

## Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

### **The Ambassadors' Ministry of Reconciliation**

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Code: 80-311

If you would open your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, I want to draw your attention to a very, very significant portion of Scripture. Second Corinthians chapter 5, and I want to read for your hearing verses 17 through 21 just to embed in your mind this text. Second Corinthians chapter 5 and I'll begin reading at verse 17.

"Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. The old things passed away, behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. And He has committed to us the Word of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

The word "reconcile" in some form appears five times in those verses. Fairly easy to conclude that that's the theme. This is a text about reconciliation. It is about, verse 18 says, the ministry of reconciliation which involves verse 19 the word or the message, the *logos* of reconciliation which is a word whose opposite is *muthos* rather than the other religious myths that deceive the hearts of men. This text defines for us the mandate that every Christian has from God to engage in the ministry of reconciliation to proclaim the message of reconciliation, thereby functioning as an ambassador for Christ through whom God is conveying His message.

When you ask yourself why you're here on earth as a Christian, the answer should find its way back to this. This is really a broader understanding of the great commission, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." "Go and make disciples of all nations." Or, "You shall be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, Judea and the uttermost part of the earth." Really the only reason believers are left on earth is for this ministry of reconciliation. Everything else will be better in heaven. We struggle to be holy here. We struggle even with our fellowship here. We struggle with our praise here. We are easily distracted. We struggle with our communion, our prayer with God here. We limp along in this life and wonder why it is that God just doesn't get us out of here. We long to escape to the glories of heaven. We want to be perfect. We long for that body which is from heaven, as Paul states it in 2 Corinthians 5. We're left here really for one reason, we're left here for the ministry of reconciliation because there's one thing we will not ever do in heaven and that is we will never tell a sinner he or she can be reconciled to God;. There is no evangelism there. We are left here, a force of

ambassadors, with a ministry of reconciliation to declare the message of how sinners can be reconciled to God. Sometimes when I'm flying, somebody sitting next to me says, "What do you do?" I will say, "I have a great job, I tell sinners they can be reconciled to God. Would you be interested?" That's what I do. That's what you do. I said that to one young man on a cross-country flight, he got up, went to the back and never returned. The last thing he wanted to do was sit for four hours next to a preacher.

But one night I was flying to El Paso, Texas, I was going down there to do a men's conference at the civic center in El Paso. And I was in the middle seat on Southwest Airlines. I...I tried to get on the plane as quickly as I could because they don't have assigned seats, but I had a high number and I was the last and I squeezed into this seat, next to an Arabic gentleman. And as we got up into the air a little bit, I took out my Bible and my notes and just started writing some things I wanted to say when I got there. Ten-fifteen minutes into the flight, he looks over, I can see he's glancing and glancing, and glancing, and finally he says, "Excuse me, sir, is that a Bible?"

I said, "It is a Bible."

He said, "Oh," he said, "then maybe you could answer a religious question."

I said, "Yes, I think I could answer a religious question." I said, "What's your question?"

He said, "Well, I'm new in America, I just immigrated, I immigrated through El Paso." There's a huge immigration center there. "I immigrated to the United States and in my country everybody is a Muslim, it's against the law not to be a Muslim. Religion is very simple, everybody's the same. In America," he said, "it's very confusing...very confusing." And he said, "My question is, what is the difference between a Catholic, a Protestant and a Baptist?" That's his question.

And I said, "Well, I'll be glad to answer that." And so I sorted that out for him as simply as I could. Talked a little bit about what Catholicism was and why there were Protestants who protested that and recovered the glorious gospel of grace and faith. And put the Baptists in the right category, just gave him a little explanation. And I said, "Since you asked me a question, could I ask you a question?"

And he said, "Of course, of course."

And I said...and I knew the answers, but I wanted to engage him in the conversation. So I said, "Do Muslims have sins?"

He said, "We have so many sins, I don't even know all the sins."

I said, "May I ask you another question?"

He said, "Of course."

I said, "Do you do them?"

"I do them all the time...all the time. In fact," he said, "I'm going to El Paso to do some sins." That's a pretty honest guy.

I said, "Really. Well just what kind of sins are you going to El Paso to do?"

He said, "When I was immigrating I met this girl at the immigration point and we will meet and do some sins."

