



## INTRO:

Hope you had a great 4th of July. We are continuing our **“What Church Can Be”** series and today looking at something that REALLY gets to the heart of who we are as a church. And that is/as you see by the title of my message... **family!**... A few years ago, it was noted that the top 100 films of all time - so films like *Casablanca*, *Gone With The Wind*, *The God Father* - they all have one thing in common: They're all about...relationship BECAUSE we respond to relationship! It's also WHY if you read biographies ya see that one of the SADDEST things is when people with great accomplishments get to the end of their lives and are reaching out for the relationships they alienated to get to where they are. We LONG for relationship and community.

What I wanna show you beginning today and into next week, is that a church, which embraces the identity of being a spiritual **family** - more than anything else - is equipped to meet YOUR relational longing. **Church as family**/that's what we're talking about! So if you have a Bible or your Order of Gathering, open up to **2 Corinthians 5** and follow along, as we hear the reading of God's word... **Brooklyn** reads. **(PAUSE RECORD)**

## TEXT:

If you wanted just 1 verse summarizing the Gospel message and ministry of the church, you'd be hard pressed to find a better one than **v.18** here - the first half of which we'll look at today and the second half next week... Because when Paul says there that, *“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself,”* what he's doing is, essentially, bringing everything he's said thus far ABOUT church... to a point! He's saying, everything we've talked about to this point; *“all this,”* most notably being new creations in Christ, with new attitudes about God and people, experiencing new blessings - ya know, church being able to be all the different things we've seen thus far in our series - *“ALL this,”* is because God has *“reconciled us, to Himself.”* All the purpose, passion, transparency, hospitality, life-giving'ness - it's all FROM the Gospel!

Author Steve Brown tells the story of when his teenage daughter Robin found herself in this really difficult English Lit. class, that she knew she'd fail if she didn't transfer out. So she comes home one day, and with tears in her eyes, begs her dad for help. So the next day Mr. Brown takes Robin to school to meet with the teacher and says, *“I'm here to get my daughter out of this English class. It's too difficult for her. She's too conscientious. Can you please put her into a regular English class?”* And as he's talking, this teacher could tell Robin was about to cry. And so after listening she says, *“Mr. Brown I totally understand. Can I talk to Robin for a minute?”* And she turns to Robin and says, *“Robin, I know how you feel. What if I promised you an A no matter what you did in the class? If I gave you an A before you even started, would you take the class?”* To which Robin, cuz she was no dummy, said sniffling, *“I think I could do that.”* So the teacher says, *“Ok! I'm gonna give you an A/you already have an A. So NOW you can go to class.”* And she dismissed Robin. But then she turned to Mr. Brown and said, *“The reason I'm doing this is because I wanna take away the threat of a bad grade, so that Robin is free to learn English.”*... Well, as it turns out, it worked cuz Robin not only completed the class, she actually ended up getting an A...on her own!

When Paul speaks of being “*reconciled to God through Christ*” here, THAT’S what He’s talking about and why he can say “all this”/everything flows from the Gospel! Because in the Gospel, you already having an A with God! You’re already in with God! The threat of failure, judgment, condemnation has been removed, such that nothing you now do can make your grade with God better. AND nothing you fail to do can make it worse. God’s love and approval of you is totally secure and NEVER determined by YOUR performance, but only by Jesus’ performance FOR you/His “*reconciling*” OF you...So that/like with Robin/*listen*: your *reconciliation* is what mobilizes your living! NOT your living mobilizing your *reconciliation*, but your *reconciliation* mobilizing your living!<sup>1</sup> God’s reconciliation of you being like this high-octane engine under the hood-of your life!

