

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / May 8, 2022 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
2 Corinthians 5-7: The Rewards of Costly Service
Inspiration for Service (2 Corinthians 5:11-21)

A trip to places where Paul served raises a question

Good morning. Happy Mothers' Day to all the moms and all who serve as spiritual mothers! We so appreciate you and want to pray for you now...

Towards the end of college, I had the privilege of visiting Italy and Greece with a few friends from church. We visited a few places where the Apostle Paul, an early church leader, once served.

That included Ancient Corinth, where Paul served for over a year and where his New Testament letters of 1st and 2nd Corinthians were sent. Here's a pic, some years and some pounds ago ☺ of me and my friend Matt in Ancient Corinth. Yes, I am "Bible-nerding" out there, pretending to be Paul, preaching the good news to Matt, who ponders the claims of Jesus. ☺

As I walked in some places where Paul did, like Rome, Athens, and Ancient Corinth, and as I even posed as Paul for a few pictures, I began to wonder, "What inspired Paul to sacrifice so much to serve Jesus?"

If you're not familiar with Paul's story, he endured much serving Jesus and people including relational attacks, spiritual attacks, public beatings, imprisonments, an attempted stoning, a murder plot, shipwrecks, going without food and water, inadequate clothing, and a chronic pain he describes as a thorn in his flesh.

What inspired Paul to live such a heroic life of sacrificial service even with all these costs? And also a life of enormous impact that's been spreading for nearly 2,000 years, and that speaks to our lives today.

Relevance: We want to serve well

I think there's something in each of us that wants to make a difference with our lives, to serve well: blessing people we care about and making a real impact. And something in each of us that wants to live heroically, to continue living out our intention even as we face

obstacles. And that when it's time to sacrifice, we have the courage to pay the price for the greater good.

If you're a follower of Jesus, there's also something in you that wants to serve in a way that pleases your heavenly Father, experiencing moments of His affirmation and hearing one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your Master!"

Orienting to God's Word

Paul shares what inspires his service in the New Testament letter of 2nd Corinthians, and it has much to say about our service today.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5. Or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Now some false teachers had infiltrated the Corinthian church, seeking to undermine Paul's service there. They did so by accusing Paul of being a false teacher with self-serving motives. So Paul addresses the false accusations to help the Corinthian church continue to be confident in Paul's teaching and equipped to answer the critics.

Teaching: Paul is inspired to serve...

not from selfishness (5:11-13) – To this end, Paul clarifies that his inspiration to serve does not come from selfishness, starting in verse 11 of 2nd Corinthians 5. **(5:11-13)**

¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are "out of our mind," as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

In these verses Paul clarifies that he and his ministry team do not serve out of self-interest. Paul's team has a real reverence for God, as verse 11 says. And whether their actions are considered irritational or rational, they serve for God and the good of people, as

verse 13 makes clear. So having clarified, in response to the critics, that they do not serve from selfishness, Paul now shares why his team serves.

by Jesus' compelling love (5:14-15) – It begins in verse 14... **(14-15)**

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.

Why does Paul serve? Paul is inspired by what Jesus has done for Paul and for the world: Christ dying for all and rising again.

On the cross, Jesus chose to experience an utterly humiliating, public, brutal, traumatic, torturous criminal's death, all while stripped bare, mocked, and appearing defeated by His enemies.

But then Jesus rose from the dead, defeating sin and death, to offer you and everyone you love the solution to our deepest needs through faith in Him. Jesus not only died in your place and rose for you, as awesome as that is, but He also died and rose for everyone you love. He died for your cherished family and friends and for the world.

This love of Christ compels Paul, present tense, continually. So Paul doesn't just remember about Jesus' love on Sunday mornings with the church and then forget about it the rest of the week; no.

The sacrificial, exceptional, selfless love of Christ is so compelling to Paul that Paul serves God and people with the same selfless abandon that Jesus did all week.

Like Paul, this compelling love of Jesus is something for us to return to every day this week. I am thankful that many here have individual and communal practices that help you remember Jesus' compelling love all week long.

Paul is compelled to serve and share about Jesus, whatever affliction might come his way. This wasn't a matter of reason, or duty, it is a matter of love, as Paul is inspired to serve by Jesus' compelling love.

The love of the One Who gave Himself up for us. Jesus died for Paul, to give Paul life, and so Paul has died to a selfish life and instead lives for Jesus. As verse 15 shows, this

is to be our way too. Those who live, which is all who believe in Jesus, should no longer live for themselves but for Him Who died for them and was raised again.

by new creation perspective (5:16-17) – In verses 16 and 17, Paul shares some consequences of a life serving our Savior. **(16-17)**

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!

A consequence of Paul's team living for Jesus is that they no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. The world says that Jesus is not God, and says to live mostly for yourself, and says that some people don't really matter all that much.

But Jesus demonstrated the high value of everyone through His death for all. Paul is primarily talking about his team in this passage, but in verse 17 he again expands the discussion to include anyone in Christ.

So all of Jesus' followers are to no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. Our old view, the one we had before faith in Jesus, about Jesus, our lives, and other people is to be gone.

