

## **“BRIDGING THE GREAT CHASM”** **(2 Corinthians 5:18-21)**

As we've been going through the book of 2 Corinthians, I've been amazed at how many well-known verses are in this book, and this is especially true of chapter five. Today we come to four verses at the end of chapter 5 that are not only well-known, but are among the most important verses in the Bible in explaining the gospel.

One of the hardest things to do when you're sharing the gospel with someone is to get them to see their need for salvation. Most people think they're okay with God – they may not go to church or be particularly religious, but they say they believe in God, they live a pretty good life, and if there's life after death, they believe they will be in heaven.

I remember a comment made by a teen boy made who came to our youth group here at church some years ago. He had been coming for several months and had observed other kids accepting Christ, and one night after youth group he was talking to one of the youth leaders and said, “I've thought about becoming a Christian and I'm not opposed to it, but I already have a pretty good life – I have a good family, I have a girlfriend, I have a truck, I play football and baseball, I hunt and fish, I have good friends – why do I need to become a Christian?” He wasn't being arrogant – he just didn't sense his need for Christ. There are many, people just like him who are not antagonistic towards God or Christianity – but they don't have a sense of how alienated there are from God and the spiritual danger it puts them in.

Our passage today is in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, and I want to start by reading these four verses and then look at some fundamental things we learn about our need for salvation and how it is obtained. Beginning in verse 18 Paul writes... “All this is from God (speaking of being made new creations in Christ) who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 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. 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. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The key word in this passage – used five times – is the word “reconciliation,” which is the restoration of our broken relationship with God. I basically have three goals in this message. First, I want to convince you of your need to be reconciled with God. Second, I want to explain how you can be reconciled with God; and three, I want to inspire those of you who have been reconciled to God to help others be reconciled to God.

Let's start with why you need to be reconciled with God. If you don't see the need, you won't think anything is wrong, and if you don't think anything is wrong, you won't be saved. To understand what went wrong in our relationship with God we must go all the way back to the garden of Eden where Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect, intimate fellowship with God. There were no barriers between them – no tension – no awkwardness – no shame or guilt – there was perfect peace and harmony in their relationship. Their close fellowship with God ended when they turned away from God and decided for themselves what was right and wrong. When they turned away from God, God turned away from them.

(SLIDE) Most gospel tracks – like the one I have here – have a picture of a deep chasm between us and God. On one side of the chasm is God, and on the other side is us – and in the middle is a great gulf, a gigantic Grand Canyon called sin. And across this great chasm is a cross forming a bridge, showing that Jesus laid down His life so that we could be reconciled with God. It’s an easy way to explain the gospel – and it all makes perfect sense. I’ve drawn this picture many times with people on napkins and scratch paper, and the plan of salvation is so simple to understand that the only thing left for the person you’re talking to do is bow their head and accept Christ. Some do, but some stare at you as if to say, “I don’t get it.”

The problem is that most people, and maybe you’re one of them, don’t feel any chasm. They say, “I don’t feel alienated from God and I don’t feel like I’ve done anything wrong to offend Him – I’m not perfect, I make mistakes, everyone does – but I believe in God – I don’t go to church or pray as much as I should – but I treat people well, I take care of my family... why do I need a bridge when nothing’s wrong?”

People who say this do not sense they’re in any danger, and this lack of awareness that we’re alienated from God has increased as our culture has become more secular. It used to be – for centuries – that people generally operated with the assumption that there was a God and that there was some tension between themselves and God – but all that has changed. Our culture for the most part ignores God, and if people do think about God, they think about the kind of God they imagine Him to be – a kind, fatherly figure who is there when they need Him – but not the holy God of the Bible who is deeply offended by their sin and views them as His enemy.

When we share the gospel with people we’re tempted to start with the good news. After all, the word gospel means “good news,” and we want people to hear it. But in order for there to be good news there must first be bad news – that’s what makes the good news so good. It’s like telling someone there’s a cure before they know they have a disease – unless they sense the dire condition they’re in, the good news won’t be very compelling. The gospel only makes sense when we understand the bad news of our fallen condition and how sinful we really are.