Cuz notice two things here. Notice what Paul means BY “*reconcile*” AND how we come to BE “*reconciled*.” **First** what he means: The word for “*reconcile*” or “*reconciliation*” there is the Greek word καταλλαγή and it literally means “to exchange” - Think money or merchandise. If you reconcile a debt, you’re exchanging a certain amount of money or merchandise to pay it off right? So metaphorically, to BE reconciled means to exchange, say, friendship for enmity, love for anger, even peace for war.<sup>2</sup> When Paul says that we’ve been “*reconciled to God*,” that’s what he means - that God has exchanged His enmity and anger, because of our sin, for friendship and love. He’s repaired the relationship that got ruptured when, you and I/beginning with Adam and Eve, sinned and determined to live for ourselves!

Now, I know that even in a church setting, the idea of sin is somewhat of a touchy topic because, of course, it invokes thoughts of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Scarlet Letter,” witch trials, or just self-righteous people always telling you where you’re wrong. But if you wanna understand the reality of your reconciliation; you gotta understand the reality of sin! So consider two things here: **One**, consider that no matter where you go in the world, you’ll find a society that, while it may not use the word “sin,”/might even espouse that everything’s relative, NEVERTHELESS has an understanding of things that are and are not acceptable. Even here in the US, where we pride ourselves on being “tolerant,” we still find extreme intolerance of certain “sins” right? I mean just ask Republicans what they think of Democrats or Democrats about Republicans. And that’s cuz, implicitly, we UNDERSTAND the concept of sin and subsequently, our need for “*reconciliation*.”...But **Two**, consider that we don’t just understand it, we also FEEL it! St. Augustine famously noted that when Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately perceived their nakedness. Now, the thing is: they’d always been naked right? It’s just that in the loving presence of God, they were perfectly safe and free to be vulnerable, so their nakedness wasn’t an issue. But the minute they sinned and ruptured relationship with God; they FELT their nakedness. And so what did they do? What would ANY of us do if we realized we were naked in public? They hid and looked for covering. And Augustine basically says, THAT’S what you and I have been doing ever since. We know we’re not acceptable the way we are. We know we’re not enough. As the atheist Jean Paul Sartre said, “*inside every human heart, whether you believe God or not, is a*

<sup>1</sup> Illustration from now defunct *Resurgence Blog* - <http://theresurgencereport.com/resurgence/authors/mark-driscoll>

<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 435–436.

voice that whispers ‘not acceptable.’”<sup>3</sup> We know this and know that if we were truly examined, we wouldn’t pass. And SO we look for covering. Some of us with stuff - what we wear, drive, where we live, how we look. Others of us do it with relationships and who we associate with, or what we achieve in comparison to others. Some of us even try to silence that voice that says “we’re not enough” by telling ourselves how special we are or even rejecting God altogether, as the famous playwright Arthur Miller did, because he thought that by getting rid of God, he’d get rid of the doctrines of guilt and judgement, which would then free him FROM guilt. BUT by his own admission, what he found instead, was that he didn’t actually get rid of that sense of “not being enough;” he just transferred it from God to people!<sup>4</sup> And then still others of us can even use religion to cover ourselves; thinking that if we obey God or are good enough Christian, husband, wife, parent, friend, THEN we’ll be acceptable - only to find that, AT BEST, we end up believing that while God might love us, we’re never sure if He actually likes us. And at worst, we live with this sorta low-grade lack of esteem that gets triggered anytime you’re in anyway critiqued or criticized... The point is: Regardless of the form, the problem is the same! We’re futilely trying to cover ourselves because we don’t just UNDERSTAND sin, we FEEL it too!

And so **First**, ya gotta see that word “*reconcile*”; it addresses your deepest needs/the deepest needs of everyone, cuz we’re not just talking about some uneasy truce with God in view of your sin. We’re talking about a complete mending of your broken relationship TO God even IN your sin! As C.S. Lewis said, “*the handwriting that was against you, being cancelled*” - think bunch of negative Twitter comments just being erased. God not just not against you, but actually being your friend and seeing you as perfectly acceptable. THAT’S what it means to be “*reconciled*”!

