

The Cross of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Reconciliation: Brought Near to God

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrine at stake in this lesson is reconciliation, the relational dimension of the cross. Where propitiation dealt with the wrath of God and redemption with our bondage, reconciliation addresses the broken relationship itself. Sin is not only guilt and slavery; it is estrangement, a rupture between us and God, even hostility. The cross heals that breach. Make sure the class hears that the goal of the atonement is not merely a not-guilty verdict but a restored relationship, enemies brought near and made friends, indeed made children. A purely legal picture of salvation, true as far as it goes, can leave people forgiven yet feeling distant; reconciliation announces that the distance itself is gone.

Stress, as Paul does repeatedly, that reconciliation is from God and initiated by God. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. The offended party makes the first move. This both magnifies grace and corrects the common assumption that we must somehow win God back. God was already reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, while we were still far off. Anchor this in the great exchange of verse 21, where the means of reconciliation is made explicit: God made the sinless Christ to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. This is substitution serving reconciliation; our sin goes to Christ, his righteousness comes to us, and on that basis the relationship is restored.

Aim the lesson at both assurance and mission. First, assurance: many believers, though forgiven, still relate to God as though he keeps a ledger of their failures and holds them at arm's length. Lead them to believe that in Christ the estrangement is truly over and they have been brought near. Second, mission: Paul moves immediately from being reconciled to the ministry of reconciliation, making us ambassadors through whom God appeals to others. Reconciliation is not only a gift to receive but a message to carry. Send the class home resting in their nearness to God and aware that they are now his ambassadors to a world still far off. Keep the tone, as throughout, one of wonder at being brought near and gratitude that moves outward toward others.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul declares, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (v. 17). What does it mean that reconciliation makes us not merely forgiven but new, and how does being "in Christ" change a person's fundamental identity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sweeping announcement: if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Reconciliation does not merely patch up the old self; it makes a new one. Paul reaches for creation language, the same power that said let there be light is at work remaking the person who is in Christ. This is not self-improvement but new creation, a fresh start at the level of identity.

Unpack the phrase in Christ, which is central to all of Paul's thinking. To be in Christ is to be united to him so completely that what is true of him becomes true of us. His death counts as our death, his life as our life, his standing before God as ours. Reconciliation happens not at a distance but by being joined to the reconciled and reconciling One. Our new identity is not something we generate; it is ours because we are in him.

Help the class feel the announcement old has passed away, behold the new has come. The believer is no longer defined first by their past, their failures, or their old labels, but by their union with Christ. This is liberating for people chained to who they used to be. God does not merely forgive the old self; he gives a new self, with a new standing and a new future.

Guard against misunderstanding. New creation does not mean instant perfection or that struggle disappears; the rest of the New Testament calls the new creation to grow and to put off remaining sin. It means a real and decisive change of identity has occurred, the foundation on which transformation proceeds. We become new in order to live new, not the reverse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reconciliation making us new creations, not merely forgiven (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15)
- Union with Christ as the basis of our new identity (Romans 6:5; Galatians 2:20)
- Identity defined by being in Christ rather than by our past
- New creation as the foundation for ongoing transformation, not instant perfection
- The creative power of God remaking the person in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to be a new creation rather than just a forgiven sinner?
- How does being in Christ change a person's fundamental identity?
- Why is it freeing to be defined by Christ rather than by your past?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul speaks of the old having “passed away” and the new having come. What part of your old life, an old identity, habit, or way of seeing yourself, most needs to be left behind because you are now a new creation in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the truth of new creation and asks what of the old must now be left behind. Paul says the old has passed away. Yet many believers go on carrying pieces of the old life, an old identity they still answer to, a habit they assume is just who they are, a way of seeing themselves that no longer fits who they have become in Christ.

Help students name these specifically. For one it is an old label, failure, addict, unlovable, that they keep wearing though God has renamed them. For another it is a habit of sin they have made peace with. For another it is a way of relating to God shaped by fear rather than by their new nearness. New creation invites us to stop dragging the corpse of the old self around.

Show that this is not merely trying to change but living out of a change already made. We do not become new by leaving the old behind; we leave the old behind because we have been made new. The indicative comes first, the new creation; the imperative follows, so live as one. This order keeps the effort from becoming a weary self-reform project and roots it in grace.

Aim at one concrete thing to leave behind. Invite each student to name one piece of the old life, an identity, habit, or way of seeing themselves, that most needs to pass away, and to take one step this week toward living as the new creation they already are in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Putting off the old self as the fruit of new creation (Ephesians 4:22–24; Colossians 3:9–10)
- Living from a new identity rather than striving toward one
- The order of indicative and imperative: made new, therefore live new
- Releasing old labels in light of who we are in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What part of your old life or identity most needs to be left behind?
- How does living from a change already made differ from merely trying to change?
- What one step will you take this week to live as the new creation you are?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says “all this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself” (v. 18). Why is it significant that God, the offended party, is the one who initiates reconciliation, and what does this reveal about his heart toward sinners?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul underscores that all this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. The initiative is entirely God's, and the class should not pass over this quickly. In every human estrangement, the question is who will move first, and pride usually keeps both parties frozen, each waiting for the other to apologize. In the estrangement between us and God, God moved first.

