

Essential Truths III: Working With God

8

The Ministry of Reconciliation

A remarkable scripture describes the ministry that God has given you:

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Let's take a moment to look at this passage from different angles, as rendered by different Bible translations.

New International Version: “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.”

New King James Version: “Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and *has given us the ministry of reconciliation*, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and *has committed to us the word of reconciliation*. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, *as though God were pleading through us*: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.”

God's Word: “God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and *has given us this ministry of restoring relationships*.”

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

▶ **The Ministry of Reconciliation** ◀

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt of the Earth

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

In other words, God was using Christ to restore his relationship with humanity. He didn't hold people's faults against them, and he *has given us this message of restored relationships to tell others*. Therefore, we are Christ's representatives, *and through us God is calling you*. We beg you on behalf of Christ to become reunited with God."

New Century Version: "All this is from God. Through Christ, God made peace between us and himself, and God *gave us the work of telling everyone about the peace we can have with him*. God was in Christ, making peace between the world and himself. In Christ, God did not hold the world guilty of its sins. *And he gave us this message of peace*. So we have been sent to speak for Christ. *It is as if God is calling to you through us*. We speak for Christ when we beg you to be at peace with God."

New Living Translation: "All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. *And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him*. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. *This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others*. We are Christ's ambassadors, and *God is using us to speak to you*. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, 'Be reconciled to God!'"

The New Testament in Modern English: "All this is God's doing, for he has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ; and he *has made us agents of the reconciliation*. God was in Christ personally reconciling the world to himself – not counting their sins against them – and *has commissioned us with the message of reconciliation*. We are now Christ's ambassadors, *as though God were appealing direct to you through us*. As his personal representatives we say, 'Make your peace with God.'"

The Message: "All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then *called us to settle our relationships with each other*. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has *given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing*. We're Christ's representatives. God *uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them*. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you."

The Amplified Bible: "But all things are from God, Who through Jesus Christ reconciled us to Himself (received us into favor, brought us into harmony with Himself) and *gave to us the ministry of reconciliation* – that by word and deed we might aim *to bring others into harmony with Him*. It was God (personally present) in Christ, reconciling and restoring the world to favor with Himself, not counting up and holding against [men] their trespasses [but canceling them]; and *committing to us the message of reconciliation* – of the restoration to favor. So we are Christ's ambassadors, *God making His*

appeal as it were through us. We [as Christ’s personal representatives] beg you for His sake to lay hold of the divine favor [now offered you] and be reconciled to God.”

The Cross totally changed your relationship with God. Before you received the work of the Cross, you were enemy of God because of your thinking and because of your lifestyle (**Romans 1:21-32; Colossians 1:21**). But now the blood of Christ has reconciled you to God. Through the death of Jesus, you now have full, unbarred access into the presence of God (**Ephesians 2:12-13, 18; Hebrews. 4:16**).

Read Romans 5:10-11

Experiencing Reconciliation

Reconciliation with God is not just a theological concept. It is a foundational reality because of the Cross, the foundation upon which your daily relationship with God is built. It is the basis of an intimate walk with God. If we are to minister reconciliation to others, we must first be reconciled to God ourselves. This is important because we can only reproduce in others what we have ourselves.

For this reason, our ministry of reconciliation begins with our own relationship with God. If we are to be ministers of reconciliation, we must ourselves be walking closely with the Lord. We must never let anything come between us and God.

Read James 4:4

Read Philippians 3:18-19

Read Ephesians 4:30-31

A Christian can be reconciled to God through the blood of Christ, yet not be *walking* in that reconciliation. In **Revelation 3:20**, Jesus spoke directly to a church:

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

Jesus was not speaking to unbelievers, but to believers! This church was comfortable in its lifestyle (**Revelation 3:15-16**). It was a church that believed it had everything and needed nothing (**Revelation 3:17**). These Christians continued in church activities as usual, but Jesus was standing on the outside! Because He loved them, he told them to repent – to open the door and fellowship with him. His plea then is the same as his plea now: “Be reconciled to me!”

