



A Life of Reconciliation

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”
2 Corinthians 5:17-18*

We’ve said many times throughout this series that to be a Christ-follower is to live life as he would live if he were in our place. To follow Jesus means committing ourselves to Christ, immersing ourselves in his example and teaching as it comes to us in the four Gospels, and learning from him how to put into practice what we see there. We don’t do this with our own strength; Jesus has promised us that our commitment will bring his constant presence into our everyday lives as a living and tangible reality. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

To this point we’ve discussed what it means to live a life of purpose, prayer, welcome, mercy, humility, peace, trust, and love. This week we turn our attention to what Jesus teaches us about reconciliation and forgiveness, which together represent the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Gospel’s transformative message. Indeed, reconciliation *is* the gospel: The greatest story of reconciliation is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who broke the barrier between God and humanity so that in the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to break down the walls that divide us.

Reconciliation and forgiveness are not one-time events, but life-long practices. They are part of a whole way of life lived in Christ. Without forgiveness and reconciliation, our world easily devolves into taking sides, bitterness, holding grudges, and violence. No wonder that almost two-thirds of Jesus’ teaching is directly or indirectly about reconciliation and forgiveness. It is God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and this work of reconciliation is still ongoing today. Our call as the church is to join in on what God is doing.

Jesus on Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Read Matthew 5:21-24. This section of the Sermon on the Mount begins to turn the perspective of the disciples outside of themselves. Jesus is talking to them about how to live. They are not disciples for their own sakes, and their own actions, but for the sake of those around them as well. There is an accountability, a responsibility to the other for the sake of the good of the community. And the disciples needed to hear this truth. How they work out what it means to be disciples of Jesus is not a solitary affair, but can and should happen within a community of the faithful.

In Matthew 5:24 Jesus tells us not to go to the altar if we are fighting with a brother or sister because reconciliation is a prerequisite to coming before God. So Jesus says to go and be reconciled. Go to the other person directly and talk about your conflict, with the purpose of finding resolution. No matter who caused the breach, it's up to disciples of Jesus to take the initiative to resolve it.

The notion that we must reconcile with anyone who has something against us before we can give our gifts to God should give us pause. What if broken relationships among neighbors, family, and friends are not just obstacles among us but a barometer for our relationship to God, too? These words reveal that our relationship with God is not a solitary and private relationship. Jesus implies that resentment and estrangement from others prevent us from even giving our gifts to God. This command calls us to far more than a baseline of decency or a standard of righteousness; it calls us to a path of relational wholeness with God and others alike.

Read Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 23:34. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive, he was told, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” In the Bible the number seven represents completion, fullness, wholeness. So when Jesus tells his disciples to forgive 7 x 70 times, he is saying to make forgiveness infinite and never-ending. In other words, stop counting. Every time you are wronged, let it go and forgive. Forgiveness does not need to be earned, the other person does not need to repent. There can be not limit for forgiveness, for there is no limit in God's forgiveness for us.

As Jesus showed us, to demonstrate self-giving love means forgiving those who have done evil against us. We see this in Jesus in his petition to God while nailed to the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Jesus knows that evil cannot be defeated with evil, violence with violence, hurt with hurt—and so he dies freely, offering forgiveness to his killers.

Following him today involves reaching out with a similar love to those who hurt us. Not only does forgiving follow Jesus' example, it also is for our own good. Releasing that heavy debt of “you owe me” frees us from carrying around resentment. With these examples that Jesus gives us (including his encounter with Peter in the following text), we are challenged to step back and view conflict as an opportunity to sow peace and reconciliation wherever there is conflict.

Read John 21:15-19. Extending forgiveness and reconciling with others are some of the hardest things anyone can be called on to do. Yet there is no question that being a Christ-follower involves both. Here Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus (18:15-18, 25-27) and rapid return to his old occupation are graciously redeemed and redirected in his conversation with Jesus. In this exchange Jesus reconciles with Peter and reinstates him into the fold by asking him three times to take care of his sheep. The call to “feed my sheep” — to love and lead Jesus' followers — is an important moment for next step in the church to come. In John 21, we see that reconciliation also creates the possibility for something new and hopeful. As Jesus reconciles with and restores Peter, he releases Peter from the bondage of past hurts and frees him to live fully into his calling.

The Ministry & Message of Reconciliation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Paul's unique understanding and usage of the term "reconciliation" is rooted in his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus – an experience in which Paul, an enemy of God, found himself forgiven and reconciled to God. In his Damascus experience, Paul encounters Jesus, who is not wrathful, but loving and reconciling. In the same act of receiving grace, Paul is asked to give account for the injustices committed through his persecutions. Miroslav Volf explains the significance of this order: "Remarkably, Jesus does not pursue justice first and then offer reconciliation; rather, the offer of reconciliation opens up the possibility of doing justice and living in peace whose ultimate shape is a community of love."

