

“Trading Up”

Ezekiel 36:22-28 • 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

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What would you give in exchange for a paper clip? If I offered you a paper clip what would you be willing to give me in return? What if the paper clip is red? Does that change things? For Kyle McDonald it changed everything.

There's a game that teens sometimes play, especially in youth groups or Young Life, that's called "Bigger or Better." The way the game works is that you begin with something you have of very little value and you try to get someone to trade for something bigger or better. You then take the new item you have and trade with someone else. You keep going trying to get better items each time. In his 2006 TED Talk, Kyle McDonald explains how he started with one red paper clip and eventually traded for a house. You heard me. He started with a paper clip and ended with a house.

As a result, a Yale management professor began using that idea of trading up for an assignment in her class on influence and persuasion. She gives the students a week to make as many trades as possible, also starting with a paper clip. At the end of the week they bring in their top trade to show the class. Students have returned with things like boxes of books or vacations. Two students working together were even able to trade for a used car, which they planned to donate to charity.

As we make our way through 2 Corinthians, we discover today what is certainly the best trade ever. Verse 21 says, "For our sake God made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In theology we refer to this as substitutionary atonement. You might want to write that down. There's going to be a quiz later. Actually, although substitutionary atonement sounds complicated

it's not really difficult to understand. It simply means that when Jesus died on the cross he took your place and my place. He traded your sin for his sinless righteousness.

Why is sin such a big deal to God? Why did Jesus have to die because of our sin? Sin is a big deal because it is really rebellion against God. Often our sin is subtle and doesn't feel like rebellion. Maybe when you think of your sin it feels more like a mistake to you. But here's what sin is. Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment out of the hundreds of God's laws. He answered that you could summarize all of God's commandments as love God with *all* your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love other people as yourself. Sin is anything less than loving God and other people perfectly. And none of us has been able to love God that fully.

The way the Bible describes it is that you and I owe that complete love and devotion to God. When we don't love him completely it's like we go into debt. We still owe it but we have no way to pay because we owe 100% to Him today. There's never any "extra" love and devotion to pay back our debt. When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them what we call the Lord's Prayer. In that prayer he said we should pray, "forgive us our debts," the debts we owe because of sin.

The way God forgives your debt is through Jesus, who is the only person to live a perfect, sinless life. He never sinned. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that in every respect He was tempted as we are, yet is without sin. He was never selfish. He never treated other people as if they were worth more or less. Jesus loved God and people fully and perfectly. And so he is able to pay your debt by trading with you. He traded our sin for his righteousness so we would be reconciled to God. The shocking thing,

though, is that it is Jesus who traded up. Hebrews 12:2 says that it was for the *joy* that was set before him that he endured the cross.

In this passage Paul comes back to his detractors that he's been dealing with through this entire book. These critics were saying that Paul didn't *look* like a successful preacher. He didn't drive a luxury car or wear designer suits. His teeth weren't white enough so he must not *be* a successful preacher. But in verse 11 Paul tells the Corinthians, "God knows the truth about us and so do you if you're honest. It's not the outward appearance that counts but what's truly in the heart."

Of course Jesus said the same thing. He said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

What Paul wants us to understand here is that when Jesus trades your sin for his righteousness it's a complete change. It's the heart transplant promised in our reading from Ezekiel. Paul says that when you are united with Christ you are a completely new creation, designed for the new reality that Jesus has ushered in. The old self-centered ways of thinking and acting are replaced with new ways, focused on God and others. That doesn't come naturally to any of us. It's entirely the work of God. As verse 15 says, "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."

One of the results of this change is that we no longer regard other people according to outward appearances, or as verse 16 says, "according to the flesh." We no longer treat people as if they are more important because of their looks or success or money. When Jesus

changes your heart you begin to treat everyone as someone created in the image of God having eternal value. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."

So what do we do with all this? Well, God never changes you for your own personal benefit. Everything God does for you is really for the benefit of other people and Paul begins and ends this passage by telling us what that is. Verse 20 says, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

An ambassador is an official who is commissioned to represent a nation to another country. Ambassadors are representatives in foreign places and they speak with authority. When you are inside an embassy it is as if you are in that country. As Christians, as those united with Christ, we are His ambassadors. Our job is to be Christ's representatives of the new era. So it's ridiculous to keep living in the ways of the old era that's ending.

Our job is to point people to this new reality, the reality that God is reconciling us to himself. In Jesus, God took the initiative to repair the relationship that was broken by sin. He reconciled us to himself. Unlike when we play Bigger or Better, God did all the work of reconciliation, which is a good thing because you and I wouldn't even try if we could. As John Calvin said, God gave us free will but we will only use our free will to choose sin.

As one theologian said, the gospel is not good advice but good *news*. So as verse 11 says,

“knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.” Paul says God gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation. Our job is to tell people the good news of the new reality in Jesus and to show them with the way we live. So let me ask you, are you still living for yourself? Because living for God and for other people is bigger AND better.

Amen.