

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: Joy to the World: God's Enemies Can Become His Friends!

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

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As we enter this Advent Season, we need to be reminded once again that Christmas is ultimately the story of God reaching out to those who are alienated from Him and inviting them to become His friends. That's what brings real joy to the world—when former enemies become friends. While there are many great words in Christian theology—words like forgiveness, salvation, redemption, justification, sanctification, glorification—one of the greatest to me is “reconciliation.” According to the dictionary, reconciliation means “the reestablishing of cordial relations between enemies.”

I suspect almost no one would question the need for reconciliation today, because there is so much animosity in the world around us. We see it domestically in broken marriages, politically in the halls of Congress, racially in walls separating the races, religiously in hatred between Muslims and Christians, Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Buddhists, and daily we are bombarded with animosity every time we listen to the mainstream media or talk radio.

What a shame when people waste their lives in anger and bitterness toward one another! What a shame when the head of the religion department at the University of Kansas offers a course designed specifically, even in its title, to denigrate and make fun of people of faith (“Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design, Creationism and other Religious Mythologies”).¹ What a senseless tragedy when little children in Iran are taught that all Jews and all Christians are children of Satan and deserve to be killed! What foolishness when schools and local governments and even merchants try to remove every trace of Christmas from the public square! We long for reconciliation but enemies just seem to multiply. The ideal of “peace on earth, good will to men” seems farfetched indeed.

But believe it or not, the need for reconciliation among people is *minor* compared to the need for reconciliation between people and God. In fact, true reconciliation among people is probably impossible without first experiencing reconciliation with God. I want you to listen carefully for the term “reconciliation” in the second paragraph of our Scripture passage this morning. The text is 2 Corinthians 5:11-21:

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 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 men'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.

Now I want to begin with a fact that doesn't come directly out of this passage but which is a necessary inference from it:

The need for reconciliation presupposes that people are alienated from God.

If there were no enmity between God and man, there would be no need for reconciliation between them. Strangely, I believe the average person considers himself friendly toward God, or at the worst, apathetic. Even atheists would not consider themselves God's enemies; after all, how can you be an enemy of someone you don't even believe exists! But the fact is, the Bible clearly states that unbelievers are enemies of God—not even neutral but actively opposing Him. And I'm not just talking about wicked people—terrorists, child abusers, and abortionists—I'm talking about entrepreneurs, housewives, corporate managers, teachers, engineers, students, members of the Rotary Club. James 4:4 says that “*Anyone* who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” Romans 5:10 speaks specifically to believers and claims that at one time we, including Paul himself, “were God's enemies.” Thankfully, however, nothing is more clear in the Scripture than that God has devoted Himself to reconciling with His enemies, and He considers no price too high to pay.

Now the word “reconcile” (or a form of it) is used to make four different affirmations in our passage today:

1. God reconciled us (i.e. He made peace with us).
2. God gave to us the ministry of reconciliation.
3. God has committed to us the message of reconciliation.
4. God urges people to be reconciled to Him.

These four affirmations raise lots of interesting theological questions. For example, why does Paul implore *us* to be reconciled after telling us that God has *already* reconciled us to Himself? And if reconciliation is something *God* does, why are *we* given a ministry of reconciliation? And what's the difference between the *ministry* of reconciliation and the *message* of reconciliation? We're going to try to answer all those questions, but let me start by suggesting that “the ministry of reconciliation” is another term for “sharing the Gospel.” When you share the good news that Christ died for our sins you are essentially telling people who are estranged from God how they can become friends with Him.

First, let's consider two motives for taking on the ministry of reconciliation:

The ministry of reconciliation is motivated by two foundational truths: (5:11-15)

The fear of the Lord. Verse 11: “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.” Persuade them of what? Well, the whole context concerns the Gospel, the truth that Jesus died and rose again, thereby paying the penalty for our sin. Paul wants to persuade men that they need to repent and to turn to Christ for forgiveness. But how is the fear of the Lord a motive for doing that? Two weeks ago I spoke on the Judgment Seat of Christ. Look again at verse 9, 10: “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it (whether dead or alive). For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

We talked about the fact that this judgment is not only comforting but also sobering. A healthy fear of the Lord and of his searching judgment of our lives ought to cause us to carefully examine *how* we are building God’s church. Back in 1 Cor. 3 Paul said that “fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” Are our lives, our words, our attitudes, our actions drawing people to the Savior or turning them away? No wonder Paul says, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.”

