

The God of Reconciliation

Justification, the foundation of our relationship with God 2 Cor 5:18-21

By Jay Wegter

“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 making an appeal 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, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:18-21).

“To Reconcile” is the restoration of friendly relations after a period of enmity and estrangement. Reconciliation answers our alienation and estrangement from God by reason of sin. *Reconciliation* is distinctly Paul’s word. He uses it to describe the *relational* benefits of justification.

Sin drove a massive wedge between us and God. We ought to take notice of the scriptural words describing our “dis-relatedness” to God: *enemies* (Rom 5:10); *children of wrath, sons of disobedience* (Eph 2:2, 3); *alienated and hostile in mind* (Col 1:21); *hostile toward God* (Rom 8:7; James 4:4); *enmity* (Eph 2:15, 16); *haters of God* (Jn 7:7; 15:18, 23-25) and *lovers of self* (2 Tim 3:2).

The sinner is in need of reconciliation—he has a *quarrel* with God concerning what his sin deserves. In terms of man’s innate opposition to God, passages such as James 4:4; Romans 8:7; John 7:7; and 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 provide a compelling clue concerning man’s radical misalignment to God’s righteousness. What we owe God ought to be the controlling factor in our lives, for He has an absolute claim on His creatures. He has the right to tell us how to live.

However, while slaves of sin it is impossible to love His holiness—the very essence of His Person. How can we love His righteousness when He justly condemns unrighteous sinners to death? ***Wrath is God’s righteous response to unrighteousness—He judges mankind out of who He is—His very Being.*** We can’t love the righteousness of God while *under His sentence against sin*, for there is hatred of God’s justice against our sin. Unbelievers have never had their *quarrel with God* brought to light. The Gospel message does just that—it *begins* with the character of God and the character of the sinner and God’s just punishment of sin. The quarrel is identified by the Gospel which reveals man’s need of reconciliation.

I. The Ministry of Reconciliation (v. 18).

“All these things” – (summed up in the phrase, “*new creature.*”) refer to the entire change of which Paul has been speaking vv. 14-17. God brought about this moral, spiritual change by *reconciling* us to Himself. He is the sovereign Author of these life-transforming realities.

“To Reconcile” --is to remove the enmity (that which separates) between parties that are at variance (at odds) – it establishes friendly relations.

“He reconciled us to Himself” (restored us to friendly relations with Himself) – this is not something we accomplish by putting away our enmity, but *something God accomplished* when, in the death of Christ, He put away everything that on His side meant estrangement! Through the atoning work of Christ, God dealt with the *wrath* His holiness demands and the *death* and *damnation* His justice requires. By the cross He put away the *quarrel* He had against us due to our trampling of His holy law.

God's reconciliation to us must precede our reconciliation to Him. As long as we are under God's wrath and the curse (due to our sin), we cannot be anything but aliens and enemies, cut off from God's favor and fellowship. When God's wrath and the curse are removed, THEN there can be holiness, life, and love. That is the order; we must have divine favor *before* we can be holy. God's work in reconciliation *preempts* legal working, for the Word says, "While we were yet enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom 5:10).

We could never put away our own hostility, dread, and suspicion toward God. Reconciliation consists of the satisfaction of divine justice by the sacrifice of Christ—the design of His death is to *propitiate*, not to reform. Reconciliation to God is the cause of the new creation (our regeneration and holiness). A changed life (*a new creation*) follows a changed relationship (*reconciliation*).

The N.T. command "be reconciled" (a change in the sinner) is based upon God's reconciling work. This is the polar opposite of the historic Greeks who saw gods as estranged and in need of being won over. That approach resembles the "religion we were all born with," namely that man can placate, pacify, obligate, ingratiate, and appease God (in a word, do what's necessary to *protect ourselves from God*.) The truth is, there is nothing you can do to make God kindly disposed to you—our reconciliation to God is based upon His reconciling work alone.

"[He] gave us the ministry of reconciliation"—He dealt with the estrangement that He might come and preach peace (Luke 2:13-14). This speaks of the *reality* that God WILLS to be reconciled with sinners. God has called believers to proclaim the Gospel—we've been given a *ministry* of reconciliation—the urgent message that God is ready to receive sinners into favor and manifest His love to them because of Christ.

By an act of infinite cost to Himself, God has satisfied His own wrath against sin that sinners might be forgiven and loved freely. A *ministry of reconciliation* is needed *because* man's reconciliation to God is not complete without a **human response**. (God's grace grants the gift of faith, but God does not believe for you.) (EX. Do you recall the human *ministers of the gospel of reconciliation* that God brought into your life?)