And I said, "Well how does..." and now we're on the right subject, you understand that. I said, "How does Allah feel about this?"

"It's very bad. I could go to hell. There's a hell in Islam."

I said, "You could go to hell. Why don't you stop doing them?"

"I can't."

I said, "Do you have any hope that you might escape hell?"

And I'll never forget this line, he said, "I hope THE God," in Arabic it's Alelah, contracted to Allah, Alelah, THE God. "I hope THE God will forgive me."

I said, "On the basis of what?"

"I don't know, I just hope THE God will forgive me."

And then I said something just came out of my mouth, I said, "Well I know the true God personally and He won't." I didn't really think when I said it how it would affect him, but it had a dramatic effect on him because in Islam God is totally transcendent, nobody knows Him. You can't know Him, He's not knowable. He's not even involved except in judgment. And he was trying to process "You know..." and he said to me, "You know THE God personally?" Like, what are you doing in the middle seat on Southwest, you know? If you actually know the God of the universe, I would think you would have more pull than that, right? Maybe even your own plane, right? He just couldn't process that. But I said He is the true God, He is too holy to overlook your sin and you will pay for it forever in hell. And he was very quiet. And I said, "However, God has designed a plan for you to be reconciled to Him and

go to heaven."

He said, "What is it?"

And so I unfolded the gospel completely to him. First time in his life he had ever heard it. He said to me, "Now, I understand how Jesus fits in."

Made no particular commitment then. I got his address, sent him a lot of material. Never heard back. Even directed him to a church in the area where he lived. I don't know what long-term affect I had on him, but I think I fouled up his weekend a little bit. That's a guess, but it's a fairly good one.

This is not an abnormal conversation. This is what we do. This is why we're here. This is what we live for, to tell sinners they can be reconciled to God. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. That's our task on earth. We have been given the message, the *logos*, the Word of reconciliation, that's the gospel. And we go through this world and through this life announcing to sinners that the enmity, the hostility, the violent breach, the alienation between them and the living God of the universe can be ended and they can be reconciled.

When we say the word "reconciliation" in our culture, we understand that. There are even courts of reconciliation. There are even reconciliation organizations that engage themselves in animosity between people to try to resolve that. There are friendships that need to be reconciled. There are sibling rivalries that need to be reconciled. There are spouses that need to be reconciled. We understand what that means. We understand what it means to be alienated in a relationship and to find a way back. But when you think about God being reconciled to sinners, that's a much more difficult thing because sinners being reconciled to one another seems reasonable since both will be guilty of sin. But with God all the sin is ours, He is perfectly flawless and holy and He has been violated. It's all our fault, all our guilt, all our responsibility and yet God has determined a way in which sinners can be reconciled to Him. It would seem from a human viewpoint irreconcilable. I understand why Islam has a god that's really transcendent and irreconcilable. That's reasonable. There is no God in the science of religion across the face of the earth that is by nature a reconciler. No system of religion has...that's why the gospel is so startling, stunning and shocking. That's why it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. It made no sense to have a God who was offended, who was blasphemed, whose law was violated regularly, willfully, who then desires to reconcile all those violators to Himself and to do so as to offer Himself in death as a sacrifice.

But God has designed a way of reconciliation. And we are here in this church not only locally but the church of the Lord Jesus Christ with the objective of proclaiming the word of reconciliation as ambassadors. The term there you see in verse 20...ambassador...really refers to what you would understand as an ambassador. It's a very noble word. It was a title possessed by someone who represented his government. It was a term of great dignity. To scorn an ambassador or to mistreat an

ambassador would be to scorn and mistreat the government he represented or the monarch he represented. To send the ambassador away is defacto to break the relationship with the government, or with the monarch he represents. An ambassador speaks wholly for his king, or his government. He is the mouthpiece of his sovereign. He never utters his own thoughts, he never makes private personal offers. He doesn't give personal promises. He doesn't make personal demands. He represents his sovereign. It is not our own dignity that lends weight to our ambassadorship, it is the dignity of the one we represent. So we are ambassadors of Christ. We are God's ambassadors, it says God is entreating through us. We don't have our own message, we don't have our own words. We don't make our own promises. We don't exact our own demands. We speak only that which our sovereign has told us to speak.