The problem is: we don’t. We’re like a fish that doesn’t know it’s in water because water is the only world it knows. In the same way we are so immersed sin and so used to sinning, that we don’t realize how sinful we really are. The sin nature we all inherited from Adam touches every part of our being. Listen to how the depth of sin in mankind is described prior to the flood in Noah’s day... “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Like a fish that doesn’t know it’s in water, we don’t realize how deep and pervasive sin is – it seeps into every part of our being – our thoughts, our motives, our desires, our words, and our deeds – there is not a part of us that is not touched by the effects of sin.

Compounding the problem is that we become very good at minimizing and rationalizing sin. One of the ways we do this is by comparing ourselves to others. Compared to Hitler and Hamas and sex traffickers, you come out looking like a saint. When you see videos of carjackings and rioting and looting on the news, you feel pretty righteous in comparison.

In the fourth century a small group of Christians grew alarmed by the sin and corruption of the world, and decided as a group to move out to the desert to get away from the negative influences of the city. What they found, however, is that the sin they thought they’d left behind them in the city went with them to the desert.

This caused one of the members of the group to write down a list of sins that he saw in his own life that seemed to repeat themselves more than others, and he came up with eight. He asked others in the group to share their own list, and they were remarkably similar. In the sixth century the list was organized formally into what became known as the seven deadly sins – pride, envy, gluttony, anger, lust, greed and laziness. I don't know about you, but these are the kinds of sins I struggle with, and if I ever get feeling holier than other people, this list removes any doubt that sin is far deeper and pervasive than I realize – it goes beyond external actions, and infiltrates my thoughts and motivations and desires.

Not only do we fail to understand how sinful we are, we fail to understand how holy God is. We're conditioned to think that God is love, but forget that He is also holy and just. God is holy in the sense that He is morally perfect and faultless – He is holy and righteous in all His ways and completely separated from sin. Because He is holy, He cannot overlook sin – He can't say, "I'm holy, but I'm just going to close my eyes when people sin." The Bible portrays God as having a righteous, indignant anger towards sin – it violates His holy character, it mocks His holy standards, and it perverts His perfect design for creation.

God is not only holy, He is just and His justice requires that He judge all that is sinful. Romans 2:5-6 says, "Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will repay each person according to what they have done."

People who don't sense their need for reconciliation don't realize the danger they're in, and that each day they're not reconciled to God they are storing up wrath against themselves that will be poured out on them at the final judgment. The ironic thing is that while people want a God of love, they also want a God of justice. When they see an injustice, when they see someone mistreated or violated, they demand justice – they demand that wrongs be made right. What they fail to see is the wrong they have done to God.

The other irony is that in our broken relationship, God is the innocent one – He has done nothing but create us and love us and bless us, but we turned our backs on Him. And He also is the offended one – we're the ones who hurt Him – and we're the ones who deserve to be judged. When we understand the depth of our sin and alienation from God, and when we understand how holy and pure God is, only then will we sense our desperate need for reconciliation.

Now that I have hopefully convinced you that you need to be reconciled to God, let's move on to how reconciliation happens – how do you bridge the great chasm that exists between you and God? Verse 18 says, "All this is from God, who reconciles us to Himself through Christ." Reconciliation is a work of God – there is nothing you or I can do – God is the one who initiates reconciliation and provides the means to accomplish it. Even though He is the innocent one, He is the one who reaches out to us and provides the bridge back to a relationship with Him.

How does He do it? Two words... through Christ. Christ is the bridge that spans the vast canyon between us and God, ending once and for all our separation with Him. 1 Timothy 2:5 says that Christ is the one mediator between God and man – He is the only one that can bridge the gap. Why is He the only way?

