

The Cross of Christ

Lesson 7: Reconciliation: Brought Near to God -- 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Think of the saddest estrangement you know of, two people who once loved each other now living behind a wall of silence. A father and a son who have not spoken in years. Friends who said unforgivable things. A marriage that froze into politeness and distance. There is a particular grief in a broken relationship that no amount of success elsewhere can ease, because we were made for closeness, and estrangement is a kind of death. Now lift that picture up to its highest level. The deepest estrangement in the universe is the one between human beings and the God who made them. And the gospel announces that this is exactly the breach the cross was sent to heal.

Paul gives us one of the most beautiful words in the New Testament for what the cross accomplished: reconciliation. It is relational language, the mending of a ruptured bond, the turning of enemies into friends. In God, he says, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. The cross does not merely settle a legal account, though it does that; it restores a relationship. It takes people who were far off, alienated, even hostile, and brings them near. The wall comes down. The silence ends. The estranged are welcomed home.

And notice, as always, who makes the first move. We did not come to our senses and decide to repair things with God. All this is from God, Paul says, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. The offended party, the one who was sinned against, is the one who initiates the peace. While we were still enemies, God was already at work bridging the distance, at the cost of his own Son. This is not how human estrangements usually end. We wait for the other person to apologize first; we guard our wounded pride. God does the opposite. He absorbs the wrong and extends his hand.

At the center of this passage stands one of the most staggering sentences in all of Scripture, and we will give it the weight it deserves: God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. There is the great exchange. Our sin was placed on the sinless Christ; his righteousness is placed on us. That is how the estrangement is healed, not by God pretending our sin away, but by Christ taking it and giving us his own standing in return. So read these verses and feel both things at once: the wonder of being brought near to God, and the call that flows from it, for those who have been reconciled are now sent to carry the same message of reconciliation to a world still far off.

Group Discussion: Most of us have experienced a broken relationship and know how heavy estrangement feels. Why do you think Paul describes salvation as reconciliation, the mending of a relationship, rather than only as a legal verdict? What does that picture capture about the goal of the cross that a courtroom image alone might miss?

Personal Reflection: Paul says God was “not counting their trespasses against them.” Is there a part of you that still relates to God as though he is keeping a record of your failures, holding you at a distance? Where do you most need to believe that, in Christ, the estrangement is over and you have been truly brought near?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 5:10–11, while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son; Ephesians 2:13–16, you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ; Colossians 1:19–22, he has now reconciled you to present you holy before him; Isaiah 59:2, your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God; Luke 15:20, while he was still a long way off his father ran to him.