According to Paul, then, if forgiveness lies at the heart of reconciliation with God, it is also forgiveness that lies at the heart of reconciliation between human beings. We cannot separate the two: being reconciled with God *means* being reconciled with "the other," whoever it may be. Paul reminds us that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. He calls us to embody the love of Christ, the willingness to die to ourselves as modeled by Christ, and the joy of reconciliation. In doing so, we become *ambassadors* for Christ.

Generally speaking, an ambassador is a respected official acting as a representative of a nation. Sent to a foreign land, the ambassador's role is to reflect the official position of the sovereign body that gave him authority. A kingdom ambassador, therefore, is a follower of Jesus who strives to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. As Kingdom Ambassadors, we carry the culture of the Kingdom of God everywhere we go. The culture of the Kingdom of God is defined by Jesus' example on the cross: His love, his selflessness, and the hope of resurrection.

As a community of people called by God, we are sent as disciples of Jesus to bear witness to God's reconciliation, redemption, and transformation of creation. And we need not work in full time ministry to be a minister of reconciliation. Your vocation, whatever it may be, has the potential to be an expression of the reconciling, transformative power of God. We must believe that God is actively carrying out his mission through the actions of Christians playing their roles in all walks of life—as managers, teachers, musicians, artists, doctors, lawyers, nurses, mothers, fathers, caregivers...and the list goes on and on. This is where the real mission takes place.

A Life Committed to Reconciliation

To be a follower of Jesus means to live a life committed to reconciliation. Since reconciliation between God and humankind is at the heart of Christ's work on the cross, it makes sense that reconciliation should be a core expression of our discipleship and our citizenship in the kingdom of God. Where reconciliation happens, people come to faith; they are given responsibility to be disciples; they strive for justice; they serve and they seek reconciliation with others.

If we are to tell the story of Jesus today, we must see ourselves as having been entrusted with the mission of carrying on God's ministry of reconciliation in the world (2 Cor 5:18-19). We are to both announce reconciliation (describe, explain, advocate for), and demonstrate it (be reconciled to others, mediate reconciliation among others). We must speak truthfully and honestly about our world, the divisions that exist, and the powers that seek to divide us. We must commit ourselves to remembering, sharing, and living the good news of the Jesus Christ, which overcomes all conflict and division that leave us separated from one another.

In addition, we must forgive those who hurt us and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt. Reconciliation grows from the hard work of forgiveness because reconciliation is possible only when we decide not to hold the sins and failures of others against them any more than God holds our sins and failures against us. We forgive because we have seen Jesus' example of forgiveness. We forgive because we have been forgiven, having received the gift of God's forgiveness. We must be aware that we will fail people and others will fail us, and we can nurture an atmosphere of reconciliation when we are quick to forgive and quick to ask for forgiveness.

Lastly, let us reflect on our wider responsibility and calling in the world. Clearly we cannot take responsibility for all the pain that permeates society today, and we cannot reconcile all the divisions that exist. But as Trevor Hudson suggests, we can ask God, "Lord, who is the suffering brother or sister that I need to recognize? To what cry in my broader community must I listen? Where are you calling me to respond to someone's need around me? Where can I contribute to the common good through prayer, protest, and practical action?" As people and places comes to mind, speak to God about them.

Discussion

1. Fill in the blank: "Reconciliation is _____." Identify 3-5 responses that seem most important to you as a group.
2. What are the marks that define Christ's work of reconciliation? How do those responses compare with the definitions given to the previous question?
3. Of all the things he could talk about, why do you think Jesus spoke so frequently about reconciliation and forgiveness? Based on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:24, what is the connection between our relationship with others and our relationship with God?
4. Given Peter's numerous misunderstandings and denials of Jesus, describe how you think he felt throughout the scene in John 21, especially as Jesus reconciles the relationship and calls him to a special task.
5. What does it mean for us to live as "ambassadors for Christ"? Paul reminds us that reconciliation is our mission. Where it happens people come to faith; they are given responsibility to be disciples; they strive for justice; they serve and they seek reconciliation with others. Describe how you have seen the work of reconciliation lead to the things mentioned above.
6. As an ambassador for Christ and a minister of reconciliation, what is something you can do in the days ahead (whether in your home, workplace, or community) to advocate for and demonstrate reconciliation?