This brings us to verse 21, and I can't emphasize enough how important this verse is – it ranks right up there with John 3:16 in getting to the core of the gospel message. It says... “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the gospel message in a nutshell, and when we understand this, we'll understand how reconciliation with God is possible. Martin Luther called this verse the great exchange. Jesus – who knew no sin – traded places with unrighteous sinners, exchanging His perfect righteousness for our sin, so that we could exchange our sin for His righteousness.

To understand this great verse, I want us to ponder four questions. The first question is: **Why is Jesus the bridge to God?** The phrase of verse 21 says, “God made Him who had no sin.” If Jesus was a sinner like you and me, the whole plan of reconciliation would fall flat on its face. Reconciliation hinges on God not counting our sins against us because He has counted them against Jesus. But this would all unravel if Jesus committed sins that were counted against Him. Reconciliation with God is only possible if Jesus is sinless.

Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted in every way we are, yet He did not sin. I've often wondered what it was like for Jesus' brothers and sisters to grow up with a brother who was perfect. Jesus lived a very public life, yet no one ever accused Him of sin. Even his enemies grudgingly admitted He was sinless. When He asked, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” no one said a word. In His trial before Pilate, Pilate said, “I find no fault in Him.” Even his own disciples, who lived with Him every day for three years testified that He committed no sin. Because He was without sin, Jesus was the only one who could bridge the gap between sinful people and a holy God.

The second question is: **What does it mean that Jesus became sin for us?** Verse 21 says, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.” This doesn't mean that Jesus became a sinner or that sin became a part of who He was – it means that He took our sin upon Himself so that His righteousness could be imputed to us.

To impute something means to credit or ascribe something to another person. It has the idea of exchanging or transferring something. For example, let's say that you didn't have insurance and because of a prolonged disease you spent weeks in the hospital, were given extremely expensive medications and round-the-clock care, and racked up an enormous medical bill – one that you could never pay back in a lifetime. Unbeknownst to you, a good friend you had back in high school who made it big and became a multi-millionaire – hears about your plight and calls the hospital and says, “Whatever this person owes, put in on my account, I will take care of all of it.” And just like that, without doing anything, you are debt free because someone else paid your bill for you.

This is what happened to us. There was not a thing you or I could do pay the colossal debt of sin we owed to God, but God made His Son, who had no sin, to be sin for us. On the cross, all of our sins were transferred to Jesus, and all His righteousness is transferred to us. This great exchange was pictured in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

On the Day of Atonement the people of Israel would bring two goats to the High Priest. The first goat was sacrificed for the sins of the people, teaching them that a payment for sin was required. The High Priest would then lay his hands on the other goat – called the scapegoat – symbolically transferring all the sins of the people to the goat. The goat was then sent away into the wilderness, symbolizing that the sins of the people had been removed for good.

All this looked forward to the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. Just as the High Priest transferred the sins of the people to the scapegoat, so God transferred our sins to His Son. Just as the scapegoat bore the sins of the people in its body, so Jesus bore our sins in His body. And just as the scapegoat was removed from the camp, so too all our sin was removed by Jesus and not counted against us.

Our need for reconciliation comes into clear focus when we realize that we were the ones who deserved death. Unless we were somehow able to stop sinning, we would forever be alienated and separated from God. But we couldn't stop sinning – we needed someone without sin to take our place and pay the debt we could not owe – and that is Jesus, the perfect lamb of God.

The next question is: **What does it mean that we become the righteousness of God?** The amazing part of verse 21 is that I don't get what I do deserve, and I get what I don't deserve. In this great exchange Jesus took all my sin – all my visible sins and all my hidden sins – all my pride and envy and lust and anger and greed – and He bore them in His body. This explains why on the cross Jesus said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Just as sin alienated us from God, Jesus was alienated from His Father when He bore our sin. On the cross the God the Father turned His back on His Son and forsook Him because a holy God cannot look upon sin.

In exchange for Christ removing our sin, we are made righteous in the eyes of God. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Righteousness means to be in a right standing before God. Because of sin, the only way we can stand righteous before a holy God is to have Christ's righteousness imputed to us. When that happens, God now sees us as righteous through Christ. Even though we still have a sinful nature and we still sin, in God's eyes we are seen as righteous because Jesus took all of our sin – past, present, and future – upon Himself so that in exchange we might receive His righteousness.

