

Welcome to our new series entitled "Bridge Builders." Like the previous series on prayer, I felt "pushed" by God to focus on this theme. You will see that this is really the crux of our mission. Let's take the rest of this month and learn how to become bridge builders.

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." Romans 3:21-26

I am suggesting that this is the World Series of New Testament passages. This will set the teaching for this series in motion. These words are incredible; they are the bridge, the home run, the victory, the championship . . . all in one. Let me set the scene: It's a tall, left-handed pitcher on the mound, ready to throw baseballs at 95 mph. What do you think the result will be if you or I step to the plate against such a foe? We would strike out - "All have sinned and fall short . . ." (verse 23) We have already been introduced to this truth in Romans 3:10-12: ". . . There is no one righteous, not even one . . ." Humanity does not possess self-righteousness. Sin—to miss the mark and fall well short of the target. The word use could be translated "lack." Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death . . ." Swing hard and swing at any pitch you can and you will get the same result every time. Left to ourselves we are hopeless.

First Base—Justified (verse 24) → A righteousness from God. (verse 21) The two meanings of this word really are two sides of the same coin: ✓ acquitted means to be declared not guilty; ✓ receive a righteousness from God means to be seen as righteous in God's sight. The reformation of the 16th century made this the focus of changing the church. God has revealed a way of being right in his sight and it all comes from him.

Second Base—Redemption (verse 24) → Sacrifice of atonement (verse 25) The two sides of the coin for this word could be summarized by: ✓ paid for AND set free. The root word of redemption is somewhat common to us. It is the word ransom and it means "payment demanded before release." In Old Testament times, a person's debt could result in him being sold as a slave. But the next of kin could redeem him, buy his freedom. This relative was called a kinsman redeemer. In the same way, Jesus is known in the Bible as our redeemer because he paid the penalty of death that you and I deserved.

Third Base—Grace (verse 24) → Freely, as a gift. (verse 24) The word simply means unmerited favor. The phrase in Romans 3:24 is "freely by grace." That's a double emphasis. It is like saying grace<sup>2</sup>. The emphasis is to show that without grace we would be hopeless. But we can be confident that grace is enough. Romans 6:23 reads, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NASB)

Home Plate—Faith (the grand slam) (verse 26) → "To all who believe" (verse 22) The word can mean trust, rely on with confident conviction, but basically faith means receive. On the other hand, what happens in baseball if the bases are loaded and the batter strikes out? Nothing! With sincere faith in Christ you have received love, forgiveness, the gift of life and the most marvelous status on the globe . . . an adopted child of God.

I have had the privilege to share with you the Gospel today. The glorious Gospel is so central to our faith that without it there would be no Christianity. When we place our trust in Christ we receive all the benefits of the Gospel. Most of us today have opened our hearts to the truth of the Gospel and asked Jesus to be our Savior. Every message from this point on in the series is meant to point to the theme of "giving it away." When we share the Gospel through our lives, the Gospel does not become weaker in us, it becomes stronger. My prayer today: "May God give you a deeper appreciation and a stronger sense of gratitude for the Gospel, so much so that it will spill out of your life and affect all those around you."

#### **Reflective Questions:**

1. How important is the Gospel to Christianity? How would you describe the Gospel in one sentence?
2. When did you receive the truth of the Gospel and personally believe in Christ? How did that happen?
3. Would you say the joy of your salvation is strong or weak? Why? In other words, how much do you appreciate the Gospel these days?
4. Which aspect of the theology of the Gospel means the most to you right now? Justification, redemption or grace? Why?
5. If the Gospel is as great as the Scriptures indicates then what should our response be and where do we go from here?

### Reading Schedule for November 9-15

I hope you enjoyed reading Colossians last week as much as I did. Colossians has so much to say about the theme that we are studying on Sunday mornings. II Corinthians is also a letter that emphasizes the importance of us being ambassadors for Christ. That means that we represent the Lord wherever we go. In our series entitled "Bridge Builders," another word for that would be Christ's ambassadors. Here is the theme verse from II Corinthians, "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." (5:20) With that in mind, let us launch into this letter written by Paul to the Christians in Corinth.

