



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

“The Ministry of Reconciliation”

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

TRANSCRIPT

There is one little appeal that we want to make to you. Someone has taken the third volume of *The Works of Thomas Brooks* from the library and, unfortunately, these books were not even processed yet. And we need that book back. If you should happen to have taken it home, we would appreciate you return it -- returning it so we can process it, and then, if you want to continue to read it then, of course, you may take it back. But this is a little bit of a personal problem because Martha, my wife, is the one who gave that series of six volumes to our library, and it keeps recurring to her, since she is trying to help out the library in its work, that that book is missing. And sometimes it occurs to her when she's cooking breakfast. And, therefore, in order to prevent me from having burnt toast [laughter], please bring that book back and let her process it, and then you can have it back and keep it until you finish it. And, furthermore, I want to compliment you on the selection of that book to steal -- I mean, to take [more laughter, Johnson laughs]. And, it's entitled, “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ,” and so that wise a very wise choice for you to make. So if you would bring it back, we would really appreciate it and I would -- my health would be much better, I'm sure, as a result of it.

Now, we're turning to 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and reading verses 16 through 19 for our Scripture reading for today. The apostle, as those of you who have been

attending know, has been talking about the Christian ministry and specifically, the ministry given to him and to those associated with it. And he has spoken in the preceding verses about the love of Christ for him, and now he speaks about the things that are essentially consequences of that. And beginning at verse 16 he says,

“Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new [creation or] creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that 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.”

Incidentally, that word in verse 19 translated “committed” in the New American Standard Bible from which I’m reading, is a word that could be rendered “deposited.” And “deposited in us” literally. In other words, it suggests a deposit made by God of the message with the resulting obligation that the apostle and others proclaim it. We do have this obligation. It’s part of the ministry of the Chapel and other evangelical churches, to carry out, in measure at least, the obligation that we have to preach the gospel of reconciliation, as the apostle puts it. May the Lord bless this reading of his word, and we bow together now for a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we turn to Thee in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and give Thee thanks for the ministry of reconciliation, that the Father was in Christ reconciling the world to himself through the ministry of our Lord who died for sinners that they might be saved. We thank Thee for this great privilege of proclaiming him as the means of reconciliation through his cross. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the

forgiveness of our sins and for the justification that the apostle relates to this ministry of reconciliation. Our trespasses, not reckoned to us. What a tremendous blessing the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ for us is. We give Thee thanks and praise and worship Thy name today.

We pray Lord, Thy blessing upon the ministry of the word, wherever it goes forth. We pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ. We pray for each one in that church and may the needs that they have be met. We thank Thee for this particular assembly of believers and the friends who are here with us today, the visitors, perhaps for the first time. Lord, may Thy blessing rest upon them for spiritual good. In the day in which we live, enable us by Thy grace to truly serve Thee according to Thy word.

We pray for our elders and deacons and for the ministry of the Chapel. May it be fruitful and profitable today. We pray especially for those who are suffering. We, Lord, bring before Thee the names of those who have requested our prayers and we ask that, by Thy grace, Thou wilt minister to them according to their needs.

May our time together be an experience that each of us will treasure and remember. Bless the singing of the hymn that follows. May we truly worship Thee as we sing and give praise to him who loved us and has given himself for us, and made it possible for us to know by Thy grace, that we have credited to our account the righteousness of God.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] The apostle’s words, if you were following the Scripture reading as we were reading it, are words that are rich in doctrinal content. And they underscore the concept of the ministry that the Lord had given him. For example, in this section that we have just read, “worldly distinctions,” the apostle says, “are no proper norm for the Christian estimation of men and things.” He says in the 16th verse, “Therefore, from now on we recognize no man according to the -- we -- we recognize no man according to the

flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh. Yet now, we know him thus, no longer.” The apostle makes it quite plain that the way in which we estimate people and things is entirely transformed as a result of our coming to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as our own personal Savior.