Press the significance that the offended party initiates the peace. We were the offenders; God was the one sinned against. By every ordinary expectation, the first move should have been ours, a coming in repentance and apology. Instead, while we were still far off and even hostile, God was already at work reconciling us to himself through Christ. The wronged party bore the cost and extended the hand.

Let this reveal the heart of God toward sinners. He is not a reluctant deity who must be coaxed into mercy, nor a stern judge waiting to be appeased before he will soften. He is the Father of the prodigal who, while the son was still a long way off, ran to him. The cross is the running of God toward people who had turned away. This is the disposition behind the whole gospel.

Draw out the assurance. If reconciliation depended on us making the first move perfectly, we could never be sure of it. But because it is all from God, our peace rests on his initiative, not our adequacy. We do respond, and that response matters, but the movement began with him, and that makes it secure. We love because he first loved us; we are reconciled because he first reconciled us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reconciliation initiated entirely by God (2 Corinthians 5:18; Romans 5:8)
- The offended party making the first move toward peace
- The heart of God revealed as the running Father (Luke 15:20)
- Assurance grounded in God's initiative rather than our adequacy
- Grace as God moving first, before any repentance of ours

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that God, the offended party, made the first move?
- What does this reveal about God's heart toward sinners?
- How does reconciliation being all from God make your peace with him secure?

Question 4

Student Question:

In your own broken or strained relationships, how does the example of God making the first move toward those who had wronged him challenge your instinct to wait for the other person to come to you first?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns the divine pattern toward our human relationships. God, though the offended party, made the first move toward those who had wronged him. That pattern stands in sharp contrast to our usual instinct, which is to wait for the other person to come to us, to guard our wounded pride, to insist that since they started it, they must end it.

Help students feel the challenge without flattening it. The point is not that every estrangement is one-sided or that reconciliation is always simple. It is that the gospel reshapes our posture toward broken relationships. Having received a reconciliation we did not initiate, we are freed and called to take initiative toward others, to be the one who moves first, as God did toward us.

Be wise and pastoral, especially where there has been serious harm. Taking the first move does not mean accepting blame we do not bear, returning to danger, or pretending no wrong occurred. It means a willingness to seek peace as far as it depends on us, to lay down the demand that the other apologize first, to reflect the God who came toward us while we were still in the wrong.

Aim at one concrete step. Invite each student to bring to mind a strained relationship where they have been waiting for the other person, and to consider one initiative they could take this week, a word, a gesture, a willingness to reach out, in imitation of the God who reached out to them first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reflecting God's initiative in our own relationships (Matthew 5:23-24; Romans 12:18)
- Laying down the demand that the other move first
- Peacemaking as far as it depends on us, with wisdom about real harm
- The reconciled becoming reconcilers in their relationships

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you waiting for the other person to come to you first?
- How does God's first move toward you challenge that instinct?
- What initiative toward peace could you take this week as far as it depends on you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says God was “in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (v. 19). What does it mean that God is not counting our trespasses against us, and how does reconciliation deal not only with our guilt but with the broken relationship itself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul restates the heart of reconciliation: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. Two phrases deserve careful attention. First, in Christ, God was personally present and at work in the reconciling act; this was not God sending a third party but God himself, in his Son, bridging the breach. Second, not counting their trespasses against them, the ledger of our sins is not being tallied against us.

Explain what it means that God is not counting our trespasses. In reconciliation, God sets aside the record that stood between us, the catalog of offenses that justified the estrangement. This does not mean the trespasses were ignored; the next verse shows they were charged to Christ instead. But toward us, the counting has stopped. The relationship is no longer governed by a tally of wrongs.

Show how this addresses the relationship and not only the guilt. A legal pardon might leave two parties officially square but still cold and distant. Reconciliation goes further; it removes the very thing that kept them apart and restores warmth and nearness. God does not merely declare us not guilty and keep his distance; he stops counting our trespasses so that we can be near him without the wall of the record between us.

Let the class feel the relief of an uncounted record. So much of our distance from God comes from the sense that he is keeping score, that our failures are stacking up against us. Paul says, in Christ, the scorekeeping has ended. We can come near, not because our record is clean by our own doing, but because God, having charged it to Christ, no longer counts it against us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God not counting our trespasses against us in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 4:7–8)
- Reconciliation removing the record that caused the estrangement
- The relational dimension of salvation, beyond a legal pardon
- God personally present in Christ as reconciler
- Nearness to God grounded in the uncounted record charged to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God is not counting your trespasses against you?
- How does reconciliation deal with the relationship, not only the guilt?
- How does it change your nearness to God to know the scorekeeping has ended?