In Paul's day this responsibility was well-known. It was a very, very commonly understood duty. It is still well-known. The world is full of ambassadors. Every government on the earth sends its ambassadors into other places in alien foreign lands for representation. Consequently if you are an ambassador, you wind up in an alien culture. You wind up in a foreign environment. You wind up with different traditions, different life style. That's how it is for us as well. There's so much about this world in which we are ambassadors that is counter-culture to us. Our citizenship is in heaven. We belong in the fellowship of the saints. Heaven is our true home. We are aliens and strangers in this world. We don't like the way they think. We don't like the way they act. We don't like the things they advocate. We don't like what they perpetrate upon us. We do all we can to protect ourselves from it, insulate ourselves from it, protect our children from it and the people we love from it. But at the same time we are here because we have been mandated to proclaim the message of reconciliation in a ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors in an alien culture. And our responsibility here is not to change the culture. An ambassador who goes into a foreign culture doesn't have a mandate to change that culture. If you're the U.S. ambassador to France, or the U.S. ambassador to Haiti or the U.S. ambassador to any other country in the world, the Arab Emirates is not to change the culture, your job is to represent the sovereign government that sent you there.

I preached a message some years ago called "The deadly dangers of moralism," in which I said, "Evangelical Christianity today is spending too much time, too much money, and too much effort trying to change the culture rather than preach the ministry of reconciliation. The sovereign has given us the message. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ." We have been sidetracked into moralistic efforts, political efforts trying to perpetuate capitalism to one degree or another, trying to make sure we protect future generations as well as the present generation from the liberal left, making sure that we develop some kind of cultural morality. That's not our mandate. We uphold righteousness, we live as righteous citizens in this world. But our mandate is the Word of reconciliation. I remember visiting the White House, I got in the security line, I was going through the very, very serious security...this was an invitation event, only people who had been invited to come and get briefings got in line. They were all people known to the White House, it all had to send security there...security information first, they had done checks on all of us and still I'm standing in this very carefully designed screening line. A tall

gentleman walks over to me, very young guy, taps me on the shoulder and says, "Come with me." And I'm thinking...What? Before I even got to the thing, you know, they're pulling me out of the line. And he said, "I'm on the White House staff, I work for President Bush and I just want you to know that your tape on the deadly dangers of moralism has been circulating the White House staff." You immediately think, "What did I say in that message?" And I remember all the things I might have said. O Lord, I hope they cut some of those things out when they edited. But he said to me, "You made the point that it's very easy for us to get caught up in a worldly agenda, in moralistic issues, political issues, economic issues, even though they might be good things to become hostile toward the people who disagree with us." And I made the statement in the message, "You turn the mission field into your enemy." And he said to me, "We had become hostile and angry and even unkind to the people that we must reach with the gospel." So he says we've been having some meetings here to talk about how that needs to change.

We have been given an ambassadorship not to fix the culture but to proclaim the message of reconciliation, changed people, changed by the gospel will change the society. This is our ministry. This is your ministry, not just mine. It's yours.

Now let's look at our text. What is involved in this ministry of reconciliation? What are the component parts of it? What are we talking about? We've said clearly this is about that, so break it down. What are the elements? I'm going to give you four things. Number one, reconciliation is by the will of God. It is by the will of God. That is so foundational, that is so critical, that is so basic, so absolutely essential and yet we might easily miss it. Reconciliation is by the will of God. Look at verse 17 for a moment. In this very familiar verse Paul says, "If any man is in Christ he's a new creature. The old things passed away. Behold, new things have come." He's talking about salvation, regeneration, conversion, new birth. All that comes with it, all the old is gone, all the new has come...so he's talking about the great work of salvation. Verse 18, "Now all these things," that is all the things that are new, all the elements of salvation, all the components of conversion, all these things are from God.