We've seen the *first exponent* of reconciliation—"the ministry of reconciliation," that we have a glorious proclamation. God wills that sinners be reconciled to Himself. And He has given believers the *ministry of reconciliation*. Look with me at the second feature of reconciliation, God is the Author and Mediator of reconciliation (He has put away the offense on His side; His arms are outstretched to sinners.)

II. The Mediator of Reconciliation (v. 19).

Note the universal lie common to all false religion; ***man by moral exertion can build a spiritual bridge to God***. But our text says that God was making atonement for the sins of the world. It's God building the bridge to the sinner, not *visa versa*! The Good News in 'Christ crucified' is that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. He was in Christ dealing with the enmity, hostility, and separation. God is telling us ***again what happened at Calvary***. The good news of the Gospel is that God on His side, has put away the quarrel by the sacrifice of Christ.

In verse 19 the two personal pronouns, "*their*" and "*them*" emphasize the **personal sense** of reconciliation. Reconciliation is applied to personal relationships—to those who *see their need* for God's

reconciling work in Christ. It is through sinfulness that *they* have become estranged and hostile (Rom 5:6-11), reconciliation removes the sin barrier and restores to friendly relations.

The participle, “not counting” explains how God was reconciling the world to Himself. The sins of believers are not *charged to their account*. To **not impute** sin is to forgive it. Not *imputing* sin, **and committing** to us the word of reconciliation are both involved in God’s saving activity (“how shall they hear without a preacher”—Romans 10:14). God’s reconciling work is manifested in the *non-imputation* of sin, AND in the *sending* out of believers as ambassadors with the news of reconciliation.

The reconciliation is free and universally offered, but it has to be made known to individuals that they might receive peace with God in Christ. The “word of reconciliation” is always the message of ***Christ crucified as Mediator who places Himself between the sinner, and God the offended party.*** The news that God has ***made peace*** is sent out by ambassadors who proclaim the ***terms of that peace—faith and repentance.***

This “word of reconciliation” (God forgives sin by the death of Christ as Substitute) is of infinite value and power. Therefore it is God’s will that it be announced to all men: ***“God is reconciled and ready to forgive—who ever will turn to Him will live and be received into favor.”*** The death of Christ proves that God is ready to receive sinners into His favor.

The ***word of reconciliation*** (the Gospel) only *melts the heart* of the sinner who has been “*slain*” by God’s law (by which his covetousness, lust, dishonesty, and pride have been exposed). True conviction always precedes amazement at God’s mercy in Christ. No one flees to Christ, the *city of refuge*, unless he fears the wrath of the *avenger*, for the law of God is the just avenger of God’s wounded honor. The sword of damnation sits above the heads of Adam’s race, it threatens damnation to law-breakers. What good news we have—God has unleashed His sword of justice upon His own Son who was willingly smitten for the guilty that they might have peace with God.

God has done everything necessary for reconciliation on His side—but men resist what is necessary on their side. In Numbers 21:9, the divine provision for life after being bitten by a “fiery serpent” was to fix one’s gaze upon the bronze serpent on the pole. This required an act of trust, an act of the will in order to be healed and live. So also, peace with God requires that the sinner fully trust Christ who has by God’s own plan born our penalty that we might be reconciled to our Creator.

We’ve seen that the second exponent of reconciliation is Christ the Mediator of reconciliation – it is God in Christ reconciling by the non-imputation of sin.

III. The Message of Reconciliation (v. 20).

“Seeing that God is *urging, asking, pleading, entreating* by us”—the divine command toward sinners, ***“be reconciled to God!”*** *Become reconciled to God. Consent* to God’s offer and terms of peace. It is not *reconcile* yourselves to God, for it was God in Christ bearing the enmity, therefore *become reconciled*, embrace the offer of reconciliation. Do not think that it is we who are asking, ***it is Christ who is asking you, it is the Father who entreats through us!*** This is the basis of our pleading with sinners to be converted; we are authorized to do so as official ‘representatives’ of Christ the Reconciler.

