

“Reconciled”

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19). God was *reconciling* the world to Himself in Christ. “Reconciliation” is one of those words Christians use to describe what God has done for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

To reconcile means to make friendly again. To “make up”, as it were. Whenever we talk about reconciling, this is “Part 2”. You have to go back to “Part 1 – that something’s *gone wrong* to destroy the friendship and harmony between 2 people, or 2 parties, that have become estranged, or enemies.

When we talk about estrangement, alienation, and the need for reconciliation this is not abstract theology or doctrine; we’re talking about the stuff of life! A father, a mother, says of their child: “We just can’t communicate with our son/daughter anymore. Seems like we’re worlds apart.” A teenaged girl ran away from home and then wrote this letter to her parents: “Dear Mom and Dad: I hate you, but I love you. I need you and then I despise you. I wish you would die, but then I would feel guilty like I always do. Why can’t I understand you like I want you to understand me?” (You can sense the alienation here). A husband and wife have a rocky marriage, and finally separate. Next door neighbors have an argument, and no longer talk to each other.

This need for reconciliation isn’t just true of individuals, but of society at large. News reports are filled with stories of ill will and hostility in the business world, in educational institutions, and certainly in politics. Estrangement is an ugly part of our life here on earth.

The Bible says that something has gone wrong in our relationship with God. By nature – as we are – we humans are estranged and separated from God. Why is that? What’s the cause? Well, *God* hasn’t done anything wrong! *We humans* are the cause of it! The root cause is our *sin*. There is a fatal flaw in human nature that’s dug “an ugly ditch” between us and our Creator. We are bent inward, self-centered, prone to self-interest. We want to put self at the center of life, rather than God. Because of that, harmony with God has been short-circuited. We are separated from God. In fact, the Bible says we are “enemies” of God. That’s not how most people see things! Not the prevailing *cultural view*. But it’s the *Biblical view* of the human condition.

This disconnect with God, in turn, creates separation and alienation within the human family. The root cause of our separation from each other is our separation from God! Can you imagine one of the newscasters on a TV network saying something like this: “This murder...this theft... this cheating scandal...this scam...is rooted in our sin and our separation from our Creator.” Don’t hold your breath! Yet this is precisely what Scripture says!

But 2 Corinthians 5:19 says, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.” God takes the initiative to heal the division between us and Himself. He did this by sending His Son Jesus into the world. The sinless Jesus took all our sin upon Himself, that we may be made right with God. Colossians 1:21-22 says, “At one time you were far away from God and were his enemies because of the evil things you did and thought. But now, by means of the physical death of his

Son, God has made you his friends, in order to bring you, holy, pure, and faultless, into his presence.”

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that one last time, He was on a mission to forgive our sins and restore our lost relationship with our Creator!

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20b). Have you been reconciled to God? Jesus made this possible. When we trust Christ as our Savior and commit our lives to Him, we are put on friendly terms with God again!

But as awesome as this is, it’s only part of the story! *Once we are reconciled with God, God wants that to filter down to the point where we’re reconciled with one another.* God sent Jesus to bring peace, good will, toward all (remember the Christmas story)! God sent Jesus to restore the harmony in the world lost once we sinned. God wants His people, believers in Christ, to be *agents of reconciliation*. Paul put it this way: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18, 19b).

What does this mean? *For one thing, it means that we share the message with people that our basic need is to be reconciled with God.* We all need the Lord, who alone can bring us back into fellowship with God.

It also means that we work on healing any human relationship that may be broken in our life. Is there anyone with whom we need to be reconciled? Perhaps a family member. A neighbor. A coworker. Someone in the church. Someone who once was a friend.

Jesus once commented on the importance of making things right with others. Jesus once said, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Is Jesus saying that before we come here to worship, give our offering, take communion – if there’s something amiss between us and someone else, we try to repair it?

In “The Chosen”, young Matthew, a tax collector turned disciple, is disowned by his parents, because he’s a Jew, working for the Roman government. But after each hears Jesus’ sermon on the mount, saying the words above, both seek reconciliation. It’s awkward, but Matthew’s father calls him “son” again, and Matthew apologizes for how he has hurt his parents by doing this.

There is power in the gospel of Christ to bring people back together again! Maybe you’re thinking, “Harry, you make this sound so easy!” I preached a sermon like this the first year or two of my ministry, about how when we are reconciled to God this breaks down the barriers between people. One lady in the congregation, came out of church and said to me, “I don’t know...you make it sound so simple.” It isn’t easy, is it! Over the years I’ve had any number

of people tell me how they're struggling to mend a relationship with someone, but it's so difficult!

So, what's needed for reconciliation to take place? *First, someone needs to begin the process. Someone needs to take the initiative and start the ball rolling.* That's what God did! Even though God wasn't at fault, God didn't wait for us to come to Him; God made the first move. Romans 5:8 says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

We can be the one who makes the first move to forgive, or to apologize. No reconciliation will take place unless we are willing to forgive. No reconciliation will happen unless we are willing to acknowledge our part in the problem.

In reality, both parties must be willing to be reconciled if this is to happen. I was in 10th grade at McCaskey, just starting high school in the fall. Phys. Ed. class. There was an older man who was the locker room attendant. Kind of a rough character. The first few weeks of school we bantered back and forth, joked a lot with each other. This one day he made some smart aleck comment, and I joked back, "You look like a crook anyway." Shortly afterwards, the gym teacher (whose name I will not mention!) called me over to the man, and asked me, "What'd you say to him?" I told the teacher that I was only kidding. But that didn't fly. Well, at different points throughout the year, this locker room attendant would taunt me, "So you think I'm a crook, do you?" The whole year, the gym teacher had it in for me. In phys. ed. class. In swimming class. He also hosted a school club, the ice hockey club, and I chose that club. I played ice hockey and loved the sport. But I didn't get into the club.

