

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Dr. Richard Pratt

Turn in your Bibles to II Corinthians 5:16-21. I just want to give a brief introduction to a man who doesn't need much introduction here at Briarwood, and that's Dr Richard Pratt. Okay. Dr Pratt and I first crossed paths back when I was in seminary at RTS Orlando some now twenty six years ago. He was one of my first professors there. And I think after we got over a short period of being annoyed by one another, we, developed a good friendship. I actually went to work for him over at Third Millennium Ministries. I'm an Old Testament Professor, as you know, and Dr Pratt is an Old Testament Professor. And he's one of the main reasons I'm an Old Testament professor having sat under his teaching at seminary. I didn't know that you could do this kind of thing. And reading the Bible with this kind of depth and understanding what the Lord is saying and helping people to understand it with this kind of depth. And so that just gave me a vision for a thing that actually, when I went to seminary, I didn't think I had a vision for. So Richard is a good friend, has been a mentor to me and a great aid along the way. However, though he is an Old Testament professor, his passion has always been global theological education. He is the co-founder and the president of Third Millennium Ministries that began in the late nineteen nineties and continues on to this day. They have been a part of the work of Briarwood Church as well. We have supported them and known them well. But what is close to his heart, that is training that next generation of church leaders and pastors around the world so that they don't fall into heresies and they don't fall into shallow belief and health, wealth and prosperity. We want to train them, and that's an important thing to do. So he has a heart for that. Briarwood has a heart for that. If you want to know more about that, come back this evening for our six o'clock service. He's going to talk about global theological education. Then we're going to have a little Q&A just to get a chance to talk to him further about that. So come back for that this evening.

Now, with that said, turn to II Corinthians 5: 16-21. Paul the apostle continues to write 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 the word of the Lord.

Thank you father. Good morning everyone. I have one question for you. Do you like Dr Scott Redd? Okay. Good. Okay. Don't go overboard. Don't go overboard. If you had said no, I would have said. I don't know him. But I'm glad you do. And he is one of my favorite people in the world and one of my best students. How about that? Is that okay? I am one of your

missionaries. I do work around the world, and I just want to tell you that it's a great privilege to be with you. And I thank this church. I thank you for your many prayers, your support, and help with this ministry that I serve. And it's just a joy to be with you. It's been a little while since I've been back, and I'm just glad to be back with you today. Thank you very much. If you want to hear more about that, I'll just reiterate what the pastor just said. And that is tonight we're going to have a little Q and A about Third Millennium Ministries. And the first question should be, why is it called third millennium? That would be a good question for you to ask if you want to know. Today we're going to look at a passage in Scripture that has meant a great deal to me, and I hope that by God's grace, we'll be able to see many things in there that will apply to your life and speak to you in ways that will transform your life and bring you into conformity with the will of God. That would be a grand goal to see occur at one time or another. I suspect everybody has faced this problem. You're in discussion with somebody about something. It gets a little heated. They're tired of talking to you about it, but you don't want to let go. And they look at you and say, why don't you just leave me alone? And they walk off and, you know, now game's over. It's not a happy time. When people do that. It's usually quite an insult as a way of cutting you off. But you can understand how that happens in daily life because sometimes things get a little too complicated, get a little, little too heated, and people just need to get away from you and. Okay, so why don't you just leave us alone? That's a good question to ask. With respect to the passage of Scripture we just read, because the apostle Paul is writing to a church, a church in Greece, a church in the city of Corinth. And he had worked with that church quite a bit. He had written a number of letters to them, and frankly, they were tired of him bothering them. And basically what they say throughout this letter is, why don't you just leave us alone now? We appreciate you, but it's time for us to go our own way and you to go your way. And in this passage, the apostle explains why he can't do that. Now, that's pertinent to our day because we live in a country, we live in a world where things have been changing rapidly, so rapidly it makes you your head spin. Sometimes when you see the sorts of things that are happening even in public, in our dear country.