November 9: **II Corinthians 1** – What stands out to you from this chapter? What verse gets your attention? "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (vv. 3 & 4) This verse is about relational connection. It is being uniquely equipped by God to help someone who is going through something that we had previously gone through. We can comfort people the best with those things that we can relate to the most. Going through a challenging time in marriage when Wendy and I were first married helps me to have empathy for those that struggle with their marriage right now. God has put me in a place to help people who are troubled in their marriage because of the comfort that I received from him going through a troubled marriage in our beginning days as husband and wife. What do these verses teach you? How do they relate to making a difference in this world?

November 10: **II Corinthians 2** – This shorter chapter is a powerful illustration about forgiving a sinner. What stands out to you from this chapter? Why? "If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." (vv. 10 & 11) We are never to respond in an unforgiving way. When we confront people about their sinful behavior, we do it with a desire for them to be restored to fellowship and to living wholeheartedly for Christ. We must be cautious that personal anger is not vented as we confront someone who has sinned. What does this say about forgiveness? Why is unforgiveness such an important issue? How does Satan use unforgiveness in the church?

November 11: **II Corinthians 3** – What verse stands out to you in this chapter? Why? It is not difficult for me to find verses in II Corinthians. It is one of my favorite letters. For example, verse 18: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." I am attracted to the word "transformed." We reflect the Lord's glory as he changes us from the inside out. The more closely we follow Christ the more we will be like him. The more that we are like him, the more that he will be seen through us by others. What does transformation mean to you? How is God transforming you by his Holy Spirit? How are you different because of what Christ has done in you? Do you think people notice? Why or why not?

November 12: **II Corinthians 4** – Which verse stands out to you? What does it mean to you? "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (verse 7) This is a marvelous verse about being human. God wants to use frail, fallible human beings. In our natural interaction with people, as followers of Jesus Christ, God can use both our strengths and our weaknesses to show himself. God can use both our victories and our defeats to help people realize how much God helps us and how much others need him. This is all part of God's plan. What does it mean that we are jars of clay? How does God use our weaknesses to shine his strength? Why is this a chapter about bridge building?

November 13: **II Corinthians 5** – What verse seems most important to you? What is God's message through that verse? "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." (vv 14 & 15) I know our theme verse that I mentioned in the beginning of this reading schedule is verse 20, when it says that we are Christ's ambassadors, but I was drawn to these verses because they say Christ's love compels us. The motivation of our life is the love of Christ for us and our love for him. It can mean both. We know that Jesus, out of his great love for us, has given up his life for our sakes. We then, because of our appreciation, would do the same. Because we appreciate and love Christ we want to give our lives away for others like he did for us. This leads to the ministry of reconciliation and sharing the message of Christ with the world. Does this make sense to you? If you really love Christ what will you do? What is the most important thing you can do for Christ?

November 14: **II Corinthians 6** – Which verse impresses you? What is God saying to you through it? "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (verse 14) The whole time I have been talking about the importance of us reaching out to unbelievers. But here there seems to be a contradictory statement from Paul about associating with unbelievers. It obviously refers to a very strong kind of relationship that has ongoing ramifications. Business partnerships, marriage, dating relationships and so on, have been referred to in this way. Paul wants believers to be active in their witness for Christ to unbelievers, but they should not lock themselves into personal or business relationships that would cause them to compromise the faith. That's the message here. Does that make sense to you? How would this verse be applied in your opinion? Is there anywhere in your life where you are unequally yoked?

November 15: **II Corinthians 7** – Which verse stands out to you? What is the message given? "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (verse 10) It is interesting to realize that there are two kinds of sorrow. A sorrow or remorse that makes you feel sorry for being caught; compare this to a genuine repentance that leads to change. You can think of Peter and his remorse, which led to repentance; and Judas' sorrow which led to suicide. One repented and was restored to faith and service; the other took his own life. We know people who are sorry for what they have done but they have no intent of changing. What is God's message to you about repentance? Is there anything in your life where you need to repent and change? Why must repentance also be accompanied with change for it to be genuine?

Let's pray for the series on "Bridge Builders," asking God to help us be effective in our relationships to those that need Christ. Pray for opportunities to bless people who are discouraged. Pray for those who are unemployed, that God might intervene. Pray for the marriages of our church.