

From The Pulpit Of



Reconciliation

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Series: 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

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Text

¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a human being? There are several different ways you could answer that. But one defining characteristic is that human beings are uniquely relational.

Now in some sense other creatures are relational. Elephant herds, for example, form bonds within their communities. Dolphins, we know, can communicate with each other to some extent. But there is something distinct in our ability and need to relate with other people. This week I walked past my dog and thought, "I should give him some attention." I got down in his face and petted him and found myself saying, "How are you doing, buddy?" And that was as far as the conversation went. But I had lunch with Jason this week and before I knew it, an hour and half had passed and we had talked about all kinds of matters on our hearts.

So we humans have an irrepressible longing and capacity for relationship, for connection that finds expression in family, friendships, falling in love. It's fundamental to being human.

But there's also this other universal human phenomenon – relationships are hard. Do you know what I mean? They take work. We have a trail of broken relationships behind us. Just this week I talked with several people that are experiencing serious relational distress, seeing their communities falling apart. Though we're repeatedly drawn to relationships, they repeatedly hurt us, disappoint us, fill us with frustration. Relationships break up. Fissures form. People you were once close to you now have no contact with. Tensions arise. Animosity builds. There's friend group drama. Why is that? Why do we have broken relationships? Hold that thought.

But first, I want to go back and amend my definition of what it means to be human. It's not just that human beings are relational. There's something more foundational to it. At the core of the definition of what it means to be a human being is to have a special relationship with God. Each and every human being knows God, is born

in a relationship with the Creator. There's an innate capacity humans have to relate personally with God, because he made us, as the Bible says, in his own image. No other creature has that distinction. What does it mean to be his image bearers? It means we are made to know God and make him known. There's profound purpose there.

But there's just one problem. Something has gone wrong with the human race. Our relationship with God was broken. Each and every human being is now born in a *bad* relationship with God. There's something between us. The relationship is ruptured. There's tension, distrust, and estrangement.

God is always in the back of our minds; we know he's there. We have this unshakeable *sensus divinitatis*. It's why all human civilizations have always had some kind of religion (and those who try not to will pay \$120 for a nosebleed seat to go hear Richard Dawkins preach at Symphony Center next month about how we can ignore that *sensus divinitatis*). But it doesn't work. We can't totally stop thinking and talking about him. We all have a relationship with God, but it's just a dysfunctional relationship, a bad relationship, a broken relationship. A distant relationship. There's resentment. There's animosity. There's hostility.

Why? Well, it stems from that same issue that messes up our horizontal relationships – human to human relationships. The Bible calls it sin. Something is deeply flawed with us at the core of our souls. The Bible asks, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you” (James 4:1)? What's that saying? It's saying that our desires are disordered. We don't want what we should want. We want what we want, and we want it for ourselves. We're selfish. And that's what makes relationships with other people full of friction because they also are wanting what they want for themselves.

But more importantly, our sin alienates us from God. Listen to this description of the situation:

By sin man sets himself in rebellion against God; he becomes an enemy of God. It is not a question of some minor misunderstanding which could easily be put right; it is a case of mutiny, and mutiny of a kind far more radical in its nature and effect than anything that is known in purely human relationships; for the essence of sin is seen in the desire of the creature to set himself up in the place, not of another creature, but of his Creator, the wish to be even as God, the attempt to place himself, instead of God, at the centre of reality as the arbiter and controller of all things. Sin is the revolt of man both against God his Creator and also against his own constitution as creature.¹

It's insane. It's messed up. So sin is not some little peccadillos. It's a deep depravity, a total corruption of our desires and wills, that manifests in an attempt at cosmic treason. We know God is there and irrationally it grates on us, irritates us, annoys us. That's sin.

And that's only half of the equation. Our sin is met with God's righteous anger. Human relationships are hard because you have two sinful parties butting heads and having their pride offended. But in our relationship with God, you have one sinful party (us) and one righteous party, holy, perfect (God). He never loses his temper. He never responds unfairly or wrongly. He is pure and holy and loving. And because he is those

things, he has a settled disposition against sin which destroys and ruins human flourishing and the whole world.