One thinks of the passage in Matthew chapter 12 -- near the end of the chapter -- which the Lord, speaking to the multitudes, his mother and his brethren came standing outside, seeking to speak to him, and someone said to him, “Behold, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak to you.” But he answered the one who was telling him and said, “Who is my mother and who are my brethren?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples he said, “Behold my mother and my brothers. For whosoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

In other words, those who are one with us in Christ are closer to us than our own blood relatives. So that’s one of the important things, the apostle refers to here. Another is, the familiar truth that God alone is the Savior of men. We read in verse 18, “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” Human redemption, we learn, fulfills aspects of the eternal purposes of God. For he says in the 17th verse, “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come.” And so this step is a step along the way to the ultimate making of all things new.

One thinks of the final chapters of the New Testament and the new heavens and the new earth, and all of the things that are made new. In fact, the writer of the Revelation said, “Behold, all things are made new.” So that is anticipated here. Human redemption fulfills the eternal purpose of God. We also have some unpleasant but necessary doctrines referred to here. Such as man is a rebel. In the 18th verse he speaks about God, “who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” So we were individuals in need of reconciliation to God, thus rebellious toward him.

The cross is set forth as something that is necessary. For we read in the 18th verse, “Who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” In the 19th verse, the same idea is found with a slightly different expression, namely that, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” In other words, the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ in his death is essential to the salvation of men. In fact, in Galatians chapter 2 -- the epistle that follows 2 Corinthians in our New Testaments -- in the second chapter and the twenty-third -- twenty-first verse -- the apostle says with reference to salvation by the laws as over against salvation by grace, “I do not nullify the grace of God for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly.” It perhaps has not occurred to some of us that if the Lord Jesus came simply to live and not to die as a substitute under the judgment of God for sinners, then his death is a needless death. In fact, one of my old New Testament teachers used to like to say that, “If Christ did not come to die for sinners, then his death -- the only perfect individual who ever lived -- then his death was the greatest blunder for which God has ever been responsible -- as if he were ever responsible for any blunder -- but this would have been the greatest blunder in the universe, if the Son of God should die, and it should have no necessary relationship to our death.”

John Stott likes to say, “Some people say that it’s very noble to affirm that we must work our way to heaven by doing good works, but, actually, that would be a very ignoble view of things because it would suggest that Jesus Christ’s death was totally unnecessary and that it was purposeless as well.” Or as one other well-known Dutch theologian has put it, “If Jesus Christ died and his death is not the ground of human redemption, then he threw his life away.” So when we read here in the 18th and 19th verses that the cross is necessary, we can understand that this is one of the fundamental principles of the word of God. We also learn here that the cross touches the world. For in verse 19 Paul writes, “Namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” In other words, there is a cosmic effect of our Lord’s suffering on Calvary’s cross. And we learn, too, that the

ministers of the gospel are under obligation to proclaim it. We mentioned that in the Scripture reading -- I won’t labor that point again.

The key term that apostle uses in this section is the term, “reconciliation.” Verse 18, “who reconciled us to Himself through Christ.” And verse 19, “reconciling the world to Himself and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” Just what does reconciliation mean? We, of course, know, at least most of us, what reconciliation means when we are adjusted personally to some one, some friend or otherwise with whom there may have been some problems. But when the Bible speaks about the reconciliation that Jesus Christ has accomplished, it refers to the position and the attitude of friendship that the individual in Christ enjoys, as over against the attitude and position of enmity toward God that characterized him previously.

Closely related to justification is the doctrine of reconciliation. For even in this passage in a moment, in the 21st verse Paul will make reference to the doctrine of justification, by which God declares us righteous in Christ. So reconciliation then refers to the position and the attitude of amity, as over against enmity, which characterized us before we came to know Jesus Christ.

Now, Paul has spoken about restraining -- a constraining love -- and of no longer living to self in verse 14 and verse 15, just preceding the section we study now. And so with verse 16 through verse 19, he introduces us to a discussion of the consequences that have issued from the knowledge that God loves us enough to redeem us through the work of our representative Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we look now at some of these consequences of identification with him. Paul has just said, “The love of Christ constrains us, having concluded this, that one died for all. Therefore, all died.” And the first consequence, he refers to in the 16th verse, “Therefore, from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him thus no longer.”

