

# Reconciliation with God!

## Your Reconciling Mission

Psalm 139:14-24; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Periodically, desperate husbands appear before me and say, "*Peg left,*" "*Connie kicked me out,*" or "*June asked for a divorce.*" Often they dissolve in tears. After a time I ask them why they think their wives want to end their marriages. The husbands usually point to specific things; and we discuss plans for change. But after they return home, they don't follow through. "*Things are better now,*" they'll tell me. When I hear that, I know the marriage will end soon. They confuse the calm their wives exhibit while they wait to see if the visit with the pastor brings any change for the end of the crisis. When no change occurs, the women reason that even ministers can't help. They give up hope, and divorce follows.

These husbands really wanted reconciliation. However, they and their wives came to believe that it could not happen. Disheartened and clueless as to what it takes, they saw no other option. Like most people, they struggle with reconciliation because they hold errant notions about it. Over the next few weeks we will expose some of the myths that prevent us from experiencing reconciliation; and you'll discover what you can do to help it happen.

It is important to clear up all the confusion because reconciliation is the essential Christian experience. It is not merely a doctrine, concept or belief. It is an experience. It is the one common experience all Christians can share. Reconciliation with God is the essential gift and experience that Jesus died to offer. It is the essential gift that Jesus imparts. A genuine faith in Jesus brings about this experience with God.

In addition, believers reconciled with God are uniquely equipped and called to minister reconciliation. They are equipped because they've gone through this experience in their life. Therefore, they are given the ministry of reconciliation. Everything we do is to facilitate, foster and bring reconciliation between people and God, and also between one

another. The Bible tells us that this is our work. We have a reconciling mission. So what is reconciliation? What does it look like? How does it happen? Moreover, what does it mean to be reconciled with God?

When people reconcile, separated people come together. Having been at odds, they now are at peace. Opponents embrace with tears and then begin walking together as friends. Once wounded and sad, they celebrate a satisfying and trusting friendship that was impossible before.

This is what God wants with you: reconciliation that results in a trusting, satisfying friendship. Unfortunately, it is possible to be very religious and not experience it. You can be baptized and confirmed. You can believe the Apostle's Creed. You can attend church and work in many good causes, and still not be reconciled with God. Jesus said,

***Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"*** (Matt 7:21-23)

Look at the force of Jesus' words. "Many will say to me on that day:" didn't we do all these wonderful things "in your name:" didn't we prophesy, didn't we dust those devils and accomplish great things? But Jesus says that he'll say, "I never knew you."

What do you do with a statement like that? What does it mean? Doesn't it suggest that not all Christian believers, or even more, that many Christians are not reconciled with God?

When I was in high school, I watched a Christian student prepare to cheat. I asked him, "Aren't you afraid that you 'll offend God?" "No," the student replied, "I asked God to forgive me already." I shook my head, and wondered if it worked to ask forgiveness before you sin. Do you suppose that would work with parents? "Mom and Dad, please forgive me when later tonight I break curfew and come home drunk." Do you think the son would be reconciled with his parents? Do you suppose that works with a shopkeeper. "Please forgive me for stealing some items from your store in a few minutes."

As foolish as that youth sounds, our notions about forgiveness and reconciliation aren't too different. The youth treats the expression "sorry" or "forgive me" as if they were some kind of magic words, some kind of formula that assures forgiveness. Don't we do the same? We think we escape judgment because we say "we've sinned" in a prayer. Some Christian groups promote a Sinner's Prayer as a way of being forgiven. It is assumed that once we pray the prayer we are automatically reconciled with God. I want you to know... that's a myth.

When my youngest was two, he was being ornery and motioned as if he was going to strike me. I said, "Ooh! You better watch it. You are going to get yourself in trouble." Immediately he opened his arms and said, "Big hug!" I can accept that from a two year old, but do you expect that from older people? Does reconciliation happen when you hear a quick "sorry" from a teenager who wants to escape trouble? "I said I'm sorry, I said I'm sorry. You don't have to say anything more." Do you feel close to someone who asks forgiveness but refuses to hear how their behavior affects you? Can such a confession result in reconciliation?

In the Bible, genuine reconciliation required genuine repentance rather than formulaic actions. God said to Israel through the prophet Joel:

***"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments"*** (Joel 2:12-13).

God rejected the formulas people were working. Reconciliation required a repentance that was more than half-hearted or double minded. God asked for the whole heart.

The history of God's people "Israel" is that they wanted God's favor without facing their sins. They would habitually violate Sabbaths, hold back tithes and disobey commands. Then they would sacrifice animals in order to escape retribution. They'd say "I'm sorry" without facing the harm of their actions and without seeking to correct them. As a result, despite their sacrifices, their homes were destroyed, their children captured and they became slaves in foreign lands. Their "sorry" brought no forgiveness and no reconciliation.

**To be reconciled with God or anyone else we must first face the pain.** We must come to grips with the damage we've done and get a glimpse of the debt from which we are seeking release. We need to see the pain. Reconciliation requires broken hearts. It requires hearts that feel the pain and weep. I've rarely witnessed a true reconciliation that was not filled with tears. Most of us want to be ignorant and oblivious. We don't want to face the pain. But until you face the pain, you don't know the forgiveness you're receiving nor the love God has for you.

**Reconciliation requires, second, a confession that takes responsibility.** It requires that we identify and openly acknowledge our damaging actions and attitudes. Only then do we come into agreement with those we hurt. When we agree with God about our behavior, we are ready for his help.

**Reconciliation requires, third, seeking correction.** Part of repentance is feeling the pain, and part of repentance is confession. But repentance goes further. It seeks to correct the attitudes and actions that cause harm. It seeks assistance when needed. Many of our behaviors are deeply rooted and difficult to change. We make ruts with our choices, and

they can be difficult to escape. Repentance seeks change even when it seems impossible. It cries out for a savior who can deliver us from what we cannot deliver ourselves.

**Reconciliation requires, fourth, seeking forgiveness.** We acknowledge that we can't pay the debt. Therefore, we ask for release. That's hard, but it's critical. God is ready to forgive. Will you seek his release and stop trying to pay off your debt.

God promises to forgive. Your spouse may not. God will forgive. Someone else might not. When God forgives, there is a peace. There's an inner sense that everything is okay. Embrace it and **accept his hand of friendship.** Begin a new life where you cultivate trust and honestly address your issues as you and God walk together.

Unfortunately, many raised in the church have great difficulty experiencing that. Many have a gnawing ache that they are somehow at odds with God. They've worked the formulas. They've said "Lord have mercy," but they feel uneasy.

John Newton wrote in *Amazing Grace* that it was grace that taught his heart to fear and grace his fears relieved. If you feel uneasy with God, ask God to give you grace and courage to face your sins. Grace will cause your heart to fear. It will fill your heart with pain. Then admit your responsibility. Take ownership for what you've done. But don't stop there. Ask for forgiveness. Receive forgiveness in the cross. Accept and celebrate your pardon. Clasp the hand of friendship that Christ offers you. You will experience tremendous relief, and you will be ready to help others.