

Appendix B: Sample sermon #1

Please Come Home – Now!

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

The main idea: God has nothing against us – this is the message to us, and through us

In his short story, “Capital of the World,” Ernest Hemingway wrote about a father in Spain who had a son named Paco. The son had done something wrong, the father was angry, and the son left home and went to Madrid.

Some time later, the father’s anger ended and he began to look for Paco, with no results. Finally the father placed an ad in one of Madrid’s newspapers. The ad read:

“PACO, MEET ME AT THE HOTEL MONTANA. NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA.”

Paco is a common name in Spain, and Hemingway wrote that at noon on Tuesday, there were several hundred young men – all of them named Paco – waiting and hoping to receive the forgiveness of their fathers.

It’s a story about a bad relationship, a bad relationship between father and son, and the father wants to do something about it even before he knows whether his son wants to or not. He does not know whether his son has repented, but for his part, he wants to forgive anyway. We do not even know whether his son was even among the several hundred who showed up.

Hemingway’s story could be told because hundreds of young men eagerly desire for a restored relationship with their father. That means, for one thing, that hundreds of young men have *bad* relationships with their fathers, and that not very many fathers are willing to take the initiative to solve the problem. But at least one of them did.

Hemingway was an atheist, and his story was really told as a joke, so I don't think he was talking about God, but his story nevertheless illustrates something about God – and that is, that God is seeking to restore a relationship with his children, and he takes the initiative in doing it. He doesn't wait for them to repent – he forgives them ahead of time, and he goes looking for them. He wants them to come home, and he is waiting to see whether they respond.

In biblical terms, this is called “reconciliation,” and today I want to look at a passage of Scripture that talks about God's reconciliation with us.

Actually, there aren't very many passages that use the word.

The Bible uses a variety of words to describe the salvation we have in Jesus Christ – words like rescue, ransom, forgiveness, redemption, propitiation, and expiation. [humor] Bible commentator Gordon Fee calls *redemption* “the least metaphorical” of the whole bunch. That is, they are all figures of speech in some way, but the word *redemption* is the one that is the closest to reality.

Another way to put it is that all the other terms indicate something done for a reason, but reconciliation *is* the reason. God forgives us, for example, not because forgiveness is a purpose in itself, but because forgiveness enables the real goal, which is a relationship between God and us. But reconciliation means restoring a relationship back to good, and it is not done for some other purpose, but the relationship itself *is* that purpose.

The whole point of salvation is not that we will live forever, but that we will live forever *with God*. Relationship is central to the whole purpose and plan, and reconciliation is the term that describes what God is doing. So even though the Bible does not use the term very often, it is an important concept for us to understand.

So today let's look at a passage in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, that talks about

reconciliation. And one reason that Paul talks about reconciliation in this particular letter is because he needs some reconciliation of his own with the Corinthian church. People in Corinth have accused Paul of being a liar and a cheat, and there is a bad relationship between them that Paul wants to patch up. And so it is natural for Paul to bring out this particular aspect of what God is doing with us through his Son, Jesus Christ. He is seeking to restore a good relationship with us.

The logic of Paul's letter is sometimes a bit hard to follow, partly because the Corinthian accusations against Paul were not very logical, and Paul is a bit emotional in what he writes.

But let's pick up the story in 2 Corinthians 5, starting in verse 14. The people were accusing Paul of preaching from wrong motives, and so in verse 14 he explains *why he preaches*:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; (ESV)

Paul has several important thoughts in here.

First, it is the love of God that is driving him to preach. He is not motivated by his own desires, or by the fear of God. Rather, it is because he is so impressed with the love of Christ, that he wants to share it with others. That's his motivation – and then he explains how he *knows* about the love of Christ: it is that Christ has died for all. He didn't just die for a few select people, or that God had picked out a special group of people in advance for Jesus to die for them. No, he died for all, for all people.

And the result, Paul says, is that “all have died.”

Now that is good news: we have all died, because Jesus died for us. Paul is not talking about physical death (as we can see by looking around us). We are all very much alive – some of us more alive than others, but all of us are alive. And Paul is not talking about being “dead in

trespasses and sins,” like he does in Ephesians. The death of Jesus did not cause us to die in that sense.

So what is he getting at? It’s that the penalty, the natural consequence, of sin is death, and Jesus as our Creator has paid that penalty for us. He died for us, so his death counts for us. His death pays the penalty of sin for us.

We are all paid up, so to speak, because Jesus has paid it all for us. It was a substitute for us; he did it on our behalf. And there was an exchange: he gets our penalty, and we are freed from the penalty, and that’s the good news about the love of Christ that Paul wants to share with others. That’s why he preaches.