Those words, because they suggest that the apostle may have had some personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus before the Damascus Road experience, perhaps while the Lord was still living, have therefore been responsible for a lot of different interpretations. It has been said that the Apostle Paul, if he were in Jerusalem, must have had some personal relationship to the Lord Jesus, which is not recorded in our gospels and not recorded actually in the epistles and is only alluded to here. “Therefore, from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh.” We knew him, but we no longer look at him as we looked at him before.

Now, of course, the apostle is saying that he no longer looks at Christ as he once did, but whether this refers to some personal contact that Paul had with our Lord or not, well, it’s highly unlikely. Some have even suggested that the apostle not only knew our Lord, that he not only had contact with Him, but actually, we can find a place in the New Testament in which Paul may well be referred to. It has been speculated for example, that the apostle was the rich, young ruler who came to our Lord and asked him, “What great thing he could do in order that he might inherit eternal life.” And since the Lord gave him an answer that pertained to the Mosaic law, it has been thought that the apostle’s unfolding of the significance of the Mosaic law, as over against the saving work of Christ, is because of that interview that he had with him as the rich, young ruler. That, of course, is pure speculation. There isn’t anything to suggest that that’s what the apostle is referring to here.

Some of our liberal professing Christians have taken another attack. They have said, “You see Paul says that we have known Christ according to the flesh but now we don’t know him that way any longer, it is therefore not necessary that we know Christ as an historical individual who lived as the gospels set his life forth, who died as the gospels say, and who was bodily resurrected. It’s not necessary for us to believe that. As a matter of fact, that’s highly doubtful. Those are probably things that are in the character of religious myths and, while they have great usefulness as God through the Holy Spirit

takes these stories and uses them as an existential means for us to come into relationship to God, they are not necessarily true.” The Christian church has always insisted upon the fact that the New Testament records truths that are historically true and, therefore, that particular interpretation of the apostle’s words runs contrary to the New Testament itself.

But what does Paul mean when he says, “We used to know him according to the flesh but now we don’t know him in that way any longer.” It’s much more likely that what the apostle is referring to is simply the way in which he regarded the ministry of Christ before the Damascus Road experience. That is, he regarded the Lord Jesus, not because he knew him personally, but because of what he knew about him. He regarded him as an heretical teacher. He regarded him as a turbulent fellow who caused riots, who caused great problems for the children of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, and, in fact, all over the land. In fact, his claims to be the Messiah were false claims.

And so the apostle, most likely, alludes to those things. We used to know him in a fleshly fashion, but in that way, we don’t know him any longer. We know him now in a truthful way. We know him to be the representative man and the mediator between God and man, the promised Messiah, and the one through whom we have -- well, as he says -- the reconciliation. So probably, that’s what Paul means when he says, “Therefore, from now, we recognize no man according to the flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him thus no longer.” Christians, therefore, are individuals who should look at themselves and others in the light of what the Scriptures say about our Lord and about us. That means, therefore, that earthly distinctions, to which we give so much honor and respect, are simply that. Earthly distinctions. We’ll say more about that in a moment.

He says in the second -- in the 17th verse -- there is another consequence of identification with Christ, “Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature, a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come to be.” So that when a man comes to Christ and, by the grace of God is brought through the Holy

Spirit to trust in him and is a new creature, having been born again, then when that has taken place, part of the eternal purposes of God have come to fruition, too, because its his ultimate purpose to have a new heavens and a new earth, peopled by individuals who have all had the experience of the new birth. So if any man is in Christ, he’s a new creation.