Read James 4:8

Establishing Intimacy

Read Hebrews 10:22

The Christian experience is one of daily drawing near to God because of the finished work of the Cross. God desires us to establish a daily intimacy with Himself. This closeness to God is the foundation of all ministry.

There was one person in Scripture who stands for all time as our example of a person who discovered the intimacy of a reconciled relationship. Her name was Mary of Bethany.

Choosing What is Better

Read John 12:1-8

Mary of Bethany discovered the kind of intimacy that the Lord desires with us. Mary would often be found at the feet of Jesus, enjoying his presence.

Read Luke 10:38-42

In this remarkable passage of Scripture, Jesus overturned many of the cultural and religious norms of his day in order to pinpoint the “one thing [that] is needed.” In Jesus’ day, it was not considered acceptable for a woman to be found sitting at the feet of a rabbi listening to his teaching. In first century Jewish culture, a woman’s place was, quite literally, in the kitchen. Yet when Martha raises this issue with Jesus, the Lord’s response is very revealing:

“Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but *only one thing is needed*. Mary has *chosen what is better*, and it will not be taken away from her.”

If we look at the description of Martha we will note the results of *not* choosing what is better. Martha was:

- Distracted by all the preparations
- Worried and upset about many things

Jesus didn’t condemn Martha for being diligent in her duties. After all, she was serving the Lord by preparing the food that he and his disciples would later eat. No, what Jesus did was remind Martha of what really mattered.

How often are you like Martha – “distracted by all the preparations” for ministry and “worried and upset about many things.” Life is busy, and ministry can be even busier still. How easy it is to get caught up in the peripherals of ministry. Like Martha, the preparations of ministry can easily become the ministry itself.

Jesus’ words to Martha may also be his words to you. In place of Martha’s name, put your own name:

“[.....], [.....], you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Choose what is better, and it will not be taken away from you.”

Ministry is not just about *doing* for God. It is first of all about *being* with Him. As you spend time with the Lord, you draw strength and wisdom from his presence. And out of the experience of your personal reconciliation with God, you are equipped and anointed to become an ambassador of reconciliation.

Read Acts 4:13

Do you notice what the Sanhedrin noted about Peter and John? It was not their eloquence or their education. In fact, just the opposite. Their astonishment arose out of the realization that these were “unschooled, ordinary men.” There was nothing that distinguished them as being special, save for one thing:

“...they took note that *these men had been with Jesus.*”

You do not need a theological degree to be an ambassador for God. Nor do you require a special title or position. A close walk with God is the only qualification you need. People don't just listen to your words. They look at your life. If your life is displaying the fruit of reconciliation, then you are qualified can share that reconciliation with others.

The Fruit of Reconciliation

Read John 15:1-8

In this passage, Jesus explains the simple basis upon which all ministry works. The points that Jesus establishes are as follows:

- Just as a branch cannot produce fruit by itself, so you cannot produce fruit by yourself (**verse 4-5**).
- You must remain connected to Jesus, in the same way that a branch is connected to the vine (**verse 5**).
- If you remain connected to Jesus, you *will* produce much fruit (**verse 5**).
- If you become disconnected from Christ, your life and your ministry will wither and become useless to God (**verse 6**).
- To avoid this happening, the Father prunes any aspect of your life that is not connected to Christ and does not produce his fruit (**verse 2**).
- This pruning is through the Word of God (**verse 3**; note also **John 17:17**; **Ephesians 5:25-27**).
- The results of this pruning will be authority to represent Christ (**verse 7**) and the bearing of the fruit of true discipleship (**verse 8**).

In order to bear the fruit of reconciliation, you must be experiencing that reconciliation. This is rule number one in all ministry: You can only give what you yourself have received. You can only impart to others what you yourself are living.

Ministers of Reconciliation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The context of our proof text (**2 Corinthians 5:18-20**) is very revealing, for in this entire chapter, Paul is laying down the groundwork for:

- How to *experience* reconciliation
- How to *minister* reconciliation

In **2 Corinthians 5**, Paul is seeking to win the Corinthians over. They had become estranged from him and reconciliation was needed. And so, Paul lays the groundwork for the challenge he would soon be bringing to them.

Let's step through **2 Corinthians 5:11-18** and note Paul's developing argument.

