

“Reconciled to God”
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
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Text Comment

- v. 15 All died in the sense that Christ died *in their place*. This is one of many places in Paul’s letters in which the death of Jesus Christ is taught to have been *substitutionary*, that is, he died in our place, on our behalf. As R.H. Tasker, an English scholar, puts it: “Christ’s death was the death of all, in the sense that He died the death they should have died; the penalty of their sins was borne by Him; He died in their place.” [Cited in Hughes, 194] And he did this because he loved us, and that love, securing our salvation, should be the great motivation of our lives. We love him because he first loved us.
- v.16 This is a wonderfully enigmatic statement. Paul is clearly saying something about the view of Jesus he entertained before becoming a Christian himself. But we know almost nothing of that. We don’t know if Paul ever saw Jesus in person or heard him preach one of his sermons or saw him perform a miracle. It is easier to assume that he did not or he would have mentioned the fact somewhere. But here he is making the point that there are two very different ways of looking at things, at evaluating people, and especially of evaluating Jesus Christ. Many know Christ in only a worldly way – they know about him, they judge him without a true understanding of who he is and what he did. There are many such people in the church itself. People who have only a worldly view of Jesus. Perhaps Paul has in view the false teachers in Corinth when he speaks of those who regard Christ from a worldly point of view.
- v.17 A further consequence of being united to Christ in his death and resurrection is that a person becomes a new creation. This is one of many ways in which the Bible describes the profound, radical change that overtakes a person who becomes a Christian. Other metaphors its uses are: receiving a new heart, undergoing a new birth or being born again, becoming a new man, etc.
- v.18 Reconciliation – or the restoration to friendship and harmony between two persons who have been estranged and alienated – is one of the three great models by which Christ’s work is explained in the Bible. The other two are *redemption* – the buying of someone out of bondage by the payment of a ransom – and *propitiation* – the turning away of wrath by the offering of a sacrifice.
- v.19 How does this reconciliation between God and man take place in the world: through the proclamation of the message about Christ and salvation from sin and people believing it and being changed by it.
- v.20 Probably the “you” does not mean that Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians as if he thinks they are not yet Christians or need to be restored to their true faith. He is simply explaining what his message to the world is. Contrarily, if he is addressing the

Corinthians, he is suggesting that, under the influence of the false teachers, they are drifting away from this great message and need to return to it. In any case, there is nothing mundane or ordinary about the gospel, it is a vital message, he presses men and women to believe it so that they may be saved.

- v.21 One of the great verses of the Bible! Here is the basis, the foundation. Here is how salvation comes to sinners. Notice Paul's careful language. God did not make Jesus a sinner but "sin." And he didn't make us, by that act, righteous, but "righteousness." He is talking about our justification. Christ, in our place, endured God's wrath against us on account of our sin. He was made sin for us. And the result is that we obtain righteousness – that is a right standing – before God because Christ's righteous life and death is accounted to us.

Now, what you have here in these verses is a grand, one of the grandest summaries of the central message of the Bible. The Bible is about salvation and here Paul tells us in sum what salvation is and how it is obtained. And, what is more, he tells us what the sticking point is, the problem that so many find with the Bible's message and the obstacle that must be overcome by the Spirit of God if an unbelieving man or woman, boy or girl – in the church or outside of her – is to become a Christian and be numbered among those whose sins God does not count against them.

Paul says *first* that in Christ a person becomes a new creation. It is a way of saying that salvation involves a radical change in a person, change going down to the bottom, change that leaves someone a fundamentally different person than he or she was before. That point is often made in the Bible and never more memorably than when Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 that in order for a person to enter the kingdom of God he or she must be "born again."

Now, what that means, of course, is that what a person is, by birth and by nature, isn't good enough; isn't nearly good enough. What you are as a human being, fallen as all human beings are, won't get you anything but God's judgment. You've got to be changed, root and branch. There is something seriously wrong with you and God will have to make you all over again from the inside out. People don't like to hear that and that is why they don't become followers of Jesus Christ. The prerequisite is accepting that there is something very wrong with you and that *you* can't fix it. And the reason why so often false teaching arises in the church is the very same. People, even supposedly Christian people, don't like the idea that they are so bad that God has to start over with them nor do they like the idea that they are helpless without his work in them and for them. And so they are always devising new forms of Christianity that are more complementary to human beings and don't require such radical surgery on our natural self-image.

