



Reconciled to God

October 1, 2023

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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*<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

*(Pastor prays)*

A childhood accident caused Elizabeth Barrett, who would be Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to spend most of her life as a semi-invalid. Because of her condition and her frailty, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's parents—and especially her father—were a bit overbearing and overprotective. So much so, that when she fell in love with Robert Browning, the man she would marry, her parents forbade her from seeing him. When she decided to marry him, her mom and dad disowned her. In fact, her father's disapproval was so upsetting that in 1846, Robert and Elizabeth Browning sailed for Italy. She would live the rest of her life exiled in Italy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived out the rest of her days stripped of the love of her family, and although her parents disowned her, Elizabeth never gave up. She wanted a relationship with them. So, almost weekly, she would write a letter to her mom and dad, and those letters are filled with love and affection and a pleading for reconciliation. In all of those

years of her writing, her parents never responded, not even once. One afternoon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning heard a knock at the door and at the door was a box on the porch that the postman had left. It was from America. There, inside the box, were ten years' worth of letters that she had written to her mom and dad, and not one of them had been opened. Today, you can find those letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and they are some of the most beautiful examples of classic English literature in existence. If only her parents had read Elizabeth's message of reconciliation, they could have been spared a lifetime of heartache and estrangement.

In somewhat the same way, God has written a letter of reconciliation, a message of reconciliation in Christ. And He has made us—you and I—the messengers, and He calls us ambassadors and missionaries of the gospel. So here's what I want to do today: Today, I hope to use this passage to call you to live your life on mission for Christ. There are people all around this church, people all around each of us, around where we live, where we work, where we go to school, who are living in soulless agony because they don't know that they can be reconciled to God. And you and I have the key to unlock their joy in the gospel of Jesus. So what I'm hoping is that you and I can put our hand to the plow and open our mouths. Why? Because...

### The Message of the Gospel Is Reconciliation

That is a beautiful word, *reconciliation*. So let's take the next few moments together and just go through the passage. Let's pull out a couple of points and see if we can make some application. Here's the first point, number one:

#### **Our Message Is Driven by Hope**

The Christian message is not a message of condemnation. The Christian message is an announcement of hope. Let me show it to you in verse 17. Let's start there. Verse 17 is overflowing with hope. Paul writes, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ.*" Stop right there. There is no sinner too far gone, there is no heart that's too hardened. There's no person too lost. There's no neighborhood too bad, and there's no family too busy. There is no wall too

high, no barrier too far, no chasm too deep. There is no sexual sin too twisted that the cross of Jesus can't overcome it. If that's the case, then I have great confidence when I go to speak to someone. I have great confidence that we can talk about the grace of God overcoming those things. I have confidence that we can engage the people around us. We live in a culture of death, and Jesus has the words of life. And look, maybe you don't see yourself as someone that has a message. Maybe you're an introvert. Maybe you don't feel like you can share the gospel. Maybe you are not clear on how to do it.

Every Sunday, when I preach, in the middle of a message, I hope to talk a little about the gospel and explain what the gospel is. The gospel is that God is holy, man is a sinner, and Christ saves. And all you have to do is believe—turn from sin and believe. I do that so that you might understand and know how to share the gospel. But maybe you don't see yourself as a person with a message. Well, in verse 17, notice what the text says: *"If anyone is in Christ."* Do you see that little phrase? That little phrase, *in Christ*, is a glorious phrase. That little phrase, *in Christ*, sums up in the briefest way the most profound and inexhaustible significance of redemption, to be in Christ. I want you to be in Christ. If you're in Christ, you have security. When I say *security*, what I mean is that He has borne on His body the judgment for our sin. You are not judged for your sins. Christ has been judged for your sins at the cross. At the cross, your sins are forever forgiven. You have been made free. There's great security in that. When you are in Christ, you realize you have great acceptance. You realize that God accepts you not because you're such a good person. You're not. You're a bad person. Welcome to Hickory Grove. You're a bad person. Somebody please don't tweet that I said you are a bad person. But what I'm saying is that we have acceptance in Christ. Do you see that?

The Bible teaches that there is only one person with whom God has ever actually been well pleased with—Jesus Christ. We'll even say that there's been only one perfect person—Jesus Christ. We say that because it is His perfection that gives us our acceptance. You see, when you are in Christ, you are

covered in the righteous, perfect life of Jesus. So God accepts you not because He's so kind and He just accepts. No, God accepts you because you are in the righteous one, Jesus. We have acceptance in Christ. Not only that, we have assurance in Him. The Bible teaches this when God raised Jesus from the dead. Some people wonder why we go to church on Sunday. We do so because Jesus was crucified on Friday, He kept the Sabbath on Saturday in the tomb, and was raised on Sunday. Now, our Sabbath is in Christ, so on Sunday, the first day of the week, God raised Him from the dead, and that's why we go to church on the Lord's Day, Sunday. There is great assurance there. When God raised Jesus from the dead, He promised that you will be raised from the dead.