But the reality is that one of those things is, is that people don't want to hear about your Christian faith anymore. And if you're the kind of person that likes to talk about Jesus and likes to share your faith with other people, eventually you may run into a situation where somebody says your religion is fine. Go ahead, believe it if you want to, but just leave me alone. Stop bothering me with this. And if that's so uncomfortable, isn't it? If you've ever had that happen to you, it's just terribly uncomfortable because we don't want to do that. We want to share our faith with other people, and we don't know what to do when they say, just leave us alone. Well, this passage then speaks to us. If we can hear what the apostle says to the Corinthians, why he could not leave them alone, even though they wanted him to. Then maybe we can learn how it is that we can be the kinds of people that can enter the lives of others around us, sharing our faith with others, letting them know what we believe, talking to them and living before them as Christians and not leave them alone. I love this passage because it's one. It's a rare passage where the Apostle Paul actually opens his heart up. He becomes very vulnerable in this passage, letting these people to whom he's writing see deep inside of him. And it's an amazing thing because as he, layer by layer, goes deeper and deeper into what's inside of him, what's in his heart that compels him to share his faith with these people, to give Jesus to them again and

again and again. It makes us look at what's inside of us. It calls on us to start examining our own hearts. What's deep inside.

Now, this is the first thing that the Apostle Paul says. He says, I can't leave you alone because I'm a changed man. I've been changed. Look again with me, beginning at verse sixteen. Listen to how he talks about being changed. 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. A lot of people have heard. Verse seventeen therefore, if anyone is in Christ, behold a new creation. The old has gone away, the new has come. It's a remarkable thing about the Christian faith. It's a remarkable thing about meeting Jesus that when you meet him, when he comes into your life and you give your life to him, he changes you. Some of those changes are radical and they can be far reaching. In fact, the Apostle even describes it as the new creation. A new creation occurs. And this is language in the Bible that actually speaks of what the world will be one day when Jesus returns an entire new creation. And even now, at this moment, people can find a way to enter into that world of the future, to see change inside of them that can be called new creation. Old is gone. New has come. And in a group this size this morning, I'm sure there's someone who's thinking to himself or to herself. I'd like to start over. I've made a mess of my life. I feel trapped. I can't get out. I'm sinking. I'd like to start again. I'd like to be a new creation. And if that's something that even crosses your mind for just a moment, let me just tell you some really good news. The good news is it's possible to be transformed. It's possible to begin again. And it comes simply by you coming to Jesus and giving your life to him. He will make you new creation. You won't believe the changes that will come. But in this passage, the Apostle Paul has a particular kind of change that occurred to him that ought to be happening to all of us who follow Jesus. It was the change in the way he looked at people, how he looked at other people. Did you notice that we no longer look at people according to the flesh. Now, that's a Bible way of saying the way people ordinarily look at other people, he says. In other words, I'm not looking at the world the way I used to. I once looked at people that way, but I don't do that anymore. Something's changed in me. I became a new creation. Well, how do people ordinarily look at other people? Imagine the human race as a big pizza pie up here. Okay. That all these different pieces to it, all these different people in it. And how do you handle a world like that? Especially when it's come to your own front door as it has in these days of ours today? Well, take that big pizza and this is what we do to manage all of these people. Manage the human race. We start slicing the pizza. We slice it this way. We slice it that way. We slice it between people who are like us and people who are different from us. People who are educated like we are and people that aren't educated like us, people who have the money that we have and people that don't have the money that we have, people who have the status we have, and people that don't have that status, who dress like us and don't dress like us, who speak like we speak and don't speak like we speak. We do all this slicing up of this pie so we can figure out who's important enough for my attention and who isn't important enough for my attention. That's how we manage the people around us. Isn't it true?

I mean, think about what it's like when you're in the grocery store and you see somebody coming toward you as you're going down the aisle, as if you notice that that person is coming

toward you, looks like you talks like you, dresses like you. Well, I'm a Southerner. I'm in Alabama. I know what you do. You look at them and you say, good morning. How's it going? Fine. Then you move on. But if you see somebody coming towards you down that same aisle who doesn't look like you, who doesn't dress like you, doesn't talk like you, all of a sudden you become very interested in how many brands of corn flakes there are on this side of the aisle. And you start counting them like this until the person passes by. Isn't that true? You avert your eyes. You don't want to make contact. That's how we manage the human race. That's looking at humanity according to the flesh. Now the apostle Paul says, I don't do it that way anymore. I've come to Jesus. I'm a new creation. So how does new creation, how does Jesus look at the human race?