But **Second**, you also gotta see how we come to BE “*reconciled*.” And the short answer is: By doing nothing! Cuz what does Paul say? Notice the prepositions he uses: He says this reconciliation? was “*from God,*” “*through Christ*” and “*to himself!*” So we’re not talking about as Russ Johnson says, “*a peace treaty made between two equal parties.*”<sup>5</sup> No! We’re talking about a gracious, unilateral, unassisted, one-sided affair, in which your reconciliation stems-from, goes-through, and ends-with God, as Jesus’ substitutionary death removes any barriers to your being A FRIEND of God! Think about that!... If that’s true, it means at least two really pretty scandalous things: **One**, it means/*listen*: God doesn’t love you today, because you’re lovely - Ya know, educated, put-together, hard-working, great parent, snappy dresser! No! You’re lovely, BECAUSE God loves you! His love for you is what provided both the means and the basis for your reconciliation. As Jesus said, “*God so loved the world that He sent His Son*”/ “*reconciled you in the cross of His Son.*” So in being already-loved, that means you’re free from, both Eastern and Western ways, of having to MAKE yourself lovely. And I say eastern and western, cuz there’s a relatively new book out entitled *Selfie*, which talks about how we typically form our identities and how we all essentially live according to 1 of 2 stories that ultimately we

<sup>3</sup> Cited in “What Went Wrong” // Genesis 3:1–19 // *The Whole Story* #3 - J.D. Greear

<sup>4</sup> “I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved . . . on an upward path toward some elevation where—God knows what—I would be justified, or even condemned. A verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day—and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself—this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench.” Arthur Miller, “After the Fall,” in *The Portable Arthur Miller* (Ed. Christopher Bigsby; New York: Penguin, 2003), 262. - Cited in “What Went Wrong” // Genesis 3:1–19 // *The Whole Story* #3 - J.D. Greear

<sup>5</sup> *Reclaiming Church: Equipping The Conversations Most Critical To The Church's Identity & Ministry* - Ebook Loc. 54 of 265

can never uphold: Either an Eastern-Confucian story, as he calls it, or a Western-Aristotelian one. And like it sounds, the eastern story is that narrative influenced by eastern thought, where you see your identity in communal terms. So you're part of a certain community, embedded within a certain group of people, and if you FAIL those people - maybe your family or village, then your life is wrecked. Shame ends up defining who you are... Here in the West though, we tend to see our lives more like a Greek epic, where you're on a journey/maybe to be happy or something. And along the way you gotta conquer certain obstacles to move onward and upward. But of course, eventually you fail in some way, or just realize you haven't succeeded in all the ways you wanted to, which leaves you not just having failed, but as a FAILURE!<sup>6</sup>... The point is: No matter which story tends to define you/and for all of us, it's probably a little of both - in the Gospel, NEITHER actually has to define you. In a really pretty scandalous way, you're ULTIMATELY free from the shame of letting down your community OR being a failure when you fail BECAUSE you're already loved-by/reconciled-to the God of the universe, whose opinion is, honestly, the only one that really counts!

But **Two**, being reconciled entirely and graciously "*by God through Christ*" is also scandalous because it means, you're not just free from having to make yourself lovely; you're free from having to make yourself acceptable too. Cuz as I've shared with you before, the essence of religion is obedience in exchange for acceptance. Religion says, "*I obey, therefore I'm accepted/ follow the rules and God will smile on me.*" But notice, there's nothing in Paul's words here about your obedience LEADING to your reconciliation or acceptance. No! Again, God's reconciling of you has nothing to DO with your obedience. Rather, it has to do with JESUS'S obedience. It's "*through Him*" as Paul says. So think about that: Instead of "*obey and be accepted*" or "*follow the rules and God will smile on you;*" THIS is saying: God has ALREADY smiled on you, so live accordingly and obey! You see?... And Friends, THAT'S the Gospel! The Gospel's not "*reconcile yourself!*" It's "*BE reconciled! Receive reconciliation.*" I mean that's scandalous, because it means that God isn't playing a game of tit-for-tat, or keeping a religious book of records, or even asking you to DO something to "get-in" with Him! Rather, He's telling you it's already DONE in Christ and therefore inviting you to simply agree and believe it!... **Do you believe it? OR are you in some way trying to add to what Jesus has already finished?**

Cuz if I could begin to close by circling back to where we started, what ALL this tells us is that/ church - far from being just a building, event, or organization - is really more a **family**. Cuz in a family, what unites you? At the most basic level, it's having common identity you didn't earn right? Well, if the heart of the Gospel is gracious, un-earned reconciliation with God, then church is really simply the community of those who've awakened-to and are living in light OF that reconciliation. **Family!** - The **family** of those united by a common reconciliation!

