

# The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18–20

## Introduction

We return once again to our study of Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, so turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. We live in a time when it seems that just about everybody is offended by just about everything. If not everybody, then certainly this generation’s crop of 18 to 25 year-olds, along with their sympathizers. And if you talk to these people—or follow them on social media—you can barely go a day without hearing declarations of, “I am so offended by that!” or “Oh my goodness, that’s so offensive!” And that tends to be the end of any rational argument or debate. As soon as someone declares that someone else is offensive or that they themselves have been offended by something someone has said, well the discussion’s over. Our society has bought into the lie that the more offended or outraged someone is by something, the more justified and above questioning they are.

For example, in the last few years, the student Senate at UC Santa Barbara passed a resolution that calls for mandatory “trigger warnings.” Trigger warnings are little notes that professors have to put on their syllabus and course notes indicating when lectures or other material will include “readings or films or discussions that might trigger feelings of emotional or physical distress.” Such things include books that discuss—note, not *support*, but merely *discuss*—colonialism, racism, religious prejudice, and war and violence. A student at Rutgers, the university I graduated from, recently wrote an article in the school paper suggesting that study of the book, *The Great Gatsby* should require trigger warnings about violence and gore.

Then in addition to “trigger warnings” are “safe spaces.” Safe spaces are supposedly places on university campuses where students can go and be promised not to hear any conversation that might be perceived as negative against a privileged class of people. Basically, they’re places for students with privileged viewpoints to have their sensitive ears protected from any disagreement. We used to call those *echo chambers*; now they’re “safe spaces.” A student at Brown University protested a scheduled debate because, quote, “Bringing in a speaker like that”—that is, like the one who disagreed with her viewpoint—“could serve to invalidate people’s experiences. It could be damaging.” Student volunteers then created a “safe space” for those who might have found the debate too upsetting. According to the New York Times report, “The room was equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows blankets, and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma.” One student tried to be brave enough to listen to the debate, but had to retreat to the safe space. She said, “I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.”

We have become so hyper-sensitive, so easily offended, that people actually expect that emotional and intellectual comfort is a basic human right—that you have a right not to be told anything you wouldn't like to hear. And as we mollicoddle university students like this, we teach them that the more offended someone is the more justified they are, and so we breed a culture of perpetual offendedness. Activist groups are protesting the Washington Redskins, demanding that the professional football team be renamed because of its insensitivity to Native Americans. University officials banned a Mexican restaurant on campus from giving students sombreros as a promotion of their restaurant, saying that it was racist and discriminatory. A kindergarten school banned the nursery rhyme, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, because mention of a *black* sheep signaled racist undertones. People are offended by everything.

And they're especially offended by God, by Scripture, by Christianity. People are offended by the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality as sin, by its definition of marriage as a divinely-ordained institution between one man and one woman, by its affording personhood to unborn children and thus condemning abortion as murder. People are offended by the exclusivity of the message of salvation—that, as Jesus Himself said, no one comes to God the Father but by Him (John 14:6), that there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved (Ac 4:12), and that whoever denies the Son does not have the Father (1 John 2:23). People are offended by the doctrines of total depravity and salvation by grace apart from works; they believe that they're good enough to contribute to their own salvation, and find it offensive to be told that something is so wrong with them that they can do nothing to earn favor with God, that even their *righteous* deeds are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6).

But amidst all that offendedness—ranging from the understandable, to the illegitimate, to the downright idiotic—there is a greater offense that should captivate the mind and attention of all those who are concerned about inequity and injustice. And that is: the just offense that *God* takes at human sin. Each and every human being has sinned against God. We have belittled His glory. We have esteemed Him but lightly. We have broken His commandments. We have scoffed at His holiness. We have mocked His justice. We have spurned His love. We have distrusted His faithfulness. We have despised His truth. We have treasured false pleasures above Him. “All we like sheep have gone astray; each one of us has turned to his own way.” And God is offended. And He is *justly* offended! The offense He takes at sin isn't manufactured by hyper-sensitivity and stupid sentimentality! God is righteously offended by sin!

