

“Ambassadors for Christ!” (Part 2): “Reconciled to God”

2 Corinthians 5.11 – 6.2

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This is part 2 of 3 on this pivotal passage in 2 Corinthians. Last week was a bit of an overview; today we dive deep into one of Paul’s fullest articulations of what exactly *happens* when one becomes a Christian. There is a change, a transformation, that takes place – *two* changes, really; first, in our relationship with God; second, in our relationship with the world. Today we’re going to talk about the change in our relationship with God; next week, the change in our relationship with the world. The concepts that Paul presents here are foundational for a healthy understanding of who we are in Christ, but these concepts often do not receive sufficient explanation. Let’s see what we can do to fix that!

I would invite you to focus your attention on verses 18 and 19: “All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them. He has trusted us with this ministry of reconciliation.” Both of the changes that I referred to a moment ago are found here, in these two verses, in very tight, compact language. The key word is “reconciliation” – reconciliation to God, on the one hand, and a ministry of reconciliation to the world, on the other. Both reconciliations are referred to in both verses. In verse 18, God “reconciled us to himself through Christ”; in verse 19, “God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ” – those two clauses are referring to the same thing, that first change that takes place within us, reconciliation with God. Then go back to verse 18: God “gave us the ministry of reconciliation”; and in verse 19, “he has trusted us with this ministry of reconciliation” – those two clauses refer to the *second* change that takes place within us, the ministry of reconciliation we now have with the world. See how that works – both of those sentences say *very similar things* about *two distinct phenomena*, using slightly different words. Verse 19 effectively repeats much of the substance of verse 18, but differently.

So the portions of these verses that I want us to dial in on today are as follows: in verse 18, God “reconciled us to himself through Christ”; in verse 19, “God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them.” That last bit – “by not counting people’s sins against them” – provides a helpful clue to what this “reconciliation with God” is all about.

Now the word “reconciliation” is somewhat problematic. Typically when we use it in contemporary English, we’re referring to an agreement or a settlement or a truce between two parties that had been in conflict. “He was *reconciled* to his brother,” we might say. A couple that has been

considering a divorce but has now worked things out between them has been *reconciled* to each other. There's a degree of *satisfaction* in both parties, and generally both parties are viewed as equals in terms of their status relative to one another. Those understandings work to a certain extent in our passage, but the Greek word that Paul uses that is translated as "reconciliation" has a much more specific and nuanced meaning. In Greek, the word was an *economic* term. It was a word that money changers used, and the people who went to them; when you wanted to exchange your coins in one currency for coins in another currency, the transaction was *reconciled* when the value of the coins was exactly the same. It has to do with keeping things in *balance*. It's similar, in some ways, to the way we might say, "I *reconciled* my bank statement": you made sure that *your* records and the *bank's* records match, that they're even, that things are in balance.

Look back at verse 18: God "reconciled us to himself through Christ". Think of that like this: God *made sure that things were balanced* between God and us. This wasn't something that *we* could do; this was something *God* had to do, and he did it through Jesus Christ. For the fact of the matter is, things *were* unbalanced between God and us. They had been imbalanced since practically the dawn of time.

See, in the grand drama of salvation, when God created this universe, things were *perfect*. They were *as they should be*. They were *in balance*. But, so our story goes, after creation, something went wrong. A malevolent force entered the picture and caused things to go astray. To become unbalanced. Genesis 2, Adam and Eve are in the garden and things are *delightful*; Genesis 3, the serpent persuades them to disregard God's one and only instruction, and things turn *awful*. Humanity is never the same; the whole cosmos is never the same. Creation and Fall. Murder and mayhem abound; the twin powers of Sin and Death now hold sway over the world – and all the horrendous, horrific things that have happened ever since then now make sense. No matter how hard humanity tried, we were simply not able to restore what had been lost. There was an imbalance – and nothing we could do would get rid of it. Nothing we could do would bring things back into balance again. Nothing we could do would reconcile us back to God. We had incurred a debt – and nothing we could do would pay it back.

