

## Be Reconciled to God

Westview Church | 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 | Pastor Brett Toney | May 10, 2026

### Ten Words

There are ten words that are perhaps the most important to every one of your relationships. Ten words: “I am sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” They are simple words, but too often they are very hard words. When they are most needed, they are the hardest to say. The humility required to say those ten words is costly. It is exposing. Reconciliation is costly. However, the price is paid by the one responding to those ten words with the three precious words: “I forgive you.” With those three words, you pay the price of reconciliation. You absolve the transgression. You overlook the offense. You lay down the claim to payment. Reconciliation is costly.

And the most costly reconciliation is the one God is accomplishing in Christ. He is restoring the world to himself. It cost making his sinless Son to be sin for our sake. It is a reconciliation that transforms how we regard other people. Paul makes the point here in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 that he serves as an ambassador for Christ to be the conduit of God’s reconciling work in Christ. His ministry as an apostle—as an ambassador—is to persuade others of the preciousness of the treasure of Christ’s love. Paul states his claim before supporting it with a “why” and a “how.” His *claim* is that we have no worldly regard for people. *Why?* Because of God’s new creation activity in Christ. So, *how* do we regard people? As ambassadors making an appeal.

### Claim: No Worldly Regard (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

We see Paul’s *claim* in v.16-17—that he has no worldly regard for people. He repeats this key phrase, “according to the flesh.” I think he means something like “according to human wisdom” or “the way the world regards people.” There was a time in Paul’s life where he

thought Jesus was a blaspheming leader of a religious cult. He was a pretender, a deceiver, out of his mind. Jesus deserved to die for his deceptions. Paul was so zealous in regarding Christ according to the flesh that he was a famed persecutor of Jesus' followers. The way of the world is what governed his knowledge. And the same was true in respect to other people. There was nothing of the Spirit shaping his views of people. There were devoted Jews and those nominal countrymen. But Romans and Gentiles? Ugh! Don't get him started.

But *now*—now that Christ's love controls him, now that the love of Jesus displayed through his death as a substitute constrains all that Paul does (v.14-15), *now* everything is different. Just as his regard for Jesus no longer is according to the flesh, neither is his regard for people. No, because of the genuine potential of being in Christ, v.17, men and women and boys and girls can be new creations. It's true! Our old selves constrained by the flesh and sin pass away. Just as Jesus was raised to the newness of an indestructible life (cf. Hebrews 7:16), so there is newness to be enjoyed. Regarding your unbelieving father as beyond hope, always a crotchety racist—that is regarding him according to the flesh. Paul has no worldly regard for others. He is ever hopeful and confident in the creative power of Christ to make sinners new. Brothers and sisters, may we never resign ourselves to conclude change is impossible. Whether reflecting on ourselves or those we disciple. That is consistent with *unbelief* in Christ, not with the redeeming power of his death and resurrection.

### **Why: God's New Creation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)**

So, Paul's claim is that he goes about his ministry with no worldly regard for people. "If *anyone* is in Christ, he is a new creation" (v.17). Such potential for change is real and substantial. But *why*? Paul affirms this claim because of v.18-19. Such transformation can happen because of *God*. It is *God's* new creation work. Paul is ever hopeful in his New Covenant ministry not

because of skills, not because of tactics, not because of strategy *but because of God*. “All this is from God,” v.18! God is the Maker of the first creation, and he is the Maker of the new creation. You and me and all humanity have broken the relationship with our Maker. We spurned his wisdom, goodness, and sovereignty. We—*creatures*—assert our independence from the Creator as though we willed ourselves into existence. We live a lie. Our beliefs, values, and actions are all in opposition to God. This is sin. It is a rejection of God’s supremacy and an elevation of ourselves.

Yet God takes sovereign initiative to exchange the hostility for friendship.<sup>1</sup> He reconciled us to himself. He did it all. He provokes and draws out those ten words from us. In love, he draws us to repentance that we fall before him and say, “I am sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” And taking the full measure of the cost upon himself, he pays the price and says, “I forgive you.” This is what God has done *through Christ*. God is reconciling the world, reconciling all things in Christ. Not just rebellious image bearers like you and me, but the *world* is being reconciled in Jesus. Christian, it’s not just you and me that are a new creation in Christ, but the creation is being made into a new creation in Christ.

How can this be? Verse 19 speaks to the price paid to reconcile, the tabulation calculated on the balance sheet. Have you paid off a debt? Kids, did mom or dad buy you something that you had to then do jobs or chores to pay off? Or you pay off a student loan or vehicle loan, maybe even your mortgage—you get a letter verifying the calculations are complete. The balance owed has been paid in full. You keep that document in case there is ever any question. Here’s God’s accounting practice: our trespasses and sins demand the due penalty of death, yet v.19—he reconciles the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against our account. He

does not give us our due penalty for failing to pay our debt. Instead he declares there is no debt, *and* he gives us the message of reconciliation.

