

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

### **Called to the Ministry of Reconciliation**

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Code: GTY113

It's been a delight to fellowship with these folks who are hosting this event, and also to get to know a few of you and reacquaint myself with those of you I've known in the past. It has also been a special privilege to have a little time to open the Word of God. I know you know these things, but as Peter said, I don't mind putting you in remembrance of these things because they are the foundational things of ministry. I know they're the things that drive your ministry and when you get to the end of the line and you're looking at your real objective, the reason we submit to the authority and the power and sufficiency of the Word of God, the reason we submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is so that we can fulfill the Great Commission. At the end of everything is salvation.

I tell our church people and it needs to be reiterated again and again, the only reason the church is still on Earth is to do the work of evangelism. Everything else that we do, we would do perfectly in heaven, but there's no evangelism there. So the Lord leaves us in our imperfections just to achieve this gathering in of His own from the corners of the Earth. Any ministry must have as its final outcome the objective of advancing the Kingdom of God, adding more voices to the Hallelujah Chorus, to borrow Paul's language, more souls singing praise to God that redounds to His glory. And in order for us to be effective with that, in order for us to accomplish that in the way that God would want us to, I think it has to be our objective in the end. The perfecting of the saints and the work of the ministry is for the building up of the body of Christ, and the body grows by salvation. And so, as a pastor, the end goal of everything we do is to bring people the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to see them come to faith in Him.

And so it's critical for us, and this has been a passion of mine for such a long time, it's critical for us to make sure we get the gospel right... to make sure at the end of the day that what we're saying is the saving message. It would be a horrible thing, it is a horrible thing to get people interested in the message and then have the wrong message. And so, we need to be sure we understand the glorious gospel that we are called to proclaim.

One passage comes to mind, I just want to talk about this for a few minutes. I know you've had a long day. These words would be very familiar to you. "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he's a new creature. Old things passed away, behold, new things have come," this is 2 Corinthians chapter 5. "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's 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.”

Five times in that passage one word appears, it's the word reconcile five times. Clearly then, the theme of this is reconciliation. We read here about the ministry of reconciliation. That's what the ministry is. It is a ministry of reconciling sinners to God. We also read here about the word of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation is built on the message of reconciliation. People can only be reconciled to God when they respond to the true means of reconciliation to God, which is, of course, the gospel.

And I just want to give you some things to think about in regard to this, just a couple of points that maybe will break this passage down a little bit. Number one, reconciliation is by the will of God. Reconciliation is by the will of God. Just listen to how strongly this comes through the text. He starts out by talking about being new creations, old things passing away, new things coming. Now all these things are from God who reconciled us. The next verse, “God was in Christ reconciling the world.” The next verse, “God is entreating through us, be reconciled to God.” God is the author of reconciliation. God is by nature a reconciling God.

Sometimes your critics talk about the Old Testament and say, “What kind of God would destroy the Canaanites? What kind of God is going to send bears out of the woods to shred young men for yelling “Bald head...bald head....bald head at a prophet?” That seems like a minor deal. What kind of God is going to open the ground and swallow up people whole? What kind of God is going to call for the death of nations, etc., etc.? That is not the question. The question is what kind of God allows any sinner another breath? If God is infinitely and perfectly holy, if God is too pure to look upon iniquity and tolerate sin, and if in fact the wages of sin is death and if one violation of the law is a breach of the entire Law from which a man cannot recover, the question is, what kind of God lets sinners live? The only kind of God who would do that is a saving God by nature. That's why Paul says in 1 Timothy 4, “God is a Savior for all men...Savior of all men.” And then he uses the little adverb *malista*, especially of those who believe. Well we know that part. We know what that means. We know that God is a Savior of those who believe spiritually and eternally.

But in what sense is He the Savior of everybody? The answer to that is physically and temporally. What do we mean by that? You can see the nature of God as a Savior on display by just recognizing that sinners live...sinners live. God says to Adam, “The day you eat you'll die.” Adam lives 900-plus years. God is by nature a reluctant judge in that sense. This is God who is at His own heart a reconciling God. In fact, Romans 2 says that God puts this on display by His patience and forbearance which is intended to lead the sinner to repentance. Look, sinners wake up in the morning, smell the coffee and watch the sun rise and kiss their babies and go off to a career and take a vacation, enjoy the beauty of creation, eat a steak, sit in a comfortable chair, laugh, fall in love. This

is the rain falling on...what?...the just and the unjust. This is what theologians have always called common grace. And this is a massive testimony to the reconciling nature of God. He is by nature a Savior, He puts it on display temporally, physically, that we might know how He longs to be a Savior spiritually and eternally. That's the real question.