What is this telling us? That God is the reconciler. That reconciliation is by the will of God. Verse 19 puts it this way. God was in Christ reconciling the world, the world used in the sense of humanity. It doesn't mean every single person who has ever lived, but it means from the human race God is doing His reconciling work. God was in Christ reconciling the world. Then verse 20, God is entreating through us. In every sense God is the source, God is the initiator, God is the reconciler. Obviously the offended party has to set the terms for the reconciliation. If you have blasphemed God as all of us have, if you have become the enemy of God, if you are hostile to God, alienated from God, if you have violated God's holiness by violating the holy expression of His holiness which is His Law and all of us have violated His Law, if you are a violator of God's Law and therefore a violator of His holiness and therefore a blasphemer of God and therefore the enemy of God and if you have done all of that against God, then only God can set the terms of the reconciliation. When two human beings reconcile, there's give and take on both parts because we're all sinful and we have to give and take

on both parts to bring about the reconciliation. In the case of reconciliation with God, we are guilty alone of the violations and God alone can set the terms for reconciliation. How thankful we should be that the true and living God is not like the false gods of this world but is by nature a reconciler.

Through the years I've studied false religions all over the world, ancient ones, modern ones, and they invent these various kinds of deities. Sometimes they even try to name them as if they are the true God of the Bible. But the gods of the nations run on a spectrum from, I guess what you could say is indifference to hostility, basically. It's one way to look at them kind of fanning across from one extreme to the other. Some gods are indifferent, apathetic and Allah appears to me to be a God who is transcendent, who is indifferent, who is way out there, who is not knowable, who has really no personal interaction with anyone. This would be true, for example, of Baal in the Old Testament. Baal is very indifferent. He is the apathetic God. And when demons and men invent their own gods, they have invented some who have been very, very apathetic. Remember Elijah up on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal and they built altars and Elijah said let's find out who's God. You build an altar, you put your sacrifice, I'll build an altar, put my sacrifice...you call your god, I'll call my God, we'll see who comes down and burns the offering. And while they're calling on Baal and cutting themselves and going through all kind of histrionics to try to get Baal who doesn't exist to react, what is Elijah's comment? Maybe he is sleeping, or on a vacation. This was a reflection of the apathy of their deity. But on the other hand, in Israel they worshiped the people, the pagan people and the unfaithful and apostate Israelites got caught up in the worship of another god called Molech or Moloch, and this was a god who was so angry, so hostile, so vicious that to appease him and get him off your back, you had to incinerate your body in a fire. So on the one hand you've got the indifferent god, on the other one you've got the hostile god, this is typical of the gods of the world, and gods of the nations, somewhere in between they all find a place. And here comes the true and living God and there is nothing like Him at all because men and demons cannot invent the true and living God. And here comes a God who is not apathetic, and who is not cruel, here is a God who is by nature a Savior. Here is a God who is by nature a reconciler. Here is a God who though completely holy, absolutely pure and flawless and who has been offended and blasphemed by His human creatures will still reconcile with them. He is by nature a reconciler.

It's a sad thing, you know, when you think about people who have been told, and this has been out there for centuries, for example, in Roman Catholicism that you don't want to go to God for your salvation, you don't want to go directly to God for your needs because God is hard and God is a judge and God is vengeful and God is wrathful. You might think you should go to Jesus, but Jesus can also be hard, and Jesus can be stern, and all of that. If you really want to be sure you can get the attention of God and be reconciled, if you really want to be saved for sure, go to Mary, she's sympathetic, she's compassionate, she's tender hearted. And Roman Catholic theology says Mary never refuses anybody who comes to her and Jesus can't refuse her, and so she sells Jesus on your case and then Jesus sells God on your case, and that's how you get God to be willing to accept you. That is...that is an attack on the nature of God. God is no reluctant Savior. God, our Savior...writes the Apostle Paul

again and again in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and in Titus...God our Savior, God our Savior, God our Savior, God our Savior in every chapter. God is by nature a Savior.

Somebody says, "Well look at the Old Testament, what kind of a God is that? He opens up the ground and swallows people whole, He sends down fire from heaven and incinerates them. He drowns the whole Egyptian army in the Red Sea. What kind of a God tells the Jews to go slaughter all the Canaanites? What kind of a God sends bears out of the woods to shred young men who are demonstrating hostility and animosity toward a ?????? ? What kind of God does this? What kind of God allows all these things to happen? What kind of God initiates these kinds of deadly judgments?

