

**The Unexpected Path to
Reconciliation with God**
~ 2 Cor 5 18-6 2

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Sometimes we have to deal with someone who refuses to do what we want them to do. If you have a dog, they sometimes disobey your commands. Parents will experience children who disobey. Toddlers sometimes scream, yell or cry when they have to clean up their toys. Teenagers may lie about their plans because they know it goes against their parent's rules. Parents of adult children may struggle when their kids make choices against the parent's belief about what's best.

Employers have to deal with some member who refuse to abide by a company policy. Managers or team leaders may have that one employee who constantly pushes back against some directive or policy they disagree with.

Camp Directors deal with disagreeable staff members. Camp counselors have to chase after rebellious campers. Teachers have one or two or a group of students who make trouble; push the limits or carry themselves with a constantly disrespectful attitude. Doctors deal with patients who refuse to follow prescriptions. We all have to deal with times when someone breaks some rule that directly affects us. Think

about how you feel if someone cuts in front of you in the lineup to get into a store or cuts you off as you drive.

Think about the frustration that you feel when someone rebels against you. You shared your expectations. You explained the boundaries. You believe there are reasonable boundaries and for the person's best. Yet they still resist or go a different way. When caught they claim they didn't understand or you didn't explain it well enough or that your boundary is just stupid.

You may be hurt, angry or disappointed. How will you respond? What would you expect of someone who has rebelled against you, if they wanted to reconcile?

Today, we're going to look at someone who experienced a very similar situation. He was extremely generous with those for whom He was responsible. He laid out clear boundaries for their good and prosperity. Yet they rebelled against Him and now sat in a mess.

That someone is God; Who experienced the rebellion of His creatures against His good and beneficial boundaries. God did no wrong. God amply provided for His creation. His creatures still rebelled starting with Adam and Eve. Yet God would provide a way for reconciliation. **The all-powerful holy God provided a radically unexpected path for reconciliation with rebels.**

We will think today first about why this path to reconciliation was radically unexpected. Then we will see actions God took to clear this path. Finally, we will see how we can respond to God's great actions. If you're discouraged or struggling in life today, I pray that this review of God's actions will bring encouragement. If we have fallen into an apathy or complacency about our faith, I pray that God will use His Word to stoke renewed passion in us for God Himself and the mission He gives us. So let's find out about God's radically unexpected reconciliation path from 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2.

2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2 (ESV)

¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

"In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you."

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

So here we discover God's path to reconciliation with us. **Why is this path radically unexpected? The greater reaches out to the lesser to provide the way to reconciliation.** In ancient times, cities, nations and empires waged war against each other. If one side defeated the other, the losing side sent ambassadors to the winners. They asked for mercy and terms for peace. This usually required great sacrifices for the losing side. They would have to pay tribute; in gold or other precious metals, maybe lose territory; maybe hand over hostages.

But here we see God, who has far greater power and ability than His creation, reaches out to those who rebelled against Him. He offers terms of peace or reconciliation to the rebels. Instead of requiring some huge sacrifice or payment from the rebels, God will pay the sacrifice with His own Son. In fact, this payment will cost Him greatly and personally.

Notice in the passage we just read that the word "reconciliation" shows up 5 times. Verse 18 – God through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Verse 19 – In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. Verse 20 – We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Any relationship that needs reconciliation implies damage or fracture in the relationship. Reconciliation has to do with the “reestablishment of an interrupted or broken relationship.” So all humans including you and me need to recognize our need for reconciliation with God. This metaphor of God’s saving work as reconciliation may have come from the author’s own experience on the Damascus road. Before his encounter with Christ, Paul was at war with God even though he thought he was on God’s side. Suddenly Christ appears to Him. In a few moments, Paul goes from a rebel, to reconciled, to apostle. God was able to do this because of what Christ had done. The greater reached out to the weaker. Paul was on a path of rebellion against Christ until God reached out. So the path to reconciliation is radically unexpected because the greater seeks reconciliation with the weaker.