Please understand that Paul’s reminder here of God’s coming judgment is not an attempt to scare *unbelievers* into heaven; rather it is given to *believers* as a means of spurring them on in faithful sharing of their faith.

In the next few verses Paul makes it clear that his own efforts to be faithful at persuading people of the truth of the Gospel have not been easy. In fact, the Corinthians have frequently misread his motives. They seem much more impressed with outward leadership skills than with the heart of the leader. Some have even accused him of being insane. To this he responds, almost humorously in verse 13, “If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” But no matter how they view him, the fear of the Lord keeps him focused on the task of persuading people to accept the Savior.

But there is another motive which is, if possible, even more powerful than the fear of the Lord:

The love of Christ. Verse 14: “For Christ’s love compels us.” Fear is a strong motive, but love is even stronger. Paul was absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ did the most loving thing possible for one person to do for another— He gave His life for His friends. Paul states in Romans 5:7, 8: “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man (I think he means a pious person, you know, the kind who is so heavenly minded he is of no earthly good), though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners (His enemies), Christ died for us.” Wow! What evidence of love! And it’s that love that Christ demonstrated so amazingly that motivated Paul to constantly persuade lost people regarding their spiritual need.

The Gospel is simple: one died for all. The term “Gospel” is bandied about a lot today. We all know it means “good news.” But “good news of *what?*” Not simply that God loves us; or that He sent His Son to be born of a virgin; or that believers go to heaven when they die. All of that is good

news, for sure. But the Gospel most simply stated is: “one died for all.” The heart of the Gospel is not the birth of the Savior or the perfect life of the Savior or the wonderful teachings of the Savior. The heart of the Gospel is the fact that He took our place on the Cross.

But then Paul says something strange, namely that the ones for whom Christ died, also died. Here’s how he puts it: “One died for all, and therefore all died.” That doesn’t sound like very good news, but it is when we realize that he’s not talking here about eternal death; rather they have “died to themselves,” “died to sin,” or as Galatians 2:20 says, “have been crucified with Christ.” (Now there are some tough theological problems here that people love to argue about, but I’m going to relegate those to the footnotes of this manuscript).ⁱⁱ

The implication is also simple: we should not live for ourselves but for Him. Verse 15: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Those who have died to themselves receive new life in Christ. But that new life is not given to us so we can live self-focused, narcissistic lives, but rather so we can live for Him! Our lives should be devoted to the One who gave the ultimate sacrifice for us and then rose from the dead, and now sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. Friends, any Gospel that isn’t grounded in the Cross and any Gospel that doesn’t result in a transformation of life is not worth the breath it takes to proclaim it.

The ministry of reconciliation (which we are called to) is based upon God’s own prior act of reconciliation. (16-18)

But first Paul makes an important inference from the truth of the Gospel in verse 16: “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.” What does he mean? Well, we all know how easy it is for us to measure people by worldly standards. If they are rich, powerful, beautiful, or popular, we have a great tendency to defer to them. On the other hand, if they are poor, weak, uneducated nobodies, we can easily dismiss them. Paul even admits he once treated Christ and His followers this way. Ray Stedman writes perceptively,

“But,” he (Paul) says, “no more. We’ve learned to look at people differently. We now see Christ for who he was, the Lord of Glory, the King of the Ages, the Prince of Life, God himself become a man.” Paul’s great Christological passages come to mind at this point. He says, “We don’t regard him that way anymore, and we don’t regard other people that way either. We see them for who they are, men and women made in the image of God but fallen from it. We see them as victims of the devil’s lies, bound by the power of Satan. But they are important, significant people because God’s image is in them. . . .”ⁱⁱⁱ

The message Paul has learned is this:

The ground is level at the foot of the Cross. Everyone has to come to God the same way—humbly acknowledging his sin and trusting in the sacrifice of the Savior. When you’re standing here in the auditorium and you happen to be near Brad Snapp or Dave Bernstorff or Merle Shofner, those guys look like giants! But if we were all out in the parking lot and you were in a hot air balloon, you

wouldn't be able to distinguish those guys from anyone else. From that perspective size is indistinguishable, as is IQ or good looks, or almost any other standard. You see, in comparison to God we are all dots on the landscape, or to use a more biblical analogy, grasshoppers. We're all sinners, all of us have fallen short of God's standards, and therefore we all need a miracle from God Himself in order to have our sins forgiven and to become what God intended for us to be. And God has done just that!