This is the hope we have when we go to preach a funeral. It's what we say when we baptize people. I hope you listen to the formula. All of that is done on purpose. When a pastor is baptizing someone here in the baptistry, we will say something to the effect of, "buried with Him in baptism." You see, all who died in Him will be raised with Him to walk in new life. We have assurance in Him.

Well, not only that, verse 17 also tells us that we rejoice in Him. We rejoice in Christ. Being in Christ is not a burden, it is having our burdens lifted. We rejoice in Him. Look what the text says in verse 17; it's unbelievable.

*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. This is remarkable, but I want to call your attention to the word, *behold*. You ought to circle that word. *Behold, the old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.* It's like Paul was writing it, and he's overcome. And he just sits back and says, "Can you believe this? Can you believe that's how I used to be, the things that I did and said, the person that I was? It's not that I've just gotten better, it's that that person is gone." And Paul says it's unbelievable, but something new has come. It's an exclamation. It has this unmistakable, spontaneous feel of joy. It's like he's overcome. It's like he just has to say, "This is so good." You take verse 17 in your Bible and you ought to

put your name by it. Verse 17 is the biography of every Christian. This gives us a message of hope. Your life is evidence that there is hope. Our message is driven by hope. Let me give you something else to consider. Here's the second thing:

### **Our Message Is Founded on Grace**

Our message is founded on grace, so it's driven by hope. We are going down the road with hope, and then verse 18 tells us the message is built on grace. Here's what I mean. If you're a guest with us today and you're hearing some of this for the first time—if you thought Christianity was this weird legalism, that you have to just follow all the rules—then listen. God has given us His law. God's law is there for our good. God's law tells us how we ought to live. God's law binds our conscience. God's law restrains us. God's law tells us where we sin. God's law is useful. All that, but God's law doesn't save us. God's law shows us we need saving; that's what it's there for. It's a tutor saying, "Hey, look how much of a sinner you are. You need Christ." So, our message is built on grace. Notice what the text says in verse 18. See what Paul says? Let's just read it all: *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."* This is from God. This is God doing it. God is the initiator. God is the finisher of our faith. Reconciliation in Jesus comes from God; it returns us back to God. If you read the Bible, if you open up Genesis to page one and you start reading, you see God and His goodness creating everything, including man and woman. He names them Adam and Eve. He creates the man and the woman in His image. The woman is created in the image of God. The man is created in the image of God. They are put together in this perfect place called the Garden of Eden. It's a perfect, wonderful place. Both of them are there without clothing. They don't need it. It's not that cold. The Garden of Eden is perfect. But in that garden, something happens, and Adam and Eve fall into sin. We call it The Fall. They sin and, immediately, they know something is wrong. They cover themselves. They hear God walking in the cool of the day. And chapters two and three say that God walks in the cool of the day, and this is what God says: *"Where are you?"* He came looking for them. He knew they had fallen into sin, and from that

point onward, God has been seeking restoration. God is the seeker. God is the sovereign one that is controlling all of the events of the world. God is the mover. He is arranging the events of your life so that you might see your need for Christ. He is arranging the events of your life and the life of others so that you, when the time comes, might share Christ with someone whose life has been made ready by the sovereign God of the universe. But listen, God doesn't just initiate. He doesn't just start the process and see if you'll finish. God initiates reconciliation, and God completes reconciliation.

Go back to verse 17. There is something I forgot back there. Go back to verse 17. One of the great promises of the Bible is in verse 17. There is power in this verse. When you come to Christ, you are made new. Verse 17: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.* And, as if you didn't get that, the old has passed away. Behold! I can't believe it. The new has come. And you'll notice the text says that God does that in verse 18. God does that. He transforms us, He changes us. God reprograms you. In verse 18 is a great word, a beautiful word. The word *reconciliation* is a beautiful word. You've got to love the word *reconciliation* and this passage, from verse 18 to verse 21. Paul uses it five times—*reconciliation*. It's one of the most beautiful words to describe what it means to become a Christian, and there are several great words to describe becoming a Christian. One of my favorite words is the word *justification*. *Justification* is the courtroom language. It's the understanding that God is the ultimate judge. We stand before God, who is the judge there. We stand under the sentence of guilty, the verdict is guilt. We stand there guilty. There's no getting around it. We committed the sins. We are guilty before God. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. The punishment for our guilt is death. That's true. But the gospel says that Jesus Christ came, and He lived perfectly. But not only that, He comes and takes that sentence. He stands in front of us and receives the condemnation and all that goes with it. The sentence of death fell on Him at the cross, and because of that, we received His righteousness and we are justified. It's a beautiful word.

