

Persuaded by the Gospel

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

By [Ed Hartman](#)

Let me invite you to take your Bible and turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. As you're turning there, let me give you a brief review of where we've been over the last several Sundays and try to bring you up to speed. As Greg Meyer spoke to our kids, nearly preaching the whole Sunday evening sermon, thank you! We've talked about the fact that if you belong to Christ you're not a guest in this world; you're not a host. You are saved to serve. And if you are going to live your life as a host then you'll discover that this Gospel that you've claimed as your own will take you where you do not wish to go, this Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become, this Gospel will strip you of what you do not wish to let go, but this Gospel will give you what you cannot live without. And since all of that is true, then the question comes to this - are you persuaded by this Gospel? Really. Are you really persuaded by this Gospel? And secondly, is the way you live your life persuading others to that same conclusion? That's what I'd like us to unpack this evening as we look at this passage.

Let's read together 2 Corinthians chapter 5, beginning in verse 11:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their

trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is God's Word. Let's go to Him in prayer.

Holy Spirit, would You please have mercy upon us and enable us to understand and to believe the truth, to celebrate it, and to be transformed by it? This is something only You can do. We trust You to do so as You have promised. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Evangelism As A Process

I've been reading a book this past week called, "The Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert," subtitled, "An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith." It's a memoir of sorts by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. Rosaria was a professor of English at Syracuse University. She was a tenured professor. She was the head of the undergraduate studies, developed all of the curriculum for all undergrad students, and she was a lesbian activist living with her partner - militant in her views, all of the appropriate bumper stickers on the back of her car, all the right committees, all of the right perspectives. Her specialty at the university was, in her words, "Queer Theory," which was under the department of Gay and Lesbian Studies. In 1999 she published an article that was a critique of a major Christian ministry, one with which you would be familiar. It was published in the newspaper and the response was unexpected. She received just a flood of mail, so much mail that she put two large boxes in her office up against the wall. One was for fan mail, and there was a lot of it; the other box was for, as you can imagine, hate mail, and there was a lot of it. Most of it coming from people who attend churches just like ours.

One letter in particular she didn't know what to do with and she read it and reread it and read it again, and not really sure what to do with it, she tried to throw it away, not once but three different times. And each time after throwing it away she went back to the recycling bin to retrieve it because the letter was written by Pastor Ken Smith who was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Syracuse and in the letter he didn't agree with her nor did he argue with her; he just asked her some questions. This is what she wrote about the questions he asked: "He encouraged me to explore the kinds of questions that I admire, like, 'How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know that you're right about this? Do you believe in God?' He didn't argue with my article; he asked me to explore and defend the presuppositions that undergirded it. I didn't know how to respond to Ken's letter but I found myself reading it and rereading it." And then later she says, "It may seem strange to you, but no one had asked me those questions

before or led me to ask them of myself. They were reasonable questions but not the sort of questions that post-modern professors toss around at faculty meetings or at the local bar." I should say you wouldn't agree with everything you'll read in this book but as Carl Trueman writes in one of the recommendations, he learned from everything she writes.

Here's the point. She finally called up this professor - sorry, the professor finally called Ken Smith and said, "I'm curious. Why did you write me the letter?" And he responded by saying, "You know, I'd rather answer that question at my dinner table. How about coming over for supper? My wife will cook. She's a great cook. And we'll talk about that." And she came - really short haircut, all the bumper stickers, with some measure of uncertainty about what she would find. That dinner wasn't a confrontation; it was an opportunity to begin a dialogue. And neither Rosaria the professor nor Ken the pastor had any idea of how long that dialogue would take, but it was two years of getting together just to talk and answer questions, look for answers to questions before she began to understand what this Gospel was all about that she was being so critical of. And in the book she writes that in a miraculous way the Holy Spirit drew her to Himself and she left her lesbian partner, had to leave the position she treasured at the University of Syracuse, down the road married a man, and is the mother of several children teaching at a different university.

I begin with that story because it so well illustrates the difference between evangelism that looks for a product and evangelism that's willing to go through a process. We're accustomed to the product. We want to present the Gospel and press people to make a decision when most people you and I talk to are going to come to faith in Christ through a process that's often extended and even protracted. You look at the apostles. There's only one of the apostles who had a point-in-time conversion experience - that's Paul on the Damascus Road. The other eleven who continued walking with Jesus, when did they come to faith in Christ? Even at the end of Jesus' ministry as Peter says, "Never Jesus, you're never going to..." Jesus says, "Get behind Me, Satan! You don't understand yet." We don't really know exactly when the light bulbs turned on for the individual disciples. We know that after the resurrection they finally understood, though they were fearful. It took a while, didn't it? Why would it not take a while for us to engage people in the Gospel and why would we not be willing to engage the process?