That's not the question. The answer to that question is a just God. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" says the book of Genesis. A just God is doing what is just. The soul that sins shall die, the wages of sin is death. God says to Adam and Eve, "In the day you eat, you will die," Genesis 3. "In the day you eat of that forbidden fruit, you will die." They eat...I think they probably ate a few days after they were created. I don't think there was much time that went by.

They ate. And Adam lived over nine hundred years. What's that about? In the day you eat you die and nine hundred years later he's still alive, what is that about? The real question in the Old Testament is not why did God execute certain people at certain times, and they were a very small minority compared to the population until the Flood and then they were a massive majority. What kind of God drowns the whole world and let's only eight people survive? A just God, but it was a long time of God's pleading and pleading and pleading with mankind before that judgment fell. When God takes a life, that's justice. That's what is deserved. The real question to ask in the Old Testament is, why did God let so many sinners live for so long? Why didn't God destroy everybody? If God is a holy and just God, why doesn't He kill the sinner when the sinner deserves to be killed? If that were the case, nobody would be born because as David said, "In sin did my mother conceive me." It doesn't mean he was illegitimate, he meant that from the time he was conceived in the womb he possessed sinful propensities. The fact that anybody lives, that anybody wakes up, has breakfast, smells the morning dew, looks at the sunrise, enjoys the day, falls in love, has a baby, throughout all of human history the rain falls on the just and the unjust, the sun shines on the just and the unjust, the richness of this world is enjoyed by all...what is that? That is simply a temporal illustration of God's patient enduring kindness toward sinners that causes Him to withhold His judgment. Some died, many died under the judgment of God, not all died and that's the question that really should be asked, not why does God kill sinners, but why does God let sinners live? And the answer is, because...as Romans 2:4 says...He is patient and enduring, desiring that they should see His kindness and repent...and repent. God is by nature a reconciler. That's why 1 Timothy 4:10 says that He is the Savior of all men. Great statement, especially of those who believe.

Now we know how He's the Savior of those who believe, spiritually and temp...and eternally He saves us. But how is He the Savior of everybody? In what way is God the Savior of everybody? In a general



sense, He's the Savior of everybody because He doesn't give the sinner what the sinner deserves when the sinner deserves it. Sinners live all around us, at all levels relative levels of sin. There are religious sinners, religious hypocrites, phonies in the church. There are pedophiles and child pornographers and terrorists at the other end, relative end of sin. They live, they survive, they flourish, they get rich. Why? Why doesn't God snuff them if He's a just God. Because He is by nature a reconciler. He shows that to us in allowing sinners to live. He is the Savior of all men, then in a broad sense, temporally and physically He spares them what they deserve. But He's the Savior of those who believe spiritually and eternally. That is a far greater expression of His saving nature. But God puts His nature on display as a Savior by allowing sinners to live. And it is His kindness and forbearance intended to lead them to repentance. God is by nature a Savior. It is the will of God.

So you work on the sinner, not God. You work on the sinner, not God. God is ready and eager to save. Do you remember the story of the prodigal, the tale of two sons? The father is God, He looks in the distance, He sees His vile, wretched, selfish, indulgent, immoral, filthy traitor son coming back. And what does the father do? Pulls his robe up, straps around his waist and runs a sprint through the middle of the village to that son and before anything can come out of the mouth of that son, throws his arms around him, kisses him all over the head. That's full reconciliation. That father is God...the sprinting, eager reconciler embracing the filthy sinner. Puts on him the sandals, the ring, the robe, kills the fatted calf, huge celebration, pictures the joy of heaven when one sinner repents. God so loved the world...the world of sinners...that He gave His Son to reconcile them. He reconciled us not just to become friends, He reconciled us to become children. It is not foreign to His holy nature, it is true in every sense to His nature. He is the reconciler. Reconciliation then is the divine provision by which God's holy displeasure can be appeased. It is the divine provision by which hostility can be removed. It is the divine provision by which sinners can be restored to Him. Man never makes reconciliation. It is what we embrace, not what we do.

To put it another way, reconciliation with God is not something we accomplish when we stop rejecting Him. It is something He accomplishes when He stops rejecting us. It is initiated in divine sovereignty. God then is the source of reconciliation. Reconciliation is through the will of God so never are we more engaged in the will of God in this world than when we are proclaiming the message of reconciliation in the midst of the ministry of reconciliation, when we are discharging our ambassadorship we are doing God's redeeming work.