Anyone who receives Christ becomes a new creation. Verse 17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" What a statement of the transforming power of Christ! If we receive Him as our personal Savior, we don't just adopt a new philosophy of life; we don't just get a new set of friends; we don't just have a new destination. We actually become a new creation. We are born again and everything changes—our actions, our thoughts, our habits, our goals, dreams, our attitudes, everything! And if it doesn't, i.e. if there is no difference in our lives since we made a profession of faith, the conclusion must follow (how can you escape it?) that the profession was not real, that we are not, in fact, "in Christ." I was convicted by the words of Robert Yarbrough, one of our profs at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School:

Where . . . (life change) . . . is lacking, there is good reason to suppose the heart still languishes in unbelief. There may be assent, there may be emotional affirmation, there may be selective obedience to gospel imperatives. There may even be impressive displays of religious activity . . . But when Jesus called for taking up the cross and following him, he probably had something more radical in mind than motoring to an air-conditioned sanctuary, amen-ing the show, and returning to the real life of Sunday TV and family fun.^{iv}

Friends, we must not minimize the powerful, effective, life-changing nature of a true conversion experience! But when this metamorphosis happens, do we get any credit for it? No!

God is the one who took the initiative in declaring His former enemies to be His friends. It says so in verse 18: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ." If He did not act first, we would remain His eternal enemies. But He *did* act first; He sent His Son to the Cross, and at the Cross Jesus satisfied God's wrath toward sin, taking our sin upon Himself. Jesus made it possible for God to declare us His friends instead of His enemies. The tendency of religious people everywhere is to try to earn God's friendship by showing Him how much we love Him or how faithful we are. But that is backward. The Gospel does not call us to do something for God that He might save us; rather it announces what God has done to save us in order that we might trust Him.

But God has given us a part to play in this drama of reconciliation. The last half of verse 18 says that He has given us "the ministry of reconciliation," and then in the next verse it says He has committed to us "the message of reconciliation."

The ministry of reconciliation involves taking the amazing message of reconciliation to God's enemies. (18-19)

There is a very real sense in which the most important message we can possibly convey to people is

that God wants to be their friend. You wouldn't know that from a lot of Gospel presentations. Sometimes the message is one of hellfire and brimstone. People come away feeling that God hates them and can hardly wait to send them to hell. At other times the message is one of reluctant mercy. God will accept you if you repent and jump through a lot of ritual hoops, but you sure don't deserve it, and you'd better not mess up or He'll zap you! But the message of reconciliation is that God wants to be friends, and He is willing to go so far as to give His most precious possession, His one and only Son, in order to establish that friendship.

What exactly is the message of reconciliation? Verse 19 answers that question: "That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."

God reconciled the world to Himself when Jesus died on the Cross. What exactly happened when Jesus died on the Cross? Years ago the late black preacher E. V. Hill came to our church in St. Louis and gave a powerful sermon entitled, "What Do You Have When You Have Jesus?" Among the things he mentioned that we have are forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification, redemption, and so much more. But the thing I remember most are his profound words on reconciliation. This man who had experienced so much discrimination and alienation in his life said, "When you have Jesus you have a friend in God, and thus are able to be friends with others." Of course, the only way that could happen is for God to do something about our sin problem, for it was sin that separated us from God in the first place. And sure enough, Paul states clearly in verse 19 that God took care of that:

God performed an accounting miracle in regard to our sins. He says, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." Isn't that amazing? God doesn't deny that we are sinners; He doesn't ignore our sins; He doesn't even minimize them. But He does choose not to count them against us. It's as though he looks at my ledger, with all my evil thoughts, deeds, and words, and He enters a debit there and credits all those sins to Jesus' account. Then He credits my account with the righteousness of Christ. It's an accounting miracle, friends, but not the kind that Enron executives tried to pull off. This one is legal because my sins have been fully paid for by the perfect Son of God.

The ministry of reconciliation is assigned to us as Christ's ambassadors. (5:20-6:2)

Verse 20: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." Once in a while our President goes to a foreign country and engages in personal diplomacy, but 99% of the time he works through ambassadors. There have also been times down through the centuries when God Himself spoke to individuals through dreams, visions, a burning bush, a talking donkey, or a still small voice. But the principal means He has used to take his message of reconciliation is also through ambassadors. Some were called "prophets", others "apostles", but the fact is God views each of His children as an ambassador, and each must represent his sovereign accurately, with faithfulness, and with cultural sensitivity. God makes His appeal to lost people through us! Those who have been reconciled with God are called to be agents of this same reconciliation to others.