Which means, every human has a relationship with God – a bad relationship, a broken relationship. God is unfairly our nemesis. And we are fairly/rightly objects of his wrath. And this is a horrible predicament to be in, to be at odds with the One who made you and sustains you and everything around you and is the only source of all that is good and pleasant and satisfying. This is a terrible position to be in; it's very tenuous to be in a antagonistic relationship with the Almighty God.

Now all that is the backdrop for this electrifyingly wonderful passage of Scripture – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. It's so crystal clear about the good news of Christianity. It's almost like the whole Bible is condensed here into 4 verses. What a marvelous truth we find here. In short, it's just this: **Christians are messengers with the most amazing message in the world – you can have a reconciled relationship with God!** That's our message. It's not – “Do you want to have a relationship with God?” Everyone already has a relationship with God... *a strained relationship*. But we've come to experience for ourselves and are here to tell everyone that **you can have a reconciled relationship with God.**

Let's pray...

Overview

We covered v. 17 last week, but I wanted to have it read again today because it articulates so well what baptism illustrates. God is in the business of new creation!

But we're really just going to be looking at vv. 18-21 today. And here's how we're going to do it. I'm going to overview it. Then I'm going to walk through it one verse at a time.

Here's the overview. Look at it with me. Verse 18 lays out two ideas, very succinctly: the message and the fact that those who believe that message are now messengers. Message and messengers.

Then v. 19 expands on those two ideas a little more: the message and the messengers.

Then vv. 20 and 21 elaborate even further on what it means to be a messenger and what exactly is the message.

So when you look at it all together, it creates this cascading effect that culminates in one of the clearest articulations of the Christian message you can find anywhere. It's so powerful!

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Verse 18

Ok. Look at v. 18 with me.

What's the message? It says, “All this [all this that he has just been talking about about a new creation] is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself.” The message is that there's a God takes the initiative (“All this is from God”) to reconcile us to himself. God is the truly, completely innocent party. He did nothing wrong. But he

makes the first move. He pursues reconciliation. He acts to restore the relationship. And he does it somehow through Christ. How exactly? We'll have to keep reading.

But then notice the second half of v. 18 – "...and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." So there's a message and there's a ministry – a message about reconciliation and a ministry of reconciliation. Those who have been reconciled by God to God are given a mission, a purpose – to see reconciliation spread.

So there's v. 18. Pretty simple, right? Two parts – a message that makes messengers. God reconciles us to himself through Christ and gives us a ministry of reconciliation.

Verse 19

Now verse 19 goes back and restates v. 18, filling in a little more detail. Verse 19 says, "that is," which means, "Let me elaborate, let me explain..." And the message is restated and the idea that we are messengers is repeated.

What's the message according to v. 19? We read that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." Something cosmic was happening in the first century person, Jesus of Nazareth. God was doing something there, namely reconciling the world to himself, making it possible for sinful people to be in a right relationship, a good relationship with him.

And it gives us a little more info on how that works. How can we be reconciled to God when we've thought, felt, said and done so many nasty things to him? Ignored him. Insulted him. Tried to replace him. Snubbed him. Been suspicious of him? How can we be reconciled with God when there's this long record of legitimate grievances that he has against us? He's got a whole list on us. It says – "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." Somehow because of Jesus, God is able not to charge us with any of that. To just let it go. Forget about it. Not hold it against us. It sounds nice, but how can he do that?

If you had a friend that mistreated you, used you, took your stuff and snubbed you, said all kinds of things about you to others thinking you didn't know but you did... for you to be reconciled to that person something would have to be done to forgive those offenses. But how? This sounds like an intriguing message: because of Jesus my sins against God can not count against me. He's willing to wipe them out. But how does that work, exactly? Keep listening.

