

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

2 Corinthians 4:16–6:13

Key Verse: 5:18

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation...”

Have you ever heard of the word “estrangement”? It doesn’t mean someone has become “strange.” In essence, it means we have a broken relationship. It’s also known as “alienation.” The dictionary defines it as “the state or experience of being isolated from a group or activity to which we should belong or in which we should be involved.” Why are we talking about this? In our society, estrangement is rampant. Recently a researcher at Cornell University has estimated that 1 in 4 American adults are now completely estranged from their families, meaning they never see them anymore. Many more just barely communicate. They “cancel” their families as too toxic to be around.¹ It’s not just sad; it’s serious. A wide variety of other psychiatric and social problems stem from estrangement. It leads to so much heartache. When we’re estranged, we’re alienated first from ourselves, then from the people closest to us, and most of all, from God himself. It seems hopeless.

But in today’s passage Paul introduces us to the ministry of reconciliation. It’s not some special ministry. In Paul’s mind, reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. It’s much bigger than the problems in our personal lives, our families or church. Reconciliation speaks to the root problem of the whole world. Of course there are painful wars in Ethiopia and Ukraine. There’s severe repression and injustice going on almost everywhere. But God is offering us all the true solution that’s full of hope. Today we want to think about what the ministry of reconciliation means, how it’s possible, and how and why all of us, each and every one, should be engaged in it. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words.

First, the context. 2 Corinthians is very interesting. Of the 13 books Paul wrote in the New Testament, 2 Corinthians is his most personal letter. He wrote it about a year after writing 1 Corinthians, and about a year before writing Romans. At this point Paul is aware of some people in Corinth who are attacking his leadership. So in this letter he repeatedly writes about his sufferings and how the Spirit empowers his life as God’s servant. In 2 Corinthians Paul repeats the word “ministry” nine times. Paul’s apostolic ministry is very unique to him; at the same time, it’s a model for us. Let’s review the

¹ Op-Ed, LA Times, Nov 28, 2021 by Galit Atlas.

highlights of his ministry, which begin in chapter 3. Paul says it's "the Spirit of the living God" who works in believers (3:3). The Spirit makes him, and us, sufficient as ministers of the new covenant (6). What's more, the Spirit's ministry within us helps us fully experience the glory of Jesus, filling us with hope, and boldness, and real freedom (7–18). In chapter 4 Paul says more on how the Spirit changes us. The Spirit shows us we engage in ministry only by God's mercy, which keeps us from losing heart (1). As the Spirit shows us the glory of Jesus, we can see how people are perishing and blinded (3,4). The Spirit shows us how God made us servants of others, for Jesus' sake (5). The Spirit shows us that our bodies are nothing but jars of clay, but with the treasure of Jesus in us (7). The Spirit gives us the spirit of faith to believe and speak the gospel (13). And as we do, we see God's grace extend to more and more people and increase their thanksgiving, to the glory of God (14–15). Praise God for the ministry of the Spirit!

Second, our hope (4:16–5:11a). Before getting to his main point, Paul writes about our hope. Why? Because this hope is the driving force behind his ministry. Read 4:16–18. Like Paul, sometimes it may seem like we're "wasting away." But by faith in Jesus, we can see the eternal weight of glory God has for us, beyond comparison with our "light momentary affliction." In fact, Paul says that all we suffer now is actually "preparing" us for this glory. With this glorious hope in Jesus, we're no longer obsessed with visible things. By faith we can see unseen, eternal things.

Paul goes on. Read 5:1–5. Now we're living in "tents," meaning our bodies. Living in a tent might refer to many things; but in this case it suggests something temporary, and, really vulnerable. A bad storm can blow a tent away. But someday, by faith in Jesus, each believer will receive "a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens." Wow! While living in our tents, we groan, longing to "put on our heavenly dwelling." Two times here Paul says we "groan." Why? It's because we're burdened. We don't want to be found "naked." We long for God's promise to come true, that "what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." We'll receive a glorious new resurrection body (1Co15:44,53). This is the very thing God has prepared us for, with the Spirit in us as our guarantee. In brief, in the gospel we're no longer earthbound; we experience this glorious resurrection hope.

What does this hope do for us? Read verses 6–8. Twice Paul mentions "good courage." Without this hope, all we think about is our bodies, how to satisfy and preserve them. It's endless—and scary. But with faith and hope in Jesus our Lord, we long, Paul says, to be "at home with the Lord." Accepting the gospel means having this good courage, and this longing to be at home with the Lord.