And that righteous offense that is effected by sin is the substance of the greatest hostility—the saddest kind of enmity—that exists between God and man. Mankind once walked with God in paradise, in perfect face-to-face fellowship. But after Adam and Eve sinned against God by breaking His law, their immediate instinct was to hide from God and avoid his fellowship. And

soon after, God, righteously offended by their sin, expels them from the holiness of His presence and seals off entrance from the Garden. Sin alienates God from man!

The prophet Isaiah comments on this broken relationship when he says in chapter 59 verse 2 of his prophecy: “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear [you].” Friends, feel the weight of this tragedy of tragedies! We who were created for intimate *friendship* with our Creator have become His *enemies*! Romans 5:10 describes man’s natural relationship to God in our state of sinfulness as *enemies*. Colossians 1:21 says that we are *alienated* from God, *hostile* in mind, and engaged in evil deeds. In Romans 8:7, Paul says, “The mind set on the flesh”—which is to say the fleshly human mind in its natural state—“is *hostile* toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

What a miserable condition! To have so exquisitely offended this perfectly holy God, and to be in such a helplessly sinful condition as to be unable to do anything to please Him! Dear friends, how will we be saved? And the answer is: we will be saved by a Gospel of **reconciliation**. We will be saved when God *overcomes* the alienation that exists between Himself and sinful creatures, by satisfying His own wrath and punishing sin in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ—destroying that hostility, that enmity, achieving peace, and thereby reconciling sinners to a restored relationship with Himself.

And it is this Gospel of **reconciliation** that Paul has been expounding on in 2 Corinthians 5. As he speaks about the driving motivations of his life that empower him for radically sacrificial ministry, he speaks of the fear of God, in verses 11 to 13, and the love of Christ, in verses 14 and following. Paul’s apprehension of the love of Christ displayed to sinners in the Gospel drives him to lay down his life in service to Christ and His Church. And as he meditates on the love of Christ, he begins describing key components of the Gospel that so brilliantly displays the love of Christ for His people.

He speaks of the doctrine of penal substitution—the doctrine that “One *died for* all”—that the one man, Christ, died *on behalf of*, or *in the place of* His people. As our Substitute, He bore in His own person the full exercise of the righteous wrath of His Father against our sin, so that we who were guilty, might justly be declared righteous, because our penalty was paid. He speaks of the doctrine of corporate solidarity, which is also called representative headship—that Christ is the head, and we are so united to Him as to be called His body, such that what is true of Him is true of us. When *He* died to sin on that cross, so also did His *people* die to sin. And when *He* rose to newness of life, so also did His *people* rise to newness of life in Him. He speaks of the doctrine of sanctification in verse 15—that the very purpose of God’s saving grace by which we are justified in Christ is that we might display His glory by living a life of practical righteousness

in obedience to Him. Or, as Paul puts it, “that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

And then he speaks of the doctrine of regeneration in verses 16 and 17—that if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. If anyone is in a saving union to Christ Jesus, he has been entirely transformed, supernaturally by the Holy Spirit, from the inside out. Everything about him changes. He has been born again—recreated in the likeness of Christ. His thinking, his desires, his tastes, his affections, his loves, his joys, his ambitions are entirely renewed! The eyes of his heart have been opened, so that he sees Christ for who He is and eagerly embraces Him in saving faith. And His changed view of Christ breeds a changed view of everything and everyone else, so that he no longer regards anyone after the flesh, but in accordance with spiritual truth.

And as Paul continues his exploration of the Gospel of Christ—of which he has been made a minister—in verses 18 to 20, he turns to explain *how* the new creation of verses 16 and 17 has come about. And he explains it by turning the multifaceted diamond of the Gospel, and viewing it from the angle of **reconciliation**. Christ’s death, which he spoke about in verse 14, was not *only* a substitutionary sacrifice, it was also the means of **reconciliation** between sinful men and the righteously offended God. Let’s read our text for this morning, 2 Corinthians 5, starting in verse 18: “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

And I read verse 21 because I just couldn’t resist, but our text will be verses 18 to 20 for this morning. And in this text Paul expounds upon the doctrine of reconciliation in **two parallel thoughts** that he jumps back and forth between. He speaks of **the message of reconciliation**, number one, and **the ministry of reconciliation**, number two.