Perhaps, this is why Jesus spoke with familial frames, like needing to be "*born again*" and coming to Him "*like little children.*" Or likewise, why the NT repeatedly uses familial language to describe the church, when it says things like, our reconciliation is akin to "*adoption*" ...

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<sup>6</sup> Idea about two ways of creating our identities adapted from podcast: "Signposts with Russell Moore" - May 4, 2018 - "How Should I Prepare For A Midlife Crisis"

whereby we now get God as “*Father*,” Jesus as our “*elder brother*,” and one-another as “*brothers and sisters*.” I mean, ya ever noticed how many NT letters open by saying something like “*dear brothers*” or “*to the faithful brothers and sisters in so-and-so*.” It’s because, in Biblical terms, church isn’t just LIKE a family; It IS family! Cuz just like you haven’t chosen the members of your biological family, but’ve been chosen FOR them and are therefore inseparably bound TO them - similarly, we didn’t choose each other. Rather, we’ve been chosen by God to be reconciled and belong TO God. WHICH MEANS if you belong to God, you necessarily belong to others who belong to God! - **Family!** And I know that depending on your experience WITH family, just that word might come with baggage, but just consider this: In John’s account of Jesus’ crucifixion, he says, “*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved/John standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then to (John), ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour (John) took her to his own home.*” You know what that’s saying? That’s saying that at Jesus’ mere declaration, Mary and John became family and demonstrated all the loyalty we’d expect from a biological mother and son...How much more ought that be true for those of us for whom Jesus didn’t just declare it...but died FOR it!...I mean, as Megan Hill says, “*That oughta stir deep emotions that overflow in tangible expression,*”<sup>7</sup> like really getting to know and invest in each other. Because we’re family by virtue of this common reconciliation, we get to know each other! Each other’s names and stories/learn each other’s interests. As **James 2:1** talks about, we renounce any hint of partiality in an effort to foster unity without homogeneity, and diversity without division!...Talk about something the world could stand to see, BUT never will...apart from the church! Or we treat each other as uniquely gifted and highlight one another’s individuality without, in anyway, degrading community. Ya know all those “*one another*” commands in the Scriptures? - “*Accept one another, Instruct one another, Serve one another, Don’t slander one another,*” plus the over 96 more? Those are all pictures of how, BECAUSE we’re family, we seek to love...one another...in profound ways/ways that are tolerant of hurt without being affirming of sin! Loose in our preferences and priorities, but tight in our commitment to each-another and Jesus! And you say, “*that seems hard/even messy!*” Spoiler alert: It can be! But at the end of the day our joy together IN it doesn’t come from how easy or smooth it all goes, but from Jesus, “*our elder brother*,” who gave everything to reconcile us to “*our Heavenly Father*,” so that we’re now free to not just tolerate each other and certainly never write each other off; but actually delight in each other...no matter how unexceptional any of us may be! And I speak from experience on this: Even if you ARE PROFOUNDLY unexceptional; if you’re “*reconciled to God through Christ*,” I dare say, as did that great theologian from the Dos Equis beer commercials: That makes you the most interesting person in the world! - someone I wanna be **family** with and have as MY family! ***So receive afresh His reconciliation this morning. And let that reconciliation be what unites us as the kind of family for which we all long! ...Let’s Pray!***

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<sup>7</sup> “Your Church Is Your Family” - article is adapted from A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church (Crossway, 2020)