



God’s Appeal in Christ

2 Corinthians 5:20-21

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We're going to be looking this morning at the end of chapter 5 of 2 Corinthians, two of the most wonderful verses in all of the New Testament, especially that last verse. Verse 21 gives us an opportunity to see the gospel in a condensed format. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Second Corinthians 5, beginning at 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. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Lord, we ask that you would open up your Word to us this morning, that as we gaze into it we would see the Lord Jesus Christ; we would see him in all of his glory, the Savior of sinners, the perfect sacrifice, the King of Kings. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

It is the most important topic you could study. It's the most important topic you could know. It's the most important thing for boys and for girls, for men and for women. It is the most practical subject you will ever take up. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul summarized it here in these two great verses. Either you are here this morning and you need to know the gospel so you can be right with God or if you know the gospel, then you need to know the gospel better so you can share it with others around you who are in need of reconciliation.

So, this morning, in just these two brief verses, we have Paul pack densely the gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior. What I would like us to see is two things from our text, one from verse 20 and one from verse 21. First, we see *God's appeal to sinners*, that God makes his appeal to sinners. Then secondly, we see *God's salvation of sinners*, that God's appeal *to* sinners consists in his declaration of his salvation *of* sinners. God's appeal to sinners; God's salvation of sinners.

God’s Appeal to Sinners

Let's begin, then, by looking at the message God brings. This message is about reconciliation. The summary of God's appeal to sinners presupposes two important things we have just seen. If you were wondering, this is indicated to us by the beginning of verse 20 with our old friend *therefore*. The *therefore* points us back to something we already know. It's *therefore* yet again.

Paul is telling us that the message and our duty to bring the message are grounded in two great truths he has already shared. First, that God has reconciled us to himself. We see that in verse 18. Secondly, that this reconciling work...

Yes, this continuing reconciling work. It is a present tense verb. God is reconciling the world to himself. These twin truths give us a mission and a message.

So, let's start with the message. We see this in verse 20 where Paul tells us "Be reconciled to God." It's a very simple message. It's only four words. Actually, in Greek it's only three words, but it is deep, and it is important. It goes to the core of who we are. Reconciliation presumes alienation. It presumes separation. That is the story of the Bible. That is the story of your life: alienation from God. We need reconciliation.

The message is forceful here. It's not something you can take or leave. No, it is a command God brings to us. Some translations put an exclamation point at the end of verse 20. You must be reconciled to God. We see it in the verbs Paul uses. God is making his appeal to sinners. He is inviting them. He's asking them earnestly. Then Paul says, "We implore you on behalf of Christ." The word *implore* means to ask, almost to beg. There is an earnestness in the verbs.

There is a great desire on God's part that we hear the message of reconciliation. This is because of the universal need for this message. Every person is born alienated from God. Every person is stained by sin, guilty of crimes against God. This is the story of the Bible. You have guilt and corruption from sin...guilt in that you deserve the wrath of God for sin. This starts all the way back in the garden with Adam. Adam and Eve were separated from God, alienated from God, and thrust out of the garden after Adam sinned.

Because Adam was the first human being and was the representative of all humanity, his sin did not stay with him. He was created innocent, in a perfect environment, yet he chose to rebel against God. The Bible tells us that Adam's sin went beyond Adam. Paul tells us in Romans, chapter 5, "Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all sinned."

Do you hear the end of that verse? Not because *Adam* sinned; because *all* sinned. What that means is Adam represented all of us in the garden, and when he sinned, we all sinned in him. You may say, "But, Pastor, that's not fair. Adam lived thousands of years ago. I wasn't in the garden. I didn't get a choice about whether to sin or not to sin. Why should I be guilty for Adam's sin?" Well, I think there are two things you need to keep in mind.

The first thing is you need to get over fairness. Facts are facts. Just because you don't think a fact is fair does not make it not a fact. I wish that Detroit, Michigan, and Buffalo, New York, were only 100 miles from Houston so I could visit my family, but wishing that and thinking that it's unfair does not change the fact. It doesn't change reality.

Secondly, I want you to ask yourself honestly this question. If Adam, who was born in a perfect world with no environmental pressures, with no bad upbringing... His parents didn't neglect him or abuse him. His parent was God. He had a perfect helper in Eve, and he had everything he could possibly want. He had no desire that was beyond him that he needed to live. He wasn't short of food, short of a place to live. He had everything one could hope for.

If in that perfect environment Adam rebelled against God and sinned, what makes you think *you* would not have sinned? Anything but arrogance or pride? You see, when Adam sinned, we all sinned in him, and the effect of that is seen in Romans 5 where Paul tells us not only did we sin in Adam but that through Adam's sin death spread to all. We see that everywhere around us. We see the result of Adam's sin in the death that surrounds us.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 15: "In Adam all die." So, if you ever thought, "Well, I'm exempt from Adam's sin," ask yourself this question: Are you exempt from Adam's death? Do you live like that? Because the two things go together. But our sin doesn't stop with our inheritance of it. We have plenty of actual sin to be judged for. Stop and think about how expansive God's law is. Remember that it covers not just actions; it covers words, even thoughts.

