

**August 9, 2009 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 “Reconciliation” by Richard Boatman**

<sup>18</sup>Now all these things [*speaking of the realities of the new creation*] are from God, who reconciled us to himself [*changed our status from enemy of God to friend of God*] through Christ and gave us **the ministry of reconciliation**: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This passage deals with both the message of God, what he calls **the ministry of reconciliation** and the means by which this message is possible. So today we'll explore both the message and the means. Reconciliation has fourteen letters, but its definition is even larger. Put simply, reconciliation is all about changing the status of relationships, in this case from enemy to friend. Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, “I no longer call you servants but friends.” Abraham, the father of our faith, was called a “friend” of God. One of the most incredible biographies in all of Scripture is only fourteen words and takes place in Genesis chapter five: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (verse 24). Surely Enoch was a friend of God.

We often do not appreciate what it means to be a friend of God because we do not understand that we were enemies of God. Imagine having your house completely clean, carpets shampooed, and the fresh smell of potpourri in the air when suddenly a herd of pigs bathed in slimy mud and playing host to hundreds of flies comes charging into your home. Enemy or friend? Now the pigs have no comprehension of their transgression. They are simply doing what is natural to them. They have no appreciation for the clean, for the holy, if you will. So you drive them away. But if somehow miraculously you could change the nature of this uncouth beast, giving it human awareness and elevating its value system, you could change its status.

Now, we were incapable of changing our nature from that which profaned the holy. But miraculously through the work of Jesus, we were offered a new status by becoming new creations created in Christ. We were reconciled, turned from enemies to friends of God. And then we were given this remarkable message to share with others. We find it in verse nineteen: “...that God was reconciling the world to himself [*changing its status from enemy to friend*] in Christ, not

counting people's sins against them. And," Paul continues, "He has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

There are at least three things to notice in this verse. **First**, God reconciled the world in Christ. We didn't do it; we couldn't do it. In a certain pond lived two wild ducks and a frog—the best of friends. All day long they played together. When the hot summer came, the pond began to dry up. Soon there was so little water that they realized they would have to move. Now the ducks could easily fly to another pond, but what about their friend, the frog? Finally, it was decided that the ducks would put the two ends of a stick in their bills, then the frog could hang onto the middle of the stick with his mouth and the ducks would fly him to another pond. As they were flying overhead, a farmer in his field looked up. When he saw the strange formation, he said, "That's amazing! I wonder who thought of that?" The frog opened his big mouth and said, "I did...ahhh." And, of course, he fell to his death. We didn't, nor could we be reconciled to God in our own strength. *God* reconciled the world *in Christ*.

**Second**, God is not "counting people's sins against them." This is actually an accounting term. In other words, God isn't holding in some heavenly hard drive the memory of every thing we do wrong so he can use it to beat us down and accuse us. In Christ, the memory is erased. In truth, before we come to a saving knowledge of the Lord, *sins* plural are really not the issue. *Sin* in the singular is. Jesus said in John 16:8, "When[the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to *sin*..." There is one sin that keeps us from the realm of God and that is the rejection of Christ. Now let's be clear because we often play games around this. To receive Jesus not only means that we accept his forgiveness and cleansing but that we surrender the core of our being to Him; and the core of our being is our will. So the rejection of Christ centers on *our* will, our human self remaining in charge of our life. Once we receive Jesus as Savior *and* Lord, our center is changed. Then *sins* in the plural become an issue. Our new relationship is established firmly in Christ, but our fellowship is affected daily through sins that need confessed and repented of.

And **third**, "[God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation." This is the message that defines God's heart towards us and our heart towards God. In a word, the message we announce is a change of status from enemy of God to friend of God, in and through the person of Jesus Christ. For as Paul said in his first letter to Timothy, "There is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus" (2:5).

The message, our proclamation as Christ-followers to the world is found in verse 20: “We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you **on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.**” And then, as a fitting reminder, Paul shifts from the message to the means. Here’s how it can be true; here’s the means that gives this message its punch: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us *so that* in him we might become the righteousness of God” (verse 21).