As His ambassadors, what should we be doing?

We should implore people to be reconciled to God. That's what Paul himself does in verse 20: "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." I go back to a question I raised earlier. Why ask people to be reconciled if God has already reconciled them? The answer should be clear: friendship has to be accepted. People don't initiate it, but they must respond to it. If they refuse to accept God's offer of friendship, He will not force it on them.

Paul states the Gospel message once again in verse 21. It's as though he wants to be absolutely sure we don't miss the heart of the issue: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There has only been one perfect person in the history of mankind, and that is Jesus. All others have sinned, and the wages of sin is death. Each was under a death sentence, so none could die for anyone else. None, that is, except Jesus. Since he had no sin of His own, He could take on our sin and die in our place.

Consider a scene on death row. The warden comes to a cell and announces to a certain inmate, "It's time; come with me." But suppose the man in the next cell were to say to the warden, "Warden, that man has become my friend here on death row. I'll tell you what! Let me take his place." The warden would laugh at the convict and say, "You can't take his place, I'm going to come for you next week!" But what if someone from outside the prison with no crimes on his record were to step forward and say, "I'll take his place," that would be another story. Probably it would be illegal in our system, but it would not be immoral. If he freely offered to be a substitute, we would marvel at the love being expressed. Well, Jesus, the only human being without a record, did just that.

Now the chapter division here is not well-placed. The first two verses of chapter 6 are a continuation of the thought of chapter 5: "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." Paul is still talking about our assignment as ambassadors of Christ, and I believe he means that since God has been so gracious to appoint us as His ambassadors, we are blowing it big time if we fail to sense the urgency of our message.

We should make it clear to everyone that *now* is the day of salvation. He quotes Isaiah 49:8 and then applies the prophecy this way: "I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation."

Once a newly assigned demon was explaining his strategy to a veteran. "My plan," he said proudly, "is to convince the man that there is no God."

"No," said the senior devil, "That will not work. All the man has to do is take a look beyond the earth and he will know that God exists."

"Well, then," said the junior demon, "I will convince him that there is no devil."

"That is more promising," replied the veteran tempter, "but, still, if he takes a close look around his own neighborhood, he will realize that the devil exists. Here's the best plan. Don't try to convince

him that there is no God or that there is no devil. Just tell him there is no hurry.”

May I say to you this morning that you have no guarantee that you will see another Christmas, or even this one. I urge you this morning, I implore you to be reconciled to God today.

Conclusion: Friends, you may sing “Joy to the World” with gusto, but there is no joy ahead for those who are enemies of God. I can’t think of a more monumental tragedy than declining an offer of friendship from Almighty God and thus missing out on that friendship for all eternity. In a moment we’re going to receive the Lord’s Supper. It is the Gospel in a simple meal—a little bread and a little fruit of the vine—to signify the body and blood of Jesus, which was offered for you to provide forgiveness for your sins.

i. The course, to be offered next semester by the Chairman of the Religion Department, is entitled, “Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design, Creationism and other Religious Mythologies.” Professor Paul Mirecki wrote in an email to one of his students, “The fundies want it all taught in a science class, but this will be a nice slap in their big fat face by teaching it as a religious studies class under the category mythology.” He signed the note “Doing my part (to upset) the religious right, Evil Dr. P.” A few days later he was forced to apologize and promise that he would teach the class “as a serious academic subject and in a manner that respects all points of view.” The name of the class was also changed to “Intelligent Design and Creationism.” Late note: the course was cancelled altogether over the weekend, and Professor Mirecki resigned as department chairman on Monday.

ii. Sadly, theologians have argued endlessly over his statement, “one died for all, and therefore all died.” Some interpret it as a statement of the universal offer of salvation, while others just as dogmatically limit the “all” to the elect. Without spending endless time arguing fine points of doctrine, I think we can say without fear of contradiction that the death of Jesus is *sufficient* for the salvation of every man, woman, or child who has ever lived. No further sacrifice is needed or possible. Yet it is also clear that not everyone is saved. So the death of Christ is *efficient* only for those who put their faith and trust in Christ or, if you prefer, only for those who are God’s chosen ones. The two groups happen to be the same.

iii. Ray Stedman, *Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians, Power Out of Weakness*, 107.

iv. Robert Yarbrough, “*Biblical Authority and the Ethics Gap: The call to Faith in James and Schlatter*,” *Presbyterion* 22 (1996): 72-74.