Question 6

Student Question:

Are there people in your life whose trespasses you are still counting, keeping a quiet ledger of how they have wronged you? How does being reconciled to God by his refusal to count your trespasses move you toward releasing theirs?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns God's refusal to count our trespasses toward the trespasses we count against others. Most of us keep ledgers, quiet records of how others have wronged us, slights remembered, debts unpaid, offenses filed away. These ledgers feel like justice, but they keep us in our own estrangements and slowly poison us.

Hold up the contrast Jesus himself drew. We have been forgiven an immense debt, our trespasses no longer counted against us, and now we are asked to release the comparatively small debts others owe us. The servant forgiven a fortune who then throttled a fellow servant over a pittance is the picture of a Christian who receives God's uncounting grace yet keeps counting others' wrongs.

Help students see that releasing the ledger is not the same as pretending the wrong did not happen. It is choosing, as God did, to stop relating to the person on the basis of the tally, to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is hard, especially with deep wounds, and it is often a repeated choice rather than a single one. But it is the path out of our own bitterness and into freedom.

Aim at one concrete release. Invite each student to name, at least to God, one person whose trespasses they have been counting, and to take a step this week toward releasing that ledger, in light of the God who stopped counting theirs. The reconciled are called to become reconcilers, beginning with forgiveness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiving others as God has forgiven us (Matthew 18:21–35; Colossians 3:13)
- Releasing the ledger of others' wrongs as the fruit of grace received
- The difference between releasing a wrong and pretending it never happened
- Bitterness as a self-imposed estrangement contrary to the gospel (Hebrews 12:15)

Discussion Prompts

- Whose trespasses are you still quietly counting?
- How does God's refusal to count your trespasses move you to release theirs?
- What step toward releasing that ledger could you take this week?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Paul says God has given us “the ministry of reconciliation” and made us “ambassadors for Christ,” so that God makes his appeal through us (vv. 18–20). What does it mean that those who have been reconciled are now sent to carry that message to others, and how does this give purpose to the Christian life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul moves from the gift of reconciliation to the assignment that flows from it: God has given us the ministry of reconciliation and made us ambassadors for Christ, so that God makes his appeal through us. The reconciled are not merely beneficiaries; they are commissioned. Having been brought near, we are sent out with the same message that brought us near.

Explain the dignity of the word ambassador. An ambassador represents a sovereign, speaks on his behalf, and carries his message to others. To say that God makes his appeal through us is to say that the eternal God chooses to plead with the world through ordinary reconciled people. This is a staggering honor and gives weighty purpose to the Christian life. We are Christ’s representatives wherever he has placed us.

Help the class see how this transforms ordinary life into mission. The ministry of reconciliation is not reserved for preachers; every reconciled believer carries it. In our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and friendships, we represent Christ and become the means through which God appeals to those still far off. The message we carry is the very one we have received: be reconciled to God.

Draw out the purpose this gives. Many people long for their lives to count for something beyond themselves. Reconciliation answers that longing. We have been given a ministry that matters eternally, a role in God’s great work of bringing the estranged home. This is not a burden added to the gospel but a privilege flowing from it, and it lifts daily life into participation in God’s saving purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ministry of reconciliation entrusted to all believers (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
- Christians as ambassadors through whom God appeals (2 Corinthians 5:20)
- Ordinary life as the arena of mission, not only formal ministry
- Purpose and dignity given to the Christian life by this calling
- Carrying the same message we have received: be reconciled to God

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the reconciled are sent to carry reconciliation to others?
- How does being an ambassador for Christ give purpose to ordinary life?
- Where has God placed you to represent him right now?

Question 8

Student Question:

If you are an ambassador for Christ, representing him to the people around you, who in your life is God perhaps appealing to through you right now, and what would it look like to take that calling seriously this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question makes the ambassadorship concrete and personal. If God makes his appeal through us, then there are specific people in each believer's life to whom God may be reaching out through them, a coworker, a family member, a friend, a neighbor still far from God. The question asks students to put names to their mission field.

Help students think rightly about this so it produces neither pressure nor passivity. Being an ambassador does not mean badgering people or carrying the weight of their souls as if salvation depended on our eloquence. It means living and speaking in such a way that Christ is represented well, being ready to give a reason for our hope, and trusting God to make his appeal through our words, our love, and our example.

Encourage attention to the people already in their lives. God often appeals to others not through strangers but through the reconciled people nearest them. The question is whether we are awake to this, noticing the person God may be drawing, and willing to be the channel of his appeal rather than keeping the good news to ourselves.