Jerram Barrs, in his book, "Heart of Evangelism," makes this one statement. He says, "Whether we recognize it or not, our lives are always persuasive." Our lives persuade those around us toward a specific conclusion, but the question is, "What conclusions are being drawn in the process of the people among whom we live - they're watching our lives and our lives intersecting with theirs - what conclusions are being drawn?" And this is why I came to this passage because this passage speaks of persuasion, not persuasion that's just point-in-time but persuasion that's willing to go through the process. Look at verse 11 in 2

Corinthians 5. Paul says, "Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others." I want us to think about that. Persuasion that's not looking to win an argument but persuasion that's willing to go through the process of living as a host and loving people toward the Lord Jesus. And so in the time we have remaining I want us to look at the call to persuasion, the goal of persuasion, the motive of persuasion, and finally the power for this kind of persuasion. I'm going to do that rather quickly.

I. The Call To Persuasion

Persuasion, the call to it - that's what this passage points to very clearly. It is the New Testament design. If you look at Paul's ministry throughout his missionary journeys, you see it over and over again. Acts 18:4, for example, "Every Sabbath, Paul reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." Acts 19 verse 8, "Paul entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God." Acts 28, "Paul explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he said but others would not believe." This is why the theme verse for our mission conference this year, and you've seen it on the front cover of the prayer booklet, is from Ephesians 6 where Paul says, "Pray also for me that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak." Again, not to win arguments, but to engage people in the process of slowly, carefully being persuaded by the Holy Spirit as the blindness is removed, as the deadness is stripped away, and the Holy Spirit does what the Holy Spirit alone can do. This is the New Testament design.

II. The Goal of Persuasion

Reconciliation

The goal of persuasion? Well I see that in verses 18 to 20 where five times you find the word "reconcile" in various forms. Look at it in verse 18 and following. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God who, through Christ, reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." That's the goal, and the goal is to be reconciled not by our own efforts but by the Gospel being embraced and

treasured as our very own.

The Gospel In An Elevator

Let me pause for a moment and ask you a question. If I were to ask you to define the Gospel, pull out a piece of paper and write it out, what would you say? Or let me make it a little bit tighter. If you were in an elevator and someone was there with you and they saw you holding a book in your hand and they said, "Huh, I saw that book on the Oprah Club. What's that book about?" Could you give them a quick answer about the book that you're reading between the ground floor and the eighth floor, or whatever floor you get off? You probably could, couldn't you? That's an elevator speech. Could you give an elevator speech about what the Gospel is? Could you put it in ten words or less? Twenty words or less? Here's my seven word answer; my elevator speech. What is the Gospel? God's amazing rescue from my triple crisis. What's my triple crisis? Well, if you look at the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation, every problem that we encounter in this world that exists under the curse that came through Adam comes under three categories. One, I have a rebellious heart. Two, I have a guilty record. Three, I have a broken life.

My Rebellious Heart

Let me tell you what, everyone I've ever talked to about the Gospel, and this is usually the framework that's somewhere in my head when I'm talking with people about the Gospel, those three headings are somewhere, and no matter where you begin it will take you to the other two. I have a rebellious heart. My life does not work out the way I want it to. As a matter of fact, as soon as I see a law or a new rule, I'm already thinking about how to get around it. Genesis chapter 6, right before the flood we read, "God looked and he saw that all the thoughts and all the inclinations of the heart of man were only evil all the time." Let me tell you what - it's true of my heart and it's true of yours. Even in the very best of our moments, the very best of what we offer, is offered with mixed motives which is an offense against God. Because somewhere in the mix I'm thinking, "How does this affect me?" I have a rebellious heart.

My Guilty Record And Broken Life

Secondly, I have a guilty record. I'm a sinner; I deserve to be sent to hell. I've not met God's standard, not even close. And third, I've got a broken life. You don't have to look very far, in my life or in yours, to find the brokenness. I've not had anyone ever argue that point. They simply nod, "Yeah, things are not the way they ought to be - not in me, not around me. Everything I thought would be good, it withers. Got married; got divorced. Had kids, they rebelled. Got a job; I'm miserable." Fill in the blanks. It's a broken world and the triple crisis is right there. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the well-known physician, assistant physician to the Queen of England who became a well-known pastor in England put it this way. He said,

“The worth of a medicine is determined by the disease from which it cures us.” There’s no point in showing the cure until you first convince someone of the disease that they have, and it’s an eternally terminal disease.