And how should we respond? He gets to that in verse 15:

and he died for all, [why? So] that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Paul is one of those people, so he lives and preaches not for himself, but for Jesus, because Jesus died and was raised for him. This verse encapsulates the gospel, and the response that all of us ought to make: Jesus died for us, so we are to live not for ourselves, but for Jesus. Our goal is not to get as much as we can for ourselves, but to do what we can for Christ.

Our life is not about us – it’s about Jesus; he is the reason for our life. And as Paul says elsewhere – we are not the ones who are living, but Christ is living in us. If we do anything worthwhile at all, it’s because Christ is living in us, initiating it and energizing it. And we get the pleasure of participating in it.

Paul draws another conclusion in verse 16:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus

no longer.

Since Jesus has died for all people, Paul does not regard anyone according to the flesh. He does not see their life as consisting merely of the flesh. Rather, he sees in every person a spiritual potential. Paul once looked at Jesus simply from a physical perspective, and from that standpoint Jesus looked like a failed Messiah, a Messiah who got killed.

But Paul did not look at Jesus from that perspective anymore, and indeed, he did not look at anyone from that perspective anymore. The resurrection of Jesus not only changed Jesus, but it changed the status of all humanity – or at least Paul could see, from the resurrection of Jesus, that the real potential of all human beings is different than what Paul had thought before. When Paul looked at a human being, he knew that there was more to the person than just the flesh that he could see. Rather, it was a person for whom Jesus had died.

Paul draws another conclusion in verse 17:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

By starting the verse with the word “therefore,” Paul indicates that he is drawing a conclusion. But what is the basis of his conclusion? We have to back up to see what his foundation is.

The verse that comes right before this talks about how Paul does not regard anyone according to the flesh anymore. But that does not seem like an adequate basis to draw the conclusion that people in Christ are a new creation. Just because Paul *looks* at them differently, does not mean that they *are* different. It’s actually the other way around: Paul looks at them differently because they *are* different.

If we want to see what the word “therefore” refers to, we have to back up further. If we

back up to verse 15, we'll see that people should live for Christ rather than themselves. But that is also not a very good reason to conclude that people in Christ are a new creation. Again, the logic works better the other way around: because people are a new creation, they need to live with a new purpose in life.

So we have to back up a little further to see the foundation of what Paul is talking about. And we see it in verse 14 – that Jesus died for all, and therefore everyone died. The death of Jesus changed the status of everyone, and that leads Paul to three conclusions:

- 1) First, in verse 15, that people should live for Christ rather than themselves.
- 2) Second, in verse 16, that we should look at everyone in a new way,
- 3) And third, here in verse 17, that people are in fact a new creation. They have a new start in life. We are to look at them in a new way because they are actually new. They are created anew – or born anew, to use another figure of speech.

Paul here does not say “all” – instead, he is talking about those who are “in Christ.”

There are two ways to understand this. First, it is to follow the logic and conclude that everyone in the universe is actually in Christ. And there is a sense in which that is true. In Christ, all humanity has a new start.

But when Paul uses the phrase “in Christ,” he often means those who *believe* in Christ. Although everyone in the universe has the potential for this new start, this new basis in life, not everyone is actually experiencing it or putting it into action.

There is a difference between the abstract idea, and the practical application of the idea. There is a difference between the objective fact and the subjective reception of that fact. It's the difference between God saying on the one hand, “This is the way it is,” and the person saying on the other hand, “This is the way I feel about it.”

On one hand, God says, “Jesus died for your sins, so you should live in a new way” and some people respond, “I don’t care what you say – it’s not going to affect the way *I* live.” God says that the death of Christ has certain results, and on the other side we see that those results are not necessarily happening – at least not yet. God says, “You are a new creation,” and some of the people don’t respond – they continue to live in the same old way.

God says, “You are forgiven,” and the people say, “I don’t *feel* forgiven.” From God’s perspective, forgiveness is a fact, but from the people’s perspective, it is not. They don’t believe it, so *for them*, it’s not true. There’s a difference between the objective truth of God and the subjective *receiving* of that truth by human beings.

Verse 18:

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

Yes, it all comes from God, it’s a gift of God, but I wonder here if Paul is also saying that he is describing things from God’s perspective, and not the human response to it. “What I have just said *is from God’s* perspective.” From his perspective, all things are new, and people are a new creation in Christ.

And Paul finally uses the word *reconciliation* in this verse: God reconciled us to himself, and he did it through Christ, and because of that, our work can be described as a ministry of reconciliation.