We are the heralds of this amazing love. God gave His Son so that we could have no penalty. Enraged sinners put to death God’s Son and they, along with subsequent generations, slew many of the messengers of reconciliation, yet God continues to send more ambassadors to proclaim the word of

reconciliation. The intensity, passion, and urgency of the plea show that man is not merely a passive recipient in an automatic process. No, God is *calling for a response* from the unconverted. God is propitious, He can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26). ***All we have to do is NOT refuse the offered love of God in the message of reconciliation!***

Why do unbelievers refuse? The great stumbling block of the cross is not the cost of discipleship, it is the fact that the cross is a monument to what sinners deserve. Here is where the unbeliever resists—he protests that he does not deserve to die and be eternally miserable. Therefore he has a quarrel with God over what his sin deserves. Friend, don't stumble over God's sentence leveled against sin. To believe the Gospel is to affirm God's *verdict* against your own sin, and to believe that it has fallen upon the Son of God in your place. Only those who have tasted God's forgiveness in Christ exalt His justice.

In resisting God's verdict, the unbeliever aims the *weapons* of his fallen reason at the goodness of God: *A good God would not allow suffering and evil, it's not fair that God should judge those who've never heard, God will not judge a person who is moral, sincere, and religious, the Bible is written by men; they falsified whatever Scriptures were given, Christians are hypocrites, religion only causes war.*

This is a battle against God—it is settled enmity against the God of reconciliation. Satan is not done sowing the lie about God he first sowed in Eden's paradise. The present darkness in man's heart is still an extension of the original lie about God. Here is where you come in as a minister of reconciliation; with the light of the Gospel. Show the sinner that his weapons and excuses are groundless. ***For in the work of reconciliation, God has satisfied His own wrath and justice against human sin.***

It's only pride and the love of sin that keeps the sinner from responding to God's plea to be reconciled. Show the unbeliever that he is the only one holding the weapons, God has satisfied His own justice and now holds out open arms. The tragedy is that no one need perish for the lack of an atonement! Do not neglect the only atonement there is. For those who believe and repent, ***God has put away His own wrath.*** Through us, He pleads with the sinner to be reconciled. "Do you prefer to die an enemy? God has paid an infinite price to make peace with you. Will you hold fast to your weapons and retain your enmity against God? Do you find the terms of peace too stringent? Does 'come and be forgiven' offend you?"

Calvin offers us a needed reminder (v. 20) – ***the Gospel is not merely for the lost***; the believer needs daily, and is allowed whenever needed, to avail himself of the offer of peace with God through Jesus Christ. In the New Covenant we have an infinite provision for ongoing forgiveness (for every offense, a renewed application of the blood of Christ is supplied). Therefore, preach the Gospel to yourself every day. Develop the habit of running to the atonement. Learn to do the bookkeeping of your conscience by means of the Gospel.

We've seen in this third element, the message of reconciliation that we must preach with urgency, with pleading. Sinners lie *buried* in the depravity of their nature (in the spiritual tomb of their inability); they sit *blinded* in the darkness of their understanding (complacency); they are held by the corruption of their affections (bondage to lusts); and by the stubbornness of the will (rebellion). Our compassion upon fellow sinners is shown when we bring the message of reconciliation. Our Christian faith must not be *privatized* so that we leave off seeing ourselves as ambassadors of Christ. If you possessed the cure for cancer, it would be a crime to keep it to yourself.

IV. The Means of Reconciliation (v. 21).

Here Paul summarizes the heart of the Gospel—this is the most concise statement in Scripture on justification). Paul explains in this verse the paradox of vv. 18-20, how can sinners be reconciled to an immutable, unchanging God? How is the non-reckoning of sins consistent with the character and attributes of God?

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin”—this is how the non-reckoning of sin was made possible—the sins of all who would believe were charged to Another. Christ suffered as though He were a sinner. He suffered what the greatest sinners ought to suffer). God allowed Christ to be condemned and die as One who was cursed—He was treated as sin personified.

“He was made sin”—by God’s decree; He was made sin (Gal 3:13). Though the Son of God was sinless, He became officially guilty of our sin and guilt. Christ satisfied the justice due our sin; this guarantees the reality of our reconciliation.

The Jews of Jesus’ day knew about substitution—the family ‘pet lamb’ was led to the slaughter. On the Day of Atonement the father of a Hebrew family would place his hands on the head of lamb before it was slain. This was a picture of the transfer of guilt.