And this hope does one more thing for us. Read verses 9–10. Aware that someday, we're going to have to give an account of how we live, we make it our aim, every day, to please him. What a beautiful life! And what pleases God? Read verse 11a. We really want to help others to prepare for that final day. We really want people to turn away from living for evil, worthless things. We really want people to live with this beautiful hope in our Lord Jesus.

Third, “a new creation” (5:11b–17). In this section Paul shares the transformation necessary to engage in ministry. Look at verses 11b–12. Here he's writing with his critics in mind. What's their problem? He says they “boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.” Among other things, evidently they didn't like Paul's appearance. Despite what they thought, Paul lived before God and spoke to people's “conscience” (4:2; 5:11). Look at verse 13. Paul is so passionate that, to his critics, it seems like he's “beside himself.” But he says “it is for God.” And when he seems to be “in his right mind,” he says “it is for you.” He's really unselfish. And he's not just being overly sensitive to his critics. This is way more than a personal issue. Apostle Paul embodies the gospel message. According to our Lord Jesus' words, accepting Apostle Paul is accepting Christ, the work of the Spirit, and the Father himself (Mt10:40; 12:32; Lk10:16; Jn13:20). Doubting Apostle Paul is doubting the gospel of God. This is why Paul repeatedly writes in this letter in defense of his ministry. It tells us that an important part of the ministry of reconciliation involves restoring trust and respect for God's servants.

Throughout this letter Paul refers to this. He says during his ministry he behaved with simplicity, godly sincerity and by the grace of God (1:12). He says he spoke to people first of all as a man commissioned by God, and also, in the sight of God (2:17). He says his confidence is through Christ, and he's sure his sufficiency comes from God, through the Spirit (3:4–6). He says he renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways, refused to practice cunning or tamper with God's word, and instead, openly spoke the truth to people's consciences in the sight of God (4:1–2). Yes, Paul experienced difficulties: he was afflicted, persecuted and struck down. But it didn't mean God was punishing him. In these ways Paul was carrying around in his body the death of Jesus, so that the resurrection life of Jesus might also be manifested in his body (4:8–12). Soon he writes some of his most beautiful words about his ministry. Read 6:3–10. What an amazing man of God Paul was! His life-giving devotion to the ministry of the gospel is so inspiring! And he repeats the word “we” here. His companions learned his life-giving spirit.

Why did Paul live this way? Read 5:14–15. Paul says he's controlled by the love of Christ. It's this love that always reminds him that Christ died for all. It's this love that

always inspires him not to live for himself. It's this love that always moves him to live for the one who for our sake died and was raised. Paul is driven in ministry not by legalism or duty, but by the life-giving love of Christ. Read 5:16–17. These verses show how Christ's love controls even our way of thinking. Now we see Christ differently—he's our Risen Lord. We see ourselves differently—we're his new creations. And we see others differently. This is so important for the ministry of reconciliation. Now, we don't despise or judge or ignore people based on our human standards; we truly love them with the love of Christ. May God make each of us new creations in Christ, controlled by his love.

Fourth, the ministry of reconciliation (5:18–6:2). This section is at the heart of what Paul wants to say. Read verse 18. Paul says that through Christ, God has reconciled us to himself. He repeats the word “reconcile” here five times. What does this word mean? In Greek it literally means to exchange coins of equal value. Paul explains it more fully. Read 5:21. This is the “divine transaction.” Christ is the one who knew no sin, but on the cross, for our sake God made him to be sin. This is why, on the cross, Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk15:34). God punished his Son Jesus in our places. On the cross Jesus took all our punishment (Isa53:5). He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1Pe2:24a). Paul adds here in verse 19, “...not counting their trespasses against them.” God is just, so he's always “counting.” But on the cross God did a kind of holy gospel exchange. He counted Christ, the only innocent one, as the guilty one. And because of what he suffered on our behalf, now God counts guilty sinners like us as “the righteousness of God.” It's not just words; it's real. Even the worst of sinners can receive this amazing grace in Jesus.

Paul says that in Christ we are “reconciled to God.” This tells us the other aspect of “reconciliation.” It means to reestablish close, friendly relations. It's impossible for us to restore our relationship with God. God is totally holy and just, and we're totally corrupt and unjust. Nothing we do, no amount of zeal or good works, can get God to like us again. In fact, our sin and wounds can make us so crooked, we actually hate God. But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro5:8b). We were God's enemies, but we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son (Ro5:10). Now we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Ro5:1b). Now we can rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Ro5:11). In Christ, God himself is offering this reconciliation to anyone. When we accept it, God pours out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Ro5:5b). He gives us the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Ro8:15). The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Ro8:16). Now, in Christ God doesn't just tolerate us; he sees us as his own dearly loved sons and daughters. He loves us, and we love him—that's real reconciliation.