- The *motive* of reconciliation
- The *mindset* of reconciliation
- The *meaning* of reconciliation
- The *method* of reconciliation
- The *message* of reconciliation
- The *ministry* of reconciliation

The motive of reconciliation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Before Paul brings his direct challenge to the Corinthians, he first establishes his motive. There are two motives that Paul clearly establishes. These two motives at first appear contradictory but are in fact closely interdependent:

- The fear of God (**verse 11**)
- The love of Christ (**verse 14**)

Paul has just established in **verse 10** that “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.” This statement is the precursor to Paul's declaration:

“...we know what it is to fear the Lord...”

How is it possible to have been reconciled with God, yet still experience a fear of him? Doesn't being reconciled with God mean that all fear of retribution is taken away? Haven't we been invited to come boldly into his presence without fear? (note again **Hebrews 4:16**).

The fear of God that Paul refers to does not result in a cowering attitude toward God. This fear is an sense of reverent awe at the fact that:

- Though we were sinners, we have been made righteous
- Though we were deserving of God's judgment, that judgment has not only been suspended, it has been totally quashed.
- Though we were enemies of God, we have been reconciled to him.

Rather than causing us to grovel before God, the fear of God compels us to persuade others to enter this same reconciliation. As Paul says:

“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, *we try to persuade men.*”

The New Testament in Modern English expresses this point clearly when it says:

“All our persuading of men, then, is with this solemn fear of God in our minds.”

But that is not Paul's last word on his motive behind the work of reconciliation. He goes on in **verse 14** to say:

“For *Christ's love* compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”

In one breath, Paul says that he is compelled by a fear of God. In the next, by the love of Christ. Could it be possible that the two go hand in hand?

- The fear of God is an understanding of the fearsome consequences of the rejection of God's purpose. This aspect of Paul's motivation was inspired by a vision of the yawning chasm of hell.
- The love of Christ involves an understanding of the awesome invitation that has been presented in Christ. This aspect of Paul's motivation was inspired by a vision of the door opened to heaven.

A balanced Christian life and ministry cannot have one without the other. Matthew Henry blends these two aspects – the fear of God and the love of Christ – into one statement:

“All were lost and undone, dead and ruined, slaves to sin, having no power to deliver themselves, and must have remained thus miserable for ever, if Christ had not died.”¹

The fear of God and the love of Christ *together* energize the ministry of reconciliation. In fact, we are nothing short of *compelled* by this two motivations. “The Greek word implies that it forcibly compresses all our energies into one effort or path.”² As explained by Marvin Vincent:

“...the idea is not *urging* or *driving*, but *shutting up* to one line and purpose, as in a narrow, walled road.”³

This was the nature of Paul's compulsion to persuade people. It's as if he is saying: “I can do nothing else. I am locked into this path by an awe of God's holiness and an amazement at his love. Everything within me is focused on this one goal – to urge people to avoid God's judgment and to experience his love.

The mindset of reconciliation

In **verse 11**, Paul writes:

“What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.”

We need to remember the context of this statement and the motivation behind Paul writing this second letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians had been grieved by the strength and apparent harshness of his previous letter (see **2:1-4**). Now he was urging reconciliation.

In this preamble to his explanation of reconciliation, Paul challenges the Corinthians not to view things from a worldly perspective. He has already stated in **4:18** that his eyes are “not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.” In **5:7**, he has declared:

“We live by faith, not by sight.” Now he tells the Corinthians in **5:16**:

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.”

In fact, it is in the context of this statement that Paul makes the defining declaration:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

This statement is, of course, a point-blank description of your new life in Christ, but Paul also intends it to be an attitude that we should hold to those around us. He says, “...we regard *no one* from a worldly point of view.” Not only should we view our own lives in the light of **2 Corinthians 5:17**, we should also view the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the light of **2 Corinthians 5:17**!

This one verse, therefore, is the foundation upon which all reconciliation is made – not only reconciliation between God and man, but also reconciliation between person and person.