Now, I think you can see from this, of course, that when he says that we have come to be, “in Christ and are a new creation,” he’s talking about something that is a momentary experience. Now, we may not recognize it as a momentary experience. It’s possible for an individual to be brought up in a Christian home and not really remember when they came to a faith -- a saving faith -- in Jesus Christ. But you can be sure of this - - that the new birth, a regeneration that they experienced and the justification of life was something that was like a creation. That is, it was a momentary act. A necessary act, so far as enjoyment of the blessings of God and, further, that necessary results flow from it.

Spurgeon, in a sermon on this particular text, makes reference to an individual who says somewhere that -- I thought I had that reference to it here -- he says that, an individual who was a convert said, “Either the world is altered or else I am.” That’s the way an individual feels when he comes to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. The world is different or else I’m different.

There is a story that W. T. P. Walston, an Edinburgh doctor, physician and Bible teacher used to tell about a man who was an obstetrician, among other physician -- physician traits and activities, who was on his deathbed. And being on his deathbed and not being at all sure of the possession of eternal life, he called for the pastor of his Church of Scotland church. And when the pastor arrived in the house, the doctor spoke to him and said, “He was very troubled about the future, and he would like an encouraging word from the pastor.” He said, “You know, Pastor, I’ve heard of the experience of the new birth, and I wonder if it’s possible that that is true and if so, how does one enjoy the new birth?” And the pastor said, “Why, Dr. so-and-so, you’ve been a very good man. You

have served the community. You have been an example to all of us, and that’s something that you don’t really need. The new birth.”

Well, the doctor persisted. “It seems to me that we find that in the New Testament. I’ve heard that some way.” He said, “Didn’t Jesus say something about that?” And the pastor said, “Well, yes, Jesus said you must be born again, but I reiterate, I don’t think that that’s what you need.” And he said, “Well, you know, pastor, I have been an obstetrician among other things,” and he said, “I’ve brought a number of infants into new life. And when I bring this baby into our experience and our life, a thought occurs, almost always, to my mind. This infant has a future and no past.” And he said, “That’s what I need. I need a future and no past, for my past is not all that good. You may say it’s good, but I know it’s not. I know deep down within that I’m a sinner. I need an experience or I need something that will give me a future without a past.” And he said, “It seems to me that when Jesus said you must be born again, that he was referring to the fact that it is possible for us to have a future without past cover.”

Now, I don’t know whether the past I had the sense at that point to explain to him what our Lord said and what was meant by that, but nevertheless, when Paul says, “If any man is in Christ, he’s a new creation.” That means essentially, this. That we have a future and our past is covered by the blood of Christ.

Now, isn’t it striking that when the apostle writes this, “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he’s a new creation. Old things have passed away,” then suddenly, the word “behold” appears. “Look. Behold. New things have come to be.” It’s almost as if the apostle spontaneously expresses jubilation over the fact that he is a new creature by the experience of having come to be “in Christ.” I’ve often said to you that when I read books -- particularly books with theological things in them -- and I see some statement that someone has made that I like, I will put in the margin, “NB,” which of course, stands for *nota bene*, note well. Well this is Paul’s “note well.” “Behold. Look. If a man is in

Christ, he’s a new creation.” Look. New things have come into existence. It’s the throb of that glad surprise that we belong to Christ and our future is secure in him.

I was reading an older theologian’s works over the past couple of days and in the course of it, something was said that I thought, spoke very much to Believers Chapel. He spoke about the fact that -- and he was talking about the new creation -- and he spoke about the fact that people lament everywhere the lack of truly social and brotherly feeling in the church. Well, I’ve often heard that, and I’ve heard it about you people in Believer’s Chapel. About us. That you can go to Believers Chapel and you can hear the word of God expounded, but the Chapel is composed of people who are not very friendly. Well, we do have some people who like to come to hear the ministry of the word of God and they want to leave. But there are others of you I know, who would like to know your fellow Christians a little better.