Now for the time being, the old, broken way still persists in our world, and we still struggle with it. Too often I do not view Jesus, myself, or the importance of all people as I should. But if you know Jesus, you are already a new creation, with a new way of viewing Jesus, yourself, and others that leads to new actions.

To quote a Christian article I read recently, "Easter was the day the revolution began. Christ's resurrection set in motion a revolt against the old order of things – an overthrow of a broken world ruled by death and all its ills."¹

Of course, the fullness of the new creation will only come after Jesus returns, but there's a sense in which we participate already in the new creation. Today we are empowered by God to revolt against the old, broken order of things as we live lives of self-denying service filled with Christ-like concern for others. In God's power, we can give

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hope-life-death/>. Accessed online 5/3/22.

people a glimpse of the new creation today as we live lives of loving, self-denying service that value everyone, whatever their politics, race, nationality, sexuality, socioeconomics, or beliefs.

by reconciliation, as Jesus' ambassador (5:18-21) – Not only do we get to give a glimpse of the new creation as we serve, we also get to share about it, as Paul shares in verse 18. **(18-21)**

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

Like the first creation, the new Creation and all its blessings come from God. Paul is probably still referring mostly to his team, but verse 18 appears to again expand the discussion to all Christians, since we are all reconciled to God through Christ.

Because of the death of Jesus in our place, God refuses to count our many failures against us. God forgives you and me over and over, our sins are never counted against us, praise be to God.

Having reconciled us to Him, God now commits to us this glorious ministry of reconciliation. We're entrusted with being Jesus' ambassadors. Not because we are wonderful, but because He is wonderfully gracious.

Like an ambassador for a country, we communicate about Who we serve. If the American ambassador to China is with the Chinese government, their words and tone communicate, as do their actions, and what they post online, and the kind of lifestyle the ambassador leads. It all communicates about America because the ambassador is a physical representative of America there in China. It's the same for us as we represent Jesus.

While the stakes are high for the American ambassador, they're not eternal. But as Jesus' ambassadors, we have the potential for eternal impact as we serve and share His good news in love, as a beautiful picture of our beautiful Savior. We are Jesus' ambassadors in

our home and neighborhood, at school and work, with friends and family and acquaintances, when we're getting things done and when we're at play.

I want to grow in this, to be a better ambassador for Jesus than I have been so far. Each week brings us all opportunities to represent Jesus, as His ambassador.

I wonder what it would have been like to walk ancient Corinth with Paul, hearing him talk about being Jesus' ambassador. Imagine if we were all there in ancient Corinth. We meet Paul, who had been called Saul, and he tells us:

“You know, I used to persecute followers of Jesus. They feared the name of Saul. I was there when Stephen was stoned to death for serving Jesus, heartily approving of his brutal murder.

I even traveled around to arrest and punish Christians in as many cities as I could, making murderous threats against them as hate filled my heart. In my pride, I thought I was doing God's work as I persecuted Jesus' followers. I was the worst of sinners.

If I had been at Jesus' trial and crucifixion, I would not have been among the women weeping and tending to Jesus. I would have been among the mockers, striking Jesus while asking Jesus to prophesy about who just hit Him.

I would have laughed when people sarcastically said, “Hail, king of the Jews” and spat on Him and struck Him. I would have been among those mocking, “He saved others, but He cannot save Himself! Let's this “Messiah” come down from the cross, that we may see and believe.”

One day, as I travel to arrest more Christians in Damascus, a light suddenly shines around me from heaven. I fall down, and hear a voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

I ask, “Who are you, Lord?” He replies, “I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting...”

Trembling in fear and astonishment, I ask, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Jesus says, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

The divine light has blinded me, so they lead me by hand into Damascus. In darkness, for three days I eat and drink nothing, awaiting my fate for so offending the Lord of all.

Do you understand how hostile I was to Jesus' followers and so ultimately to Lord Jesus Himself? With the way we think, we'd say, if you're spending your life traveling from place to place to persecute as many of God's people as possible, and you're mocking God's Son, then you're out. You're paying for your own sins; God will rightly judge you for all your wrong.

Next Ananias, a follower of Jesus, the kind of man I came to Damascus to arrest, comes to me, his enemy, and embraces me and call me, "Brother Saul".

Then Ananias says, "The Lord Jesus... has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately I receive my sight, get baptized and spend time with followers of Jesus.

I learn about the grace of God, the magnitude of the bill that Jesus paid for me on the cross. That all my judgment for seeking to arrest and kill Jesus' followers, and for every other evil thing I've done, that rather than all that judgment come down on me, Jesus had it come down on Him instead.

Jesus took my place, the place I deserved to be, on that cross, taking my failures to His account.

You see, Jesus wasn't only dying for the sins of people like those women tending to Him on the cross. Jesus was also dying for the jeering onlookers and the abusive persecutors, like me.

Jesus, the One with all glory, chose to lose His glory on the cross so that I could share in His glory. Jesus willingly pays that price to get me back to God and make me a new creation.

