything—more, I think, than did the judge's verdict and the notarized paperwork. It was the moment, in his recognizing that he would be heard, that he went from being an orphan to being a son. It was also the moment I became a father, in fact if not in law. We both recognized that something was wrong, because suddenly, life as it had been seemed terribly disordered.”²

Wow, now like those babies in the orphanage, we were utterly helpless, guilty before God. So Jesus came on a rescue mission for us, ripping you out of something way worse than that orphanage and making you a new creation - reconciled to God, gifted with Jesus' righteousness, adopted into God's family.

And if you're here and don't yet know Jesus, I am so thankful you're here. God is ready now to adopt you too if you'll come to Lord Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead. And if you've got questions you're wrestling with as you consider the Person of Jesus, I'd love to grab a meal or coffee sometime this week and talk about your faith journey.

Now a baby is dependent on others for life, there's no such thing as a “self-made” baby, and it's the same for those who become God's children. There is no “self-made” Christian - we can't earn our way into God's family. Jesus had to do all the work, all we can do is receive this gift by faith in Lord Jesus, the very son of God.

III. Live as ambassadors (2 Cor 5:15-16, 18-20)

A. We are blessed ambassadors

And like Maria and Russell Moore, once adopted into God's family, we get to live as ambassadors for Jesus. Listen to how verses 18-20 say it:

¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/when-russell-moore-truly-understood-abba-father-for-the-very-first-time/> Accessed 12/22/17.

Here Paul is not only talking about himself as an apostle, we see that because he uses plural pronouns in these verses. He says, “God gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation... has committed to *us* the message of reconciliation... *we* are therefore Christ’s ambassadors.”

Paul is talking about the people of the Corinthian church, and Christians here today, being Christ’s ambassadors. And if you are not familiar with the Bible books of 1st and 2nd Corinthians, the Corinthian church was no model church. They had a lot of struggles and sin issues, they were the kind of church that showed you more what not to do than what to do. And yet Paul describes this church as Christ’s ambassadors.

That’s encouraging to me, it means that no matter our failures, there is no need to condemn ourselves. Rather, as we marvel at how God gives us yet another chance to serve Him and how Jesus really did pay for all our sins, we are inspired to live for Jesus and share the good news with others that Jesus can forgive all their sins too, that He is the God of second chances.

Jesus has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation, we are Christ’s ambassadors. Now an ambassador of a government typically lives in a foreign country and represents his or her home country. The ambassador is a diplomatic agent working on behalf of his or her home government, a local presence in a foreign land speaking on behalf of the home country.

And every Christian has this amazing opportunity to serve as Christ’s ambassador! You don’t have to be a Christian for a certain amount of time, or get a certain amount of theological education, or have great people skills, we all serve as Christ’s ambassadors. We get to invite people to join us as part of the worldwide, eternal family of God.

B. Ambassadors to kids in our world

Now as we think about serving as Christ’s ambassador, we could apply this passage in lots of directions. So to narrow things down, in the spirit of the adoption illustration, we’ll focus on serving as ambassadors to kids.

Let me start by speaking with the kids and youth here. If you know Jesus, you are already Christ’s ambassador to the kids at your school, on your team, in your neighborhood. You can pray for them and share the good news of Jesus with them. You have God’s Spirit working in you, and its not some junior version of the Holy Spirit, God can work through you now to bless the kids around you in Jesus’ name.

And the same is true for the adults, whether it's blessing a kid who lives near you, or blessing your friend's kid, or blessing your kid's friends. You have opportunities to love kids, to serve them, to share the gospel with them, to invite them to church.

And the opportunities aren't limited to kids you are naturally in relationship with. You could get involved with a local program tutoring a child. Or volunteer with a pregnancy resource center that supports families with unplanned pregnancies. Or you could sponsor an orphan overseas through a Christian ministry. Or start a ministry here that serves kids. Or support a Christian teacher who has the amazing and challenging opportunity to represent Jesus to so many kids on a daily basis. Thank you teachers.

And perhaps someone has even thought about adoption, like the Moore's, or about fostering a child, and you sense God moving in you now to begin that process. If that's you this morning, I'd love for you to share that with me afterwards so I can pray.

Now being an ambassador to kids is often difficult and messy, and you can always come up with reasons why it's not a good time to serve the kids of the community and church. And that's why verses 14-16a are so important, they say:

¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.

The love of Jesus is so important to being an ambassador to kids. As verses 14 and 15 say, His sacrificial love compels us to no longer live for ourselves, but to instead live for our Savior, who has given us so, so much.

As it has been said, "Christ died our death for us that we might live His life for Him." In other words, Jesus didn't gift us with so much blessing so we could just hoard it for ourselves. Rather than live for ourselves, we now live as Jesus' representatives. And as we do, as verse 16 says, we no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. We can view kids as God does, that every child has eternal significance as one made in God's image: the unborn child at risk of being aborted, that child you know that rubs you the wrong way, the teen in a juvenile detention center, every child here on Sunday morning, every child not here on Sunday mornings from the surrounding neighborhoods. They all matter deeply to God, and we have the opportunity bless them as we represent Jesus.