Murder is a sharp word. Adultery is a look. Idolatry is longing for something you don't have and want. How much have you sinned this year? How about even this month or even today? It's not that we can just say, "Well, I know I've done some bad things. I know I've sinned, but I've done some good things too, and they'll counterbalance. The good will outweigh the bad," as if we have some kind of cosmic scale, and you load up your bad and load up your good and see which weighs more.

James tells us that anyone who fails at one point is guilty of all. Paul says in Galatians 3 that whoever is under the law is under a curse when he doesn't do everything under the law. Even one sin is enough to make us guilty before God. Worse yet, we are responsible for our own sin. Pastor Al Martin likes to remind us that we have not only a bad record, but we also have a bad heart. It is out of our hearts that sin comes.

Now, there are two kinds of temptations we face: external and internal. I think often we want to focus on the external temptation, as if when we sin we have the focused observation and interference of Satan himself in our lives. That's the only reason we sin: because we're being tempted beyond anything we could bear by the Devil. The truth is it's far more common that temptation comes out of ourselves, out of the heart.

If you don't believe me, hear the words of Jesus. "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, and adultery." That's what Jesus says in Mark 7. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way: our hearts are deceitful beyond even what we can know. The end of this sin is eternal separation from God. It is hearing God say, "Depart from me" and being in a place with weeping and gnashing of teeth, where there is no relief and there is no good.

What is worse is that we cannot solve that problem. We are alienated from God, but we cannot bring ourselves to him. The message of the gospel is that it is God who reconciles. We saw this last week. God does not wait for us to come to him, because if he did, he would still be waiting. We are lost in darkness and sin. We are unaware even of our need, but God makes his appeal. He initiates. He has done the work. That is the message. God comes to us.

He comes to us, first and foremost, in Jesus. We can never forget that. God does not owe you Jesus. He could have left you alienated and condemned, but he didn't. He brings you the message of reconciliation in Jesus. He's doing that right now from this pulpit. God has made reconciliation. We only need to receive the offer. God in Christ has finished the work. There is nothing left for you to do.

Do you see this in verse 20? "Be reconciled to God." The verb is passive. It doesn't say, "Reconcile yourself to God." That's what we might expect, that we need to do our part. We need to help fix the problem. But no. God has done all of it. All you need to do is receive his offer of reconciliation. All you need to do is believe. He has resolved the problem.

People have a problem that is beyond their strength and ability to resolve. They are alienated from God, but God has answered that problem. He has answered it in Jesus. Do you see that? That is the most important issue you will ever face. Well, if this is so important, how does word get out about it? How do people know about this message? We saw that sinners are guilty before God, and they don't even know that. They are blind to their need and to the solution.

The answer is that God not only makes reconciliation; he brings that message to the ones in need. Who is the real source of the message? It begins, it originates with God. Verse 20 has some interesting grammar. Our translation puts it this way: "...God making his appeal through us." This is grammatically set off from the rest of the sentence. It is the assumed foundation of what else is being said. It is the background for verse 20. It is the assumption. "We are ambassadors," Paul says, "and speak just as if God were speaking."

Now, how does God make his appeal? In his great wisdom, God has chosen to make his appeal through those whom he has reconciled. He could have made it directly to each and every single person. He could have used the angels to bring this message, but he has chosen to use reconciled sinners. That's what Paul says. We are the instruments of his appeal. God makes his appeal through us. We are his instruments. We are the ones, Paul says, who implore you in the place of Jesus.

The thought is the same as when Paul says, "God is making an appeal." Jesus makes his appeal through us. Paul makes a familiar concept for his case. He says we are ambassadors for Christ. I fear that we have lost a true sense of what the word *ambassador* meant for Paul, because in our day and age, you get to be the ambassador to a country by making large campaign donations.

You want to live in France and see the Eiffel Tower and eat baguettes and cheese? You make a large donation, and you make it known that you'd like to be the ambassador to France. You like beach weather and palm trees and a soft breeze? You make a large donation, and you make it known that any one of the Pacific islands or Caribbean islands you are more than willing to be an ambassador to.

That's not what an ambassador was like in Paul's day. In those days, an ambassador was a man of great authority. When he spoke, the king spoke. He didn't act on his own authority. So it is with us, with you and me. When we speak the message, we do not speak our own message. We do not speak on our own authority. We speak in the place of Jesus. That's what Paul says: "On behalf of Christ." As if Jesus were here speaking, we speak on his behalf.

Jesus is speaking to lost sinners right now in the world. He is speaking to them through us. Whomever we bring the gospel to, Jesus is speaking to. But the nature of this gospel, the nature of this appeal is even stronger. It's not just speaking; it is appealing, calling, urging strongly, Paul says. It is coming alongside someone and comforting them, encouraging them with good news.

As messengers of Jesus, we are called to know the gospel and to bring the gospel to people who are in need of the gospel. That is our calling, not to make hell-bent sinners more comfortable, not to give them greater self-esteem, not to make society a better place. We are called to bring God's message of reconciliation to sinners.

