

The Great Exchange

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Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 5:15—6:2

Preached on: Sunday, January 9, 2011

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Well, do take your Bibles this morning and turn to page 699 in the church Bible, page 699. That is 2 Corinthians chapter five.

When I was here back in the summer I preached, I think, on chapters three and four. So I thought the next best thing to do would be to go to chapter five. And I didn't think back then that I would be here today. I like coming to Philadelphia in the summer when it is warm and then Christine complains it is too warm. So she has seen the other side on the place which is good. So there is something for both of us, cold for her and heat for me. Bring on the heat.

I have also discovered that despite the pretensions to be Presbyterians, you are into immersion in a big way. Since I have been immersed in 10th people since I arrived going here, there and everywhere meeting people. And what they have is this kind of deep immersion principle by which they take a candidate and they make sure that he kind of gets everywhere, meets everybody and so on.

So I am not as sure about the sprinkling thing. Sprinkling would have been good. But total immersion is ok.

But it means that as I look around this morning it means I see friendly faces, people I have already met and talked to and that is encouraging. Not that the rest of you don't look friendly, but a smile would be good.

Let's read together there for 2 Corinthians chapter five and verse 11.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.

We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those

who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.¹

This is the Word of the Lord.

If I was in your place this morning I would want to hear from the candidate at this church what he thinks about the gospel. And if I were a stranger and not a Christian and were in your shoes this morning and sitting where you are and had been invited along to a Christian church I would want to know what all the fuss was really about. You have got ideas in your head about what Christianity is, about what its interests are. You may have walked away with the idea it is about morality or it is about a particular political stance or a whole host of ideas that may have come into your head.

But I would wonder as you sit in this room what it is that makes these people get up in the morning, these Christian people that come here week by week. What is it that drives them? What motivates them? What is it that they are interested in? What is the thing that they think is the gospel? If the word “gospel” means good news, what is this news that they have to tell me?

And so in answer to both those questions I want to say that the very heart of this gospel, this good news message is this word “reconciliation.”

Actually it comes from a word that means literally a kind of exchange, the kind of word you might use if you were exchanging currency as I did from pounds sterling into US dollars. Metaphorically, of course, it denotes an exchange or a substitution of one thing

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:11—6:2.

for another, of peace instead of war, of love for anger, of friendship for enmity. And we all understand, I think, no matter if we have got a Christian background or not, we understand that reconciliation is something we need in our torn world, because the opposite of reconciliation, which is alienation is so apparent in every area of our lives.

Some people are just alienated and they show this in their anger, in their misunderstanding of others, in their isolation or in their disrespect for authority or miscommunication between them, in nervous breakdowns and broken marriages and industrial disputes and international crises. Alienation is part and parcel of our every day lives.

The Bible is concerned with alienation. But it is concerned with the alienation that underlies absolutely every other broken relationship in the world, that is, our relationship with God. This alienation works both ways. It works from me towards God. I am alienated by nature to God. I don't like God.

Richard Dawkins doesn't like God. In his book *The God Delusion* he writes this. Listen to this. "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction. Jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak a vindictive, blood thirsty, ethnic cleanser, a misogynist, homophobic, infanticidal, genocidal, philocidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capricious, malevolent bully."

You try saying that, by the way.

You may not know all the words, but I think you get his idea, don't you? He is not very pleased with God. And now you may be sitting there thinking to yourself, "Well, I am not a Christian, but I don't really use that language about God, but you just ignore God. God really doesn't figure in your mind at all. He isn't part of your life. He isn't important to you. He isn't the center of all that you are and all that you do, so therefore, by simply ignoring God, you are actually siding with Richard Dawkins and all the other Dawkins of the world for whom God is the enemy.

But when Paul uses the word "reconciliation" I want you to see that actually he is thinking primarily not about how you feel about God, but about how God feels about you, because God is hostile to you. The Bible uses that kind of language over and over again when it talks about judgment or wrath, the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men and women. God is alienated from us.

And there is a little hint of an illustration about this, I think, in the text if you look at verse 17 where for the Jewish readers of this letter that Paul is writing, there would have been immediately a light go on in their head that he is quoting from the Old Testament when he talks there about a new creation, the old having passed away and everything having become new. He is quoting from Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah the prophet prophesies a new thing.

“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing.”²

What Isaiah is doing in his day is having announced the fact that the people of Judah would be taken away into exile he is addressing the people way in the future who will be in exile and he is giving them a promise in that historical context in which they would find themselves hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem and from the temple that represented the presence of God in the midst of his people. That very geographical distance between Jerusalem and Babylon would stay fixed in the minds of the children of Israel as a reminder that because of their idolatry of over 1000 years, their rebellion against the God who created them and made them a nation and provided for them and sent his prophets to them, that their rebellion had distanced them from God. They had now no access to his presence.