What actions cleared the way for this radically unexpected path? First, God initiated reconciliation with those who rebelled against Him. Verse 18 - “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself.” The word “This” refers to what came before likely in verse 17. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” All this new creation is from God. The means to enter this new creation comes from God in

that He sent His Son into the world. God did not wait for the people of the world give permission to send the Son. He did not consult with the rulers of the world about the best time to send the Son. God sent Jesus according to His timetable – when that time was right in God’s eyes and purposes.

Notice in verse 18, God is the subject of the reconciling activity. God is not someone who just agrees to participate in a reconciliation discussion. He starts the reconciliation plan. In fact, Paul can talk about a done deal for himself and his ministry associates. “All this is from God who through Christ reconciled (past tense – finished product) us to Himself.” I believe Paul is talking about his ministry team here because he mentions the ministry of reconciliation. This is what Paul, Timothy and his other ministry associates do. But they couldn’t participate in the ministry of reconciliation until they themselves had been reconciled with God in the first place. God initiated reconciliation with those who rebelled against him.

Next, **God provided His own Son for reconciliation so He could not hold the rebel’s trespasses against them.** (19) Trespass is a violation of a moral standard established by God. They are offenses, wrongdoing or sin. But a trespass not only involves breaking some standard set by God. It is rebellion against God Himself. I think we like

to minimize our transgressions (or trespasses) and the damage they do to relationships. It's somewhat easier to face up to our transgressions when we've just broken some rule. But violating or offending a person is quite a different story. When we sin, or transgress, we offend and grieve God Himself. King David realized this in Psalm 51 when he confessed to the Lord "Against you have I sinned." Friends, we have transgressed against God. We have grieved him.

So, despite all this, in verse 19, we read, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." To "not count or to not reckon" means to release hold of the count – or payment required. Those in Christ have no need to settle accounts with God because God settled the account through His own Son's sacrifice. When we come to Christ, God cancels our account payable. No further reckoning is required because of what Jesus has done.

This is the message of reconciliation God entrusted to Paul. This is the message of hope we need to bring to our world. In Christ God can reconcile you to Himself. God acted to clear the path for reconciliation by initiating the reconciliation process and provide the means.

Next, we see another way God cleared the path. **God sends out ambassadors of reconciliation to those still rebelling against Him.** Verse 20 – "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God

making his appeal through us." Remember the normal pattern of negotiation in ancient times? The lesser or defeated power sends ambassadors to the stronger power. The ambassadors would beg for mercy and learn what sacrifices were necessary. But here God sends out ambassadors to people still living in rebellion against Him. He makes the sacrifice necessary for us to come to Him. He sends out ambassadors to proclaim the news of this possibility of reconciliation. Who was that ambassador in your life? Who did God use to bring you the possibility of reconciliation. That was part of God's gift and reaching out to you even while you still lived in rebellion against Him.

There's one final action on God's part from this passage that completely cleared the way for reconciliation. This explains how God could not count our transgressions against us. God didn't just sweep our sins under the rug. God didn't say "let's pretend that never happened so we can all get along." Verse 21; **God made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** This is one of the deepest and meatiest statements about the Gospel in the whole New Testament. Paul may have thought back to Isaiah 53 in writing this verse. That passage describes the suffering servant who was despised and forsaken so that the people might have life. I want to point out some parallels between

this verse and Isaiah 53. So Jesus knew no sin. He was sinless and lived a perfectly sinless life. Isa 53:9 – He committed no lawlessness, nor was deceit found in his mouth.

But then God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin. Now this does not mean that God made Jesus a sinner. But it does mean that Jesus took our sin onto Himself. Isaiah 53:5-6 describe this: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa: 53:5-6). Jesus served as our substitutionary sacrifice to atone for our sin. This is how God could not count our trespasses against us. Justice was served when Christ bore the punishment. God counted our trespasses against Christ even though Christ never sinned.

What was the result for us? The last half of verse 21 – “So that in him (Christ) we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the great exchange. God places our sin on Christ. We, in Christ, become the righteousness of God. This is also talked about in Isaiah 53:11 - “By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

Now whole books have been written to try to explore what it means that we become the righteousness of God. But it at least contains these 2 pieces. Just as God put our sins onto Christ, in some way it seems God put Christ’s righteousness onto us. So we are clothed or dressed in his righteousness. Then God looks at us with Jesus’ righteousness upon us.