The meaning of reconciliation

In order to understand the force of Paul’s argument, we need to understand what he means by the term “reconciliation.” Just look at how many times he uses the various forms of the word “to reconcile”:

- **Verse 18** – “...God [has] *reconciled* us to himself through Christ...”
- **Verse 18** – “...God...gave us the ministry of *reconciliation*...”
- **Verse 19** – “...God was *reconciling* the world to himself in Christ...”
- **Verse 19** – “...God...has committed to us the message of *reconciliation*.”
- **Verse 20** – “...We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be *reconciled* to God.”

The Greek word Paul uses for reconciliation literally means “to bring into harmony.”⁴ It has the meaning of “to change or exchange (as in money)” and, with regard to people, “to change from enmity to friendship.”⁵

The Gospel that Paul preached was the good news of harmonization between God and man, and between man and man. This harmonization, in Paul’s view, can only happen in the person of Christ.

Read Ephesians 1:9-10

The method of reconciliation

God’s method of bringing reconciliation – restoring harmony – between himself and man was Christ’s death upon the Cross. This Paul sees as an exchange (**verse 21**). On the Cross, an eternal transaction took place, where sin was exchanged for righteousness, judgment for eternal life, enmity with God for peace with God.

Remember, the very meaning of reconciliation holds within it the concept of an exchange. This is how you were reconciled with God, but it is also how you are reconciled with any brother or sister in Christ who has offended you.

You can never experience reconciliation with someone while the sin of that person is still counted against them. And so we have the matchless example of God himself to show us how reconciliation works. Let's look back again at **verse 19**:

“...that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, *not counting men's sins against them.*”

It was impossible for God to not count men's sins against them *outside of the Cross*. But because of the Cross of Christ, God was able to extend forgiveness to the offenders of his holiness. In exactly the same way, it is because of the Cross of Christ that you are to extend forgiveness and be reconciled with others. The Cross of Christ means that the Christian you are being reconciled to is, in truth, “a new creation in Christ.” The old has indeed gone and the new has indeed come!

Read again 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The message of reconciliation

Not only are we to experience reconciliation ourselves. We have also been given a *message* of reconciliation! Look back over the following verses again:

- **Verse 11** – “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to *persuade* men...”
- **Verse 20** – “...*as though God were making his appeal through us*. We *implore* you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

Note that the urgency of Paul's motivation – *compelled* by the love of Christ – is translated in an urgency of message – we *implore* you on Christ's behalf. No matter what ministry you may have – whether expressed within the church, at home, in the workplace or on the street – this message of reconciliation should flavor that ministry.

The ministry of reconciliation

Every Christian has been called by God to be a minister of reconciliation. In fact, the reconciliation of the Cross compels us to share what we have received with others. This reconciliation is outworked on two levels:

- Reconciliation to God (**Colossians.1:21-22; Romans 5:10**)
- Reconciliation with others (**Matthew 5:23-24**)

John tells us that it is impossible to say we love God yet hate our brother (**1 John 2:9-11; 4:10-12,20-21**). Put in another way, we could say that it is impossible to experience the benefits of reconciliation with God if we have not been reconciled to a Christian who has offended us.*

Read Ephesians 2:11-19

Verse 12 describes the condition of people before reconciliation:

* Although John is specifically addressing relationships within the Church, the principle also applies to your relationship with non-Christians. Forgiveness and reconciliation is important to God, regardless of who the offender may be.

- Separate
- Excluded
- Foreigners

But when Jesus appeared on the scene, all of this changed. He destroyed every barrier, every dividing wall of hostility, making “the two [separated parties] one” in himself. It is in his body that the two are reconciled, and Paul goes so far as to proclaim that God “put to death their hostility” in Christ!

Jesus was the great Peacemaker. His was the exemplary ministry of reconciliation. Now you too are called to be a peacemaker! (**Matthew 5:9; James 3:18**). Because you have received peace with God, you are now able to introduce people into that same peace. Because you have received reconciliation, you can now be a minister of reconciliation.

Read 1 John 1:3

¹ *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2 Corinthians 5:9-15, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

² *New Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2 Corinthians 5:14, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

³ *Vincent's Word Studies*, 2 Corinthians 5:14, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

⁴ *Teacher's Commentary*, 2 Corinthians 5:16-20, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

⁵ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), p. 513.

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