

Big Words of the Cross, 2

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

“. . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

“RECONCILIATION”

Salvation was and is by substitution. The object of substitution is reconciliation. Let us clear our minds of all prejudice and pre-conceived ideas regarding reconciliation, so that we can start at the beginning as we walk through the process of it. Because of its importance, let us make sure that we get this right.

Forgiveness is “in” today. Children are taught to say “I’m sorry” without thought, depth, repentance, or regret. Apology is “in”; confession of responsibility is “out.” The Scriptures teach profound repentance. The word “apologize” is not even found in the Scriptures.

Picture two people who are close friends, and then the relationship is torn apart. For them to reconcile, their relationship has to be restored to the way it was. With reconciliation the lost is found, the dead is made alive, and the sin is forgiven. How can this be? First, the offended must want this restoration more than anything

else. Second, the offender must want this restoration more than anything else. Society, today, just wants to be free from responsibility. *Both* the offended and the offender must be willing to pay any price for restoration. We must grasp this truth!

Forgiveness does not mean ending an argument yet living apart. Reconciliation is not a "Cold War." Too many sinners want forgiveness without reconciliation. They wish to be free from responsibility but not to be restored. To be forgiven means that we can be reconciled and can get along together again.

In one sense, the offender is at the mercy of the offended. Our text tells us that God reconciled us to Himself in Christ. God reconciled the world to Himself; God did not reconcile Himself to the world. Who moved first? God did! Jesus died for me before I repented! God provided forgiveness for me (through the gospel) before I was born! God wants sinners back! However, sinners must want to be taken back. Man is eternally lost unless God acts. We are His enemies, but we can be reconciled! Who moved first? Love responded first!

- Forgiveness is impossible without the grace of the offended.
- Forgiveness is impossible without the repentance of the offender.

It only takes *one* to forgive. It takes *two* to reconcile. We cannot help a man who will not help himself. Forgiveness is an unnatural act. The offended does not wish to pay the price; the offender does not want to repent. Nevertheless, they must do *both* to reconcile. Unless forgiveness leads to reconciliation, forgiveness fails.

Forgiveness is not the end (as our society thinks); rather, forgiveness is the means, and reconciliation is the end. Forgiveness does not merely free us from penalty; forgiveness allows us to restore a broken relationship.

THE LAWS OF “FORGIVENESS”

Shakespeare said, “To be, or not to be, that is the question.”¹ Scripture says, “To forgive, or not to forgive—that is the issue.” I must forgive. I must be forgiven. These are the big issues of life. Forgiveness is the bridge over which all must walk. What do we do when we forgive? What do we do when we accept forgiveness? Paul said, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). Forgiveness begins with kindness. Be kind first! Then practice the laws of forgiveness. What are they?

The first law: The unforgiving cannot be forgiven. Read Jesus’ prayer in Matthew 6:12–15; Mark 11:24–26; and Luke 11:4. (See also Matthew 18:35; Luke 6:37; 2 Corinthians 2:7) Do not just learn the theory—start the practice! Our paramount purpose must be to learn to forgive. Be the first to forgive!

The second law: The offended must forgive, if only for sanity’s sake! Without forgiveness, one can become bitter, mean, and angry. The past must not rule the future. Without forgiveness, one lives in chains. If you wait until the offender repents, you may waste your life waiting. Once you forgive in your heart, the offense ceases to be a primary issue—whether or not the offender repents.

The third law: There cannot be forgiveness without repentance. The chair and the plate belonging to the

¹William Shakespeare *Hamlet* 3.1.56.

prodigal son were there even when he was in the far country (Luke 15), but he had to repent and return to use them. The prodigal left home to sin; to be forgiven, he had to stop sinning and return home (Luke 15:11–24). You cannot have forgiveness while living in the far country and sinning. The forgiveness was there—the unmerited yet conditional forgiveness of God. The father could not force the prodigal to return. God cannot save us until we let Him.

The innocent do not need forgiveness; they need to be defended and vindicated. Sinners are not innocent. Sinners are not victims. We must accept full responsibility for our sin. We must acknowledge guilt: “I did it.” Read Psalm 51. Then we must repent (change). Someone may say, “It doesn’t matter.” Sin, offense, and betrayal matter! Sinners are violators!

Sin must be dealt with. Remember Peter? He was willing to forgive seven times (Matthew 18:21–35). Jesus multiplied that seventy times! He Himself used the number “seven” in Luke 17:3, 4. Peter was listening; but he was not thinking, learning, or beginning to practice. Nothing is too big or too much to forgive (Matthew 18:21–35). At the same time, forgiveness is not license to sin (Galatians 6:7).

Reconciliation is more than forgiveness. To reduce salvation to forgiveness is to rob it of its fullness. Repentance is not just turning from sin; it also involves turning to God. The prodigal could have been forgiven yet made a slave. God wants sons, not slaves (Luke 15). Sinners cannot accomplish their reconciliation, but they can reject it when God offers it. The popular attitude “I am not here to judge you” must be revised! Repentance involves judgment of sin. We will not engage in judgment, repentance,

and forgiveness until we see sin the way God does. Repentance can never be too soon, but it can be too late.

The fourth law: Forgiveness does not guarantee a painless future. Forgiven sin still has consequences. Time and forgetfulness are not forgiveness. God remembers our sins no more (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17), but this is not “spiritual amnesia.” Sin has consequences. King David’s baby died. Forgiven Israel was punished. Jerusalem was “wiped out like a dish” (in A.D. 70). Sinners still have nightmares. “My sin is ever before me,” David wrote (Psalm 51:3b).

Forgiveness is a gift, yet it is the most costly thing on earth (Romans 5:10). Gifts like forgiveness are to be humbly received and greatly enjoyed. Only when we accept our forgiveness do we love as we can and should (Luke 7:36–50). Forgiving is not forgetting; it is starting all over again.

*The cross . . .
there is no other way!*