C. Pass on your blessing to kids

So our application this morning is to pass on your blessing to kids. Now we've all got different gifts, vocations, family situations, energy levels, and so on, so passing on your blessing to kids will look different for each of us. God will not lead everyone to get involved in the same way or to the same extent. But we can all prayerfully consider how God would have us pass on our blessing to the kids around us as Jesus' representative and then act as He leads.

D. Ambassadors to the kids of our church family

And we have the opportunity not only to bless the kids in our world, but the kids in our church family. Every Sunday there are many kids in this building who do not yet know Jesus, some even come from families where their mom or dad does not know Jesus. And every Sunday there are kids here just starting their journey with Jesus who need help taking "next steps".

And you and I serve as Christ's ambassadors to them. And I am so thankful that so many of you take this sacred calling seriously! Together, let's be a church where the kids feel that we are so glad that they're here, not only when they're behaving as we'd like, but also when they're not at their best. A church family that feels warm, loving, gracious to kids.

And let's be a church where every child keeps hearing the incredible news that they are invited to join God's family through Jesus' work. And let's be a church that believes God can do great things through our kids. Thank you Northwest for investing in children here in ways that will make an impact for decades to come, all the way into eternity.

For when those investments aren't made, the results are concerning. Studies have found that over 40% of kids in youth group fail to stick with their Christian faith throughout college. To find out why, researchers at the Fuller Youth Institute conducted a six-year longitudinal study of hundreds of church kids to discover why many leave the church and what similarities there are among the kids who stay. Their findings are in the book *Sticky Faith* and one of the key findings is that kids not connected to the broader church were more likely to leave.

In contrast, kids and teens who formed meaningful relationships with the adults serving in their ministries and who stayed for both services on Sunday morning so that they could connect with the broader church through participating in the worship service or volunteering alongside adults in places like the children's ministry or food pantry, were far more likely to stay in church through their college years. Because of these findings, the researchers recommend that

families and churches help each young person be surrounded by five Christian adults who build a relationship with them and pray for them.³

And if you'd like to be one of those five adults serving as Christ's ambassador for some kids or teens, talk with Landry Saathoff, our Youth Ministry Leader, or Pam Jenness, our Children's Ministry Coordinator about serving. We're not that large of a church, so to take advantage of our amazing opportunities to make faith investments in kids, more of us need to serve.

And if you are unable to serve in Sunday School, you have a role to play - praying for our children's and youth ministry volunteers and kids, getting to know some of the kids of the church and warmly greeting them by name, and so on.

For every adult believer has the privilege of representing Jesus to the next generation. As God's Word says, we are a family, brothers and sisters who are to love everyone in the church, including kids,⁴ who are to use our gifts to help build up the body of believers, including kids,⁵ and who are to participate in passing on the faith to the next generation.⁶

That's why when we have a baby dedication, Pastor Dave or I ask the whole congregation to commit to love the child being dedicated, show them what it means to be a Christ-follower, and make our church a place of good, wholesome, and holy memories for them. It's because God's Word says we all have a role to play as His ambassadors to kids.

And like an ambassador for a country, we communicate a lot about the one we serve, whether it's accurate or not. If the American ambassador to Italy is talking with the Italian government, the look on his or her face communicates something about what the American government thinks, as does his or her word choice, and tone of voice, and so on. It all communicates because the ambassador is the physical representative there in the foreign country.

And we are Christ's ambassadors, His local, physical representatives to the kids of this church and community. You are the look on His face to these kids, you are His tone of voice, so let's make sure we represent the love of Jesus to these kids. And on top of that you are the one

³ http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/interview/KaraPowell_Youth_Ministries_that_Stick_Interview_2.pdf. Initially accessed online on 2/18/16.

⁴ 1 Pet 1:22, 1 John 2:9-11, 3:10-11, 4:19-20.

⁵ Eph 4:11-16

⁶ 2 Tim 2:2, Titus 2:1-8, Matt 28:19-20.

He makes His appeal through. As verse 20 says, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” But only if you take advantage of that sacred opportunity.

IV. Conclusion

A. Remember our blessing

So may we remember our blessing in Jesus. Our Savior living a perfect life in our place, dying for our sins, and rising from the dead, so that we could be new creations in Christ, reconciled to God, and counted as righteous through Christ’s work. Once alienated orphans, now adopted by God Himself into His worldwide family. May we wonder, marvel, and fall on our knees in worship.

B. Pass on your blessing to kids

And as verse 14 says, may Christ’s love compel us to no longer live for ourselves. Rather, let’s live adoring our Savior Who sacrificed so much to gift us with so much. Adoration leading to gratitude for the opportunity to pass on our blessing to kids.

Jesus will help us do this as we look to Him. For we are not called as Christ’s ambassadors because we are so wonderful, He calls us because He is wonderful and help us live out this calling.

When the Moore’s left the orphanage to return to America, little Maxim let out a guttural yell. As Moore said it, “On some primal level, he knew he had a father and mother now.” Brothers and sisters, you have a heavenly Father now, and you can cry out to Him when it’s hard to be His ambassador to kids. You can cry out to Him when you fail and receive forgiveness and another chance. He’ll gift us with His Spirit, His Word, and His church to help us to live out this sacred calling. Let’s pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love the Lord.