

The 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; 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.” Society wants freedom without accountability. There can be no reconciliation without satisfaction. 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! Reconciliation is not a business transaction. Jesus died for me before I repented! God provided forgiveness for me (with 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 moved 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.” (William Shakespeare Hamlet 3.1.56.). Scripture says, “To forgive, or not to forgive—that is the issue.” I must forgive. I must be forgiven. That is the big issue 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 put it this way: “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; Luke 11:4; see also Matthew 18:35; 2 Corinthians 2:7; Luke 6:37.) 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, it 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 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: “I did it.” Read Psalm 51. Then we must repent (change). Someone may say, “It doesn’t matter.” Sin, hurt, offense, and betrayal matter! Sinners are violators! When we are violated, then we rebuke; when there is repentance, we forgive (Luke 17:3, 4).

Sin matters. It must be dealt with. Remember Peter? He was willing to forgive seven times (Matthew 18:21–35). Jesus multiplied that seventy times! Jesus Himself used the “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).

God did not say to Adam and Eve, “I forgive you.” They were driven out of the Garden of Eden. Jesus did not yell down from the cross, “I forgive you,” although He did ask God to remit the sin of those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34).

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 cannot 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” (A.D. 70). Sinners still have nightmares. “My sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51:3b).

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

The Big Words of the Cross, 3

1 John 2:1, 2

*“And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins;
and not for ours only,
but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).*

“Propitiation”

The big word “propitiation” is one we have a hard time spelling and often mispronounce. This word presents a difficult concept because heathen practices have tarnished the concept. Pagan idols were portrayed as having childish whims that had to be appeased. In Jesus’ time “propitiation” referred to appeasing the anger of an idol by making a blood sacrifice.

God does not have moods; He is above hurt feelings. He did not appease Himself at the cross. He created a salvation by which He was justified. God Himself justified Himself. Jesus provided this propitiation through His personal sacrifice. In a sense, God bore our punishment! In this way, He can be just and still save sinners.

Man must be righteous, but he cannot create righteousness because of his sinfulness. It is of God, but God cannot just confer it on sinners. Neither can sinners pay back, bribe, or impress God with lavish gifts. Jesus became the final, perfect sacrifice for us. He took upon Himself first our flesh, then our sin. He is both our sacrifice and our High Priest (Hebrews 2:14–18). He is both our Lord and our Savior (Acts 2:36). He is our vicarious sacrifice—the fulfillment of all Jewish sacrifices. He was not made guilty; He was made to be sin as our substitute for our sin (2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

Propitiation enforces the enormity of sin. Love without wrath is sentimentality. Divine grace satisfied divine wrath by a divine self-sacrifice.

“Expiation”

The New Testament says it is impossible for sinners to save themselves. Only Christianity has the Savior, Jesus (Acts 2:36).

Propitiation (reconciliation) is made possible by expiation (making atonement). Propitiation and expiation are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. You expiate a sin, but you propitiate a person. Expiation is a doctrinal truth; propitiation is a personal application of a doctrinal truth. Expiation is the removal of guilt; propitiation is the removal of the divine wrath that has come because of the sin.

Jesus is our “mercy seat” (Romans 3:25, 26). Our righteousness is a faith-righteousness that comes through Christ. The blood of Jesus is our expiatory sacrifice. This is the heart of the heart of the heart of our faith. The cross is where the sin of man is judged. To expiate is to pay the penalty, the price (1 John 2:1, 2); to propitiate is to satisfy the justice of God. We were bought with a price, and a righteous God has declared us righteous through our faith in Jesus. We are not declared innocent, but we are considered “not guilty” because Jesus paid the price for our sin (Hebrews 2:17, 18; 1 John 4:9–11; 1 Peter 2:9, 10).

Jesus is our “Passover” (1 Corinthians 5:7). He covered our sins, allowing God to put them behind His back (Romans 8:1, 2; see Isaiah 38:17).

God did not stand apart from the cross in petulant anger. He involved Himself in our plight. In Christ, He took the penalty of our sins upon Himself—not in mechanical substitution, but in profoundly personal love. God cannot and will not forgive and accept us except through the cross.

“Imputation”

The idea of imputed righteousness is profound yet simple. Sinful man cannot be righteous; therefore, imputed righteousness is the only kind of righteousness he can have. Justification has been called “the supreme paradox of the gospel.” Through forgiveness, God makes sinners just, or righteous (Romans 8:1, 2).

Imputation is an accounting term. Another’s riches are placed in my account. Our sins are imputed to Christ, and His righteousness is imputed to us (Isaiah 53:5, 6, 10, 11; 1 Peter 2:24; Romans 4:11; 14:9). Read and reread Philippians 3:7–11. Tragically, we would prefer to merit grace, but grace cannot be merited! Burton Coffman well said, “Nothing that man could ever do in a million years of righteous living could ever earn the tiniest fraction of the salvation God gives to men in Christ” (James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Romans* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1973), 122.). Furthermore, imputed righteousness eliminates human pride. The only meritorious work in salvation is the cross.

“Ransom”

The best known and most misunderstood facet of atonement is “ransom.” A ransom is the purchase price for freeing slaves, and sinners are the servants of sin. God forever silenced Satan at the cross (Matthew 20:28; Galatians 3:13; 1 Timothy 2:5, 6; Titus 2:14, 15), where the blood of the Lamb was given to redeem us. What Satan thought was his greatest victory was his final defeat! Our sins will either be paid for at the cross, or they will be paid for in hell. We make the choice. Jesus died for us—as a price for our sin and a substitute for our death. He did not die as a martyr for a cause, but He freely gave His life as a ransom for us. Jesus made sin forgivable and man savable. Hallelujah, our Redeemer lives!

To whom was this ransom paid? God did not buy sinners back from Satan. God does not negotiate with anyone! We are “sold under sin” (Romans 7:14; NKJV), but we are not sold to Satan. God, not Satan, was satisfied at the cross (1 John 2:1, 2). Satan is the “accuser” (Revelation 12:9, 10). God cannot be holy without punishing sin. Sin has to be paid for.

Neither was the ransom paid to society. Society has no law or court to deal with sin. The ransom was paid in order to satisfy the justice and holiness of God. We were bought with a tremendous price. Upon being ransomed, the debtor is totally owned. A ransom is satisfaction for the insult of sin. The penalty of law (Romans 6:23) is paid, and its sanctity is vindicated. The ransom reveals the seriousness, sheer depth, and horror of sin. Salvation is given to us as a gift when we believe and obey. Jesus not only dethroned Satan, but He also dealt with sin. In overcoming sin, Jesus overcame death. The sin-debt is unpayable except through the marvel of His grace.

The redeemed must never forget what redemption is!

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