The means of reconciliation (v. 21) powerfully overcomes a common error: justification is not a reward for faith. The *bedrock* foundation of your relationship with the Living God is NOT that you accepted Jesus, but that Jesus traded places with the believer. Don’t make a ‘savior’ out of your faith. Our Savior suffered death as an *atonement sacrifice*. He made a full and perfect satisfaction of the Law’s demands of justice to the lawbreaker (Rom 8:3). As Charles Hodge states, “*His death was a true substitution; what was done by One was in place of another. It avails as though that other had done it.*”

Your conscience needs to know that your forgiveness is not based upon the depth of your sorrow, but upon the satisfaction of God’s justice! This is so important to *reconciliation*. It means that there is nothing in the *perfection* of God’s character and His holy law that is standing in the way of your pardon. This is a vital part of our invitation to the seeking sinner to be reconciled. Christ has *purchased* not only legal pardon, but the joy and peace of conscience which issues from reconciliation.

In order to perform the work of our redemption, Christ had to ***identify with our condition***. This is why He was *despised, rejected, not stately in form or appearance*. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The reality of our Lord’s humiliation must be allowed to sink into our own hearts that we might share it with others. Christ experienced ***maximum alienation*** (the very opposite of reconciliation). And He did so that we might be reconciled to God. It was our alienation from God by reason of sin that He took upon Himself.

You know what took place in the Garden of Gethsemene—Christ looked into the horror of the cup and shuddered; His whole being quaked; He sweat clots of blood. He was given a *virtual* preview of the cross that in that night of prayer to His Father He might see from the perspective of a mortal man the hell He would experience on Calvary’s cross. He went through this experience to seal the voluntary nature of His death for sinners. Gethsemene sealed His willingness to lay down His life for sinners.

Oh to have this penetrate our hearts that it was our sorrow and grief in His substitutionary work for us. He literally identified Himself with our separation, our *unfitness* to know God. What a mystery it is ***how deep He went into this unfitness*** (yet without sin). The perfectly fit One (in righteousness and

holiness) became our *unfitness*. The consequences of our sin fell on Him. Like an entire mountain, an ‘Everest’ of guilt. He became our *unfitness* and *dis-relatedness*, and our *curse* that we might become His *fitness* and *right relatedness* to the Father.

Now let’s bring this into the present—into your daily life. As you reckon Christ’s ‘Gethsemene love’ for you, your heart will become increasingly attached to your Savior in trust, devotion, adoration, and loyalty. As a grateful believer you will want to *preach the Gospel* to yourself each day. You will find joy in *consenting* to be represented by Jesus Christ instead of trying to measure up and make yourself “fit,” “lovable,” and acceptable to God. It will purify your motives of love, worship and service as you regard Christ to be your entire eligibility for God’s love, favor, and acceptance. You’ll literally rest upon Christ as your right-relatedness to the Holy Trinity.

Consider the wisdom and power of God in the cross. The means God has chosen to pardon and reconcile sinners must not simply *avoid* the violation of God’s attributes; the method of salvation must *exalt* God’s attributes. It must lift them up and reveal them—making God’s glory known.

In His voluntary death, Christ came to stand in that relation with God which is normally the result of sin (crushing agony, isolation, abandonment, judgment, separation, wrath, torment, death, loss of all well-being). Sin’s consequences fell on Him; He was reaping what we sowed. This penalty was not simply death impersonally imposed according to the justice of heaven, it was radical separation from God while suffering as the object of divine wrath. He experienced utter alienation from God. He voluntarily identified Himself with all of your radical *unfitness* and *estrangement from God*; He carried it away so you could have a love relationship with God.

Notice again in v. 21, that it is Christ’s willing identification with the sinner’s guilt, the sinner’s penalty, and also the consequences of sin in the soul (alienation). This identification is for the *purpose of exchange*—He became identified with sinful humanity that we might become identified with His righteousness. Because He is God, because it was voluntary, God’s law is upheld in this exchange. Our sins are imputed to Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us.

Here the full meaning of justification is disclosed: through their relationship with Christ, men and women may *exchange* their sinful condition for a status before God of “God’s righteousness” (that is a righteous status, a God-approved righteousness). The removal of their guilt is joined to the crediting of positive righteousness which equals a positive relationship.

Not only does this end the hostility, but there is the gift bestowed of a righteous status—a place of favor. We become the righteousness of God by union with Christ. We are reconciled because Christ voluntarily accomplished His vicarious work in our human nature. We could not be rescued unless the nature that sinned suffered the death penalty and the nature that had failed to obey God supplied perfect obedience to God’s law. Thus, “*God was in Christ*” v. 19, alludes to the necessity of the incarnation.