Oh, the big pizza pie is still there. And Jesus teaches that it is to be sliced, but only once. Cut it one time and on one side of the cut is those who are in Christ and on the other side, those who are in need of him. Those who are your brothers and sisters in Christ, and those who ought to be your brothers and sisters in Christ. It's that simple. I love the fact that Jesus brings up something here that maybe we don't quite get in our world today, but think about it this way. He says in verse seventeen, he says, or sixteen, he says, we once looked at Christ according to the flesh, but we do so no longer. Well, what does that mean? He used to judge Jesus according to the normal standards of humanity.

So let me ask you this question. I'm going to give you a little quiz about Jesus here, and you can answer all these questions out loud, please. I know this is a Presbyterian church, and you're expected to sit there and do nothing, but this is your chance to do something. So let me script it for you. The answer to all these questions is no, okay? You don't even have to think about it. Just say no. Here we go. Are you ready? Did Jesus speak English? Did Jesus have the kind of money that you have? No. Did Jesus dress like you? Did he live like you know, if Jesus were to walk into this room like he was two thousand years ago, we would say, this man is crazy. I don't know if you've noticed it. Maybe your children, your young people in your family haven't done this, or maybe you just haven't seen it, but there's this thing going around and it goes something like this. They'll be talking to somebody. Turn away from them. Then do this. You ever seen that? You ever seen it? Well, let me tell you what that means. It means what a loser. That's the way we would look at Jesus. Jesus the loser. But something's happened to us. We've been grabbed by the gospel of Christ. We've been filled with His Holy Spirit. And now the one we would have called loser has become our Lord. And the apostle is saying, look, if that's happened to you, if you've changed the way you look at Jesus, it should have an impact on your life to make you look at other people differently to. People around you at work in your neighborhood, in your families need you to be the kind of person and need to be the kind of person that does not judge them by the standards of the world, but that looks at them with the eyes of Jesus. And aren't you glad that Jesus looked at you that way? Okay. So the apostle says, look, I know you're telling me. Why don't you just leave us alone? And he says, I can't do it. I'm changed. I don't look at people the way I used to. But he goes on, he says something else here, too. I love this passage because now we're taking a step more deeply into his heart. He says, I'm not just changed. I've been called to something. And it's an unbelievable calling that I have in this life. Listen to the way he describes it. Beginning at verse eighteen. He says this, he

says, all this, all this changing that's gone on in us all. This is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. I don't know about you, but I don't normally walk around talking about the Ministry of Reconciliation. That's kind of more Bible talk here. So let's put it as plainly as we possibly can.

A ministry is a service that you provide, an activity that's a service to someone else. And reconciliation means basically bringing people who are enemies of each other or angry with each other and making peace between them. You stand in the middle and you make peace between them. This often happens in counseling sessions where a husband and wife will come in. They're at the end of their rope. They just can't take it anymore. They can't agree on anything. And then the counselor stands in the middle and tries to make peace between the two of them, tries to reconcile them. My wife is one of those kinds of counselors, therapists in a big hospital in Orlando, Florida, and she does this every day of her life. She's been doing it for more than thirty years now. And so she comes home and tells me stories. She never tells me names, but she does tell me stories about what kinds of things are going on between people. And she has to get into the middle of it and try to bring reconciliation, try to bring peace, human trafficking, all kinds of things that we deal with in Orlando. And she's right in the middle of it. And she tells me these stories, and I think about what smile she has, what energy she has, what life she has in that. And I hear it and I say, yuck. Why would anybody want to spend their life doing that? Getting into the middle of a big fight like this, day after day after day? No thank you. That's the way I respond. But the apostle Paul doesn't respond that way. He doesn't see this ministry of reconciliation, that he's a part of, that God has given him as something that's a burden, something even to be ashamed of or to be weary of engaging with people trying to bring peace. Now, keep in mind, he's not talking about making reconciliation between two human beings. There's something much bigger than that going on. It's reconciliation with God. So just imagine it this way. The God of heaven and earth, holy and perfect in every way. And people who have made themselves by their own actions and by their own choices, the enemies of God. What's to be done? Somebody has to be in the middle, A ministry of reconciliation. I know how easy it is to think that in this world of ours today, that's so diverse. You don't know what the people across the street believe. You don't know what these people are doing, or people at the office may hold valuable. I know it's very easy to sort of pull back and just play it safe, not wanting to offend anybody and not get into the middle of the God of heaven and earth and people on the earth who have made themselves as enemies. But the apostle says, this is what God's called me to do. In fact, it's what he's called us all to do as we are imitators of Christ and the Apostle. He didn't think ministry of reconciliation and go, yuck! I'd rather not do that. No, he has just the opposite reaction. Look at verse twenty. Look at what? How he describes it. He says, therefore We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. I never knew what that meant, even though I grew up as a Southern Baptist, and the organization for boys in the Southern Baptist Church used to be called Royal Ambassadors. We abbreviated it to RA's. And we thought that meant rotten apples because that's how we acted. But we were to be royal ambassadors. And every, every meeting we would start off by saying, we are ambassadors for Christ.