God prophesied through Isaiah there would come a day when there would be a return from exile to the presence of God.

Now those people did come back to the Promised Land, but they never really enjoyed it. And as they read the prophecies of Isaiah they must have wondered was Isaiah right when he said all that he said. Was he correct in the vision that he cast of this great return, this new creation that would end up affecting not just people being brought back to God, but all of nature, the cosmos transformed.

What Paul is saying as he writes to the Corinthians is that the real fulfillment of that prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled today as people, men, women, boys and girls from all around the world are being reconciled to God. They are being brought back home to God. That is the forerunner, the harbinger of a reconciliation of all things when the universe is reconciled to God.

God’s intention is to reconcile first people to himself and then the cosmos.

Well, that is the theme of the passage. And as Paul develops it, you can summarize it, I think in a sentence. He says that this great work of reconciliation is all of God through Christ for our sake.

It is all of God, first of all. All this is from God. God is the source of reconciliation. Using the language of creation, the original creation in this new creation everything is a work of God. And all the moves, you notice are coming from God’s side. All this is from God says the apostle. And that is just as well, because by nature, you see, I am not looking for reconciliation with God. And since sin renders me blind and indifferent and powerless, if ever there is going to be a fixing of this relationship than God is to act prior to and independent of any human action. And that is precisely what the apostle says happens. Eight verbs in this passage have God as their subject. God initiating, God reconciling, God giving his Son, God appealing to us, God making Christ to be sin for us.

² Isaiah 43:18-19.

And that is also counterintuitive. It is not the way we naturally think this kind of thing happens. Normally if there is a broken relationship, if there is alienation, you need a third party to come along. If there is a couple who have fallen out with each other and they have issues, then you need a counselor there to help them to work through those issues to get them speaking again about the issues that they need to talk about. Whenever there is industrial dispute they need arbitration. Whenever there are political problems you need to bring in the UN or some other outside body.

But here it is the wrong party that is at work. Here it is God who has been offended, God whose character has been impugned by his creation, takes the steps and makes the move, who reaches out towards us.

There was an Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, and he summed it up by this.

“All is of God,” he said, “The only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed.”

You take careful note of the language of verses 18 and 19. God through Christ reconciled us. God was reconciling the world to himself. The verb is “reconcile.” The subject is God. God is the source of reconciliation.

All is of God. And, secondly, all is of God through Christ. Do you notice that? Christ is the agent of reconciliation.

So how does God deal with it? He doesn't deal with it by ignoring it or denying it or changing his mind about sin or compromising his holiness. No, he acts and he acts through Christ and in Christ. There is this unity. When Christ acts, God acts. When God acts towards us in redemption he always acts in Christ. That is important to remind ourselves.

And when he uses this language here, when he points us backwards in Christ God was reconciling us, he is pointing us back to a historical moment and to a specific event. He is referring us to the death of Christ particularly. Do you see this?

I mean Paul says in Romans five, for example, “We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”³ And he has the death of Christ on his mind going back to verses 14, 15. He has the death of Christ on his mind because the love of Christ controls us. Because one has died for all, therefore all have died and he died for all those who live might no longer live for themselves. He has the death of Christ on his mind.

And this death of Christ is not something the Father forces him into, but do you notice it is motivated by the love of Christ. What the Father does and what the Son does out of love, the love of Christ controls us. That is his love for us drives him to do what the Father sends him to do.

³ Romans 5:10.

Well, specifically, what has he done for us?

Well, look at verse 19. The steps are three.

First, He chose not to count our sins against us. Of course, they should have been since we had committed the sins, we had trespassed the boundaries. We had ignored him or rejected him. And that is a serious thing.

Here we are finite, limited beings, guilty of an infinite sin against an infinite holy and wonderful God. We are in debt to God.

In Scotland when we say the Lord's Prayer we say the words, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Well, the English don't like the use of the word "debt." So they never use that version. They prefer the sins version. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

But debt is a good word, not just in Scotland and I think you use that there, don't you? Do you know? Nobody ever solves anything. You do say debts here when you say the Lord's Prayer. Yeah. Just checking if there is life out there.

Well, it is a good word, isn't it, because it reminds us that, in fact, we owe something to God. We owe our love and our obedience. We love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. That is what we owe him. And our debts have accumulated to such a degree that we are facing a reckoning.