Aim at one concrete step. Invite each student to name one person God may be appealing to through them, and to identify one way they will take that calling seriously this week, a conversation, an invitation, an act of love, a prayer. Reconciliation received is meant to flow outward, and it begins with the people right in front of us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal participation in the ministry of reconciliation (1 Peter 3:15)
- Representing Christ well through life and word, trusting God for the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)
- Awareness of the people God may be drawing through us
- Mission as flowing from grace received, not pressure or self-reliance

Discussion Prompts

- Who in your life might God be appealing to through you right now?
- How can you represent Christ without pressure or self-reliance?
- What is one way you will take your ambassadorship seriously this week?

Question 9**Student Question:**

The passage reaches its summit 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." Explain this great exchange, how our sin was placed on the sinless Christ and his righteousness is credited to us, and why both halves are essential. How does this verse hold together substitution and reconciliation, showing that we are not only forgiven but given a new standing before God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it rests on one of the most profound verses in Scripture: for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. This is the great exchange, and the class should walk through both halves slowly, for each is essential and together they hold substitution and reconciliation in a single sentence.

The first half: he made him to be sin who knew no sin. Christ, the sinless one, was made to be sin for us. This is the strongest possible language of substitution. Our sin was reckoned to him, charged to his account, so fully that Paul can say he was made to be sin on our behalf. He who had no sin of his own took ours, bearing it to the cross. This is how the trespasses God no longer counts against us are dealt with; they are charged to Christ.

The second half: so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. The exchange runs both ways. Not only does our sin go to Christ; his righteousness comes to us. We do not merely have our record wiped clean to a neutral zero; we are given a positive standing, the very righteousness of God, in him. This is more than pardon; it is the gift of a new and perfect standing before God, not our own but Christ's, credited to us.

Stress why both halves are essential. If only our sin were taken away, we would be forgiven but empty-handed, with no positive righteousness to commend us. If righteousness were given without our sin being borne, justice would be violated. The exchange satisfies both: our sin justly borne by Christ, his righteousness graciously given to us. This is the ground on which the estrangement is healed; we are brought near not on the basis of our own righteousness, which falls short, but on the basis of his.

Show how this verse holds substitution and reconciliation together. Substitution is the means; reconciliation is the goal. Christ stands in our place, taking our sin and giving his righteousness, precisely so that the relationship can be restored, so that we who were far off can be brought near and welcomed as righteous in him. The legal and the relational are not rivals; the great exchange accomplishes the legal basis on which the relationship is fully restored.

Make it personal. This is how we are not only forgiven but accepted, not only pardoned but welcomed home as those who bear the righteousness of God in Christ. When we stand before God, we stand in Christ's righteousness, and that is why the nearness is real and secure. Reception of this gift is through the obedient faith by which we are united to Christ; in him, and only in him, we become the righteousness of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The great exchange: our sin charged to Christ, his righteousness credited to us (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- The sinlessness of Christ underlying his being made sin for us
- Imputed righteousness as a positive standing, not merely a cleared record (Philippians 3:9)
- Both halves essential: sin justly borne and righteousness graciously given
- Substitution as the means and reconciliation as the goal, held together
- The gift received in Christ through an obedient, uniting faith (Galatians 3:26–27)

Discussion Prompts

- What are the two halves of the great exchange, and why is each essential?
- How is becoming the righteousness of God more than having a clean record?
- How does this verse hold substitution and reconciliation together?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 as a whole, where enemies are made new, brought near, and sent out. Name one specific way that being reconciled to God is changing how you relate to him, and one concrete way you will live as a reconciled ambassador this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the lesson and calls for a personal response. Remind the class of the movement of these verses: new creation, brought near by a God who made the first move, no longer counted against, given the great exchange of Christ's righteousness, and sent out as ambassadors. We are made new, brought near, and sent out.

Invite each student to name one specific way that being reconciled to God is changing how they relate to him. For one it may be the end of relating to God as a scorekeeper; for another, a new boldness to draw near; for another, the security of standing in Christ's righteousness rather than their own.

Then ask for one concrete way they will live as a reconciled ambassador this week, whether taking initiative toward a strained relationship, releasing a ledger of wrongs, or reaching out to someone God may be drawing through them. End by looking ahead: having seen that we are brought near and given a new standing, the next lesson presses deeper into that standing in the great word justification, where God declares the believer righteous through the blood of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reconciliation reshaping how we relate to God day by day
- Living from nearness rather than distance

- The reconciled becoming reconcilers and ambassadors
- Standing in Christ's righteousness as the ground of confidence

Discussion Prompts

- How is being reconciled to God changing the way you relate to him?
- Which truth from this lesson struck you most, and why?
- What is one concrete way you will live as a reconciled ambassador this week?