I never knew what that meant until I met an ambassador. I was on a short term mission trip long time ago in a country that was called then Czechoslovakia. I was in Prague. We had just landed the night before. It's early in the morning, and the leader of the group comes to me and starts shaking me like this in the bed. He says, Rich, rich, you got to get up. Don't you want to go meet Shirley Temple? I said, what? He said, yeah. Um, our senator, Senator Trent Lott, has made it possible for us to have an appointment with Shirley Temple, the ambassador of the United States, to Czechoslovakia. Shirley Temple. Now, a lot of you may not know that word, that name that person, but she was a child movie star and child musician and dancer. I mean, Michael Jackson has nothing over her. She was so popular. She was popular worldwide way back decades and decades ago. Shirley Temple Black was the ambassador of the United States to Czechoslovakia, and we had the opportunity to go see her. Okay. So I got up and I was so lazy I had to put my shoes and socks on in the back of the car. And as I was pulling my socks up, people in the car were leaning over the back seat and looking at me, saying, okay, Rich, what are you going to say? And I said, I'm not going to say anything. Leave me alone. They said, you got to. You're the professor. You got to say something. And so I pulled the other sock up and said, okay, you want me to say something? This is what I'm going to say. I'm going to ask her to sing Good Ship Lollipop as a world famous song that she had. Look her up on YouTube or something. You'll see her good ship lollipop. So I'm going over the words on the good ship lollipop. Something. Something. Something. Candy shop. Okay. I could remember them. And I'm going over it and over it, because what I want to do is ask her and then catch her, and then mock her for having forgotten this famous song of hers. Got the picture. We get into her office. She's not there. Everybody else in the group knew what to do. They sat down, put their hands in their laps and waited. But I didn't know what to do. So I start walking around the office and as I walk around the office, there are photographs of her. Now, it's not photographs of Shirley Temple. The child movie star is Shirley Temple, the ambassador, and she's with the president of the United States. She's with the Queen of England drinking champagne. She's with Gorbachev. She's with a person that looked to me like Mao. I couldn't tell who it was exactly, but I was impressed. By the time I got to what I thought was the Mao picture. I'm impressed with this woman who. And about that time the big French doors opened up in the back of the office, and in comes Shirley Temple Black and everybody in the group stands up appropriately, and there's a parting of the Red sea, because I'm on the other side of the group, and the parting of the Red sea was for me to walk down the path to do my bit with her. So I got it. I start walking down the path and there are two students over here. It wasn't Scott, but two students over here. And they were doing this. Richard. Richard. Richard, Richard. They were looking for this. They wanted me to do it so badly they couldn't stand it, so I walked right up to her. I put my hand out and I said, how do you do, Madam Ambassador? It's an honor. It's a privilege to meet you. And I sat down. I did not dare ask her to sing good ship lollipop. Why? She was my ambassador. She was my country's ambassador. She represented me and my country to the other nations of the earth. She was important. She deserved to be honored. That's what the apostle is saying here. He uses the technical word for an ambassador, but he doesn't say we are therefore ambassadors of the United States. Did you see what he said? We are therefore ambassadors for Christ. Christ the King. So let me tell you something. Maybe you would like to have met Shirley Temple Black. It was an honor to meet her. But Shirley Temple Black had