What Paul says is, "God did not count our debts against us."

Now can you imagine if he had?

The Bible says this. "If you, oh Lord, kept a record of sins, oh Lord, who could stand?"

Can you imagine if you the tape recording of your life had been left on all of your life or if that heavenly scanning machine that scans you... Do you know you get scanned now when you go through airports and the scans are quite embarrassing for some of us more than others? But imagine that scanning machine in heaven that scans every thought, every thought of our minds, everything about what we have done. Can you imagine how embarrassing that would be? All of that record of our sins was kept.

It is the good news. The first step of the good news is this. God chose not to count our sins against us.

Now this raises a question of justice. Can God be just and do that? Well, if that is all he did, then he could not be just. But there is a second step. Here is the second step in verse 21. God took our sins and counted them against Jesus. So he is not overlooking them. He is not pretending they are not there.

You know, sometimes when there is something really uncomfortable we talk about the elephant in the room. Maybe you don't talk about the elephant in the room here. We talk about the elephant in the room and it is not an individual. It is something we are not talking about in the room. And the elephant in the room is our sins, but God doesn't overlook it. He doesn't pretend and he doesn't talk as if it is not there. He takes the sin and he reckons it to the Savior.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

Now as you read that, I want you to notice there are two things that Paul has in mind here. He obviously has the life of Jesus in mind here. That is very important. And he wants to say about the life of Jesus that it was a sinless life.

We read elsewhere in the Bible that, don't we, that he was the just one. The just one gave himself for the unjust ones. I think there is an Old Testament kind of connotation here or reference here because when you brought the animal for sacrifice it had to be perfect, that is, as perfect as you could find an animal, as without blemish. You couldn't offer to God a broken leg or an animal with a broken leg or a skin rash or a terminal illness. It had to be as perfect as you could find one.

What Paul is saying is that Jesus the lamb of God, Jesus the sacrifice for our sins was the perfect sacrifice. There was no flaw in his character. There were no skeletons in his cupboard. There was nothing embarrassing that might come onto the internet. Don't check too far. You are checking up. There is always something someone has taken somewhere that has been put on the internet that will embarrass you. But there is nothing like that about the Lord Jesus. He was without sin. In other words he is saying, "God substituted the sinless one for the sinful ones." And he comes to take their place. And what Paul is saying is, "This is the Mediator we need."

This is the Savior we need. This is the one who was born of a woman, born under the law. This is the one who comes to John the Baptist as he is baptizing sinners in the wilderness and John says, "I can't baptize you because you are not a sinner." And he said, "But look, I have to take my stand among sinners. I have to take my stand among these people who are coming to you to be baptized because of their repentance, their repentance over broken promises, over living double life, over harboring bitterness of having stolen or hated or lied or cursed. I have to stand beside those people because I have come to represent those people. I have come to fulfill all righteousness by taking the place of sinners."

Only Jesus could say that and only Jesus could say, "Which of you can convict me of sin?"

Well, it is this one without sin who takes our place, who becomes the sin bearer, who pays the wage of sin, a wage that he did not deserve. The wage of sin is death.

Justin Martyr writes like this. “The Father, wishing his Christ to take on himself the curses of all.”

Ambrose of Milan, “Jesus took up death that the sentence might be fulfilled and satisfaction given for the curse placed on sinful flesh.”

Augustine, “Christ, though guiltless, took our punishment that he might cancel our guilt and do away with our punishment.”

This is a mystery that lies at the heart of the message of the gospel. You can rationalize it away, but I think that would be wrong to do that. It is a mystery. We stand amazed at the mystery. It takes our breath away.

John Calvin puts it in a way that cannot be put into words at the very same time when he loved us. He was also hostile to us until he was reconciled to us in Christ. And he was made sin. That is not he was made a sinner. But he was made the object of the wrath and the judgment of God for our sakes. In Christ on the cross sin is judged and taken away.

So the third step is this. God doesn't count our sin against us. God counts our sin against Christ. God takes Christ's righteousness and credits it to us. That is the last piece of the jigsaw. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So there is a double imputation. The word is imputation. The key, the theological word of crediting or reckoning something to someone.

First my sins are imputed to him. He is held responsible for them. And his righteousness is imputed to me.

Now there is a whole host of things captured in that word righteousness and in chapter three verse nine, for example, it is the opposite of condemnation. Contrast the ministry of condemnation with the ministry of righteousness that exceeds it in glory.

And I want you to notice that he not only talks about righteousness, but he talks about the righteousness of God imputed to us. We become the righteousness of God.