Paul is saying here that God reconciled “us” to himself. That includes all believers. But in the next verse, he says that God was reconciling *the world* to himself, and in his letter to the Colossians [1:20], he says that God was reconciling the *universe* to himself, and that certainly includes all unbelievers as well.

Well, we have here again a statement of universal truth, but with a discrepancy in what we are able to see. We look around the world today and we see a lot of people who don't *look* like they are reconciled to God. God says that they are reconciled to him by the death of Christ, but in some cases they haven't even heard of Christ, and in other cases they don't want him, and in some cases, they are even active enemies of Christ.

God says they are reconciled – past tense – but they sure aren't acting like it. This is the difference again between the objective and the subjective, between the objective statement of fact from God, and the subjective experience of that on the part of human beings.

Now, the word reconciliation means the patching up of a bad relationship, of making it good again. And this involves two parties. It is like God puts an ad in the newspaper saying, "Paco, all is forgiven. Come back to Papa." Reconciliation has been declared *from Papa's perspective*. But whether or not Paco responds, is up to Paco.

Or we can use another example. Let's suppose that two lovers have a quarrel. Maybe they have been married a long time, and they have a fight and they get mad at each other. But after a while they begin to realize how stupid this was, and they regret what they have done.

And one of them says to the other, "I am sorry. I forgive you. Will you forgive me?" The first one opens their arms wide and says, "Can we kiss and make up?" *That* person has, in their mind, been reconciled to their spouse. There is no animosity; there is a desire for good relationship.

But will this reconciliation be received? It is up to the other person. The first person might be reconciled in their own mind, wanting peace instead of fighting, but the other person may not be reconciled in *their* mind. One person can have desires of peace while the other has desires of war. There is a reconciliation, but on only one side.

Or it is Papa in the Hotel Montana, throwing his arms open wide, saying, “I love you. Come, and let us be friends.” And it is up to Paco to decide whether to come and hug him, or to use this moment of vulnerability to inflict further hurt on the person he still hates.

And Paul is saying, From God, there is peace. He doesn't want to punish you. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ – and that is the good news that Paul was preaching to the Corinthians. He was not preaching from selfish motives, but because he was so taken by God's generosity toward him, that he had to live for Christ, and the way that he did it was to spread the good news about the reconciliation we have with God, done at God's initiative – while we were yet sinners, as he says in Romans.

He did not wait for us to repent – he took the initiative even when we were his enemies. His mind was peace toward us, of reconciliation, but that does not mean that our minds were suddenly and mysteriously changed from animosity to peace.

No, we were much like Paul in that regard – even after the death of Christ, even after God had reconciled us to himself, our minds still had enmity or anger toward God. The reconciliation was, at first, all from one side, from God's side, and only as we learned about it, only as we accepted it, did it happen on our side as well.

Only when we saw the open arms, only when we believed that Papa really wanted us, were we willing to come to him and embrace him. And only after we had experienced that embrace would we be willing to go and tell other people about it, tell them that the offer was genuine, and God really did want us, no matter what we have done in the past.

In verse 19 Paul gives us a little more explanation of how God did it:

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

How did the reconciliation happen? It happened because God did not count our trespasses against us. That was the cause of the whole problem: we had broken the law, done stuff that God did not want us to do, and since God is love, he has a natural revulsion against things that hurt other people, and that is precisely what we were doing. So it would seem that God had every right to dislike us, and if he wanted to start all over with a new creation, it would be quite reasonable for him to start all over with somebody else, instead of trying to change us into a new creation.

But God reconciled us to himself through Christ, by not counting our sins against us. He forgave us all our sins because of what Christ did on our behalf. He suffered the result of our sins, and so God does not count them against us. They have been paid in full – by Jesus Christ – and it was all done well before we repented, well before we committed the sins, and well before we were even alive.

It's all quite astonishing, in a way, that God would do all that for us in advance. But we have to remember that God's perspective on time is different than ours. It is not like God was just seething with anger and wanting to punish everybody up until the point that Jesus died and paid the penalty for us. And then all of a sudden God says, "Well, now I feel better. The price has been paid, so I guess everybody is OK now."

No, that would make God look like an ill-tempered human being. No, when it comes to reconciliation, we need to remember a couple of things:

First, that God is the one who initiated all this. He was the first one to seek some reconciliation, and that means that he was already reconciled in his own mind even before the deed was done. He didn't want to punish us – he wanted us to escape the punishment, because he wants us to live rather than die. When the Bible talks about the wrath of God, it is not meaning to

say that God is seething with anger and wants to obliterate us. No, the truth is that God loves us and wants us to escape the consequences of sin. There *is* a punishment for sin, but God wants us to escape that punishment.