## **I. The Message of Reconciliation (vv. 18a, 19A)**

In the first place, then, let us consider **the message of reconciliation**. And Paul discusses **the message of reconciliation** in the first halves of both verses 18 and 19. He says in verse 18: “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ,” and then in verse 19: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

So, starting with verse 18, Paul begins by saying, “Now all these things are from God.” And the “these things” that he’s referring to are the things he just discussed. The new attitude, and

worldview, and ways of evaluating people of verse 16, which as we said comes as a result of the wholesale re-creation of the soul that is regeneration, in verse 17—all these things are from God. This is a declaration of sovereign grace in salvation. The work of regeneration—the work of the new birth—is not the work of man. Man no more effects his *new* birth than he effected his *first* birth.

When Nicodemus asks how man can be born again, Jesus doesn't give him a to-do list. He doesn't say, "Perform this set of religious duties by which you might cooperate with the grace of God." He doesn't say, "Repeat after me and pray this prayer." He doesn't even say, "Repent and believe," because repentance and faith are the *consequences*—not the *causes*—of regeneration. What does He say? John 3:8: "The wind blows where it wishes." The sovereign breath of the Spirit of God breathes spiritual life into the valley of dry bones according to *His* sovereign will—*not* according to the free will of the dry bones. John 1:13 says the children of God "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of *God*." "In the exercise of *His* will," James 1:18, "He brought us forth by the word of truth." And the theological term for this doctrine is *monergism*, which means "one agent at work." It is the opposite of *synergism*, which speaks of a cooperative effort. Scripture teaches *monergistic regeneration*—that the new birth is entirely a sovereign work of God.

#### A. God the Source of Reconciliation

But the statement that "all these things are from God" doesn't only look back the work of regeneration; it also looks forward to the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation is every bit a sovereign work of God as regeneration is. "All these things are from God, *who reconciled us*." God is the subject of that sentence, not man. And man is the object of that sentence, not God. Sinful human beings do not undertake to achieve reconciliation with God. Everywhere Scripture speaks of reconciliation, God is the active reconciler, and man passively receives reconciliation from God. Colossians 1:22: "Although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet *He* has now reconciled *you*." Romans 5:10: "While we were enemies, we *were reconciled* to God"—passive voice. And the next verse, Romans 5:11: "through [Christ] we have now *received* the reconciliation." This is plain: **God is the source of reconciliation.** Reconciliation is not what man accomplishes; it is what man receives as a gift of sovereign grace from an unspeakably merciful and longsuffering God.

And this is truly astounding. There is alienation between God and man, but God is not the cause of that alienation—as if He were just a hard, cruel taskmaster under whose oppressive and tyrannical rule mankind righteously rose up and threw off of themselves in principled rebellion. God is the most pleasant, most beautiful, most satisfying being not only that exists, but that even can be imagined. The rule of His law is not onerous and oppressive; His commandments are *not* burdensome, says 1 John 5:3. As epitomized in the Lord Jesus, His yoke is easy, and His burden

is light, Matthew 11:30. And He didn't *lay* that easy yoke and light burden upon mankind in a barren wasteland devoid of any means of sustenance and refreshment; God issued His law to mankind in the *Garden of Eden*—a lush paradise rich with gold and precious stones, flowing with the refreshing waters of four rivers that watered the multitude of trees that were pleasing to the sight and good for food, from which man was encouraged to eat freely and enjoy—from all except one tree. And in the midst of all of that loving provision, man rebelled against God, and man *has* been rebelling against God ever since.

Now usually, when there is to be reconciliation between alienated parties, a third party is enlisted as an impartial mediator to initiate the restoration of the relationship. Or, even more appropriate, the offending party initiates reconciliation by going to the one he's offended and asking for forgiveness and for terms of peace. But while we sinful human beings were still in open, full-throated *revolt* against our loving and gracious Creator, He—the offended party—took the initiative in accomplishing our reconciliation. While we were running the other direction away from God, obstinately persisting in the very rebellion that is the substance of our alienation, God reconciled us to Himself through Christ. “While we were *yet* sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). “*While* we were *enemies*, we were reconciled to God” (Rom 5:11).