The Gospel Solution

So having looked at the triple crisis, here’s the solution of the Gospel. This is what we proclaim. In exchange for my rebellious heart, God offers a new heart. He removes the heart of stone and He gives us a heart of flesh. He writes His law on our heart and He inclines us to follow and obey. He does the miraculous. He adopts us as His own. In exchange for the guilty record, God offers me a perfect record. That’s what you see in verse 21 of this chapter. It, to me personally, and I say this cautiously, this to me is the most important verse in the Bible. It’s the target of everything in the Gospel. I’ve memorized it in the New International Version. I encourage you to memorize it because you’ll use it often. “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we would become the righteousness of God in Christ,” meaning God treats Jesus the way my sin deserved to be treated. That’s the cross. He was punished in my place. And now He treats me as Jesus alone deserves to be treated.

If your Gospel only means that Jesus has died on the cross to forgive you of your sin, you only have half the Gospel because God the Father still demands perfection. He says, “Be perfect as I am perfect. Be holy as I am holy. Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. Be holy, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.” If you’re like me, you have to hang your head and say, “I’m not perfect and no one’s perfect, so who meets the standard? How do we get in with God?” We don’t need just forgiveness; we need perfection. And that’s what we call righteousness. So God the Father credits the righteousness of His Son, Jesus, by the power of His Holy Spirit to us, so that when He looks at me He not only says, “You’re forgiven,” He says, “You’re perfect in every way,” and He smiles and He rejoices over me with singing.

In exchange for a rebellious heart He gives us a new heart, in exchange for a guilty record He gives us a perfect, in exchange for a broken life - what does He give us? New life. That’s what verse 17 says. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come.” In Revelation 21, Jesus makes all these future looking promises and then suddenly He turns to the present tense and He says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” If you belong to Christ, He is right now in the process of making all things new. I need to hear that every day when I wake up and I look at myself in the mirror and I think, “I don’t know if I can do this again. I feel so bad about how I failed yesterday. God have mercy.” And by the power of the Holy Spirit He says, “All things new. We get to start over again today. And I am with you and I am for you and if I am for you no one can be against you, not even you.”

That’s the Gospel. That’s the message to which we are persuading others. The

only question is, are you persuaded of that Gospel? Here's the truism - what goes deepest to the heart, goes widest to the world. You can't persuade others toward what you've not celebrated yourself. If this Gospel is weak and fragile in your life, your life of persuasion is going to be weak and fragile, isn't it? To the degree that you celebrate this Gospel, you will be persuasive in the way that you hold it forth to the people among whom you live.

III. The Motive Of Persuasion

The motive of persuasion - let me touch on that just briefly. Paul says, "For Christ's love compels us." There's some debate over whether that's our love for Christ, the love of Christ, loving Christ compels us, or is it God's love for me, Christ's loving me; that's what constrains us and controls us and compels us. It's really very simple. Paul says in Ephesians 3, "I'm praying for you and I'm praying that something supernatural will happen. I'm praying that God will strengthen you from the inside out so that you will have the capacity to get how deeply He loves you, because once you understand how deeply He loves you - how wide and high and long and deep is this love of Christ that surpasses knowing - once you know that it will hold you in its grip and it will propel you forward. That's supernatural. To know that love is a supernatural thing and we need it desperately.

IV. The Power For That Kind of Persuasion

The "Ought To" And The "Want To"

The power, lastly, for that kind of persuasion, well that goes back to the gap, doesn't it? We talked about that before. We can make a very clear, airtight case that if you belong to Christ then you're His ambassador and your life is to be persuasive, both in how you live as a host and in the words you speak boldly and clearly. The problem is, what we ought to do often isn't what we want to do, and the wider the gap between the "ought to" and the "want to" the bigger the problem. So what do you do when you don't want to do what you ought to do? Let me give you the wrong answer first: Just don't think about it. Get so busy with a lot of other good things that you don't have to think about that hard "ought to" that scares you. Just don't think about it. Distract yourself with other good things. And a lot of us are good at it, aren't we? The wrong answer.

The right answer goes right back to repentance and faith. When you recognize, "I don't want really to do what I ought to do," then you repent, because if you know the love of Christ and you know He's called you to this but you don't really want to or you're afraid, you repent of the fear and the unbelief. Just like every other place, you repent of a weak "want to" and you say before the Lord Jesus, "Guilty. I don't want to do this thing and it shames me. I'm afraid." You repent. And by

faith, you go to Him and you say, "Lord Jesus, You promised that You came not to be served but to serve, and I'm asking You by Your Holy Spirit would You serve me, not by being my butler, but would You serve me by equipping me an empowering me, by overcoming my unbelief and propelling me forward in a way that would really be supernatural? Would You please do that? By faith I'm trusting You to do that in that way."

