

Reconciliation **2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

People sometimes complain about others using big words

- They complain they're only trying to show off.
- They complain they see themselves as a cut above the rest of us.
- They complain they can't understand them because of all the fancy words they're using.

The reality is that big words aren't the issue. The issue is whether they're words we understand or not.

- There are some relatively small words most of us don't understand. *Zygote*, for example, has only two syllables – yet I suspect it's only the Scrabble enthusiasts amongst us who know of its existence and even they may not know its meaning. *Lar* only has three letters and appears in my Boggle dictionary – but I couldn't find it listed in any of the three regular dictionaries in our house.
- There are some quite large words that aren't a problem because they're in fairly common use. I looked through an article written by someone well-known for his ability to communicate with today's young people – and it contained words such as *resonate*, *navigate* and *turbulent* in one short paragraph.

This morning we're thinking about *reconciliation* – a word with six whole syllables. Yet it's a word in most people's vocabularies these days (even if the word *vocabulary* isn't!). We know all about reconciliation:

- Reconciliation between the descendants of European settlers and the aboriginal population.
- Reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians –

or the lack thereof.

- Reconciliation between fighting marriage partners.
- Reconciliation in workplace arrangements.
- Reconciliation between football coaches and their players.

It's a word that's part of everyday usage.

The Series

This morning we want to think about how the Bible uses the word and what it means to us as Christians. Over the last three Good Fridays, we've worked our way through a long-term series dealing with the four main images the Bible uses to help us understand what happened at the cross – four images that speak of what Jesus achieved for us on the cross.

- You probably don't remember that. Having a series where there's only one sermon every twelve months doesn't make it easy to remember.
- You may not have been here the last three years.

In 2007, we thought about *propitiation* – an image from the temple and thus not very familiar to us today. It's a word not in many of *our* vocabularies – even though it was commonly known in Bible times. It's an image that speaks of the sacrifice that needs to be made to turn aside God's anger at our sin. Jesus died on the cross to turn aside God's anger at us. He made that sacrifice for us.

In 2008, we thought about *redemption* – an image that came from the slave markets. Again, this was very familiar in Bible times, but it's less familiar today. It's an image that speaks of the price paid to release a slave from bondage. We were in slavery to sin and death and evil. Jesus paid the ransom to set us free from that slavery.

His death was the price paid to set us free – to redeem us.

Last year, we thought about *justification* – an image from the law courts that speaks of getting a favourable verdict in court. The one on trial is either acquitted or condemned. When we're put on trial in God's court, we can be confident of being acquitted – justified – because Jesus already paid the penalty for our crimes. We don't deserve to be acquitted – but Jesus already served the time for us. The penalty for our crimes was fully paid by Jesus on the cross. Thus, God can pronounce us *justified*.

Today we come to the fourth image – *reconciliation* – an image from the area of personal relationships. It speaks of a relationship gone wrong – a relationship that needs repairing and restoring.

All four words are rather big and, except for *reconciliation*, aren't used very much these days. It's tempting to think: they're big, boring words that I'll just put in the too-hard basket and won't bother about. Let me assure you that, from the slave's point of view, there's nothing boring about being set free. For the one facing court, there's nothing boring about a *justified* verdict. You and I are the slaves. You and I are the ones facing court. This is very relevant to us.

Why is Reconciliation Necessary?

Just as relevant is this image of *reconciliation*. At the outset, it's important to realise that people – all people – need to be reconciled to God. Some people wonder what the fuss is all about:

- They don't feel they've done anything to upset God.
- They haven't tried to bother God at all – they've

simply tried to do their own thing without wanting God around to interfere.

- They haven't set out to antagonise God or to get God off-side.
- They don't feel God's angry with them.

So, they ask, why all this fuss about *reconciliation*? Isn't that just for people who deliberately upset God?

That's not how God views it – and in the long run, His opinion's the one that's more important. Since He's the One who is God and Creator, it's what He says about the situation that's crucial – not how we may feel or not feel about it.

The Bible says: in the beginning, God had a good relationship with Adam and Eve. That's the picture of the Garden of Eden. God made the Garden and it's a good and beautiful place. He put Adam and Eve in the Garden to enjoy it and care for it. He probably met with them in the cool of each day, walked with them, and had friendship with them. It's always in the context of God being Creator and them being creatures. Yet, in that context, there was perfect harmony between God and humanity.

That harmony's destroyed when humanity deliberately disobeyed God – and ate the fruit of the one tree forbidden to them. At that point, the relationship between God and humanity became highly strained, to say the least. Humans had rebelled against God. Humans had declared themselves God's enemy. So it continued right through history. As more men and women were born, so we each joined the side of Adam and Eve. We each enlisted in the rebellion against God. We each showed ourselves to be God's enemies. We ran our own lives our

own way without reference to what our Creator wanted.

- Some are very active in their rebellion. They know what God says. They know what God wants of them. They deliberately refuse. Some go so far as to even flaunt their disobedience before others.
- Others are more passive in rebellion. They don't deliberately set out to disobey God. Rather, they just want to ignore God. They don't pay any attention to Him or bother Him. They hope that, in return, God won't bother them.