And the second thing we need to remember is that Jesus Christ was slain from the foundation of the world, as it says in the book of Revelation [13:8]. Even before time began, the plan was for Jesus to die for everyone, so that everyone would die in him and be able to live as new creations. God's attitude towards us has *always* been that he wants us to escape the punishment of sin.

The reconciliation we have in Christ has been in existence from all eternity – it was put into physical form at one particular point in history, about 2000 years ago now, but that one event in human history is simply a manifestation of an eternal truth. God has always been reconciled to us, his attitude toward humanity has always been one of peace rather than war, of love rather than punishment. Our Papa has been holding his hands out for a hug from the beginning of time, always desiring for us to return to him and return that hug.

When the Bible talks about the wrath or anger of God, it is putting it in terms that we humans can understand. If we were there, *we'd* be angry. *We'd* want to punish. That kind of language helps us know that sin and rebellion is really bad, that it really does disrupt the relationships we were created to have.

And does God punish us? In a few cases, apparently so – but in the vast majority of cases, the unpleasant things we experience in life are the result of sin, either our own sins or the sins of other people, and they are not direct punishments from God.

In the few cases where God does punish directly, he does so as a means to teach us how to avoid something worse. It's like a doctor causing the patient to have pain – a little surgery

here, to avoid a lot of pain down the road. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, the Bible says, and he takes no pleasure in causing us pain.

Rather, the whole message of the Bible is that he wants to save us, to rescue us from the results of our sins. And the message here in 2 Corinthians is that he has already done it – past tense – in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus died for all, we are new creations, with a new start – and that was God’s plan all along, even before the old creation got started.

So God’s attitude toward humanity from the beginning was one of peace and reconciliation. But that does not mean that the problem was simply in human beings, in that we were alienated in our own minds through some horrible deception. It was not merely a subjective problem, one rooted in our own misunderstanding, and all we really needed was a little re-education.

No, Paul is saying that there really was an objective problem, and the problem was our trespasses and sins, and this real problem was taken care of by Jesus Christ dying for all people. He had an objective reality to take care of. However, now that it is done, the main problem remaining *IS* subjective: people need to respond to what God has done.

Paul is compelled by the love of Christ to preach the message of reconciliation, and how are people supposed to respond?

He tells us in verse 20:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

In one verse, Paul says that we have been reconciled. In this verse, he pleads with us that we need to *be* reconciled. It is an objective fact, but we need to make it a subjective reality, too, by accepting it into our lives.

God wants peace and reconciliation with every human being, and because of that, he sent his Son Jesus Christ to make it happen. And since he has commissioned his people to tell people about it, Paul sees himself as an ambassador for Christ, as a representative of a foreign power, making an appeal on behalf of God, on behalf of Christ.

The gospel is not Paul's idea – this is *God's* appeal. If God were here in person, this is what he'd be saying: "Be reconciled to me. I am at peace with you. Be at peace with me. Don't worry about all the sins you have done – I am not counting them against you. Jesus Christ has experienced the penalty for you. Paco, please come home!"

You see, the real Paco did not show up at the Hotel Montana on that crucial day in Hemingway's story. (Here I am making up my own story.) And so the father did not give up. He recruited that crowd of young men to go throughout the city of Madrid, trying to get the message across. They walked every street, shouting out, "Paco, please come home. All is forgiven!"

And not just Paco – they also called for Juan, and Pablo, and Salvador, and Ana, and Susan, and everybody else they could think of. "Children, please come home! All is forgiven! Your father loves you. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He's holding out his arms for you – he wants you forever!"

How did it happen? Paul says it again in verse 21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Who was it who "knew no sin"? It was Jesus, who never committed a single sin. And yet God made Jesus to be sin – he did it *for our sake*. He was doing it on our behalf, dying for our sins, dying for us, dying for the sins of all humanity. It's the great exchange: he became poor so that we might become rich, and he became sin so that we might become righteousness.

In Jesus, our trespasses are not counted against us – they are gone. We are counted as righteous, *completely* righteous, as righteous as God himself is, because God himself has decreed that it is so. And we will forever be living evidence of the righteousness of God, that God is so faithful to his children that he will go to the ends of the earth to draw us back to himself. From his perspective, from his side, everything has been done. The path is clear, the door is open, the arms are open wide.

The question for us is, Will we run to him, or run away?

And from the preacher's perspective, we can't just leave it as a question. No – we need to *exhort*: “We implore you on behalf of Christ: **be reconciled to God.**”

4538 words – about 32 minutes