Can you imagine Wells Fargo sending you a letter the day after you close on your house? It reads, “There is no record of your mortgage. The house is yours full and clear. Go, tell your neighbors how your account was reconciled.” Would you be afraid of what your neighbors might think of you if they learned of that letter? Yet how much more God has done for us by removing the judgment and wrath we deserve for our trespasses. And how much more timid we are with the message of reconciliation entrusted to us. Paul knows how he regarded Christ according to the flesh. He knows how great his trespasses are that are now not counted against him. God’s new creation work in Christ is why he has no worldly regard for anyone. *Any* who are in Christ are a new creation.

#### **How: The Ambassador’s Appeal (2 Corinthians 5:20-21)**

*How* then does Paul regard people? How do you *not* regard others according to the flesh? Verse 20, as “ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” I remember reading a biography on John Adams, the second U.S. president. Before being president, he was the first U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom. Adams was introduced to King George as the “minister plenipotentiary.” That’s a good five dollar word. He was the ambassador with abundant power to represent the U.S. He wasn’t “minister *omnipotentiary*”—he wasn’t *all* powerful. He was a representative. He stood to speak on behalf of the nation. That’s the role of an ambassador. In a sense, the nation speaks *through* the ambassador. We don’t regard people the way the world does. We don’t think they can never change or are only of value for their economic output. No, we regard them as God does: image bearers who are estranged from him. We proclaim the

reconciliation God is working in Christ. We make the ambassador's appeal. We speak as though God himself is speaking.

And here is the message of reconciliation we have been commissioned with: "Be reconciled to God" (v.20). That's an interesting message. It's not, "Pay back your debt." It's not, "Make restitution." It's not, "Follow these twelve steps." It's not, "Do nice things to make amends." It's a passive command. "*Be* reconciled." You can't do it. It's done to you. I think Paul means, "Lay down your weapons. Stop the rebellion. Quit striving. Submit yourself to the decisive, reconciling work of Christ." The Corinthians are living inconsistent with the reconciling work of Christ. They are living like the unforgiving servant in the parable—he was forgiven a great debt but then went and demanded payment for a small debt (Matthew 18:23-35). Don't do that—be reconciled to God! Are you doing the same, brothers and sisters? Are you enforcing an exacting standard on others, on your children, that you cannot keep, do not keep? Are you harboring ill will against others that is inconsistent with the reconciliation God has worked to restore you to himself? Are you going about following Christ as though it depends on *you* and not on what Christ *has* done?

Don't nullify the accounting God has done for your benefit in Christ. Don't spurn the great payment God has taken upon himself to reconcile you to himself. Paul is quick to remind the Corinthians—remind us—of the great cost there was for God to say, "I forgive you." He can't just click, "Select All > Delete" on the balance sheet. That's unjust. The debt *has* to be paid. There is no free lunch. The payment is made through the Great Exchange. Verse 21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God." God took the Sinless One, the Eternal Word, the Only-Begotten Son, the Spotless Lamb and "made him to be sin." He counted my sin—*my* sin, *my* pride, *my* anger, *my* lust, *my*

covetousness, *my* envy, *my* malice—God counted my sin as Christ’s. It should be *me* who cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), not Jesus. And *all* of his righteousness, *all* of his holiness, *all* of his Father’s good pleasure, *all* of the communion, *all* of the life—mine. The debt wasn’t deleted. It was paid. O, how costly it was to reconcile the world to himself. It cost the death of God himself. He took all the trespass and sin. I took all the righteousness. It is the only way for God to be both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26). So, “be reconciled to God.”

### **Costly Reconciliation**

Be reconciled and no longer regard anyone according to the flesh. You do that by the thorough, consistent, and regular proclamation and application of Christ being made to be sin on your behalf. Those ten words, “I am sorry I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” They are hard and seem to be so costly when the far surpassing treasure of the sinless savior is squandered and thought to be of no value. But when you behold the One who was made to be sin on your behalf—when you reckon with the infinite value of the preciousness of the blood of our savior, those ten words flow as freely as his blood. They flow freely because you know how great the cost was for our Father in Heaven to say to you, “I forgive you.” And that forgiveness changes everything.

Reconciliation is costly—most costly. Our God gladly paid it for any who are in Christ. So, Church, regard no one according to the flesh. Their transformation is possible. Just as sure as God is reconciling the world—reconciling you—to himself. Don’t live out of step with this good news of the gospel, but be reconciled to God. You have been entrusted with this message to share as a glad-hearted appeal. You have been forgiven so much. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for your sake, so that you might become the righteousness of God. All this is from him, so be reconciled to God.

<sup>1</sup> cf. BDAG, s.v. “καταλλάσσω,” 521.