But then notice that at the end of v. 19 it says that we're messengers. It says, "...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." In v. 18 it said, "gave us the ministry of reconciliation." In v. 19 it says, "entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." This makes clear that the ministry of reconciliation is not trying to get people to get along. It's sharing the message, the word of what God has done in Christ to reconcile sinner to himself.

Verses 20 & 21

Okay. Now let's look at vv. 20 and 21. These two final verses elaborate even more on these twin concepts: message and messenger. Except now the order is reversed.

First, it addresses the idea that we are messengers, in v. 20. It says, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ." An ambassador is a great analogy. Remember, in v. 19 it said that we've been entrusted with the message. An ambassador doesn't create

government policy. An ambassador simply delivers the message. As one person has put it, “He does not speak in his own name. He does not act on his own authority. What he communicates is not his own opinions or demands, but simply what he has been told or commanded to say. [That’s super freeing!] But at the same time he speaks with authority, in this case the authority of Christ Himself. [That’s super emboldening].”² The text says, “[W]e are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

When Christians are trying to share the good news, it’s not something we made up. It’s not our personal opinions. And it’s not some personal self-help scheme, like sharing with someone what diet plan worked for us, maybe it will work for you too? No, it’s passing on from the sovereign Lord his terms for peace. We’re just the mailman. But it’s not junk mail. It’s a divine summons.

But there’s something a bit peculiar about this analogy. The Christian’s “role as ambassador stands as strikingly different from ambassadors in the political realm of [the first century]. The normal pattern of diplomacy involved the lesser political powers sending their ambassadors to the greater political powers before whom they would plead their cases.”³ But here, God, in his grace and mercy, is taking the initiative to seek reconciliation with those who have offended him, who have no right, no claim, to receive his pardon, much less to be in fellowship with him.

Nevertheless, Christ sends us and God makes an appeal through us. It’s a personal plea. It says, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Implore. As messengers we aren’t just dispassionately delivering the mail, we care about those who are lost. We implore out of love and with a sense of earnestness and urgency, because the situation is so serious. This is about people’s eternal relationship with their Maker, and we have really good news, the terms of peace are so ridiculously easy.

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But how? And now we come to the last verse, v. 21, where the message is more fully explained. “[T]hese few direct words [set] forth the gospel of reconciliation in all its mystery and all its wonder. There is no sentence more profound in the whole of Scripture.”⁴ Are you ready? “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Verse 18 told us that God takes the initiative and reconciles us to himself through Christ. God is the beginning and end of it all, and in the middle is Christ. Verse 19 told us that in Christ God was not counting our sins against us. That’s wonderful, but how does it work? Sins can’t just disappear. God is holy and just, not some *Aw shucks* permissive grandparent in the sky.

A couple Saturdays ago I drove a couple of my girls to their Cross Country meet up at Horner Park. I dropped them off and then parked the car along a side street and went to watch. Afterwards, going back to the car I noticed some glass shards on the ground next to my car. Then I got in and started to drive away and discovered that my side-view mirror had been hit and broken. There was no note saying, “Call this number and I’ll pay for it to be replaced.” I can forgive this person and not try to find Ring camera footage of the incident and press charges and charge the damages to his account. But the mirror still needs to be replaced. So what has to happen for this person to be forgiven? I have to pay for it myself. I have to cover the cost.

Now, that's a somewhat impersonal analogy (I'll probably never see that person who hit my car again), dealing with primarily physical damages, and ones fairly inconsequential (it's a 2009 Nissan Sentra; I got the part online for about 65 bucks and hope to install it later today). But when it comes to our broken relationship with God, we owe an infinite debt that we could never repay that keeps accumulating. Our only hope is for God to forgive us, to not count our trespasses against us, which he has said he is willing to do. But they don't just disappear. He has to absorb the cost himself. How?

"For our sake he made him [Jesus Christ] to be sin who knew no sin." Jesus Christ was the only human who ever lived who never sinned. That in itself is a stunning claim, especially to be made within the period of living memory of him. Jesus was perfect, no sin, intimate, unbroken relationship with God the Father while he walked this earth, untainted love for other people.