Second point, reconciliation is by the will of God. Secondly, by the act of forgiveness...by the act of forgiveness. Look at verse 19. It says that God reconciles us, God is in Christ reconciling, God is begging. And here is what makes it happen. Verse 19, "God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself not counting their trespasses against them." That's the only way this can work. God has to stop making our sin an issue. That is the only possible way. God has to overlook our sin. God has to dismiss our sin. God has to erase the record of our sin. He has to treat us, listen to this, as if we never sinned. That is such a wonderful thing.

You would think when you say to a sinner...Reconciliation with God is possible. And you say, "He's willing to forgive all your sin, all the sins you have committed in the past, all the sins you are currently committed...committing and all the sins you will ever commit in your life. He will forgive them all forever. Bury them in the depths of the deepest sea, remove them infinitely as far as east is from west and forget them." Does that sound good? Does that sound like a good offer, to have all your sins completely and fully forgiven? Who wouldn't accept that?

I love what it says in Ephesians 1 verse 7, "In Him we have redemption, through His blood the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us all." Lavished grace washes away our sin. The only way that God can be reconciled to the sinner is if God no longer considers our sins. This is staggering. This is absolutely staggering. How can God, infinitely holy God, just decide sin is no longer an issue to Me? We might work that way in relationships. We have to. You might say to your child who has sinned against you as a parent, you bring your child in and you say, "Look, I forgive you. I love you. I want the best for you. This is wrong. I acknowledge it is that. But I forgive you. I forgive you so completely for your conduct or your behavior." Or you might be talking to a spouse or someone else, a friend. "I will no longer remember this. I will remove it. It will cease to be an issue. And I will be reconciled to you." We can do that as human beings. But to think of God doing that who has been so offended of just stepping up and saying, "I forgive it all?" That's exactly what is necessary. That is exactly what is required. Not counting their trespasses against them.

So when you talk about being reconciled to God, you're talking about a relationship to God in which your sins do not any longer exist. Wow. That leads me to a third point. The ministry of reconciliation is by the will of God, by the act of forgiveness...thirdly, by the obedience of faith...by the obedience of faith. And now we get to the point that the sinner is going to have to do something in the middle of all of this and that's in verse 20. Most interesting verse, he says, "We are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us," that's the ambassadorship idea. And then he says this, "We beg you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God." Now for the first time we have the introduction of the human element here. You need to be reconciled to God. God is the reconciler but not apart from the human will, not apart from your response. And isn't it fascinating...you would think the sinner would say, "Where do I go and what do I do? And what do I say to have all my sins forgiven, to escape the horrors of eternal hell, to have the promise of everlasting heaven? What? Just tell me. You're telling me that all my sins will be forgiven, not held against me, not accounted to me, obliterated, blotted out, wiped out forever. I will escape hell and enter heaven. Who would refuse that deal?" And yet Paul comes back and says, "We beg you."

What are you begging about? This is the best offer any human being was ever made. What is the begging part? The picture here is pleading. It's actually the Greek word *parakaleo*. This is a word with lots of meanings...ask, urge, encourage, counsel, admonish, exhort. It's associated with the Holy

Spirit who is called the *parakletos*, a noun form of the same word. So here we are counseling, urging, asking, pleading, admonishing, exhorting to get people to be willing to reconcile to the God who is willing to reconcile with them. Why in the world is this something you have to beg people to do?