Both are equally rebellion against God. Suppose the king says: All subjects must have my picture on their bedroom wall.

- Roy can't be bothered going out and buying the king's picture and hanging it on his wall. That's passive rebellion. He simply couldn't be bothered following the king's instructions.
- George goes out and buys a picture of the king of the neighbouring kingdom and hangs that on his wall. That's active rebellion.
- Harry hangs up the picture, but draws some defamatory additions and uses it as a dartboard. That's active rebellion disguised as passive rebellion.

It doesn't matter whether the rebellion against God is active or passive – it's still rebellion. We've all joined it. That's what Romans 3:10-12 says:

As it is written

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,*

not even one.

OK, you say, God says I'm His enemy. So what? Is it a problem for how I live? What's it really matter if I'm God's enemy?

The Bible says being God's enemy is a significant problem – the most significant problem we'll face in this life. We can rank our enemies according to how much they're likely to trouble us.

- The young three-year-old boy living down the street who says he hates you probably won't cause you much loss of sleep. You may prefer he loved you and may try all sorts of bribery to change his attitude. Yet, if you can't change his mind, you're not likely to experience much fear.
- If your enemy's the twenty-year-old local Mafia rep who threatens to measure you for a pair of cement shoes, that's a different story altogether. Then you may consider a permanent trip to the Amazon jungles to deal with that.

So where should you rank God as an enemy? Should you lose any sleep knowing that God's your enemy?

God says that, when He brings this world to a conclusion, He will judge those who remain His enemies. God says the punishment associated with that is something totally undesirable – something to be avoided if at all possible. Is God likely to carry out His threats?

- The Bible says God's truthful. So if He says He'll do something, I can be sure He intends to do it.
- The Bible says God's powerful. So if He says He'll do something, I can be sure He has the ability to do what He says He'll do.

Being God's enemy is a very serious thing.

Think about that for a moment.

- If you're a Christian, it means there was a time when you were God's enemy – not just neutral or an impartial observer, but an actual enemy opposed to God. It's important to remember you've changed sides and how that came about.
- If you're not a Christian, it means you're currently God's enemy – maybe actively; maybe passively; maybe even religiously. As God's enemy, your future prospect is God's judgment – unless you can change your enemy status.

We must be clear about this. We have a tendency to think too highly of ourselves.

I'm such a nice person. I've got a lot to offer. God couldn't bear to miss out on my company in heaven.

Things would be so dull if I wasn't around.

That isn't what the Bible says. I wasn't nice. I was God's enemy. I needed reconciliation with God. If you aren't a Christian, you still need that reconciliation. The only other prospect is God's judgment.

How is Reconciliation Achieved?

How is it, then, that human beings such as you and I are reconciled to God? What process is involved?

- Is it a process requiring me to take the initiative?
- Is there something I have to do to show God I'm worthy of being reconciled to Him?
- Do I have to earn my reconciliation with God?
- Am I too far gone? Am I so much an enemy that there's no hope of becoming God's friend?

The short answers to those questions are:

- No – I don't take the initiative.
- No – I can't be worthy enough.
- No – I can't earn God's friendship.
- No – God offers reconciliation to all.

The good news of the Bible is that God has taken steps to reconcile us to Himself. He didn't wait for us to take the initiative. He didn't sit around and say:

Well, those humans made themselves My enemies.

They created their own problem. Let them solve it.

By ourselves, we couldn't come up with a satisfactory solution. It's not a problem we humans can solve. We are the problem – our entrenched rebellion. Left to ourselves, we'd have no hope. Our status as enemies would be permanent. Our only future would be God's judgment.

God took the initiative. Although we're the ones at fault – the ones who made ourselves His enemies – He took the initiative to restore the relationship. The initiative He took was to send Jesus to die for our rebellion.

The Bible tells us that, at the cross, the problem causing hostility between God and us was dealt with fully.

- Jesus Himself was perfectly good. He always lived in harmony with His Father. He always lived how God wanted Him to live. Never once did He rebel against the Father's wishes.
- Because of that, Jesus deserved to live. He didn't deserve to die – for death's the punishment for rebellion.
- And yet, Jesus did die. He was cruelly put to death on a cross – the event we remember today.

Why? If Jesus was perfectly good, why did He suffer the

penalty of death?

The answer has to do with all four images:

- Jesus died as the sacrifice to turn aside the wrath of God – to *propitiate* God.
- Jesus died to pay the price of our release from bondage – to *redeem* us.
- Jesus died to pay the legal penalty for our sin – to *justify* us in God's court.
- Jesus died to *reconcile* us to God.

At the cross an exchange took place. My rebellion – the things that make me God's enemy – they were placed on Jesus as if they were His. He took them and He paid the penalty for them. He endured God's judgment on my sin, in my place.

It wasn't just for me that Jesus died. His death was sufficient to cover the rebellion of all of us, so each of us can be reconciled to God. Jesus' work is complete. The cause of the hostility between God and humanity is fully dealt with from God's side. It remains now to call on men and women to receive the reconciliation God offers.