There is another word: *sanctification*. It is not in the courtroom, *sanctification*.

It is in the temple. It's in Old Testament worship. *Sanctification* has to do with the sacrificial system. God is holy, and we as sinners cannot approach His holiness to go into the temple. The priest must be sanctified. That sanctification happened through blood sacrifice. So all of the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament are foreshadowing of what Jesus Christ would do, once and for all, at the cross. And so *sanctification* would happen when blood was shed. The Christian is sanctified when Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross, and it is through that blood that we are cleansed and made holy to approach God.

*Sanctification. Justification.* I love the word *redemption*. *Redemption* is a real earthy word. *Redemption* takes us not from the courtroom or the temple, not even to church. But *redemption* takes us down to the back alleys where the slave market is. It walks us down there where we see ourselves stripped of our clothing—filthy, nasty, chained up. Nobody knows our name, and there we are slaves. Slaves. That's what sin does. It enslaves you. There you were, enslaved, and God comes and sees you there. There's nothing you have to offer Him. God comes and sees you in your enslavement, and He decides to put His love on you, to love you. Nothing about you made Him do this, but He just loves you. But to get you, He would have to pay a high price. That price is the life of His Son, Jesus. Jesus Christ dies on the cross to purchase and redeem you. It's a beautiful word. God redeems you. He takes you out of the slave market. He cleans you up, puts clothes on you, then He clothes you with the righteousness of Jesus that makes you part of His family and brings you home. It's adoption. *Adoption* is another great word. It means we were orphans in the world without hope. This is what's going on outside of the church. Look, people outside of the church are not our enemies. They're our mission field. They're not our enemies. This culture, yeah, we war against it. But we war against a culture, not people. Because those people are orphans in this world without hope. That is where we were. And by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, what happens is we are made children of God. We become the family of God. We are His family. Every one of those words is a wonderful word to display what it means to be a Christian.

But *reconciliation*? That's in a whole different category. *Reconciliation* is family language. It's friend language. It's affection. You see, we all were enemies of God because of our sin. You don't have to hate God in your heart to be an enemy of God. You just are an enemy of God when you neglect to recognize His good hand. We do all of those things that break His law, and the Bible says that God was dreadfully angry that we had treated Him such. And the truth of the matter is that it's not us that are the offended party; God was the offended. He's the one that had been wronged. And yet, although He is the offended party, God has taken the initiative. He has crossed the divide. He has solved the problem. And because of the cross you can go from being an enemy of God to being His friend. A lot of people ask the question, what kind of God sends people to Hell? That's the wrong question. It sounds good. It might make a headline, but it's the wrong question. The better question is what kind of Holy God would let sinners live? And the answer is that He is a reconciling God. Not only that, you notice at the very end of verse 18, He gives us the message of reconciliation. So we are reconciled to Christ. We are reconciled to God through Christ. The end says, "[He] gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Do you see all of this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself? He didn't just save us, He gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Look, brothers and sisters, at Hickory Grove, there is no ministry, there is no service to our community more urgent than the ministry of reconciliation. There's nothing more urgent.

This month, I should say in the middle of the month, we'll do Mercy Ministries. Those are there to earn us the right to do the ministry of reconciliation, so we can share the gospel of Jesus. Mercy Ministries are not an end in and of themselves; they are what take us to the more important ministry of reconciliation. When we do Trunk or Treat— coming up at the end of the month—that is not just so we can get people in the parking lot and they can have candy in a safe place. This is not primarily for safety. This is so that the people living around this church—the nations, at our back door—can come to this place so that we might have an opportunity to share the ministry of



reconciliation. This brings me to the third point, number three:

### Our Message Is a Clear One

Our message is a clear one. Look at the message. Verse 18 is the statement, 19 is the explanation. Verse 19 is our message: *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.* Pay close attention to verse 19: *...in Christ, God was reconciling the world...* Look how broad that is. God is calling out to the world, to those around us, to anyone who has ears to hear. He is calling to the world in our city and in our nation, across the nations. And not only that, be careful with how you understand it, the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation is primarily the announcement of what God has done. So what verse 19 says is, *That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.* That, although you are a sinner, the ministry of reconciliation is that God doesn't count that against you.