We don't have to talk God in to saving sinners. That's a given. You know, the Pharisees and the scribes were merciless on Jesus. And the thing that they finally came up with was He does what He does by the power of Satan, right? Beelzebub. He is not only not from God, He is from Satan. And the primary peg that held up that belief was that Jesus spent all His time with the people they had deemed Satan's people...tax collectors, prostitutes, and the assorted thugs and riff-raff that goes along with tax collectors who strong arm money out of people and the other criminals who would associate with that kind of low life. They were convinced that Jesus had to be from Satan because He was at home with Satan's people. And so when Jesus spent His time with prostitutes and sinners, they were outraged and they were offended and they bring it up, I'm sure, for the umpteenth time in the fifteenth chapter of Luke and Jesus says, "You just don't get it, do you?" You just don't get it.

Let me tell you three stories. There was a man who had a sheep, he lost the sheep, went and had... went and looked for the sheep, found the sheep, put the sheep on his shoulders, brought the sheep home, called everybody together and had a party. What is that symbolizing? The joy of God over one sinner who repents. A lady loses a coin, searches, finds the coin, calls all her family together, has a party. Why? Something valuable to her was found and this is another symbol, there's more joy in heaven over a sinner who repents, over you self-righteous Pharisees who need no repentance. You don't get it, you don't even know the heart of God. You think you represent God, you think you know God? You have no clue where God finds His real joy. And God's not waiting to start the party for a thousand people to be converted at the next crusade. Heaven rejoices over one sinner... one sinner.

And then He tells the story of all stories, the greatest short story ever written, the story of the two sons. This is really fresh in my mind. I'm working on the book today, it's got to be finished in two days, on *The Tale of Two Sons*. And Jesus says, "You don't get it." He tells the story about a father, had a son wretched, rotten. Jesus paints the worst sinner that a Pharisee could imagine. He's telling the story to the Pharisees. This is such an outrageous kid, nobody would do that. No good Jewish boy would want his inheritance, which is like saying, "Die, Dad, you're in my way." No one would be that disrespectful. Nor would he take his third of the estate which his younger son would get and liquidate it into cash. That means you would sell it as a future on a discount. Nobody would do that. Nobody would be stupid enough to do that.

Then take it, go to a Gentile country which would instantly make you unclean and spend it all on prostitutes and end up feeding pigs. Come on, it's an outrageous ridiculous story in their minds. Nobody would do that. But if anybody did do that, that certainly is the worst sinner.

He comes back... what does the father do? Sees him coming, the father seems to have no concern for his own shame, a father so dishonored. This is a shameful father in the story. Father to the Pharisees, the father is the most shameful person in the whole story. The son is shameful, but a father who didn't slap that son silly and make him restore everything he had wasted because the Rabbi said, "Restitution before reconciliation."

What does the father do? He sees him from afar off, sprints and Middle Eastern gentlemen don't sprint, they glide. Sprints through town which means he has to pull up his robe and unbare his legs. Unheard of. In fact, in Middle Eastern language, the word for robe is *makaboot*(???), it means that which brings me honor. That's why you wear it to the ground. Takes the shame upon himself, sprints through, throws his arms around the pig-stinky kid, kisses him all over the head, full reconciliation. Puts a ring on his finger, shoes on his feet, the robe, has a party. This is the worst sinner Jesus could paint and the father comes... you see God, don't you?, coming down out of heaven, running for the dirt of our city and our world to embrace the filthy sinner. And the older brother comes in and the older brother is the Pharisees and now the ones listening to the story are in the story. And the older brother says, "This is outrageous." And he's just parroting exactly the way the Pharisees feel.

And the father says, "Everything I ever had was right here for you." They represent the religious, you know, in the house sinners...self-righteous, proud. He said, and I love this line, "We had to rejoice, we had to because your brother who was dead," and they would have had a funeral when he left, "is alive, we had to rejoice." Heaven has to rejoice when a sinner repents. That's the joy of God.

We don't have a reluctant rectifier, aren't you glad for that? One of the reasons I could never be a Roman Catholic, never, because I don't believe that I have a problem if I go to God cause God is too tough and so I need to go to Jesus. But if I go to Jesus, Jesus can be touch, too. So I've got to go to Mary because Mary's tender and sweet and Jesus can't refuse Mary. That's Roman Catholic theology. God is not by nature a reconciler. Jesus may be but He's a reluctant reconciler. So go to Mary if you want anything because Jesus can't refuse Mary. That's not the God of Scripture. God is not a reluctant reconciler, He is a God who finds His consummate joy in the salvation of sinners. So when you do the work of evangelism, you're doing the work that is the joy of God.

So, reconciliation is by the will of God. Another point, and by the act of forgiveness. How can God rectify the sinner? It says this, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...how?...not counting their trespasses against them." There's only one way that a sinner could be reconciled to God and that is if God removes sin, right? If God removes sin. If God forgives sin. And that's the gospel.