From that point forward, there came a series of efforts on God's part that helped to *cover* the debt. The covenant with Noah. The call of Abraham. The law of Moses. Worship in the tabernacle, and later the temple. The coming of the prophets. All the stories we find in the Old Testament of God continually reaching out an olive branch to humanity. God provided a way for the people to achieve a *temporary* restitution with God, through the keeping of the Law, through the sacrificial offerings at the temple, but the problem was, *nothing made the problem go away*. Sin was *covered*, but the debt wasn't *paid*. It's like a lender saying, "It's okay, you don't have to pay me what you owe, *yet*." The debt still existed; it's just that God provided the people with a means of holding it at bay. They had a temporary pass – but only temporary. It's like they were allowed to pay the *interest* on their debt, so that the debt didn't increase, but the *principal* remained. Observing the law and offering ritual sacrifices were *good*, but they didn't satisfy the debt. As the writer of Hebrews puts it so beautifully: "it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Hebrews 10.4)

But the blood of Jesus Christ *can* and *does* take away sins. It restores the balance. It pays the debt. As Paul writes in Galatians 4, "When the fulfillment of time came, God sent his Son, born through

a woman, and born under the Law. This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted.” (Galatians 4.4-5) God came to earth in human form, to pay the debt that no mere mortal could pay. The scales had been imbalanced ever since evil first tempted humanity long ago; now, through Christ’s sacrificial self-offering on the cross, that balance is restored. The debt is paid. The slate is wiped clean. There is no longer a need to pay either interest or principal. Observing the Law, offering sacrifices – none of that is needed anymore. The debt no longer exists. We are no longer bound in chains. *Freedom* is ours – a precious gift, given to us only through Jesus Christ.

Back to our passage. Verse 18. God “reconciled us to himself through Christ.” That’s what God did, what we couldn’t do, what freed us from our debt, what restored us to a balanced relationship with God. Come again? Verse 19. “God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them.” Our reconciliation with God happens in conjunction with God not counting our sins against us. In a pre-Jesus world, that reconciliation simply wasn’t possible. There were *no means available* by which we could restore our broken relationship with God. All that changed when God sent Jesus into the world, when Christ hung on a cross and *died*. John calls him “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That’s what he did, all right. He took away our sin. He made it possible for us to have a restored relationship with the Father. A *reconciled* relationship with the Father.

This doesn’t mean we’re perfect. It doesn’t mean that we no longer commit sins of all sorts. You and I both know that we still do. But it does mean that God no longer holds sin over our head. It means that there’s nothing that can separate us from the love of God. We’re forgiven. We’re free.

So what happens when someone becomes a Christian? How is that person’s life different?

Well, think about the difference between having a multi-million dollar debt hanging over your head, and having that debt completely removed. Erased. Eradicated. And knowing that you’ll never have *any* kind of debt, large or small, hanging over your head again. There’s *more* that happens when one becomes a Christian than just that, of course – you make a commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads, for one thing – but in terms of *this* passage, the critical difference is that you are now *free*. Totally, completely free. You’re given a gift, a beautiful gift, a magnificent gift, a precious gift. It’s *yours!* Free for the taking, free for the receiving. It’s like a grand birthday present, every single day of the year.

So you may be wondering: what does this mean for my life? What’s the practical application? What do I have to *do differently*? Answer: It means *everything* for your life, and you don’t have to *do* anything! Just receive it. Just simply receive it. Let Jesus wipe that debt away. Let him wash your slate clean. Let him reconcile your relationship with God. You don’t have to live with any more guilt, any more regret, any more shame. Take it all to the cross. Let Jesus wipe it all away.

Oh, there’s stuff to do, all right. We’ll talk about a piece of that next week. But for now, for today, just bask in the glory and the freedom that is *yours*, by the grace of Jesus Christ. Enjoy that freedom! Enjoy the opportunity you have to live completely debt-free. We don’t deserve it; we didn’t earn it. It’s just a *gift*. A wonderful, precious treasure. A gift called *grace*. God loves you – *that much*.

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