And this man, speaking about a hundred years ago, said this, “After you said people have been everywhere, the water of truly social and brotherly feeling in the church,” he said, “They try all sorts of well-meant devices to stimulate.” Ice cream suppers, for example, might be a good illustration of that. But then he went on to say that, “Nothing short of this, that is, this experience, goes to the root of the matter. The ‘social’ in this universal sense, is dependent upon the religious.” You know, one of the reasons that congregations are not friendly -- of course, they may be trying all of these things to stimulate friendliness, these devices of which he speaks. And you may have a false kind of stimulation present in a congregation. In fact, I’ve seen the same kind of things at the Cowboy games when someone has caught a long pass for a touchdown. And it’s particularly friendly if we happen to win the game on a last-minute score. All those people out at Texas Stadium, they love everybody at that moment.

But that isn’t what Paul is talking about when he talks about the things in the church that make for the kind of fellowship that is meaningful. What Paul is talking about and what the New Testament talks about is the sense of community that we enjoy

because we’ve been saved by Christ. That is, when we come to understand that we are sinners and that we’re lost and that God has spoken to our despairing soul and the burden of eternal condemnation has rolled off of our back, and we know that we are new creatures in Christ and everything has become new, what a difference that makes to a group of Christian people. I can go in churches where there is a live experience of what it means to be converted and immediately I have friends. And they have a friend in me. There is the community of the same experience in Christ that is the ultimate human experience. That makes us love one another, because we love him. That is really the source of true Christian love.

My hope and my feeling and my prayer is that, when an individual comes in this congregation who knows the Lord, that he may find here individuals who had a similar experience and have come to know the Lord and rejoice in the deliverance and salvation and reconciliation and justification that is ours in Christ. That’s what Paul means when he says, “Look. New things have come to be.” That’s happened to us.

The source of this great transformation, the apostle traces to God himself in the 18th verse. “Now, all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” It all begins with God. It ends with God. But it’s through Christ for him.

Now, that brings us to the expression, “reconciled us.” That is, brought us from enmity. Brought us from rebellion against God. Brought us to friendship. Brought us to amity. And I’d like for you to notice that this is not something potential. This is something actual. It’s not something that is undetermined. It’s something that’s determined and real. He says, “Now, all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” This is something God has done. He has reconciled us. It’s not a provisional thing. He goes on to say, “And has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Would Paul regard that as a provisional thing or as a conditional thing? No. God had spoken to him and called him to the ministry. And so the reconciliation, is a

reconciliation that is not potential, not provisional. It’s actual. It’s determined by God. It’s real. It’s something that he has accomplished.

Now, in verse 19 -- the nursery has let out but the meeting’s not over yet evidently. In the 19th verse, the apostle amplifies the matter. He says, “Namely, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed to us, deposited in us, the word of reconciliation.” What was accomplished through Christ in verse 18, is said to be accomplished in Christ here.

Now, we ask ourselves the question from verse 19, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” Is this also a determined real thing? “Reconciling the world to himself.” Is this not provisional? Well, if it were provisional, then what we would have would be a reconciliation that does not reconcile. That would be strange, isn’t it -- wouldn’t it? A reconciliation that does not reconcile. Further, are not the “them” of verse 19 really the same as those receiving righteousness in verse 21 where he says, “He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” The reconciling action is an action that ensures the non-imputation of trespasses. Did you notice that? Verse 19, “Namely, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Now, if trespasses are not counted against a person, that means that he has righteousness. That flows naturally because, you see, trespasses are of two classes, things that I have done and things that I should have done but did not do.

When I grew up, I learned a catechism and sin was defined as the things that I’d done that were contrary to God and the things I should have done which I didn’t do. Now, if our trespasses are not reckoned to us -- if our iniquities are not reckoned to us or imputed to us -- that means that the things that I have done are not reckoned to my account, but on the other hand, the things that I should have done but didn’t do, they’re not reckoned to my account either. In other words, I have a positive righteousness because I’m regarded -- not simply as not having done the things that God disapproved

of, specifically, breaking the law, but I’m regarded as having done the things that I should have done. That what Paul means when he puts justification in the context of “not imputing our iniquities to us.”