Here we behold the magnanimous heart of God as the eager seeker and Savior of the lost! How many of us, when we are justly offended, are apt to sit with our arms folded in self-righteous self-satisfaction, *not-so-patiently* waiting for the offending party to come groveling back on their hands and knees, pleading for our clemency? And yet here is the offended God, pursuing a rebellious people, taking the initiative to satisfy His own righteous wrath against the sins of His people, because they could never extinguish that wrath even if they wanted to. Dear friends, God is no reluctant Savior! He Himself is the eager reconciler (MacArthur, 199)! As one commentator put it, “This is the great glory of the gospel: that God in his grace takes action in Christ to save us from God in his wrath” (Storms, 172). What a glorious God we have! How bountiful is His mercy! How great is His patience! How large is His heart! This reconciling God, GraceLife—your God!—is worthy to be worshiped! Worthy to be praised! Worthy to be admired! Worthy to be loved! Worthy to be delighted in! See that this truth—that **God is the source of reconciliation**—makes its way into your heart, and that your heart returns the praise to God that He is worthy of.

## B. Christ the Means of Reconciliation

But our passage teaches us that, concerning **the message of reconciliation**, not only that God is the source of reconciliation, but that **Christ is the means of reconciliation**. Verse 18 says that God “reconciled us to Himself *through Christ*.” And again in verse 19: “God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

This is pointing to the truth that the reconciliation God accomplishes He accomplishes through Christ's cross work. See, our sin alienates us from God. Our sin arouses God's righteous wrath against us. And if God is just, He must exercise His wrath in the punishment of sin. This means that if we are to have any hope of being reconciled to God, sin has to be dealt with. And Paul addresses that in the final phrase of verse 19: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, *not counting their trespasses against them.*" And the word "counting" there is the Greek word *logizomai*, that familiar word that Paul uses again and again to refer to the doctrine of imputation. It's well-translated. *Logizomai* is an accounting term that means "to put something down on someone's account" (Harris, 444). In a positive sense, it can mean to credit something good to someone's account—to reckon or count someone as having done something positive. In a negative sense, as it's used here in our verse, it can mean to debit something from someone's account—to count someone as having done something wrong and therefore to "count it against them." Paul says: God achieves this reconciliation by not counting our sins against us—not imputing our sins to our account.

Said another way, reconciliation comes through the forgiveness of sins. The psalmist makes plain this link between the non-imputation of sin and forgiveness in Psalm 130, verse 3 and 4. He writes, in what should be the cry of every heart of every person in this room, "If You, O Yahweh, should *mark iniquities*, O Lord, who could stand? But there is *forgiveness* with You, That You may be feared." Rather than marking iniquities—rather than counting our sins against us and imputing our sins to our account—there is forgiveness with God, that He might be feared, that He might be reverently worshiped and stood in awe of. David praises God for that very thing in the opening verses of that great penitential psalm, Psalm 32. He says, "How blessed is he whose transgression is *forgiven*, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom Yahweh does *not impute* iniquity." You see, as long as God imputes our sins to us, as Calvin says, "He must of necessity regard us with abhorrence; for He cannot be friendly or propitious to sinners" (237). But there is forgiveness with this God, that He might be feared.

But how can a holy God forgive sins? How can a perfectly righteous, perfectly good God, whose nature is to punish all sin and wrongdoing, simply not count our trespasses against us? A holy God can't merely overlook sin! He can't pretend as if His own character, and holiness, and worthiness, and loveliness ought not to be honored with the utmost reverence, worship, and obedience. He would cease to be *God* if He did that! He would be an *idolater*, because He would elevate in His affections something *above* His own holy name. He would be a *liar*, because He would be saying that it's no big deal if His nature is violated by man's sin. But God is not a liar! He is not an idolater! He regards His own beauty and worth above everything in this world. And when His character is violated by human sin, He can't simply overlook it. How can this holy God not count sin against us, and yet remain perfectly righteous?