But what's even more astounding is that this truly sinless one would say, "Count their sins to my account. I will pay for them." That's what the Cross is all about. Think about it. It makes absolutely no sense otherwise. Why have Christians for 2,000 years reveled in the death of their Leader? It's not some inspiring account of someone suffering injustice at the hands of those in power that rallies us to keep fighting against power. That's not what Jesus was doing. He was self-consciously laying down his life as a ransom for many, to cover the cost, to pay the penalty, to absorb God's righteous anger at sin so that God and humans could be reconciled, to remove all obstacles for us to have a good relationship with God. Such sacrificial love propitiates God, but also captivates us. What an overture of relationship!

But wait. There's even more. Look at the second half of v. 21. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is what's called double imputation. Our sins are imputed to Christ's account on the Cross. But that's not it. That would just bring our account from negative infinity to zero. Christ's righteousness is imputed to our account, bringing us to positive infinity.

This means we can enjoy the same intimacy, the same acceptance and closeness and approval and delight that the Father has for his Beloved Son. We don't have to work our way back into God's favor. We don't have to merit our own righteousness. In fact, trying to do that is still a way of fighting God, trying to stick it to him – *See! I can be good enough on my own.* That's what all other religions are doing. They're acknowledging that he's there, but trying to pridefully prove themselves to him and still have some hand in their salvation.

But Christians are messengers with the most amazing message in the world – you can have a reconciled relationship with God because of what God has done in Christ to reconcile the world to himself, because of grace, because Jesus bore the punishment for our sin on our behalf and gives us his perfect record of righteousness. This is what Christians celebrate and communicate. Listen to how one Christian put it around the year 130:

He himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness?

By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!⁵

Conclusion

And not just a legal declaration of justification, but resulting in a personal enjoyment of reconciliation. As the Bible says elsewhere, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). If you’re a Christian, are you enjoying that relationship? Are you walking in amazement that “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10)? Are you rejoicing “in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11)?

The God of the Universe has gone to great lengths to reconcile you to himself. He’s atoned for your sin. He loves you. He welcomes you. You can trust him to care for you. If you’re in Christ you are objectively brought near, but your subjective experience of that can still fluctuate. But today he’s calling you to take more and more advantage of your reconciled relationship with him.

And he’s given you the great privilege of telling other people how they too can have their relationship with God fixed. It’s not a self-help program. It’s not a list of to-dos. It’s an invitation to cease running away from him to all kinds of things that won’t satisfy in the end and come to the one who sent his Son to be sin for us that we might become righteous and reconciled to him.

And if you are here today and you’re not yet a Christian, I’m telling you, on behalf of God himself, **you can have a reconciled relationship with him!** You can know him as your loving Father who will take care of you through this life and into the next. You can have a warm, happy, deep relationship with God, but only through Christ, only by admitting your sin and trusting him alone to deal with it for you and bring you into relationship with him.

The Lord’s Table

We love it that you’re hear today, hearing God’s Word, seeing how it’s changed our lives, witnessing the vivid imagery of baptism... And now we come to the Lord’s Table. The Lord’s Table is another powerful image of God’s reconciling grace in Christ. Not only has he come and picked us up off the streets and given us a bath, but he’s brought us to his Table, the place of intimate fellowship. Those of us who have repented of our sin and put our trust in Jesus as our Savior and have been baptized and become part of his church family, are welcomed every week to dine together with him, a symbol of our reconciled relationship with him and with each other...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, September 20, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 205. I found Hughes' commentary on this whole passage to be extremely eloquent and soul stirring. I was tempted to just basically read the whole thing in place of my sermon. I highly recommend reading it.

² Hodge, as qtd. in R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974 [1958]), 89.

³ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 311.

⁴ Hughes, 211.

⁵ *Epistle to Diognetus*.