I'll tell you why. Because, Jesus said, "Men love their sin. They love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. They run from the light," John 3. You talk about them having to repent of their sin, you talk to them about having to be willing to give up their sin, you hear the words of Jesus, "If any man come after Me, let him deny himself," that is put an end to the person you are with the choices that you make and the life that you live and the sovereignty that you exercise over your own behavior, this is the end of you refusing any further contact with the person you've been, willing to take up your cross and die if necessary and eager to obey...you're talking about hating father, mother, sister, brother. You're talking about hating your own life, Jesus said, you're talking about giving up everything, selling all to buy the pearl of great price, selling all to buy that treasure hidden in the field, Matthew 13. Oh, this is giving up everything. The sinner's life is defined by sin. The sinner's life is defined by sinful thoughts, sinful attitudes, the cultivation of sinful activities and sinful relationships. And this is where he gets his gratification and this is where he gets his fulfillment, or she and you are asking them to let go of all of that. That's why it's a begging operation. The sinner holds to tightly to his sin, even the legalistic religious sinner, Jesus goes in Luke 4 to His hometown of Nazareth, He preaches in the synagogue to the people He grew up with, He spent 30 years in that synagogue, everybody knew Him, it's His own synagogue where He was every Sabbath, where He went to Sabbath school as a kid and He goes, He preaches one sermon, Luke 4, at the end of the sermon they try to throw Him off a cliff and kill Him...the people who knew Him best. Why? Because they would not accept His diagnosis of their wretched sinful condition. They were proud religious hypocrites who wouldn't let go of their hypocrisy. The sinner clings with a death grip to his sin.

And so, we plead, we beg...be reconciled to God. How? The Scripture is very clear, "By being willing to turn from your sin and trust in Christ." Christ is the focus of this. Look at verse 17, "It all is in Christ," verse 18, "It all is through Christ." Verse 19, "Again it is in Christ." We are ambassadors, verse 20, for Christ, on behalf of Christ. It is necessary for the sinner to repent and turn to Christ. And that's what we beg sinners to do. That's what I said to the man on the plane, "I'm telling you, God is a reconciler and God is willing to be reconciled to you if you will repent of your sin and put your trust in Jesus Christ." And you beg and you beg and you beg, you say in Acts 16:31, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved." It's hard to believe because they can't get past the love of their own wretched sin.

Reconciliation is by the will of God, it is by the act of forgiveness, it is by the obedience of faith. One final point remains and this is the key to everything. Okay? God is a reconciler, willing to forgive the sinner who repents and believes in Christ...raises a huge question...huge. Here's the question. How can God...to put it in the language of Romans chapter 3 verse 26...how can God be just and the justifier of sinners? How can...how can He do that? Because as soon as He just passes over

everybody's sin, forgives it, He stops being just. Justice punishes sin. For example, if I'm a judge in a court, I sit at the bench, people are brought in criminal court, the criminal comes in and says, "Yes, I'm a mass murderer, yes I killed all those people, I confess to all of it, I did it, here's how I did it." Here are the circumstances, a full confession. A full confession is corroborated by all the evidence, eye witnesses the whole case is air tight. He says then to the judge, "Judge, I'm really sorry about it and sorry I did that. I won't do that again. Could you please be gracious and forgive me?" And if I as a judge were to say, "Of course I forgive you, I feel compassion toward you, and love toward you, you're forgiven, you're free."

I wouldn't be a judge very long, would I? Because I'm not just. The violation of the crime demands justice. And shall not the judge of all the earth do right, as I said? God must be just so how can He be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus? How can God be just and holy and uphold His Law and still justify someone for believing in Jesus? That's Romans 3:26. Or to put it in language of Romans 4:5, how can God justify the ungodly? That is a profound little statement. Most people think religion is about the godly. You know, you're going to get to heaven if you're good. But it is God who justifies not the godly but the ungodly. How can He do that?

And that brings us to the fourth point and the key. Reconciliation is by the work of substitution...it is by the work of substitution. God justifies the ungodly by punishing a substitute. God's Law being violated, listen I'm going to make a statement that you might not have thought of, every sin ever committed in the history of the world will be punished by God...every sin you or I or any human beings who have ever lived or will ever live, every single sin will be punished, either eternally in the punishment that comes to that sinner, or in a substitute. And there's only been one substitute, verse 15. Here's how God maintains His justice and justifies those who believe in Jesus, justifies the ungodly, verse 21, "He...being God...made Him who knew no sin..." Who's that? You've only got one person on the list. One sinless one. "He made the spotless sinless Son of God, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners...Hebrews says...the one of whom God Himself said, I am well pleased with Him." He made Christ...the Greek says...sin on our behalf, in our place for us. What a statement.

God made Him who knew no sin, the Lord Jesus, the Lamb without blemish and without spot, He made Him sin. No one was qualified but Him. Revelation 5, He's the only one qualified to come and take the scroll out of the hands of God and take back the earth as the rightful heir. He is the holy one. He is the perfect Lamb, sinless. God made Him sin.