Becoming A Practicing Trinitarian

In short, where does the power come from? I'm not sure if you're familiar with this phrase but I like to think about being a practicing Trinitarian. We all affirm the same creed, we believe in a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God. Do you know what it is to be a practicing Trinitarian? It means to believe what you recite the creed to say. It means to believe that there really is a sovereign God who removes hearts of stone and gives hearts of flesh. Believe that He really is at work in drawing people to Himself. Believe that Jesus meant what He said in John 6:44 when He said, "No one comes to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him and I will raise him up on the last day." Believe what Jesus said in that same chapter, verse 37, when He said, "All whom the Father gives Me will come, all whom the Father draws will come to Me." There is a sovereign God who is at work. Trust Him. Believe in the power of the Lord Jesus and the message of the Gospel. Believe that His death on the cross and the verification of the satisfaction of God's justice in the resurrection was sufficient to provide a sweeping atonement for all of your sin, all of your guilt, all of your shame, and all of your blame and for that of those among whom you live. Believe that Jesus is enough. And believe in the Holy Spirit. Believe that the Holy Spirit really is at work, that He will empower you, He will intersect your life with the lives of those in whom He is already at work. And pray that God would make you a practicing Trinitarian in speaking forth the Word boldly, trusting in the power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the truth of the Gospel, spoken boldly and clearly as you live as a host in this world, not to win arguments by the persuasion with which you engage, but to win men and women, boys and girls to Christ, for His glory.

Persuasion Through Process

I have one last story if you'll give me a few more minutes. I spoke yesterday with my good friend, Shane, who's a church planter in Colorado. And he told me a story about his realtor. When they came to Colorado, they were looking for a house and a realtor was recommended to him and he made an appointment to meet with him and the realtor didn't show. And so he picked up the phone book, was going to call him and thought better of it and said, "Let me call the next guy on the list," which he did. That man came thirty minutes later and they went looking at houses. During that visit, the realtor said, "So what do you do here in Colorado?" And my friend said, "I'm a pastor. I'm a church planter and we're planning to start a new church." And the realtor said, "Okay, what kind of church

and what do you believe?" My friend answered. Well, that led to a second meeting and looking at other houses and a third and a fourth and they kept talking about family and life and concerns. And that went on for six months. They found a house but they kept connecting, kept visiting, kept talking. And my friend Shane kept praying for this man in whose life it appeared that the Holy Spirit was already at work.

And after they got together one day, Shane had picked up this realtor and dropped him off at his office, and the realtor still had his seatbelt buckled and paused for a moment with his hand on the buckle and he said, "Can you explain this Gospel thing one more time to me? I'm just trying to put it together." And Shane told me he was tired that day, it was a long day, it was late, he was late for dinner, and he sighed and said, "You know, it just comes to this. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God." And the realtor un-clicked his seat belt, sat there for a moment and said, "Huh, makes sense." And walked out of the car, shut the door, and went to his office.

A week later, the realtor called him up and said, "Something's happened. I can't explain exactly what it is, but when I unbuckled my seatbelt, I wasn't sure who I was anymore because all of a sudden everything made sense and the questions I'd been asking all of my life, the answers became crystal clear and I saw as if for the first time. And he described what you and I would call a conversion experience. And that man became a member of the church and is walking with the Lord Jesus. And he points to a six month process of just engaging with a man who loves Jesus and is eager to live his life in such a way that others are persuaded in the process.

Look, it's rare that you talk to someone about the Gospel, it happens, but it's relatively rare that people say, "I see the light," and then make a profession of faith. For most people it's a process in which, by your living as a host and by your speaking the words of the Gospel boldly and clearly, not to win an argument but to win a brother or a sister, they come to faith in Christ, believing in the power of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a rebellious heart exchanged for a new heart, a guilty record exchanged for a perfect record, a broken life exchanged for a new life, and they become part of the family. The question is, are you persuaded of that Gospel? Really persuaded? Is this your life? And secondly, is your life persuading others to treasure this Gospel as their very own? Let's pray together.

Father, Your Word invites us to be men and women devoted to prayer, being watchful and thankful, praying that God would open a door for this message, praying that we would proclaim the mystery of Christ and proclaim it clearly, boldly, and persuasively. We want to be faithful ambassadors for the Lord Jesus. Would You please drive this Gospel home deeply to each of our hearts that it would be our greatest treasure, that it would secure us and free us, that it would

embolden us and propel us forward? And then, would You please by the power of Your Holy Spirit, enable us to live persuasively that Your people would be drawn in, that we would have the great privilege and pleasure of seeing men and women, boys and girls become committed followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? We're asking for the miraculous and we're trusting You to make it so. We pray this in Jesus' precious and holy name. Amen.

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