Read Romans 4, 1 through 8. It’s a necessary inference derived from that. And here, we have it here. He says in verse 19, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

Now, we are faced with a dilemma. If it’s true that the world does not have its trespasses counted against them, then what must we believe? That everybody is saved? The whole world? Not having their trespasses reckoned to them would mean that the world -- the whole world -- has been reconciled. If we mean by “world,” every single individual. That flows, naturally. He says -- look at it again, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Now, someone might say, “Well, we have to believe, but is not that a trespass?” That’s not reckoned either against them. So, in other words, here we have, “reconciling the world, not counting their trespasses against them.” In other words, the act of reconciliation ensures the justification.

Now, if we want to believe that everybody is going to be saved, that’s one of the alternatives. That’s one side of the dilemma. But on the other hand, there is another way out, because after all, the Bible clearly in many, many places says there is such a thing as the “Lake of Fire” and that individuals are not only going there, but some are already held under divine judgment.

The other alternative is to understand “world” in a difference sense. Now, Augustine understood the world as the world of the elect. I’d like to suggest that that’s not quite right here. You see, the term “world,” if you read through the Bible -- go home and get your concordance and look up the uses of the term “world” -- and you ought to do that instead of remaining in darkness. But look it up and you find different senses. For example, terms like “all,” terms like “world,” can refer to everyone without exception

or everyone without distinction. And thus, we could say, “the whole world has gone after Christ.” So, as the Jewish leader said, “But not everybody had.” The Jews and Gentiles were going after it. And so likewise, in the New Testament, there are many places we must understand those universal terms as all without distinction, not all without exception. Now, if that’s the sense of “world,” then we have no problem with this text. It means exactly what Paul has said, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world.” As a matter of fact, there is no article in the original text. And so let’s render it “man” or “mankind.” God was in Christ, reconciling “mankind” to himself. That is, his reconciliation is a universal kind of reconciliation that touches all classes of men. “Not counting their trespasses against them.” That is, these individuals in the world, who are reconciled, are individuals whose trespasses are not reckoned to them. These are the believing people of God about whom he has been speaking all the way down this passage.

Well, why did he use “world”? Well, because the redemption of Christ has a cosmic affect. As a matter of fact, he’s already mentioned new creation, and the work of Christ not only touches individual salvation, it touches this physical world about us as well. Just as when Adam fell, the creation came out of the curse. Thorns and thistles, it brings forth. Work in your garden and every day you work in your garden and you stick your finger on the thorn of some bush, you can say, “God’s speaking to me again about the fall in the Garden of Eden.” So when man fell, the creation fell.

When man is redeemed, and ultimately is given a resurrection body, we read that we shall have a removal of the curse and finally a new heavens and a new earth in which everything becomes new. Christ accomplished that by the blood that he shed on Calvary’s cross. The blood that Christ shed on Calvary’s cross not only saves me from the guilt and penalty of sins, it is the ground of my new resurrection body. It’s the ground of the kingdom of God. It’s the ground of the new heavens and the new earth. It’s the means by which Christ secures his sovereignty over the whole of the earth. Christ’s salvation is a cosmic salvation. So Paul, I think, as in Colossians 1, speaks here about the

world -- not without exception -- without distinction with a little bit of a cosmic flavor because of the extent of the reconciliation that Jesus Christ accomplishes.

When I think of this passage, I cannot help but think of the parable of the prodigal son. I’m going to close -- we have about three minutes -- by just reading through that parable in Luke chapter 15 because I think it illustrates the attitude of God to sinners and specifically illustrates the reconciling work of the Lord God through the Son whom he sent. We read in Luke 15 in verse 11, “And he said, a certain man had two sons.” You see the Lord Jesus telling three little stories to illustrate that, when men say of him, this man receives sinners and eats with them, he’s really reflecting the attitude of God towards sinners. So “a certain man had two sons and the youngest of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me,’ and he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

Now, when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country and sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses,” ah, what a marvelous little clause that is. When we come to our senses. That’s accomplished by God the Holy Spirit in regeneration. He said, “How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I’m dying here with hunger? I’ll get up. I’ll go to my father.” Now, he’s got his little speech arranged, “and I’m going to say to him,” because it’s embarrassing to go back and tell his father that he wants to be back with him, that his father was right all along, he should have listened to the elders, and he’s back and he’s got now to say, “I made a mistake.” That’s difficult, isn’t it? So he gets up his little speech and he says, “I’ll get up and go to my father, and I’m going to say to him, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and in your sight.” There’s

good theology. Sin is against God and men. “I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men. And he got up and he came to his father.”