And the answer to that is glorious. He does it **through Christ**. He accomplishes forgiveness and reconciliation through the atoning work of Christ on the cross! God can justly and legally and righteously not count our trespasses against us, because He has counted them against Christ, our Substitute! God can legally not impute our sins to *us*, because He has legally imputed them to *Christ*, when He put Christ forth as a propitiation for our sins on the cross. In that great Psalm of worship, David says in Psalm 103 verse 10, “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” And it is true that God has not dealt with us according to our sins, because God dealt with *Jesus* according to our sins (Storms, 173).

You see, God does not just sweep sin under the rug. That is not what grace and mercy are. That’s why in Romans chapter 3, as Paul begins unfolding the blessed truth of justification by faith alone apart from works, it’s why he’s so earnest to vindicate the *righteousness* of God. For, Proverbs 17:15, “He who justifies the wicked . . . [is] an *abomination* to the Lord!” But God justifies the wicked! So how is He not an abomination to Himself? Answer: Romans 3:24–26: We are “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly *as a propitiation* in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness . . . for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” You see? Just *and* justifier, because He set forth Jesus as a propitiation—because His wrath against sin would not go unsatisfied, but would be satisfied by exercising the fullness of His wrath against our sin in the person of Christ our sinless, sin-bearing substitute. O praise the wisdom of God that devises not only a gracious Gospel, but a righteous Gospel!

2 Corinthians 5:21—one of the most precious verses in all of Scripture, and one we’ll spend an entire sermon on next time—2 Corinthians 5: 21 says, “He made Him—” that is, the Father made Christ—“who knew no sin, to *be* sin on our behalf.” The Father transferred the debt of our sins to Christ’s account—God imputed the sins of every person in every age who would ever repent and believe in Christ to the Son of God on that cross, and punished our sin *in Him*. And He did so—the Father treated the sinless One as if *He* was the sinner—second half of verse 21: “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”—so that not only would our sins be forgiven and have the slate wiped clean, but so that we might be credited the righteousness that God requires for reconciliation and fellowship with Him. God treated Jesus as if He lived our life of sin and uncleanness, so that He might legally and justly treat us as if we lived Jesus’ life of perfect righteousness and holiness. The Puritan Richard Hooker said it well when he said, “Let it be counted folly or frenzy or fury or whatever. It is our wisdom and our comfort; we care for no knowledge in the world but this: that *man* hath sinned and *God* hath suffered; that God hath made himself the sin of *men*, and that men are made the righteousness of *God*” (in Storms, 174)!

And so the New Testament testifies with one voice that this reconciliation of which God is the source is accomplished **by means of Christ and His Cross**. Romans 5:10 says, “While we were

enemies we were reconciled to God *through the death of His Son.*” In verse 11 he says it is *through Christ* that we have now received the reconciliation.” In Ephesians 2:16, he says that *Christ* has established peace, so that He “might reconcile [both Jews and Gentiles] in one body to God *through the cross, by it* having put to death the enmity.” And then verse 18 says, “For *through Him* we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” And in Colossians 1:20, Paul writes that God was pleased “through [*Christ*] to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace *through the blood of His cross.*” Verse 22: “Yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body *through death*, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”

Because of this most glorious atonement accomplished by our Great High Priest, we who were alienated and separated from the God we were created to know and worship will be **reconciled**—will be restored to loving fellowship with Him. “Christ died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God.” That’s what salvation is about! That’s the goal! Restoring us to the all-satisfying, unspeakably glorious, consummately delightful God that our sin cut us off from! It is one thing for the righteous to die for the unrighteous. It is one thing for a Judge to declare a guilty criminal righteous because a sufficient payment has been rendered on his behalf. But it is entirely another thing for that Judge to then enter into a personal relationship with that forgiven criminal—for that Judge to become as a Father and care for that criminal as if He were His own son.