You know, we need to go back to that so often. You hear, you know, Jesus wants to make you happy and Jesus wants to fix your life, and Jesus wants to bump you up a few notches on the success scale

and straighten out your slice and help you get more home runs and thank You, Jesus. The business that Jesus is in is the business of forgiveness of sin. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, judgment.

And our message, and this is the message I love to preach, just a quick story. I'm on a flight, flying to El Paso, sitting next to an Arab guy. And he's looking over, and looking over. I'm in the middle seat on Southwest, the worst place, you know, no service, cramped. And I'm sitting there and I've got my Bible out cause I'm going to go do a men's conference for Calvary Chapel down there in El Paso. And I'm just writing some notes and this guy looks over and he says, "Excuse me, sir, is that a Bible?"

I said, "It is a Bible."

He said, "Oh, sir, maybe you could answer a question for me."

I said, "Sure."

He said, "I have just immigrated into the United States through El Paso a month or so ago, and I am Muslim and all my nation is Muslim but I'm trying to understand American religion. Could you tell me, sir, the difference between a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Baptist?" That was his question. That's exactly what his question was.

And I said, "Yeah, I think I can sort that out for you." So I gave him sort of the simple definition, you know, put the Baptist in the Protestant category, and you know, explained a little bit to him. And I said, "Could I ask you a question?"

"Of course, of course."

And I knew the answer but I wanted to engage him at the point he has to be engaged. So I said, "Do Muslims have sins?"

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

I said, "Do you do them?"

He said, "I do them all the time." And then he said this, I'll never forget it. He said, "In fact, I'm flying to El Paso to do some sins."

I said, "You are?"

And he said, "Yes." He said, "I met a girl when I was immigrating and so we have planned to meet together and I will do some sins."

Okay. We're going down the right trail here, folks. This is...we've cut to the chase. And so, I said, "Well how does Allah, Al Elah in Arabic, how does Allah feel about this, your sinning?"

He said, "It's very bad. I could go to hell forever."

I said, "Well that's probably not good. Why don't you stop?"

He said, "I can't stop, I can't stop."

I said, "Is there any way that you can escape hell?" And there is no salvation in Muslim, none.

He said this, I'll never forget it, he said, "I hope de God will forgive me."

And then I said something, it just came out, didn't think about it. "I said, "I know Him personally and He won't."

Whoa!...

And I was thinking more of the second part, He won't. And he heard the first part and thought... "You know God personally and you're in the middle seat on Southwest?" It's just...that was not processed. He looked at me like, "Are you kidding me?" Because they don't believe anybody knows God. They believe in a completely indifferent transcendent detached deity. And I said, "But, you know, if you've want to talk a little bit more, I've got a great thing to tell you. I can tell you how all your sins can be forgiven. Would you be interested in that?"

You can?

And I just unpacked the whole gospel which he never understood. This is always where you've got to go, folks, this is always where the message has to go because this is about the forgiveness of sin. This isn't about bumping up people's comfort scale with life in this world. This is about escaping hell and entering heaven. And this is the message that God will forgive your sin.

I unfolded that with him and told him, I really messed up his weekend, I don't know what he told that girl when he finally met her because... "You know those plans we made...I don't know about those plans." But anyway, I followed up by sending him some material and never heard back from him, so I don't know. But I do know this, the message is always about forgiveness. And the good news is this, people sometimes will say to me, "What do you do?" And I say I tell people God will forgive all your sins, are you interested? That's the message, isn't it? That's the message. The only way you can

ever be reconciled to God is to have your sins forgiven totally.

So reconciliation is by the will of God, by the act of forgiveness. I'll just give you one more point. That poses a very interesting question. How can God do that? Paul poses the question this way. How can God be just and the justifier of sinners?

Let me give you a little scenario. I'm a judge, I'm sitting on the bench, I've been appointed to that responsibility. And my job is very simple, I am to uphold the letter of the Law, as a judge, right? That's my duty. That's the expectation. A guy comes into my court, criminal court, and he says, "Your Honor, I did it, I killed all those twenty people. I confess that I did it.

And it's not a sham confession because all the evidence points to the guy, everything supports that. But, he says, "You know, Your Honor, I'm just really sorry about that. I feel real bad about it. I'm sorry for all the implications that came out of what I did and I just feel really bad about that but I just want to know if you'll just forgive me."

If I said, "Sure, I'm a nice guy, I'm a gracious guy, I find my joy in forgiving sinners. Hey, you're free to go." I would be defrocked, put out of that place instantaneously because justice has to be met.