That the hostility between God and us has been dealt with is illustrated by something that happened at the time of Jesus' death. In the temple in Jerusalem was a section called the Holy of Holies – the part symbolising God's dwelling with His people. That part of the temple was divided from the rest by a heavy curtain. No one was allowed behind the curtain except the high priest. Even he could only go in once a year and only with the blood of sacrifice. That curtain showed the people they were separated from God; that they needed reconciliation.

When Jesus died, that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. God removed the barrier. The work of reconciliation had been done by Jesus. Because Jesus died for our sins, we can now have access to God. The writer of Hebrews emphasises this in Hebrews 10:19-22.

Reconciliation involves two parties being reconciled to each other. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke the relationship between God and us.

- They turned their back on God and said they were no longer willing to live in the relationship the way God created it.
- In a sense, God also turned His back on them. He pronounced judgment on them. He sent them out of the Garden.

For there to be true reconciliation, the problems on both sides must be dealt with.

The message of Easter is: God's dealt with the problems on His side. His just anger has been satisfied. He took steps to see that the just penalty for our rebellion has been paid. He's done everything necessary on His side for reconciliation. Now it's up to us to accept the offer.

When we think of this concept of reconciliation, there's one important distinction we must keep in mind. When we think in terms of our earthly relationships, we think of a transaction between equals. In a marriage relationship, when husband and wife have a fight and want to make up, they come to the table as equals. They compromise between themselves. There's usually fault on both sides. There's usually give and take on both sides.

When we're talking about God and being reconciled to

God, we don't come to the table as equals. He comes to the table as Creator – we come as His creatures. Some have such a high opinion of themselves that they want to change that.

- Some come to the table wanting to reverse that situation. They want God to accept their terms. They want a reconciliation that maintains the status quo. They want God to allow them to be their own boss and they want God to submit to their demands and they want God to take away any threat of judgment.
- Some come to the table willing to compromise. They want God to accept them as equals. They want a reconciliation giving them terms of limited rebellion. They'll let God have His way 50% of the time and they want their own way the other 50%.

We aren't equals – not by a long shot. We're created in God's image – and so can relate to Him meaningfully – but that doesn't mean we'll ever get close to being on the same level as Him. Reconciliation must always be on His terms. Our rebellious natures complain about that. We think God wants to diddle us somehow – that He just wants to keep us under His thumb and have His own ego stroked. That's part of our character – not His.

- God's totally good – His instructions to us aren't to gain some personal benefit for Himself; they indicate how life is best lived for us and how we can get the most out of His gift.
- God's complete in Himself – He doesn't come to the table with some hidden agenda of how He can get us to meet His needs. God doesn't have any needs. He doesn't need us. He comes to the table wanting what's best for us.

He asks us to give up the rebellion and be reconciled.

What does Reconciliation Mean for us?

What are the implications for us? What's it mean in day to day terms for me to be reconciled to God? Four things, very briefly. These aren't the only four things – but they are four fairly significant things.

First, it means we no longer face God's judgment. God's judgment is reserved for those still His enemies when He ends this world. If we're reconciled with God, then we're no longer His enemies. We're now His friends – trying to live on friendly terms with our Creator. That, of course, means we now pay attention to His wishes and try to live how He wants us to live.

Secondly, it means we have access to God in prayer. We take that for granted – as if it's our right to talk to God. We often don't remember what a privilege it is. The fact that I, as a rebellious human, can be on friendly terms with the righteous God is amazing. Can you imagine a cockroach being on friendly terms with a housewife? Yet I, an insignificant lump of dust that's rebelled against his Creator, now have freedom to come into His royal court and ask favours. I have confidence because of His promise to grant me such access through Jesus.

Thirdly, God now gives me ambassadorial status. As a human already reconciled to God, He now gives me the task of telling other humans they too can be reconciled with God. Having understood what Jesus did on the cross to reconcile me, I'm to share that knowledge with those not yet reconciled. God calls all humans to be reconciled to Him – to give up their rebellion. The way God gets the message out is through those already reconciled. We call

others to accept God's free offer.

Fourthly, this gives us a basis for better relationships with each other. Because we no longer see ourselves as our own little gods wanting our own way all the time and wanting to push ourselves ahead of others, we're free to relate to them on better terms. Having got the vertical relationship with God put on the right footing, it frees us up to have the horizontal relationships with others also on the right footing. It's the sort of thing Paul emphasises in the second half of Ephesians 2. We're all equal – rebels forgiven by God because Jesus died for us.

Conclusion

Reconciliation is a big word – but it's a word we're familiar with in our human relationships. The Bible says it's also an important word in terms of our relationship with God – and there is no more important relationship. Think through the three questions we looked at briefly this morning.

- Why is reconciliation necessary? If you don't understand you're God's enemy, you won't realise the desperate situation you're in.
- How is reconciliation achieved? This is why Jesus died for us – to make reconciliation possible from God's side.
- What does reconciliation mean for us? You need to accept God's offer of reconciliation for it to have any benefit for you.