This leads us to one final question in verse 21: **How am I reconciled to God?** We see what God has done in verse 21 to provide reconciliation – is there anything I do to be reconciled? Over and over again in scripture we read that we are to believe, to trust, to receive all that Christ has provided for us on the cross. This means that you humble yourself before God and acknowledge your sin and your need for salvation. You then confess your sin to Him, and put your trust Christ alone to save you from God's wrath. You say, "I believe that Jesus paid the penalty for my sin and I receive you as my Savior."

When you believe, God not only sees you as righteous, but He now treats you as His friend and your fellowship with Him is restored. Romans 5:9-10 puts it like this... "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" The good news of the gospel only makes sense when you understand your dire condition apart from Christ – the gospel then takes on a whole new meaning and changes the entire course of your life.

My final aim today is to enlist you to be an ambassador of reconciliation. If you have been reconciled to God, God calls you to help others understand and receive His reconciliation. Let's look again at verses 18-20... "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 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. 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."

God calls the reconciled to be reconcilers, and the term Paul uses for this is ambassadors. An ambassador represents one country to another country. The United States has ambassadors all over the world who go live in foreign countries and represent the interests of our country. In the same way, as believers we are called to represent Christ to the world, and speak on behalf of Christ, urging people to be reconciled. Verse 18 says God gave us the ministry of reconciliation – verse 19 says He has committed to us the message of reconciliation – verse 20 says having been reconciled ourselves, we are therefore Christ’s ambassadors.

Not only are we to represent Christ in the way we live and conduct ourselves, the emphasis here is on communicating the message of reconciliation. We are God’s spokesmen. Verse 20 says that God makes His appeal through us. People get saved in a lot of different ways, but the main way God has ordained is through believers telling people the good news. As Romans 10:15 says, “How will people hear without a preacher?” You represent Christ to your neighbors, to your extended family, to your coworkers, and to the people you run into on a daily basis.

As Christ’s ambassador you should always be praying for and looking for opportunities to talk to people about being reconciled with God. You don’t have to have all the answers, all you need is to have a passion to see lost souls come to Christ. I try to always have a gospel track nearby – in my car or in my wallet – so that I can give it to someone or walk them through it. If you don’t have a track nearby, grab a piece of paper or napkin and draw a chasm with a cross over it. When you’re talking to people, don’t skip the bad news – include yourself in it – we’re all sinners and we all need reconciliation. Be ready to share your personal testimony of how you came to faith in Christ.

Not every interaction you have with people is going to result in your explaining the gospel, but you want to look for ways to get there – by looking for ways to steer the conversation towards spiritual things. You’d be surprised how easy that is to do – everyone is deeply concerned about all that is going on in the world – it doesn’t take much to bring God into the conversation and how He is the solution to all the chaos.

A big part of sharing your faith is having a passionate desire for people to be reconciled with God. That’s why Paul uses words like “appeal” and “implore.” In verse 11 Paul used the word “persuade.” These words convey a sense of passion and urgency – such as when you see a house on fire and do everything you can to pull the people inside out to safety. It doesn’t mean that you try to coerce or twist someone’s arm and say, “You better accept Christ or else,” but you do want to gently and lovingly persuade them and implore them to be reconciled with God because they’re in danger of eternal damnation.

Perhaps God is speaking to you today, and you sense – maybe for the first time or in a whole new way – your desperate need for reconciliation. I want to invite you – implore you – to be reconciled to God. Humble yourself before Him and acknowledge your sin. Say to Him, “I want to turn from my sin and turn to you. I believe that Jesus died for my sin – in my place – and right now put my trust in Him alone to be my Savior from sin. I want to be reconciled to you and be your friend. Thank you for the wonderful good news that overrides all bad news and makes it possible for our relationship to be fully and eternally restored.”