So the question then is how can God forgive the sinner and not violate His justice? How can God be just and the justifier of sinners? That's the great question that's behind the Reformation. I mean, the actual Reformation. That was the question, how can God be just and the justifier of sinners? And the answer to that comes in this marvelous last verse, fifteen Greek words, the greatest summation of the gospel on the pages of Scripture, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Now let me just unravel that a little bit. He made...that is God made Him who knew no sin...who's that? Short list. One name. He made Him who knew no sin, the one who was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, the writer of Hebrews says, the one in whom no one could find a fault, the one of whom the Father said "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The perfect, sinless, Son of God. So He made Him who knew no sin to be sin.

Boy, that is a critical statement in an understanding of the gospel, you have to ask...what does it mean? There are teachers floating around, you'll hear them on Christian radio and television, who say, "On the cross Jesus became a sinner...on the cross He became a sinner." One of the popular ideas is that on the cross Jesus became a sinner and so God cursed Him and sent Him to hell for three days, after which He had paid for His sin, God raised Him from the dead. That's a very popular teaching today.

But my Bible says that when He was on the cross, He was a lamb without blemish and without spot who had every right to say, "My God, My God," what's the next word? "Why?" Even in the Garden in His prayer, "Let this cup pass from Me." He knew that this would not be justice in this case.

Now it doesn't mean that? It doesn't mean that Jesus became a sinner. What does it mean? It means this, and this is the heart of Reformation doctrine, this is why Protestants are Protestants and this is why evangelicals are evangelicals. God treated Jesus as if He had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever or has ever believed. God treated Jesus as if He had personally committed every sin ever committed by every person who has ever believed...though He committed none of them. God put all the punishment for all the sins of all who believe on Him and poured out His wrath.

And you say, "If all of those sinners had to pay for that, they would be in hell forever and still not pay for it. How could Jesus pay for the accumulated sins of all those people in three days?"

And the only answer that I can give you is He is an infinite person and so He suffered an infinite wrath in infinite measure. On the cross, I'll put it another way, Jesus was treated as if He lived your life. That's amazing, isn't it? That's why Paul talks about being in Christ, crucified with Christ. God treated Jesus as if He lived my life and fully exhausted all His wrath. And Jesus knew it and said, "It is finished, it is done."

That's not the only part of the story. The backside of that is so thrilling. He was...He became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. That's the other side of it. Let me explain what that means just briefly

On the cross, Jesus was not a sinner and I'm not righteous. True? I'm not righteous. On the cross, God treats Jesus as if He lived my life, turns around and treats me as if I lived His life. Is that staggering? That's why there's therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus.

A little footnote to that. You know, if I were God I might have said to Jesus, "I need to have You die for sinners, so I need You to go down and do that, but I really only need You for the weekend. You can just go down there on Friday, we'll work this deal out, they'll put You on a cross, You'll be out of the grave on Sunday and You can be right back up here by, you know, Sunday evening. That's all I really need."

And you ask the question, "What's all this 33 years about? What is the 30 years of obscurity in which you only have one tiny glimpse at the age of twelve, when you know that He's aware of what's going on? Why 30 years? What is that about? Why having to endure all of that and why having to endure three years of that tremendous ministry? If the cross is everything, and the grave is everything, what's that? Why is that necessary?"



And the answer is this. He was in all points, that is to say in all chronological points through His entire life with sin. He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Jesus lived a perfect infancy, sinless, a perfect childhood, perfect adolescence, perfect young manhood, perfect adulthood. Why? So that that perfect life in its totality could be credited to your account and my account. And so, as I said, God treats Him as if He lived our life so He can treat us as if we lived His perfect life. That's the glory of the gospel. That's the doctrine of imputation, our sins imputed to Him, His righteousness imputed to us. That's the defining character of the Reformation.

This is too glorious, is it not? He is not worthy to suffer. We are not worthy to be saved. He the worthy One takes the wrath of God. We the unworthy receive the righteousness of God. This is the glorious, glorious gospel that we preach and proclaim.

And isn't that the message of Isaiah 53? He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. Of course it is. This is Galatians 3, He became a curse for us. This is the good news of the gospel.

I just fear that in this day in a big hurry to get response, we don't really unfold the full glory of the gospel. We want to make sure that while we're inviting people to get into the Kingdom, we're getting the door open and we're making clear what the gospel is and how they are to respond to it.

One last little note. He says in this passage, "We're ambassadors for Christ as though God were begging through us, we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." So that's where we are. We tell them God is a reconciler. We tell them He will forgive all their sins. We tell them Jesus is the sufficient and perfect offering who bears the full wrath of God for our sins. And we beg you take this gift. That's what we do. That's the ministry of reconciliation.

So whatever has to change, let it change. But there are things that can't change the authority of the Word, the Lordship of Christ, and the purity of the gospel. Amen? Amen.

Father, thank You for great days together. We pray, Lord, that all that has been accomplished here will redound to Your glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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