

Reconciled to God, Ambassadors for Christ

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[0:00] Amen. I'm going to start with a question this morning.

Have you ever messed something up so completely that it was such a lost cause that all you could do was just start over? Yeah. So, my dad tells a story about how one day he walked into a neighborhood barber shop where he had been a few times before for a haircut.

Now, when his turn came, he had sat down in the chair. It was pretty evident that the barber had recognized him. Now, that was clear because the barber asked him, do you want the usual?

Well, he responded by saying, yes, he would like the usual. Now, it became apparent pretty quickly that it was a case of mistaken identity. The barber immediately took off a strip of hair down to the skin right down the middle of his scalp.

Now, at that point, my father had the option of either protesting and walking out of the barber shop with his reverse mohawk, or having the remainder of his head shaved and starting over with a new head of hair.

[1:44] He chose the latter. I think he chose rightly. So, repentance is kind of like that. Right? We realize that we've made a mess of things by our sins, made a terrible mess of things, that we are so far removed from where we should be that our only hope is to start over.

But how do we do that? How can we start again free from the guilt and the power of sin when we have sinned so greatly, when we have become enslaved to sin?

Now, our epistle reading for this morning tells us the answer pretty clearly. It is in Christ, in Christ alone, that we find freedom, that we find forgiveness, that we find mercy, and that we find new life. Now, look there with me, if you can. 2 Corinthians 5. What does it say? Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. What does that mean? What does the new creation look like? What is Paul talking about here?

[3:03] What does the old creation look like? What's the difference between the two? How do we recognize that? Well, we should recognize the old pretty easily.

It's the condition of fallen and sinful mankind outside of Christ. Now, we can find examples of what that looks like in practice, either from looking at the world around us, or from countless examples of Scripture.

Now, since in our congregation we've been doing a lot of studying of Romans lately, Romans 1 seems as good of a place as any to find out what the old that Paul is talking about might look like. What does it say? They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

They are gossip, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[4:20] Now, that sounds pretty dramatic till we stop to consider that outside of the grace of God, that is all of us.

But Paul tells us, my brothers and my sisters, that if we are in Christ, we are a new creation.

That was us before, right? But that is not us now. What is the new? What does that look like? It looks like freedom and forgiveness, doesn't it? It's being given a new heart.

A heart that is indwelt, transformed by the Holy Spirit. A heart that is lovingly obedient to God. The old has passed away.

The new has come. Now, this is what God can do for us and has done and is doing for us in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Verses 18 and 19 tell us, All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[5:37] 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.

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, not counting their sins against them, not counting their disobedience against them.

God's mercy to us in Christ is amazing. We see a powerful illustration of that kind of mercy and forgiveness in our gospel passage appointed for this morning, don't we?

Now the account that Jesus gives of the prodigal son is probably familiar to most of us. And it's really familiar to us in a couple of ways.

First, we've likely heard and read it. But not just that, we've probably lived it too. It's ultimately about the way that God receives sinners who come to him in repentance.

[6:49] Have you been there? Yeah. Well, let's take a look at it again in Luke 15. See what it tells us about our reconciliation with God through his Son, our Lord Jesus.

What it says about God not counting our sins against us. Verse 11.

There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me. And he divided his property between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. There he squandered his property and reckless living.

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his field to feed pigs.

[7:58] He was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. No one gave him anything. Isn't that a powerful picture where sin and rebellion against God have left mankind?

All of us, by nature, we're all like the younger son. We've turned our backs on God. We've squandered the gifts that he's given us. And we find ourselves in the disgusting muck with nowhere left to turn.

That's an awful, hopeless place to be. But that is exactly where we are apart from Jesus Christ. So what does the son do when he recognizes his dilemma?

Verse 17, But then he came to himself. He said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? But I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. He realizes that all he can do, the only way out of this mess that he's gotten himself into is to go to his father and ask for mercy.

[9:36] He goes. He knows that he can't claim any good justification for the way he's behaved. He can't claim that his father owes him anything.

He can't even claim that he is worthy of being called his father's son. But he will return. He'll confess to his father that he's sinned.

Why is that? Because he realizes that he has nowhere else to go. He believes that his father will receive him. So what happens when he returns to his father?

He arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe.

[10:42] Put it on him. Put a ring in his hand and shoes on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. So his father sees him coming. The son is hoping at best to be received as a servant.

But his father's reaction is one of unbridled joy and compassion. His father loves him.

He runs to him. He's ready to celebrate. Ready to restore him as his son. It's as though his son was dead and is alive again.

The son had grieved his father. He had rebelled against his father. And he went back to his father with only the hopes of not starving to death in the pig pen. Reality that he had messed things up so badly that it couldn't be fixed in any way other than starting over.

[11:55] And that's precisely what happens. All because of his father's love and compassion for his son.

My brothers and sisters, that is precisely what happens when we come to God in repentance and faith in Christ. The old passes away.

Our guilt, our sin, our shame, are washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. The rags that we wandered in wearing are taken away. God is merciful toward our iniquities and remembers our sins no more.

The new comes. We are clothed in a new robe with new sandals on our feet, new rings on our fingers. The righteousness of Christ is given to us.

God receives us not as enemies, not as unprofitable servants, but as his beloved sons and daughters. Because in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.

[13:07] So how do we respond to this free, this total offer of forgiveness, this offer of new life?

Well, let's look back at 1 Corinthians 5. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now, if anyone is hearing this and hasn't been reconciled to God, if you haven't come to God in repentance and faith in Christ, haven't received the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life, then I implore you, be reconciled to God.

And don't wait. Come home. God is ready to receive and to welcome and to give new life and to give hope and joy that will never end to anyone who comes to him in faith and repentance.

Now, if you're hearing this message and you have been reconciled to God, then we have a common mission, joining together as ambassadors for Christ, imploring everyone to be reconciled to God.

[14:40] Now, what's an ambassador? Anyone have a good working definition for us here?

Representative of a country that goes to foreign territory that is hostile.

Yes. Representative of one country living in another. Absolutely. Well, you know, as I was thinking of the phrase ambassadors for Christ, as I was thinking on that, this description of Christians dating from the second century, but it's still just as true and awesome today as it was then, came to mind. It says, They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws.

Indeed, in their private lives, they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned. They are put to death, yet they are brought to life.

They are poor, yet they make many rich. They are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor.

[16:03] They are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless. They are insulted, yet they offer respect. How's that for a job description for ambassadors for Christ?

Ready to sign on there? Now, in our country, at this point in history, we don't have to undergo some of the more undesirable challenges described here that our brothers and sisters around the world are actually encountering even now.

But we do need to be ready for those challenges should they come someday, and they might because the work of an ambassador is dangerous. But we should all live as those whose citizenship is in heaven, as those who love everyone, as those who implore everyone to be reconciled to God, as those who bear witness to the gospel and plead with those who are lost, those who are burdened with sin, pleading with them to come home and find their own citizenship in heaven.

You know, as I thought on what an ambassador means, what that involves, I thought of government and politics, and it occurred to me that in this election year, there's a lot of talk about how we can make our country great again, how we do that.

Well, first of all, I certainly would encourage everyone to make use of your right to vote and participate in the political process. But if we want to see an improvement in the lives of our families, in the life of our community, in the life of our city, ultimately in the life of our nation, our first task is to be ambassadors for Christ.

[18:17] Because only God, only God's grace in Jesus Christ can change the human heart. And that's where the problem is, isn't it?

Now, another thing for us to think about as ambassadors is that in our gospel passage, we find at the end that the older brother resents the fine treatment that his younger brother gets, his rebellious younger brother, when he had been the good and obedient son to the father.

But that is not the attitude of the ambassador for Christ. The ambassador for Christ remembers that he or she had been just as lost in sin as anyone else.

The ambassador for Christ isn't prideful or resentful. The ambassador for Christ remembers that Christ was made to be sin who knew no sin so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.

there's no room for boasting or for jealousy. Why? Because we know that our sins through many have been forgiven only through the blood of Jesus and that Jesus is our righteousness.

[19 : 45] we know that love compels us to share that message with those who are lost as we once were. We are ambassadors to our families to our neighborhoods to our city to our nation and ultimately to the whole world.

we have been reconciled to God. We have been called to be ambassadors so that others may be reconciled to God.

Are we ready for the task? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.