I tried to reconcile with both the locker room attendant, and the gym teacher, but to no avail. I was a young Christian then. It bothered me. But there was nothing more I could do, because there seemed to be no forgiveness on their end. If reconciliation is to happen, *both parties* have to be willing to work on it. If the other person simply refuses to make up, all we can do is grieve the loss, and maintain a reconciling heart!

But there is a power in the gospel of Christ to bring people together again. In the time of Jesus, and the first century of the Church, one of the ugliest divisions was the enmity between Jews and Gentiles. Strict Jews hated Gentiles, and would not have anything to do with them. Bitterness between Jews and Gentiles soared. But this passage in Ephesians tells how God broke down the walls and barriers separating Jew and Gentile when both are reconciled to God through Christ! Ephesians 2:14-16 (New Living Translation): "For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us...He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death." Notice, "He united Jews and Gentiles into one people", "he broke down the wall of hostility" that separated them. "He made peace between Jews and Gentiles." Don't you think this is what the world desperately needs today!

This story comes out of wartime France. Some soldiers with their sergeant brought the body of a dead soldier to a French cemetery to have their friend buried there. The priest gently told them that that was a Roman Catholic cemetery, and he had to ask if their comrade had been a baptized adherent of the Roman Catholic Church. They said they didn't know for sure. The priest said he was very sorry, but in that case he couldn't permit burial in his churchyard. So the soldiers took the dead soldier, and with sadness buried him just outside the fence of the churchyard.

The next day they came back to make sure the grave was OK, and to their surprise they couldn't find the grave. They knew it was only 6 feet from the fence of the cemetery, but they circled the fence and could find no trace of the freshly dug soil. While they were trying to figure out what happened, the priest came up. He told them they he had been troubled because of his refusal to allow the man to be buried in the churchyard. So, he got up early in the morning, and with his own hands he *moved the fence* to include the body of the soldier inside the cemetery bounds.

Can we do that? Can we “move the fence” to include those with whom we have misunderstandings, hurt feelings, angry differences? That's what Jesus did for us! He “moved the fence”. He died so that *all* who receive Him and believe in Him can be included in God's kingdom – forgiven of our sins, and reconciled to God. Didn't matter whether you were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman, white skinned or black skinned. Can we “move the fence” and have a heart like Jesus?

I have mentioned in my sermons Father Greg Boyle, who for many years has been a priest serving gang members in Los Angeles. In his books there are amazing stories of how when some of these gang members experience love – the love of Father Boyle and his coworkers, and the love of Christ – how former enemies in opposing gangs work together, become friends. So many stories. Here's one.

Father Boyle writes, he's walking to his car at the end of the day and he bumps into Lorenzo, who's on a break from working in the bakery. After some small talk, Lorenzo says, “You know, my car just died on me this weekend. Middle (of nowhere)...so, what do I do? Naturally...I call my homies. First one says, ‘Hey, dawg, I'm in the middle of something. I can't go.’ Next one, same thing. Over and over. ‘I'm really busy dawg, sorry.’ I called five of my homies and all said no. I didn't know what to do. So – I can't believe this myself – I called Manny. We work together in the bakery. I don't have to tell you, but there is no one in the bakery who is a greater enemy of mine than Manny and his ‘barrio’. But I had his number, so I called him.” At this point Lorenzo slows the story down, as if he's hearing it for the first time. “And you know what my worst enemy said to me when I called him?” His eyes are suddenly and surprisingly moist. “He said, ‘On my way.’”

God is a God who wants His creation to live in harmony, people to be reconciled to Him, and to one another. And if we're followers of Jesus, we ought to be leading the way for that to happen!

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So, what’s needed for reconciliation to take place?

First, someone needs to begin the process.

Someone needs to take the initiative and start the ball rolling.

Even though God wasn’t at fault, God didn’t wait for us to come to Him; God made the first move. Romans 5:8 says, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Secondly, we need to be willing to forgive, and we need to be willing to say “I’m sorry.”

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No reconciliation will take place unless we are willing to forgive. No reconciliation will happen unless we are willing to acknowledge our part in the problem.

Along this same line, both parties must be willing to be reconciled if reconciliation is to happen.

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How many in marriages want to be reconciled with their partner, but the partner wants no part of it. How many neighbors try to mend fences, but the other neighbor can’t let go of the enmity felt. How many want to restore a family relationship, but the other family member couldn’t care less.

If the other person simply refuses to make up, all we can do is grieve the loss, and maintain a reconciling heart! (Repeat).

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point Lorenzo slows the story down, as if he's hearing it for the first time. "And you know what my worst enemy said to me when I called him?" His eyes are suddenly and surprisingly moist. "He said, 'On my way.'"

Here's another story. "Bugsy and Miguel were homies both sentenced to rehab. It would be difficult to identify two gang members who hated each other more...they belonged to rival gangs...I would visit them on Sundays and initially was instructed to see them one-on-one, since they couldn't stomach speaking with me together. During his stay, Miguel wrote me asking for money for 'cosmetics' (hygiene or personal effects), which I happily sent along. When I made my Sunday visit some weeks later, Bugsy and Miguel insisted on a share meeting. 'You know the forty bucks you sent me?' Miguel asked. 'I gave Bugsy twenty.' Miguel waits a beat, for all the pieces to fall into place. 'I guess,' Miguel continued, 'all I needed to do was meet his insides.'" (Gang member talk for "all I needed to do was get to know and understand him).

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