But now, notice the picture that we have of the father. While he was still a long way off, the father looked down the road and saw him, recognized his walk. He not only felt compassion for him, but he ran -- I’ve said this before, but have you ever seen an old man run? It’s embarrassing. Embarrassing to see an old man run. There are several of you out in the congregation, I don’t ever want to see run. [Laughter] And I’m sure, you don’t want to see me run. It’s embarrassing. But here is a fellow -- mind you, they wore long, flowing robes in that day -- so you get the picture of a father, an elderly man, pulling up his robes and running down the road. Embarrassing to the people about him. He runs to the son. He embraces him. He “fell upon his neck,” the original text says. He fell upon his neck and he began to kiss him.

Now, the son’s going to say what he thinks he’s got to say. After all, the father could demand anything. He thinks, as a condition for return and at least a confession. And so he starts his little speech. “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven in your sight. I’m no more worthy to be called your son.” Before he can get out the next clause, but the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet and bring the fattened calf. Kill it and let’s eat and be merry, for the son of mine was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found.” And they began to be merry.

My Christian friend, that’s Jesus Christ’s picture of God. Never forget it. That’s Jesus Christ’s picture of God. It’s his own story. It’s his only defense of the criticism made of him. This man received sinners and eats with them. Ah, he not only does that, he runs after them. He falls upon their neck when they’ve come to their senses and are ready with a word of, “I’m sorry.” And the God that is presented here is a God who waits, who hopes, who longs, who sees, who runs, who kisses, and who promises to

pardon -- and the Lukan account says, “giving our Lord’s words.” And they began to be merry. Some wise Bible teacher said, “And whoever heard that they stopped.”

That’s the picture the apostle is talking about when he says, “There is a God who has reconciled us to himself through the Lord Jesus Christ.” And this reconciliation is a worldwide reconciliation encompassing all classes of people and guarantees that their trespasses are not reckoned to them. He has reconciled us, and that is an effective work because it necessarily issues in non-imputation of their trespasses. And, therefore, the reconciliation cannot be broader than the non-imputation of their trespasses because it’s the necessary result of reconciliation. They are the same. He reconciles those whose trespasses are not reckoned to them. You may have that experience.

If you have questions about whether you belong or whether you’re included in a statement like that, God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. You may have the experience and know with certainty that you belong with the “us” and with the “them” -- not by asking some theoretical question, “Am I one of the elect?” We never learn that until after we’ve come to the knowledge of him. You can become one of whom the apostle is speaking about by simply bowing your head, acknowledging your need, your guilt and condemnation as a sinner, looking to Christ who died for sinners, receiving as a free gift non-imputation of trespasses, justification of life, forgiveness of sins. Come to Christ. Believe in him. Trust in him. Know above certainty that you belong and have the marvelous position and attitude promised in the ministry of reconciliation. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are indeed grateful to Thee for these magnificent words of the apostle. We thank Thee for the way in which so pertinently, he touches the needs that we have in 1987. O God, how marvelous it is to have such a God as we have, one who reconciles us to himself through Jesus Christ our Lord and who guarantees that our sins and trespasses are no longer reckoned to us.

“The Ministry of Reconciliation” by S. Lewis Johnson
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Lord, if there should be some here who have never believed, may they at this moment, like the prodigal, return and receive as a free gift, eternal life. And may that sense of joy, a sense of the possession of the newness of Christ pervade this congregation for the glory of Thy name.

We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.