God's Salvation of Sinners

Then in verse 21, Paul turns to the substance of that message, of God's salvation of sinners. It's almost as if Paul expects us to ask, "Okay, Paul. Well, what do I tell others? How can a holy and perfect God be reconciled to a sinner? What is the message of hope that we have, Paul?" Paul describes the gospel, the message of hope, in what has been called the *great transaction* in two parts. Our salvation is found in our sin being placed on Christ and Christ's righteousness being placed on us. That's the summary of the gospel. Jesus bears your punishment, and Jesus gives you his righteousness.

First, Paul deals with the punishment. This is essential, because God is holy and cannot ignore sin. Paul says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." You see, we are sinners, and if God simply waved his hand at our sin, he would no longer be God. God is just, good, perfect. He must stand for righteousness and justice, but we have sinned, and we are separated from God. We should receive the just desserts of sin: death and hell forever.

How can God be just and the justifier of the sinner? The answer is found in Jesus. Jesus took our place that day on Calvary. Do you see it in how Paul puts it? "For our sake..." We could translate it "In our place." Jesus was punished instead of us. What we deserved he received. He was condemned that we might be justified. That means the punishment is paid, that the debt is settled.

If you have believed on Jesus Christ and trust that he died in your place, you have nothing to fear. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ. Jesus has done it all. You can rest in that assurance. Jesus could do that, Paul tells us, because he knew no sin. Now, when Paul says that, he doesn't mean Jesus was unaware of sin, somehow ignorant of sin. What he means is Jesus never committed any sin, ever. He lived his entire life and never broke God's law once in deed, thought, or word.

We see this over and over again in the Scriptures. In John, chapter 8, when Jesus is under attack by the scribes and Pharisees, he says, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" As the story goes on, you see that his enemies simply slink away. They make not one accusation at all. Surely, they hated Jesus. They wanted to destroy Jesus. If there was one thing they could have come up with against Jesus, they would have offered it here. Jesus was giving them a grand opportunity. He didn't say, "Tell me about my worst sins. Tell me about all of my sins." He said, "Tell me one."

Now, gentlemen, I don't suggest that as you go home, before you have lunch, you say to your wife, "Honey, before we eat, what could you convict me of sin of?" Your lunch and your dinner will probably get cold with all of the litany of sins your wife can bring against you. Ladies, you're not exempt either, because if before you went to bed tonight you said, "Honey, before we hit the pillow, what could you convict me of sin?" you'd be up well into the next day.

You see, Jesus is fundamentally different than we are. We are sinners, but Jesus is not. Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 4: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Peter, when he describes Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, says he is a "lamb without blemish or spot" and "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth."

He was free from all sin, and because of that, Jesus could take your place. Because he was God himself, he could pay the infinite punishment for sin for all of his people. All of his people's sins were placed on him, the substitute sacrifice. We see this on the cross, where he suffered the wrath of God. He was made a sin offering. He was cut off from his Father. He bore the wrath of punishment for sin. That was why he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's not that Jesus ceased to be God in that moment. It's that the Father's face was hidden from him by the wrath that was being poured out on sin.

Galatians 3 tells us that Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. This is what Jesus has done in your place. But there is a second part to the great transaction. It's more than just that we escape the penalty of sin. It's more than we are just not guilty. It is so much more. Jesus became sin, Paul writes, *so that*... Do you see it? There is a purpose in Jesus becoming sin, and that purpose to his atoning work was so that we would have our record wiped away and our hearts cleaned, but there was more. Jesus was remaking every believer, every forgiven sinner, in his image.

Do you see that? Do you see the *so that* in verse 21? "...in him we might become the righteousness of God." It is not only that all of our sins were credited to Jesus. His perfect, spotless righteousness is credited to us. Remember all of those verses we looked at that said Jesus had no sin, that Jesus was the spotless Lamb without blemish, that never was any sin found in his mouth, that he always did the will of the Father? That righteousness that Jesus earned he gives to those who believe in him, and this can never be reversed.

This verb *become* means exist. It's the same verb we saw in verse 17: "The new has come." It describes a state of existence, of something that is permanent. That is why you can have confidence on the last day. If you are like me, you stumble, you fall. You try to do your best, but you know it is not good enough. You sin far more than you realize, far more than you want to, but there's hope in Jesus. Your standing before God does not depend on you. It has been earned by Jesus.

Charles Hodge puts it this way: "A full, complete, infinitely meritorious satisfaction has been made for our sins, and therefore we may come to God with the assurance of being accepted." You have assurance, not because you're perfect, not because you're worthy, but because Jesus *is*, and you are clothed not in your own rags, but if you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are clothed in the righteous robes of Jesus.

This is the message of the good news. God has reconciled sinners to himself in Jesus Christ. By his death, our sins are placed on Jesus, carried away forever. By his perfect life, we have the righteousness of God. This is the greatest message ever. It is a message that God has chosen to bring to the world through sinners like you and me. Do you believe this message of reconciliation? If so, are you bringing it to a world that desperately needs it? May God give us grace to bring Jesus to others.