Having reconciled me, I marvel that Jesus now entrusts me, former persecutor of His church, with His ministry of reconciliation, to be Jesus' ambassador.

So I've been serving Jesus ever since, seeing many join me in following Him. Yes, others have rejected me, and I've suffered along the way.

But Jesus has made me Who I am through His compelling love. I am His ambassador, I cannot be anything else, whatever suffering comes.

So now I tell my brothers and sisters in Jesus, like you:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And 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.

So 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. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 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. 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. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Next Step and Interview

Amen. This morning we've seen Paul's inspiration for service. Our next step is to join Paul in serving as Jesus' ambassadors. That's how we can apply this passage to our lives: inspired to serve as Jesus' ambassadors.

As we represent Jesus, think of the impact God will bring through our lives as we look forward to hearing one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your Master!"

To help us serve as Jesus' ambassadors, here in our context, I'd like to invite Jennifer Robison to join me up front. Jennifer will share about serving as Jesus' ambassador, as we think about applying this passage to our lives.

Of course, what it looks like for Jennifer to serve as Jesus' ambassador won't be exactly the same as it looks for you, but it helps to hear our brothers and sisters' stories. Give us a sec as we get things set up for Jennifer...

Thanks for sharing, Jennifer, and Happy Mother's Day.

Share with us a little about yourself and how you're involved serving people.

I've been a member here at Northwest for about 33 years. For the last six years I've coordinated our English as a Second Language ministry. Most recently I've had the blessing of being involved in our Welcoming Well group, which is focused at the moment on one recently arrived Afghan refugee family. Along with others, I'm involved in teaching the mom English and also meeting other practical needs, like taking her to the doctor, etc.

What does it mean for you to be Jesus' ambassador?

When I first started college, I actually entertained the idea of being a diplomat and serving as an ambassador or consul in a foreign country. I made other career choices, but as a Christian, I am, in fact, today an ambassador for Christ. An ambassador represents her own country, but she lives in another country. She learns all she can of the country's institutions, history, and culture and often grows to deeply love its people. Jesus came and lived among us, trading heaven's unfathomable joys for the pain of an earthy existence and even death. He loved all kinds of people, like the Samaritan woman, a tax collector, a Roman centurion, Mary Magdalene. Having faith in Him, choosing to follow His way, means we are inspired to follow his example. More than inspired, we are compelled!

As God has slowly transformed me into His new creation, I have found myself increasingly delighted in getting to know and trying to serve people that I might be tempted to regard, from a worldly perspective, as not worthy or maybe so different from me as to be feared or disliked. I'm more and more convinced that our message of reconciliation must be more than words, lest we be only a noisy gong or clashing cymbal. The church must woo people into His kingdom by giving them glimpses of the love, redemption, and reconciliation that will come to ultimate fruition when Jesus returns.

There may be people here ready to really begin representing Jesus, but they're not sure how to start. So would you share how you got started, and also what led you to serve as you do today?

Well, first of all, I think our focus needs to be on our own relationship to Christ. Our value, and God's love for us, does not depend on how much we accomplish for God. Our goal has to be to live life with God, not just for God. Honestly, I'm still a bit mystified about what that means, but I think it's crucial. Our passion, our mission must not be our end all, it must not become our idol. We love because God first loved us. Our service to him starts with our relationship with him.

I grew up in Venezuela, so I was blessed to learn a second language as a child. I have always been interested in other cultures, fascinated by how cultural norms and perspectives can vary so widely from group to group. When we first came to San Antonio, I discovered that I really enjoyed teaching English as a Second Language and GED classes in a community ed program. Later in life I got a master's in teaching ESL and taught at UTSA. After I retired a

few years ago, I volunteered in another church's ESL program and loved it!! So, I thought – let's do that at our church! Over the years, I've helped in youth group, taught kid's SS, etc., all of which were good experiences. But finally, in teaching English as a ministry and now also in working with our refugee family, it feels like I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to do, and there's such joy in it!

1 Peter 4:10 says "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

God gave me the blessing of being raised in another country, which led to my interest in languages, cultures, etc. and, it took a while, but that eventually led to what I'm doing now. So, if you're seeking to find your place of service, my advice is to jump in, try different things. Love others wherever you see a need. And look particularly for ways to serve that seem to fit your gifts and that stir your heart.

Would you join me in thanking Jennifer for sharing?

Jennifer, would you please pray for us to be the ambassadors that Jesus wants us to be?

Heavenly Father, you taught us to pray for your kingdom to come, and that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We know that your kingdom will come to full fruition when Jesus returns, and all of your creation will be renewed, and all relationships will be made right. But in the meantime, as we live in this broken world, renew our faith. Thank you for your love for us. As we contemplate your sacrifice on our behalf, deepen our love for you / and for all people made in your image. Show us, Lord Jesus, how each of us is to participate in the new creation you inaugurated when you came to live with us, how we can bring glimpses of your kingdom into this world. Equip and guide us as we seek to be your ambassadors, calling those around us to be reconciled to you.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, as His ambassadors.