Here's how He does it. Let's pause here and make the gospel plain. And once you hear this, you are accountable. The gospel tells us, according to the Bible, that God created everything we see and created you in His image—man and woman; the image of God in us. It makes it so that we deserve to be respected. I respect you because you have the image of God. You have dignity. But that dignity, the image of God in us, has been disfigured by our own sin. We received this sin nature from our parents all the way back to Adam and Eve. You don't have to be taught to sin, you already know how to sin. But we not only have a sin nature, we actually commit sins. Those sins are not just things that are bad, that society might think are bad. The Bible teaches us that those sins are an offense to God. They are breaking His law. They make it so that we can't be in His presence, and He won't be in ours. That's a problem because those sins bring with them the punishment, and the wages of sin is death—eternal death, being eternity in hell. But that doesn't have to be the end of it. It doesn't have to be the end of it for you. The Bible tells us that God in His love has given us Jesus. He is fully God and fully man.

He had to be fully man because He's going to save men and women, humans. As fully man, He kept all of God's law for us. We can't do it—He did. And what happens at the cross? He then takes the wrath of God. This is the Christian gospel at the cross. God judges your sin. If you believe this truth, your sin is on Jesus. He takes the wrath of God for you. The wages of sin: His death. He dies a literal, real death. Three days later, on a Sunday, God raised Him from the dead. He has ascended into Heaven. He is reigning as Lord, fulfilling the promise of the Bible. The gospel promises that if you believe that, if you'll turn from your sin, you will be saved.

If you already are a Christian, He has entrusted with you the message of reconciliation. Verse 20 says that we are *ambassadors*. Do you see that? *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* I mean, not only are we working for God. We we're not just working on behalf of God. We represent. That's what an ambassador does. If the church is the embassy and you are an ambassador, you leave the embassy, you take the message from King Jesus. Verse 20 says, *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* God makes His appeal through us. What an odd verse. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God is making His appeal through us. And here's the appeal: "we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." There's a lot here in verse 20. It's amazing that God speaks when you share the gospel. It's amazing to me that if that's the case, then we have an obligation. We have an obligation to faithfully and precisely proclaim the message deposited and trusted in us. We've got to clearly be able to explain the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the saving power of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the need for repentance and faith. We have an obligation to faithfully and precisely preach that.

There is another obligation from verse 20: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* We must have a deep concern. How hard-hearted do you have to be to look at people and not think they're going to hell. If we

actually believe people are going to die one day and go to hell, how can we not have a conversation that's uncomfortable? There is a deep concern at the end of verse 20. You just hear him, "I implore you." Do you see that in verse 20? *I implore you, I beg you.* If you're not a Christian here today, I want to beg you to at least consider to be reconciled to God through Christ. You've heard the gospel. God will save you. God loved and has given us Jesus. He loves you, and I implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. There's an urgency. It's why we take a month to think and to concentrate, to remind ourselves that, as the church you are in an embassy of the King. As an individual, you are an ambassador of the King. We have a message to deliver. Our message is driven by hope. Our message is focused on grace. Our message is a clear one. I'll say one more thing, number four:

### **Our message is the glory of the Gospel**

The glory of the gospel is seen in verse 21. I don't know how to put it, verse 20 it's so magnificent. There is, in the whole Bible, no sentence more profound in all of Scripture than in these 15 words. In 15 words, Paul has set forth the gospel of reconciliation in all of its mystery and wonder. In fact, that's how I'll close. Let's just go through it. Join me there. Verse 21. You just keep looking at verse 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.* You understand that God loves you, right? That He came after you. For God so loves the world, for our sake, there is grace. There is God pursuing you, not you pursuing Him. For our sake, God did this. This is God coming. This is all of grace. The text says that He made him to be sin who knew no sin. The perfect one, Jesus, made to be sin. Here's the great exchange. You can put it aside in the margin if you'd like. This is the great exchange where Christ takes our sin gives us His righteousness. Verse 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.*

That means that He would be counted as the focal point of all of the accumulated sins of all his people across all of history. He made Him to be sin. Come to Jesus. This is what happens. In Him, we might become the

righteousness of God. Brothers and sisters, here is the glory of the Christian gospel. Here's the reason we are on mission. We are ambassadors for Christ. God is making His appeal through us. We implore you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

*(Pastor prays)*