Then, in the *second* place, Paul says that the good news is that God has reconciled sinners to himself. But, of course, what *that* means is that apart from faith in Jesus Christ, we are separated from God, alienated from him, at odds with him. Our problem with God is not "some minor misunderstanding which could easily be put right; it is a case of mutiny, and mutiny of a kind far more radical in its nature and effect than anything that is known in purely human relationships; for the essence of sin is seen in the desire of the creature to set himself up in the place, not of another creature, but of his Creator...the wish to place himself, instead of God, at the center of

reality as the arbiter and controller of all things.” [Hughes, 205] What is more, man’s rebellion against God, his self-absorption and self-love and self-worship is not the only factor in his alienation from God. There is also God’s holiness and his wrath against sin in human life. God is not the helpless victim of man’s mutiny against him. His supremacy as Lord and Judge remain unimpaired and, until his holiness has been satisfied, until the terms of his justice have been met, there can be no reconciliation. It is precisely this that makes Christ’s sacrifice so important. His death in our place, the just for the unjust, was precisely to meet the demands of God’s holiness. Man’s rebellion was met and matched by the love of God in Christ. He saw to repairing what man would not and could not. [Hughes, 205] So, once again, to accept the Bible’s message of salvation is to admit that we are in ourselves profoundly estranged from our Creator and only he can bring us back. People don’t like to hear that either.

Then, in the *third* place, Paul says that salvation comes from God’s not counting our sins against us, something he is able to do because he has already dealt with our sins in the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. But that means that, left to ourselves, we have many sins that would be counted against us and that would doom us. We are sinners, deeply, constantly, comprehensively sinners. What is more, we are guilty and so liable to be punished for our sins. We expect others to be punished for theirs, why not ourselves for ours? But, tell some friends or workmates that they are sinners and that their sins must doom them unless they come to Christ and see how they like it. See if they will thank you for telling them the truth, however unpleasant; see if they will compliment you to others for having given them such important information about themselves. No one likes to be told that his life is comprehensively wrong and that he or she is living it badly. We have long accustomed ourselves to thinking differently and to holding much higher views of ourselves. We conspire with others to fix standards so low that we can hardly fail to meet them. Only now and again does a beam of light flash across our conscience and make us see something about ourselves, something in ourselves that disturbs us and worries us. Only now and then, and only for a moment, do we see ourselves morally as God sees us. Usually we go on blithely thinking very well of ourselves.

An article in a recent edition of the journal *Social Psychology* (1993) reported that 90% of American business managers rate their performance “superior”; 86% of employees rate themselves “better than average”; among divorced couples, 90% insist the break-up was their spouse’s fault. Studies, time and time again, confirm this utterly unrealistic assessment of ourselves. Do we love our neighbors as ourselves? Do we love God with all our heart? Hardly! We are not close, ever. And we are committing actual transgressions every hour of every day. 86% admit to lying to their parents; 75% to lying to a friend; 73% to a lover and only 11% cited lying as producing any serious level of guilt or embarrassment. 74% will steal if they can get away with it, but only 9% will be seriously bothered by their having done so. Only 17% still define sin as a violation of the will of God. No wonder they do it so easily and without shame.

The professor understood this well who told his class to sit one seat apart during the examination to avoid all appearances of evil, “as the Good Book says,” he told them. “What if we don’t believe in the Good Book?” asked one student. “Then you put two seats between you!” [In R. Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage*, 143]

Paul would have agreed entirely with C.S. Lewis who wrote,

“A recovery of the old sense of sin essential to Christianity. Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of his to be true, though we are part of the world he came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom his words are addressed.” [*Problem of Pain*, 57]

I know I don't like to be told of my failures. I certainly find it easy to resent anyone who tells me that I am bad. But I am enough of a Christian, thankfully, to know that *I am bad*, and all the more when I am measured against God's standards, and that this recognition is the beginning of everything wonderful and good. If I don't acknowledge my great need, then I will never come to Christ in true faith for him to meet my need.