Read 5:18 again. Paul adds here that God “...gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” In a sense he’s talking about himself and the other apostles. But he’s also implying something else: Anyone who’s been reconciled to God, in some sense, is entrusted with this ministry of reconciliation. And who’s the object of this ministry? Read 5:19. Here Paul says it’s “the world.” Through his servants God wants his gospel ministry of reconciliation to be spread to the whole world. What’s the source of this ministry? Paul says in verse 18a, “All this is from God...” God himself is the source. It’s not a human idea; reconciliation is God’s idea. It’s at the core of what God’s ministry is all about. This truth totally changes our mindset. We may think mission and ministry are something we have to do. And we may have many ideas about our mission and ministry. But the ministry of reconciliation begins with God the Father himself. He accomplished this ministry through his Son Jesus Christ. And he sends his Holy Spirit to carry it out in the world, through us. Father, Son and Spirit—all three are focused on the ministry of reconciliation. It’s what God wants done in the world. It’s God’s “ministry,” God’s “message,” and God “entrusts” it to us. Some of us may not feel called to a certain ministry or mission. But when we’re reconciled to God in Christ, we’re all called to the ministry of reconciliation. We all need to be earnestly asking God to show us how to engage in this ministry practically.

Apostle Paul, who experienced God’s grace deeply, had a clear identity and direction. Look at 5:20. In making his appeal through Apostle Paul, God was making him an ambassador for Christ. Likewise, when we receive his grace of reconciliation, God sends even sinners like us on a spiritual diplomatic mission to restore people’s broken relationship with him. Paul says, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (20b). “Implore” means to “beg” or to “pray.” And who is Paul writing to here? It’s not unbelievers: it’s the Corinthian Christians! As Christians, aren’t they already reconciled to God? They are. But their reconciliation with God needs to go deeper. They need to know God’s grace in Jesus deeper. This may be why they were having problems with Paul.

So how can we grow in reconciliation with God? It’s only through ongoing repentance. We can’t just say, “I repent” or “I’m sorry.” In this letter Paul uses the expression “godly grief” (7:10). This grief is deep. It begins with the work of the Holy Spirit in us (Jn16:8). It includes confessing, admitting and naming our sin. Then it goes deeper. We truly grieve over our sins against God and sins against others. Later Paul says that godly grief produces repentance, earnestness, eagerness, longing and zeal, just to name a few (7:10–11). We become more aware of our sin, and more aware of God. This is crucial to true reconciliation.

We also notice that, though Paul wants all people to be reconciled to God, he also longs for the Corinthians to be reconciled to himself. Read 6:11–13. This shows us that reconciliation isn't only theological; it's relational. We have to practice reconciliation in our real life relationships with the real life people around us. Later in this letter Paul calls it "restoration" (13:11). Literally, this word means "to mend what's been broken." Our Lord Jesus taught us that if we have a broken relationship with anyone, we need to remember God's grace and go and be reconciled to that person first, before trying to do something for God (Mt5:23–24). We shouldn't give up or make excuses. Even if we have intense hostilities between us, through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ any two people can be reconciled (Eph2:16). How can we work out such reconciliation? In Greek, the root word for apologize (Ac16:39) is the same as the word for comfort (2Co13:11). As we receive God's comfort from his reconciliation with us, we can go and comfort others (2Co1:3–7), calling them aside personally, not only to speak truth but to listen, encourage, console and help them. By God's grace we can do this even for our greatest critics and our enemies. James 5:16 says, "...confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed..."

Paul concludes with a final appeal. Read 6:1–2. Quoting from Isaiah 49:8, he's proclaiming that the era of God's grace has come. He's pleading with all of us not to receive the grace of God in vain. He doesn't want us to just hear about it and do nothing. So he repeats the word "now." "Receive it now!" "Practice it now!"

Today, so many people are estranged from God and from others. So many, even Christians, have broken relationships. It causes so many problems. But reconciliation in Christ is God's hope for the world, our only hope. May God help us, through godly grief, to be reconciled to God, and reconciled to others. May God help us accept the ministry of reconciliation as our own. May God use us in this new year to proclaim his message of reconciliation, wherever we are.