Believers are *partakers* of Christ’s righteousness. We are identified with Him and His righteousness to such an extent that it forms our new identity. We *preach to ourselves* that Christ carries our righteousness; He is your status and favor with God; it doesn’t come from you!

How difficult it is for Adam’s race to understand how willing God is to show favor (*He is both the God who atones, and the atoned-for God*). Thus it is impossible to make Him any more favorably disposed than He is! You cannot soften Him up or make Him more kindly disposed toward you. God

planned that Christ should propitiate His just wrath against sin. The Father who sent Christ is ‘propitious’ (Rom 3:25-26).

Our Gospel proclamation must *eliminate* every ray of hope that the sinner may satisfy God, win His favor, and thereby obligate God to forgive him. The law of God must *kill* the sinner’s self-righteous hopes before the Gospel can make alive.

One pastor said it well: God is impossible to *satisfy*, but easy to *please*. Dear people where do we look to find that God is satisfied on your behalf? You know the answer: God is *infinitely satisfied* with what His only begotten Son has done on your behalf. In that fact alone your conscience may rest. For, your conscience is a primitive extension of God’s justice, His *courtroom* if you will. Therefore your conscience will only find *ultimate rest* in that which satisfies God’s justice (what pleases Him is faith in the atoning work of Christ—John 6:29). Ongoing faith in the work of Christ is our contact point with our Heavenly Father. When we keep taking Christ for all the reasons God gave Him, we are glorifying God and having communion with Him (John Owen).

What a paradox the Gospel is to man’s nature. By carnal reason alone, man cannot conceive of an act that would appease his Maker. If you gave a man a rowboat and a thimble and then required that he *transfer all the beach sand of the Atlantic to the Pacific*, that assignment would be easier than pacifying God. The only protection from God’s wrath is the hiding place He provides. As soon as man attempts to do the work of propitiation, he winds up being an enemy of what God has done at Calvary.

We must set forth the *compassionate love of Christ* in His work of reconciling us. In a mid-West farm town a grade school boy saved up coins in a coffee can so that he could buy a puppy. Finally he was able to make the purchase. When he brought his chosen puppy to the counter of the pet store, the owner said, “You don’t want that one, it has a lame leg.” The boy pulled up his pant leg revealing a leg brace—he then said to the pet store owner, “I could love a puppy like that.”

Christ *identified* with our withered condition due to sin; He identified Himself with sinners as they lay trapped in their chains and in the consequences of their sin. He identified Himself with us that He might take away everything that stood in the way of a love relationship with God. He identified with us that we might have everything we need to enjoy God forever through union with Christ. He was willing to experience maximum alienation, that we might have everlasting reconciliation.

This is why we may boldly tell the seeker, “Welcome the conviction of your sin; if you are to repent you must consider the seriousness of your sin.” “Don’t trust your own flawed opinions above the infallible Word of God.” “Why fight against God’s gracious terms of peace?” “His terms of pardon and reconciliation are in your eternal interest. You can only live forever with burning holiness if you are united by faith to Christ the holy One.” “Drop your weapons and see God’s infinite goodness in giving His Son to wipe away your most wicked deeds.”

We’ve seen in this lesson that God is the One who makes atonement; and thus, He is both ***“the atoning” and the “atoned-for” God***. He is *satisfied* with what His Son has done in your place. All those reconciled to Him know Him to be such. Let us always remember, as we keep living upon Christ by faith, God is glorified. He has chosen the terms of reconciliation that are consistent with His holy nature. He has joined His eternal glory to your eternal good in the Person of Christ.

The message of justification (Christ’s work of reconciliation for you) is spiritual food for your soul. Keep returning there so that your heart is frequently warmed by this fire. Feed your conscience on

God's terms of peace through Christ until the verdict of heaven in your justification is the 'loudest' verdict in your conscience.

Let your soul feast on the Gospel of Christ your Substitute because as a partaker of Christ, it is your right to enjoy hope, joy, peace, and comfort in believing (Rom 15:13). Let your soul feast upon all God is toward you in Christ. May I suggest a prayer as you desire to grow in your knowledge of God in Christ: *"Lord, I exchange all I am for all Christ is. He is my eligibility for your favor and love. He is my qualification for all future blessing; He is my peace and acceptance with you; my robe of righteousness. Father, grant me the grace to keep consenting to be represented by Christ—let me depend upon His reconciling work for me to cleanse my conscience at its deepest level. Enable me to get off of the performance treadmill and begin living by the grace that is in Christ Jesus."*