The English scholar, R.V.G. Tasker put it this way: “Man's greatest need is to know man's greatest need.”

That Tasker should have said such a thing is wonderfully interesting. He was professor of New Testament in the University of London in the 1940s. He was an eminent scholar, well known in his academic discipline, would later serve on the committee that produced the *New English Bible*, was a recognized authority in the New Testament field. But, he would later say that all of this time he was regarding Christ in a worldly way. He was an Anglican minister but he didn't know Christ as his Savior. He didn't believe himself to be needing a new creation, he didn't see himself as alienated from a holy God, he didn't imagine that his sins would mean his doom unless Christ Jesus took them away.

Then, one night in 1947 he went to hear Martyn Lloyd Jones, the great London preacher, speak to the University's student Christian union. Lloyd Jones' topic that night was the atonement, the work of Christ bearing our sin and guilt in our place, the subject of Paul in 2 Cor. 5:21.

He said later that his life was “revolutionized by that address.” [I. Murray, *Lloyd Jones*, ii, 183] He was a preacher himself, but he was used to hearing and delivering polite and quite short Anglican homilies that wouldn't revolutionize anyone's life. Indeed, after hearing Lloyd-Jones a few times, he told another Anglican minister friend, “by the time we...have concluded our little homilies the Doctor is just emerging from his introduction.” [197] And what was it that revolutionized his life? It was precisely his coming to see himself as a sinner in desperate need of God's salvation, as someone who had been ruined by sin and needing to be remade, as someone guilty before a holy God and needing to be forgiven and reconciled to God. He now stood up for the Word of God and for salvation by grace through faith in Christ, he stood up for it even among his liberal colleagues in the prestigious divinity faculty of the University of London and, as he later recollected, he was “sent to Coventry” by them. That is, he was ostracized, they shook their heads at him. They ridiculed him. How could a man so educated accept such out of date ideas. Paul knew all about being sent to Coventry; he knew how foolish, even offensive, unsophisticated the Gospel of Jesus Christ seemed to many in his day. But, of course, there is nothing out of date about human sin and God's grace and Christ's sacrifice as the means of reconciling God to man.

As Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher and Christian once wrote, “There are only two kinds of men: the righteous who believe themselves sinners and the rest, sinners who believe themselves righteous.” Or as Paul might have put it, “the kingdom of God is not for the well-meaning, but for the desperate.” Christianity does not begin in comfort, but in dismay. But, on the other side of that dismay about oneself one finds God’s love, Christ’s perfect sacrifice, the forgiveness of one’s sins, the new creation, and peace with God.

You see, Paul is not really chiefly interested in telling people how bad they are, how hopeless their situation is if left to themselves, how much needs to be done for them and to them that they cannot do themselves. That is all just preparation for the wonderful message he has been commissioned to proclaim to the world. There is forgiveness to be found, complete and unqualified forgiveness of all our sins; there is peace with God and friendship with him and communion with him that human beings, no matter how rebellious they have been, can now enjoy; and there is a new creation, the beginning of a completely new life from the inside out, a life that will eventually become, by God’s grace, precisely what human beings were made to be and that forever. That is Paul’s message and ours as well.

For the Bible, while it is straightforward in its dark and gloomy assessment of the moral condition of mankind, of men and women as they are by nature, unless changed by Christ, it, finally, pays the highest conceivable compliment to mankind. For it is these sinful men and women, boys and girls, that the living God, the Maker of heaven and earth, loved with an everlasting love. It is for these rebels that the Son of God came into the world and suffered and died. It was to reconcile these sinners to himself, to bring them into harmony with himself, that Jesus endured such ignominy and shame so as to carry their sins away and put them right with God.

You may be aware that nowadays there is a great deal of discussion as to whether we human beings are alone in the universe, that is, whether or not other civilizations may exist in the universe besides our own. Since the rise of evolutionary thinking and until comparatively recently, it was assumed by many that, the universe being so large and life having arisen from non-life here, no doubt it must have done so at many other places. Now that we are familiar with the vastness of the universe, the mind-boggling numbers of stars and solar systems and galaxies and the mind-numbing distances between them, it seemed to many simply unbelievable that earth, that tiniest speck in one corner of the immensity that is our universe would be the only place where life would be found. Movies like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or *ET* or *Contact* keep the idea of extra-terrestrial life alive in the public imagination. And contact with other life is assumed to be a matter of when, not if. During the 1990s in the U.S. alone some 900,000 people claimed to have been abducted by aliens.