But I agree with those who say there is more this than just positional righteousness. Notice the word “become.” There seems to be some sort of dynamic or changing element to this. It’s like we practically become righteous in our behavior and living. Back in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed from one degree of glory to another.” God, through the Holy Spirit is making us more and more like Christ. That means we will display more and more of God’s righteousness. But, this only scratches the surface of the depth of this verse. As one commentator puts it, “we stand on the brink of a great mystery and can only glimpse it’s depth partially.” But God brings about this great exchange of our sin for His righteousness so that we can experience a fully reconciled relationship with Him.

So we’ve seen The all-powerful holy God provide a radically unexpected path for reconciliation with rebels. We’ve seen the actions

God took to initiate and provide Christ for reconciliation. He also sends out ambassadors announcing this possibility of reconciliation. He accomplished this reconciliation by the great exchange of our sin for His righteousness.

So how will we respond to what God has done?

First, we must **Realize our need for reconciliation with God**. This doesn't affect most people. Humanity is not made up of a few really evil rebels who need to reconcile with God and then the rest of us pretty good people. We are all rebels. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian dissident who spent time in Soviet Gulags, wrote – (1974) – “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Second, we must **Be Reconciled to God** if we have not already experienced that. It struck me as strange that Paul would appeal to the Corinthians in verse 20 to be reconciled with God. Why would he appeal to believers to be reconciled with God? Weren't they already reconciled?

Yet Paul speaks to an entire church. Just as with our church today, ancient churches offered a mix of people with varied spiritual condition.

Some are deeply committed to Christ. Some have little or no spiritual commitment at all. Some were aligned to Paul. Some distanced themselves from Paul. This text calls us to examine if we've acknowledged our rebellion and received God's reconciliation terms.

Third, we need to **Apply our reconciliation with God to others especially fellow believers**. In 2 Cor. 6:1, Paul writes “we appeal to you to not receive the grace of God in vain.” Don't receive this in an unfruitful way. Let God's grace work in, and change you. Yet some Christians who claim they are reconciled with God refuse to reconcile with other believers. One commentator writes this: “Those who receive reconciliation have already received a taste, token or guarantee of God's future work in their lives and in the universe as a whole. They also individually begin to model the kind of peaceful relationships in every area of life. . . . Paul's strained relationship with the Corinthians is a serious aberration from this ideal, and he desperately desires to resolve this hostility. (Turner – 1989:3)

“The Corinthians alienation from Paul says something about their relationship to the gospel: They are out of step with gospel realities. So the fact that some of the Corinthians are still not reconciled to Paul shows a disturbance in their relationship with God. That fact *might* indicate that they do not have a relationship with God at all.” Do you

hear that? If we have settled into a pattern of unreconciled relationships with other Christians, then it calls into question our reconciliation with God. Because of a reconciliation with God, it is possible to reconcile with others.

Yet do we write off other Christians and decide we're no longer talking to them because of their politics, or theology or worship preferences? We can become experts in division and separating from one another. We can take pride in our own purity and standing up for truth. But it results in multiple unreconciled relationships, we have a serious heart issue that needs to be brought before the Lord. Be reconciled with God and then with one another.

Finally, **Bring God's reconciliation message as ambassadors of Jesus Christ.** The ministry of reconciliation is primarily the proclamation of what God has done. We are called to bring this message to rebels who have not yet heard this news.

If you are discouraged today. I pray you will take heart in seeing all God has done for you in clearing the path for reconciliation. If He has done those great acts, He will continue to look after you. If you need to reconcile to God for the very first time, it starts by admitting you're rebellion. Then we must receive God's peace brought by the blood of His Son. Then repent or turn from our rebellion and instead turn to the

One who created us. If we claim reconciliation with God, yet we're comfortably settled into some sin habit or unreconciled relationships, we must confess this and then ask for Jesus' power to enable us to overcome. Finally, we must pray for the Lord to open doors for His ambassador work. We accept this radically unexpected path of reconciliation, and then let God do the rest.