Dear friends, in the marvelous gift of salvation, God does not merely make an alteration in His bookkeeping concerning the sin reckoned to our account (Garland, 290). The Judge does not just merely drop the charges against us. Our God reconciles us to Himself through Christ, so that we might have access to our Father, Ephesians 2:18 says—in whose presence, says David, is fullness of joy, and in whose right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11)! Our sin had cut us off from Him—this magnificent treasure, this ocean of delight! And the cross of Christ overcomes the alienation and hostility that exists between us, and purchases the **reconciliation** that brings us back to Him! The very bottom of why the Gospel is good news is because it **reconciles** us to the God who makes heaven heaven!

## II. The Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 18b, 19b–20)

And just as we have considered that God is the source of reconciliation, and Christ is the means of reconciliation, we also discover that we—Christians, called into joyful, enduring *ministry* even in the midst of affliction—we are the instrument of reconciliation. That leads us to our second point: **the ministry of reconciliation**. We see this in the parallel phrases in the second halves of both verses 18 and 19, and then through verse 20. Paul says, God “reconciled us to Himself through Christ *and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*” In verse 19 he says, God “has committed to *us* the *word* of reconciliation.” And then verse 20: “Therefore, we are ambassadors

for Christ, [in the conviction that] God [is] making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” We who are beneficiaries of the *message* of reconciliation have been commissioned to **the ministry of reconciliation**—that is, the ministry of the proclamation of that message to those who are not yet reconciled to God.

#### A. A Ministry of Proclamation

And these verses contain several features of the **ministry of reconciliation**. In the first place, I want you to notice that the ministry of reconciliation is a ministry of proclamation. And we see that by the parallelism in verses 18 and 19. In verse 18 it says that God “gave us the *ministry* of reconciliation,” and then in verse 19 it says that God “has committed to us the *word* of reconciliation.” The *ministry* of reconciliation is the proclamation of the *word* of reconciliation, which is to say, the *message* of reconciliation that we just discussed. Namely, that the perfectly holy God who is justly offended by the sins of men has, in His infinite wisdom, devised a way for His infinite love to rescue sinners from His infinite wrath, without compromising His infinite righteousness—that He can be both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus, through the wrath-propitiating, reconciling work of the cross.

Brothers and sisters, *that* is our ministry. So many people are running around chasing their tails trying to figure out how the church is supposed to be engaged in ministry. Some think the church’s ministry ought to be lobbying for political change and turning the tides of the culture’s morality. Some think the church’s ministry is to usher in the kingdom of God by working to eliminate poverty and hunger and homelessness, and by advocating for social justice. Others seem to think the church’s mission is to entertain an unchurched society—just get people to come to church by any pragmatic means necessary. No, first and foremost, we are to be preachers of this Gospel of reconciliation! *That* is our mission. The heart and soul of the ministry to which we have been called as followers of Christ is the verbal proclamation of the Gospel.

Yes, we are called to serve one another in ministry. Yes, we are called to minister compassion to the lost world around us. Yes, we are called to live holy lives that adorn the Gospel. But all of our service, and all of our compassion, and all of our holy living will never open blind eyes to the glory of Jesus. Only the *word of reconciliation* will do that. Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by *hearing*, and hearing by the *word* of Christ”—by the proclamation of the *message* concerning Christ and His atoning work of reconciliation! And so we must proclaim this message. If we claim to be partakers of the New Covenant and therefore ministers of the New Covenant, above all else, we must open our mouths and preach to our friends and family and neighbors the life-giving truths about (a) the holiness of God, (b) the sinfulness of man, (c) the substitutionary life, death, and resurrection of the wrath-bearing Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And (d) we must call all people everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone for righteousness. We

cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are being faithful in Christian ministry if we are not regularly speaking the Gospel. The Christian ministry is—first of all—a call to proclamation.

