

# Reached For What

## *The Reach of God:*

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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They're desperate, but they don't drop towels on Monday Night Football. They are not desperate housewives. They are desperate husbands. They show up behind my office desk, at the parsonage, in my yard, or over the phone. Some of their wives I've never met; others I've talked with long before the husband realized things were serious. Somehow, the men misread the complaints. Somehow, they didn't understand. They loved their wives, but the wives didn't see it or believe it. The wives often say:

*You love your football, fishing, hunting, TV, computer, whatever; but you don't love me. You use me. Whatever I am, I'm not your partner. You don't know me!*

The husbands are blindsided. Although they had warning, they didn't see what was unfolding. Their painful situation illustrates what sin does to us all. Sin blinds all of us, not just us husbands, to reality. Since Eve took fruit from the forbidden tree on the false notion she would be fulfilled and really live rather than die, we also have been living in deception and dying in judgment. We suffer primarily from a relationship problem rather than a religious problem. Most people are religious and acknowledge the existence of God. The problem, exposed in the Bible, is that our religious practices quickly degenerate into a deluded, self-serving substitute for an honest and trusting relationship with God. Michael Slaughter writes:

*We seek safe gods – the kind who will bring us to a comfortable place, who will reduce risk and help us achieve our desired futures. There is a self-serving religion masquerading as Christianity, and it is cultural and counterfeit. You should check it out because you might be serving another god. (Real Followers, [Abingdon Press, 1999], 53)*

Contemporary writer Leonard Sweet asks,

*For mission's sake, what if Christians were to renounce Christianity and become disciples of Jesus?* (Easum, **Leadership on the Other Side**, [Abingdon Press, 2000], 111)

Are we apprentices of Jesus? The fifteenth century German monk, Thomas a Kempis, wrote:

*We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do...* (Ibid, 111)

Reflection on Jesus, admiration for Jesus, adulation to Jesus cannot compare to obedience of Jesus. Jesus said, ***"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me"*** (John 14:21). Jesus reserved his harshest condemnation for those who were sincerely and devoutly religious. Jesus is not looking to make you and me religious.

All throughout the Bible, people who are religious and who pay homage to God substitute religious sacrifices and gifts for actual trust in and obedience to God's word. One such episode is recorded of the exiles who returned to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Ezra found out that they had been sexually disobedient. He wrote:

***When I heard this, I tore my clothing, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this unfaithfulness of his people.*** (Ezra 9:3-4, NLT)

Do you get the picture? These folks trembled at the words of Scripture because they saw how they and their people violated them and were liable for judgment. They didn't put their faith in their own judgment, or pick from the Scriptures the pieces they liked.

If we select what we like from people's words, we do not trust them. If we do that with our leaders' words, we do not follow them. If we do that with our Lord's words, we do not obey him.

God reaches out to us because we need reaching. Our hearts don't see straight. We poison with words and deeds the very people we love; and we fool ourselves with a hollow homage of God. We need a lift from the darkness. God's reach gives us eyes to lift us from a darkened and deluded perspective. Paul wrote:

***We have stopped evaluating others by what the world thinks about them.*** (2 Corinthians 5:16, NLT)

Do you see yourself differently today than you once did? Do you find yourself hungering to know what God says and trembling about its implications for you and others? Or do you embrace a comfortable, cultural religion? God reaches with his Spirit to lift you and me from our delusional darkness.

Second, God reaches you and me for love. God made us as his children, his companions, and his partners in ruling creation. We are made in his image. God saw all the tough stuff ahead for us. He even saw the cross before he made a single one of us. God is not unfeeling. Jesus is your window to your heavenly Father. You see in Jesus your father weeping, weeping for us. You see him weeping and you see him trading Jesus' life for yours. Paul wrote:

***God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*** (2 Corinthians 5:21, NLT)

The God who covered the earth with water in the days of Noah is the God who put Jesus on the cross for you. The God who wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah is the God who in love traded his Son for you. The God who drowned the Egyptian army in judgment is the God who so love you that he visited us in Jesus of Nazareth and became our Passover lamb. The Bible does not reveal two Gods. It reveals only one; and that God is love; and that love has spared nothing, not creation, not even God's own son on your behalf. God reaches into our world to lift you and me from our delusional darkness and he reaches in tears and sacrifice for love of you and me.

God reaches you for lift, for love and for life.

Last Sunday we were horrified to hear of the massacre in northern Wisconsin. The toll: eight hunters shot, six dead and who knows how many scarred lives. It is that scarring that continues to create victims.

When I was eight years old, I was involved in an automobile accident. My initial injury wasn't severe; but it produced scar tissue on my face that later had to be surgically removed. Similarly, some who have surgery later suffer from lesions or scar tissue. They suffer greatly even though the initial problem was addressed long ago. Those physical complications that grow out of the initial trauma reveal a lot about what happens to our souls and thus our relationships. Things that happened long ago continue to invade and pervade our lives today. Adults suffer terrible nightmares from things that happened in childhood. Retired soldiers break into cold sweat years later. Many feel tainted or broken for life, and all of us are affected both inwardly and socially by the trauma of evil.

All of us know that the episode in Wisconsin could have occurred here in southeastern Minnesota. Those hunters could have belonged to our church family. The young man gunned down in the back crying "help me, help me," could be your brother; yet it doesn't take a massacre for us to know evil. Evil has bared its fangs here. It has bit with vicious venom ejected into our souls. Some of us are still profoundly affected, still bitter, still angry, still guilty, still in mourning. Some of us are still stumbling from its venom and then what about the scarring?

Although evil has both the face of terror and of kindness, although with one face it lures us in, props us up and deceives us totally and then with the other it clobbers us and imprisons us with fear and death, God's reach is far stronger and greater. Truly there is no deception that can't be exposed. There's no destruction that can't be overcome.

The power of the resurrection is not reserved for or limited to the resuscitation of old bodies. It is the release of eternal life now that overtakes our bodies soon. Jesus prayed:

***Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*** (John 17:3, NIV)

Jesus promised:

***Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*** (John 5:24, NIV)

Notice that we don't wait for eternal life. It is to be possessed now. The crossover doesn't come in future years. It doesn't wait for the throes of physical death. The crossover occurs with reconciliation. It depends only on being reconciled to God. Life is in reconciliation; death is without it. Therefore, the Apostle Paul writes:

***If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*** (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV)

You are not doomed to walk around as a scarred soul for your remaining years. Reconciled to God, you are a new creature with no scars. The sins, the guilt, and the scars with their implications have passed away. Your life is no longer plagued or defined by them. You have a new nature to nurture, a new destiny to fulfill. It makes no sense for a scarred soul to inherit an eternal home. There is no heaven in that; far from it, it appears more like hell. However, reconciled to God, you're lifted from darkness, loved as his child and new for eternity. God gives you a new mind, a new heart, a new destiny... truly a new life!

Are you living a cultural religion, do you pick and choose from the Bible whatever is comfortable or do you tremble at God's word? Do you see yourself as a desperate sinner and open your life to God with tears? Have you heard the words of Jesus and believed the one who sent him? In your pain have you been caught in God's love? Has God reached you?