nothing over you. She was the ambassador of the United States of America, one of many nations in the world that will come and go if the Lord tarries like every other nation has done throughout history. But you are ambassadors for the King of the universe as though God were speaking through you. You are ambassadors for a king whose kingdom spreads to the ends of the earth, a kingdom that will never end, a kingdom of joy, a kingdom of peace, a kingdom of prosperity. A kingdom that is so wondrous that the sky will be lit up with the glory of God. That is our King and we are his ambassadors. So it's time for you and me to stop saying to ourselves, well, I guess nobody ever wants to listen to me anymore. It's time to hold your shoulders and put them back a little bit, and lift your chin up a little bit and realize that when you talk to other people about Jesus, when you show kindness to other people on the behalf of Jesus, when you reach out to your neighbor, to your friend, to your wayward children and grandchildren, when you are a kind person in the name of Jesus, you are ambassadors for the King of the universe. What more could you want than that? What more could you want than that? The Corinthians were saying to Paul, can't you just leave us alone? And he said, no, how could I possibly do that? I'm an ambassador for Christ. So as our world around us is now mounting opposition to us, scoffing at us, cursing us, mocking us, laughing at us, there is no shame to be had. We are the ambassadors of the king. So the apostle says, then I can't leave you alone because I'm changed. I don't look at people like I used to. But he also says, I'm called, and it's a very high calling and I'm so glad to have it. But then he says, he mentions a third thing and it's easy to miss it. He says something. It's another C word. He's not just changed. He's not just called. He cares about these people.

Look again at verse twenty. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now the apostle Paul was uncertain. He did not know exactly what the spiritual condition was. Of all the people in the church at Corinth. In fact, in certain places, in his letter he says, I doubt that you're really followers of Jesus. So he's talking to people that were church goers, not just pagans, but church goers. And he says, I care about you, and I care about the pagans, too. See, he's opened his heart up all the way now. This is why I can't leave you alone. Maybe some of you memorized this verse in the old days in the King James Version. Do you remember that King James Version? It said, we beseech thee on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. Well, nobody beseeches anybody anymore. So I'm glad they don't translate it that way anymore. What they translated is here implore, implore. Other Bible translations put it, we plead with you, be reconciled to God. Well, when do you beseech someone? When do you implore someone? When do you plead with someone is when you care about them. And you care deeply. You don't say, oh, you don't want to hear from me. Okay, then go away. It's all right. You're not important to me anymore. No. He cared about them. I think sometimes this is a hard thing for us to do because as opposition mounts against the Christian faith in our land, and it is, we get so frustrated that the natural reaction is to have rage and anger. I get it. I watch the news too. But the apostle was living in a country and in a city, and talking to people in countries and cities where that was. That kind of opposition was true in his day, too. But he says to these people, I can't leave you alone because I care about you. It's a lot like what happens in families. Now I'm going to say something to you that's a little bit of a stereotype. If it doesn't fit for you, that's okay. But I think you'll get the point. It's very often true that if a couple

has, say, a young teenager, a son and that son begins to do things that he shouldn't do. Get a note from school. Get a phone call from the principal. Something like that. Um, there's usually a reaction that's pretty predictable. The reaction of the mother is to be broken hearted and tears will come. I can't believe our son is doing these things. The father will typically do what we call tough love. But actually what it is, is that he is so angry he can hardly stand it. And so he'll say to that boy, if you don't stop this, you are grounded for the next fifteen years. You think you're going to college. Just wait and see if you get to go to college. Now go back to that room. I don't even want to see your face for another three or four days. If you hear things like that, it's a natural reaction. We get it. It's okay. But, you know, if that son continues to be wayward, if he continues to follow paths of self-destruction, eventually, even the hardest heart of the hardest father will break. And he will go to that son, and he will begin to plead. Please don't do this. You don't know how this is going to impact your life. You're going down a path of ruin. It's going to destroy you. Please don't do this. That's what the Apostle is talking about. That kind of caring. So as easy as it is for us to hear the world telling us, leave us alone and for us to react and say, okay, we can do that. That will make my life a lot simpler. The apostle calls on us to care. And to care deeply, to have our hearts broken over what people are doing to themselves. That's why we can't leave them alone. Aren't you glad that Jesus doesn't rage at you every time you do something wrong? Aren't you glad that he weeps over us? That his heart breaks over us because he can see what we do to ourselves, wittingly or unwittingly? He can see it. And he cares about us. Well, if you know the care of Jesus, the patience that he shows, the tenderness he shows the gentleness, he shows. If you know that of Jesus, how can you do anything but the same to others? In a world where people tell us more and more, why don't you just leave us alone? The answer is this. Can't do it. Can't do it. We're changed people. We're called to be ambassadors of the King of the world. And I care about you. Let's pray together.