## B. A Privilege and Responsibility

Secondly, the ministry of reconciliation is both a privilege and a responsibility. We see that in the two verbs used in these parallel phrases in verses 18 and 19. Verse 18 says that God “*gave* us the ministry of reconciliation,” and verse 19 says that He “has *committed* to us the word of reconciliation.” The word “gave” communicates the idea of giving as a gift. Paul uses it earlier in 2 Corinthians to speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit that God gave to us as a pledge of our future inheritance (1:22; 5:5). That means that, so far from complaining about God’s commands upon us to be faithfully engaged in evangelism, we ought to see this call to Gospel ministry as a gift of God’s grace—a special privilege that we, creatures of the dust, ourselves offenders of the holiness of God, might be used by God to announce His message of reconciliation to others!

And that second word, “He has *committed* to us the word of reconciliation,” speaks of giving as a sacred trust. The ESV brings that out in its translation of the verse by rendering it, “. . . *entrusting* to us the message of reconciliation.” This means that not only is our ministry a gift and privilege, it is also a sacred responsibility. It’s not a gift that we are free to reject; rather when God reconciled us as His people through Christ, He also entrusted to us as His ministers this **ministry of reconciliation**, and He expects that we steward that trust faithfully—that we don’t take our lamp and hide it under a basket, but put it on the lampstand and shine it for all to see.

And just in case you’re confused about who the “us” is in these verses, let me assure you: it’s you. Some people say, “But isn’t the ‘us’ just speaking about Paul?” Or “Isn’t it just the Apostles?” Or “just the preachers and evangelists?” Nope. **The ministry of reconciliation** is given to all those who have been reconciled. Look at verse 18: “Now all these things are from God who reconciled *us* to Himself through Christ and gave *us* the ministry of reconciliation.” The “us” in the second half of the sentence has to be the same as the “us” in the first half of the sentence. And so if God has reconciled you to Himself through Christ, He has given you the ministry of reconciliation. If you have not been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, you have not been reconciled to God through Christ. All Christians are called to Gospel ministry!

## C. An Ambassadorship

Third, Paul illustrates **the ministry of reconciliation** by picturing it as an ambassadorship. Listen to a literal translation of verse 20: “Therefore, we are *ambassadors* [on behalf of, and in the place of] Christ, [in the conviction that] God [makes His] appeal through us.” And this is a fascinating figure of the Christian ministry. An ambassador in the ancient world was very similar

to what an ambassador is in our present time. It involved a sovereign—in their day an emperor or a king, in ours perhaps a president or prime minister. And that sovereign, because he could not go himself to a foreign land, would commission a messenger, a spokesperson, to represent himself and his office and the interests of his country to that foreign land. The ambassador acted on behalf and in the place of his sovereign, and embodied all of the authority of the one who sent him. Insofar as he remained faithful to the message he was sent to deliver, the voice of the ambassador was as the voice of his sovereign. In fact, there was a Rabbinic proverb that said, “The one who is sent is as the one who sent him,” and “A man’s agent is as the man himself” (Harris, 446).

But note, not only is the ambassador invested with the authority of his sovereign, his authority and the particulars of his message are circumscribed by his sovereign’s desires. That is to say, the ambassador does not speak in his own name. The authority for his message rests not with him or his reputation, but in the name of the one he represents. He does not have the authority to embellish his message or deviate at all from communicating his king’s intent. He is bound not to speak his own opinions or make his own demands; he must speak only and exactly what he has been commissioned to say. The moment the ambassador utters his own opinion, or speaks contrary to the intent and interests of his sovereign, he is relieved of his post.

How many implications this figure of ambassadorship has for our understanding of Christian ministry! God Himself is our Sovereign, who takes those He has already reconciled to Himself and commissions us as ambassadors of heaven to all the climes of this foreign land called planet earth to speak the word of reconciliation on His behalf and in His place. We represent God Himself and the interests of the country of our heavenly citizenship in this fallen world. Therefore, as we carry out this **ministry of reconciliation**, preaching the Gospel of reconciliation, we are bound to speak only the words with which we have been commissioned. We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Cor 4:5). We do not preach our own doctrines. We do not preach our own opinions or speculations. We do not embellish the message here or there.