Notice the two words, *so that*. “God made him who had no sin [*who had no profaneness or distortion or disunity between himself and the Father*] to be sin for us [*to take on our profane nature, our distortion of soul and our disunity of spirit*] **SO THAT** in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

A while back Larae and I went to one of our favorite restaurants in Iowa Falls, Chung Gardens. The parking is pretty unhandy and the building is nothing to write home about, but the food...the food is simply wonderful. It makes any inconvenience in trying to get out of the parking lot insignificant. On this day, we used the alley to make our escape. As we drove we saw one of my former Lay Speaking Class participants walking along side the narrow road. We lowered our window and began visiting. Not long into our conversation he looked at me and said, “You look like you’ve lost about twenty pounds.” At this point I wanted to kiss him. “You almost look gaunt,” he said. Now I wanted to include him my will. Gaunt. Can you imagine it...me gaunt? I haven’t been described as gaunt—thin and bony—in over thirty years. He was looking at me through eyes different than my own. And I want to tell you, I liked what he saw.

Beloved, when we are in Christ, God doesn’t see the profaneness, the distortion or the disunity. He sees Jesus. And I want to tell you, I like what he sees. “...**SO THAT** in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Praise the Lord!

Let me try to bring some needed clarity to the word righteousness. The root word is *right*. We sometimes hear *righteousness* defined as “right-standing with God.” It’s not a bad way to see it, but I don’t think it fully captures the essence. **First**, it refers to rightness in our relationship to God and to others. Imagine a water pipe that is off kilter, unable to receive the flow of water because of its relationship to the source. Putting the pipe back in its intended groove places it in rightness to or right standing with the source of water, the relationship between source and recipient being restored. Jesus is the mediator of this new right standing as he is in his person both water source and pipe. But **second**, the righteousness of God also refers to our character or to the quality of our

lifestyles. Rightness of the water pipe in relation to the source of water then affects the quality of the entire vessel. So, rightness with God through Jesus the God-man—who connects us both—leads to the birth of a new nature, the new creation, and to the ongoing growth of that new nature into Christ’s full image. Notice what verse 21 says, “...so that in him we might **BECOME** the righteousness of God.” We must see righteousness as both a position and a process, both who we are and who we are becoming.

I think one of the great mistakes we make is trying to apply the teaching of our Lord, as Oswald Chambers says, “apart from the imparted nature of our Lord.” In other words we cannot act like Jesus, we cannot in mere human strength be righteous and do righteousness without being truly connected to Jesus. And I’m speaking of a vital, experiential, Holy Spirit birthed connection constituting a new creation, a new nature. “I am the Vine, you are branches” (John 15).

When Jesus spoke of praying in his name, he was referring to praying in accordance with his nature. To my knowledge Jesus never spoke of unanswered prayer. That is because he never asked anything outside of God’s nature. Ending our prayers with “in the name of Jesus” is nothing magical. We can employ the words “in Jesus’ name” and still be outside his nature. To be branches of the Vine means that we ask nothing outside of the “vine’s” nature, that is in accordance with our human nature rather than the new nature.

In Acts 19 Luke reported that the seven sons of Sceva tried to cast out a demon “in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches” (verse 13). They were not branches of the Vine but just borrowers and abusers of his sacred name. The evil spirit responded, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” At that the man with the demon “overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding” (verse 16). You see, Jesus’ name is not a formula but an invitation to walk in a new nature as new creations created in Christ Jesus.

Today’s passage is cause for celebration—we are given the message of reconciliation and made the recipients by means of Jesus’ glorious work on our behalf. But our celebration is innocuous if it is but an imitation of righteousness. To celebrate Jesus is to celebrate union with God through a new nature that is both in right-standing with God and becoming fully righteous as branches of the Vine. Let us celebrate Jesus not in hollow words *about* him but in holy union *with* him.