What does that mean? Does it mean He became a sinner? There's a teaching floating around in the Faith Movement that on the cross Jesus became a sinner. It's been articulated again and again. On the cross Jesus became a sinner and had to go to hell for three days to pay for His sin and then was raised from the dead. Blasphemy. On the cross He is the Lamb without blemish and without spot. On the cross He says, "My God, My God, why?" There's no sin, that's why the why. If there's sin, there's no why, it's becoming a just punishment. What is this going on then if Jesus isn't actually a sinner?

Listen to this. On the cross God treated Jesus as if He were a sinner. He brought Him, the sinless one, to be the substitute for sinners, depicted in all the sacrifices in the Old Testament, a substitute giving His life for the sinner. Put it another way, God killed Jesus with His wrath over your sin instead of doing it to you. To put it another way, on the cross God treated Jesus as if He lived your life, as if He lived my life. That's right. On the cross God treated Jesus as if He lived, listen, your life and my life. To put it another way, on the cross God treated Jesus as if He had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever believe through all of human history. He treated Jesus as if He had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever believe through all of human history, though He committed none. God treated Him as if He had committed them all. And you ask the question then, "How is it that if it's going to take an eternity of punishment for one sinner and still the punishment is not enough, how could Jesus bear the punishment of all the sinners who belong to God and bear it all from Friday to Sunday?"

And the answer is only this, that He could take an infinite amount of punishment summed up in a brief amount of time because He is an infinite person. So God treated Jesus as if He lived your life and unleashed the full fury of His wrath. And again I say, He bore the punishment of God for every sin ever committed by every person who through all human history would ever believe in the true and living God.

But that's not all. The back side of this substitution is equally startling. Look at the rest of verse 21, "That we might become the righteousness of God in Him." He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace and reconciliation was laid on Him. God caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. All of that is in Isaiah 53. He became sin for us who knew no sin. But here's the other side of that. That we might become the righteousness of God in Him. This is so thrilling. He was made accursed for us, so says Galatians chapter 3. He bore our punishment by becoming a curse in our place. Peter puts it this way, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, by His wounds you were healed." It's the same idea. Substitution, our sins imputed to Him. But the other side of all that is His righteousness then credited to us. That last statement, "That we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

I'm not righteous. You're not righteous. We know that, don't we? We all live in Romans 7, don't do what we ought to do and do what we ought not to do. And we all say with Paul, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death." We all long to go to heaven so we can get rid of this cantankerous flesh that keeps subjecting us to sinful things. I'm not righteous. But then again, Christ was not a sinner, but God treated Him as a sinner and though I'm not righteous, God treats me as if I am righteous. On the cross God treated Jesus as if He lived my life, and now He treats me as I live...as if I lived Jesus life. Is that a startling thought?

People say, "Why did Jesus have to live thirty-three years?" If I were God I might have said, I need you to go down and redeem sinners, so go down on a Friday, you can die and be raised on Sunday and be back Sunday night. Get it done. What's 33 years? He had to live a perfect life. He had to be in all points tempted like as we are. He had to fulfill all righteousness, Matthew 3:15. Why? So that a perfect life would exist that could be credited to the account of those who belong to God. He dies a perfect death, the death that we should have died, so that we could be credited with living a perfect life. That's why there's no condemnation. God looks at the cross, sees Jesus. Looks at the cross rather and sees us bearing His fury. Looks at us and sees His Son. That's what it means to be in Christ. This is the gospel. This is the message, the word of reconciliation that we are to discharge in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors. Reconciliation is by the will of God, by the act of forgiveness, by the obedience of faith and by the mighty work of substitution.

Father, as we close this wonderful discussion of this great text, we are reminded that this is all Your plan, all of grace, grand and glorious, incomprehensible grace that You would treat Your Son as if He were a sinner so that You could treat us as if we were righteous. And some day You will make us righteous when we enter into the glory of heaven to come. We bless Your name, for giving us this reconciliation, for making us Your beloved, adored children though we are undeserving. May we be faithful in the ministry of reconciliation to preach the glorious gospel by which we were reconciled, so that others may be as well. In Your Son's name, amen.

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