We are not innovators, seeking to improve upon our King’s prescribed methodology of communication! “Well, you know, preaching, authoritative declaration, simple pronouncements of absolute truth—our culture doesn’t take kindly to that sort of discourse. Instead of just preaching and announcing and declaring, let’s have a conversation; let’s dialog and have a give-and-take, a back-and-forth. Or let’s not talk at all: let me *show* you what my king’s message of reconciliation is just by the way I live my life. Or better yet, you can come to my ‘church’ and watch our drama team pantomime the Gospel through interpretive dance!” No! We are not orators, seeking to adapt and contextualize the message we’ve received to the whims and tastes of our various audiences! We are heralds, ambassadors, men and women under assignment—methodologically obligated to communicate our King’s message precisely as we have received

it! Any deviation from the *content* or the *intent*—the message *or* the method—and we will be found a rogue ambassador, an unfaithful steward, and will summarily be relieved of our post.

And note, as God’s ambassadors, we embody all the authority of the one who sends us. Insofar as we remain faithful to our King’s message, verse 20, we maintain the conviction that *God Himself* makes His appeal to the lost *through* us! As we go through these foreign lands as faithful ambassadors, heralding terms of peace from the King who these sinners have offended and alienated—terms of peace and reconciliation from the One whose wrath is justly kindled against them, and against which they have no escape—as we proclaim to them that the Lord Jesus Christ has come to pay for sin, and satisfy wrath, and accomplish peace through the blood of His cross, and that this reconciliation might be received through faith alone apart from any works, and as we plead with these enemies on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God, the voice of the ambassador is as the voice of the King. God Himself speaks through us. Friend, think of it! You who were once a hostile, alienated enemy—yourself having received this gracious reconciliation—are now put into service by the reconciling God to be the instrument of the reconciliation of other enemies! Praise God for His grace in entrusting to us **the ministry of reconciliation!**

#### D. Urgency

And note, finally, just briefly, the urgency and earnestness with which we are to announce the terms of this reconciliation. This is not a cold, detached, impersonal, matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it, recitation of facts. This is earnest entreaty! “Dear sinner, in the conviction that God Himself is making His appeal through the very words we speak, we beg you on behalf of Christ—we stand in the very place of Christ Himself and we beg you: be reconciled to this great God! Be reconciled to this King whom you have so exquisitely offended, whose wrath is justly kindled upon you, whom you cannot beguile or manipulate, out of whose strict hand of justice you cannot wiggle. Be reasonable! You cannot withstand the strength of this King if He comes against you in the fierceness of His anger. You have no *defense* against the Holy One of Israel, who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. And yet this fearful King sends me to you with terms of peace! With entreaties of reconciliation! Dear sinner, lay down your arms! Run from your certain destruction! Confess your sin! Turn away from your rebellion! Turn away even from your *good* works, which avail nothing for righteousness before this holy God who demands perfection, and put your trust in Jesus Christ alone for righteousness, who has lived, has died, and has been raised for sinners just like you!”

#### Conclusion

And men and women, there are some of you who sit here this morning who have yet to heed these entreaties from Almighty God. You may convince others—and perhaps even deceive

yourselves—that you have come to terms of peace with the Holy God of the universe, but you are still alienated from Him, you are still His enemies. Because you haven't yet forsaken your sin. You still carve out pockets of your own life and your own behavior which you refuse to submit to His Lordship. You still trust partly in your own merit to avail with you before the bar of God's righteousness. Dear friend, I plead with you—I beg you on behalf of Christ—be reconciled to God! Don't dare to meet this King before having come to terms of peace. You will not survive it. Be reconciled to God through Christ, even this morning.

And dear brothers and sisters who *have* been reconciled, stand in the strength of this amazing grace that has been shown to you. We are guilty criminals, rightly condemned for our sin, and yet through Christ we know forgiveness. We have offended and alienated God our Creator, and rightly condemned to eternal separation from Him, and yet through Christ, we enemies are reconciled as friends—even more, as sons and daughters in the family of God. May we stand in this grace, and exult in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:2). And may we be faithful to the ministry of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted—ambassadors who herald terms of peace to our King's enemies through Christ our Savior.