Nowadays, however, many voices are being raised in the scientific community, non-Christian voices by and large, in denial of this prospect of finding life elsewhere in space. It is a question of some importance because *SETI*, the government program for the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, is costing tax-payers billions of dollars. Radio signals are being sent out to the distant reaches of the universe, satellites are being equipped for the search for other life, and so on, and all at great expense. It has been religious orthodoxy for many scientists to believe in the existence of other life in the cosmos. To doubt it is virtually to doubt evolution.

But the fact is, there are growing reasons to doubt it and not just because there are growing reasons to doubt evolution itself as an adequate explanation of life itself or human life in particular. Two University of Washington astrophysicists have authored a book profoundly pessimistic as to the possibility of finding other life in the universe. There are a large number of factors that are utterly unlikely and so utterly rare in the universe but which are absolutely essential to life. I won't bore you with the technical details but they have to do with such things as the factors that produce a magnetic field, galactic location, plate tectonics, a planetary crust of a very specific type and so on. What is more, there have been, it is estimated, some 50 billion species of life on this planet of ours, and only one has developed high intelligence. Even on evolutionary premises, that is a very discouraging ratio.

As the editor of *Astronomy* magazine put it: "On Earth, a long sequence of improbable events transpired in just the right way to bring forth our existence, as if we had won a million-dollar lottery a million times in a row. Contrary to the prevailing belief, maybe we are special." Some physicists are even speaking of what they call *the anthropic principle*, viz. that the universe, in many ways, seems to have been finely tuned for our benefit, that man is, in some real sense, the center and the purpose of it all.

Stephen Hawking, the celebrated Cambridge astro-physicist was asked what disturbed him most about the anthropic principle. He replied, "The human race is so insignificant, I find it difficult to believe the whole universe is a necessary precondition for our existence." The University of Washington scientists say, however, that actually a universe of immense proportions may be necessary after all for a single planet full of life, because a stable universe with gravity must be expanding or it will collapse.

Physicist Alan Sandage, Edwin Hubble's protégé, said, "We can't understand the universe in any clear way without the supernatural." Physicist James Trefil concluded his book about extraterrestrials and the conditions of life by saying, "If I were a religious man, I would say that everything we have learned about life in the past twenty years shows that we are unique, and therefore special in God's sight." Not being a religious man, apparently, he was unwilling to go where the evidence was leading him. [The above taken from Fred Heeren, "Home Alone in the Universe?" *First Things*, 121 (March 2002) 38-46]

Here is the alternative: Stephen Hawking thinks man insignificant. Paul thinks him sinful, alienated from God, in great need of remaking, but magnificently significant, the center of God's interest, the object of the most amazing thing that ever happened: the Son of God came into the world as a man, to suffer and die in the place of men, to reconcile them to God by taking away their guilt and sin. That places mankind at the very center of everything. The earth may be a very small place in the spatial scheme of this universe, but it is the place on which the Son of God set his feet. That makes it the center of the universe in the only way that matters. No greater compliment could be paid to you but that God not only made you and gave you life, but takes a great interest in your life, pays you the compliment of passing a true moral judgment on it, and offers you eternal salvation through his Son.

The earth is the center of things because it was here that God's love and grace were made known, it was here that he brought men into fellowship with himself, it was here that his Son paid the price of our salvation, and it is here that men and women everywhere are being summoned to new life in Jesus Christ.

There may be any number of people who will say what I have just said better than I have said it, but you will never hear in all your life anything as important as what you have heard this morning. You have heard the honest truth about what you are and will remain if you do not come to Christ, you have heard of God's love that seeks out rebels against him, you have heard what God did through Jesus Christ to reconcile sinful human beings to himself, and you have heard of the salvation that can be had by anyone who will acknowledge his or her great need, believe in Jesus Christ, and be forgiven all his or her sins.

I urge you too, "be reconciled to God!"