Now this is language that no theologian would, I think, use for fear of becoming a [?] really with his colleagues because it is such bold language, that we might become the righteousness of God.

The righteousness of God throughout the Bible has all kinds of connotations, but one of them, at least, is that his absolute rightness, his absolute purity, his absolute faithfulness, his absolute kindness, his absolute nature that is good. And here you are this morning. You are good, bad and ugly spiritually. And, well, you know the ugliness in your heart. You know the things that you hate about yourself.

When God sees you in Christ he is, can we say he sees a reflection of his own righteousness when he looks at you? You become the righteousness of God in him. Just a little bit. That is an absolute statement.

I don't understand it. I don't know how it works. I really don't know how it works. It is a mystery, isn't it? But there are Paul's bold words before us. No wonder one of the early epistles we have after the New Testament in the epistle to Diognetus it says, "For we read, oh, the sweet exchange, oh the incomprehensible work of God, oh, the unexpected blessings that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners."

Or Martin Luther writing to a distressed monk. He said this. "Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and to say, 'Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness. I am your sin. You took what was mine and set on me what was yours.'"

You have become the righteousness of God in him. So there is the order, isn't it? There is the order. All is of God through Christ to whom God has given our sins, who has paid the penalty for our sins so that we might become God's righteousness in him.

Well, there is one last thing to say. All is of God through Christ for our sake. That is a strong theme in this passage. The Greek is *υπερ ημων* (hoop-er' hay-mone'), for our sake. Christ died for all, for him who for their sake died. For our sake he made him to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness, for us, for us, for you, all done for you.

He talks about it as a gift of reconciliation. It is all done. You don't have to add to it. You don't have to do anything to make it work. It is not like, you know, God has kind of fixed things up his end. Now you have got to walk the rest of the way. It is presented as an absolute finished work. The tense of the verb in verse 18, "reconciled," is something that has happened once and for all.

One of my favorite Scottish theologians James Denny puts it like this. "This word 'reconciliation' is not something which is being done. It is something that is done. It is a work that is finished. It is not a tentative preliminary affair. God is not preaching a gradual reconciliation. He preaches a finished work. It is done. You are given the gift of reconciliation.

No wonder Paul can say in Romans five, "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."⁴

Well, you have been given the gift of reconciliation. But there is one other thing we have been given and that is the ministry of reconciliation. I think primarily Paul is talking about himself here and the apostles when he talks about Christ gave us or God gave us the ministry of reconciliation and goes on to talk about the message, the word, rather, of

⁴ Romans 5:11.

reconciliation that he preaches. And he talks about how that looks or what that looks like in general terms when he says, “We implore. This is what we do. We implore on behalf of Christ. Be reconciled to God.”

That is our normal thing. The word used, I think, wrongly. I think he is just describing generally his evangelistic work. We implore people on Christ’s behalf that is what we do. Be reconciled to God.

So while I was working with boys and girls in the school or working with poor people on the street or whether or with business people in the offices, for any of the various ministries and mercy ministries of our church, the church here, or through our missions around the world, what are we doing with men and women? Ultimately what are we saying to them?

Be reconciled to God. Accept what God has done in Christ. I am saying this to you this morning if you are not a Christian. I am saying to you, “Accept what God has done in Christ. Receive it. Rest on it. Trust it. Be reconciled to God.”

And it is done for you.

I love the words of that old hymn.

If thou my pardon has secured,
And freely in my room endured
The whole of wrath divine.
Payment God cannot twice demand,
Once at my bleeding Surety’s hand,
And then again at mine.

The work is done and to us has been committed the ministry of reconciliation because if the Church is an apostolic Church built on the foundations of the apostles and if our gospel is an apostolic gospel because it comes from them who were the first ear and eye witnesses of Jesus and if our faith is an apostolic faith, since we have come to believe in Jesus through their testimony in Scripture, then we, too, are apostolic people with the great task of getting the gospel out to the world and of working the gospel into ourselves.

Do you see that? That is what he is saying in chapter six there. No time to expound it, but there he is. He is applying it to these people who are believing people and he says, “No, you have received this gift, this grace. You have received it. It is yours. What are you going to do with it? Are you going to live now consistently with it? Are you going to put it into practice? Are you going to realize now is the time that now is the day of salvation? History now is split between the before and the after. We are now living in this new era, this new era that is going to consummate in the reconciliation of the cosmos all things in Christ.

How are you going to live in this age? Are you going to live to get this message out to the world? That is a challenge to any preacher.

One of my favorite old hymns by Charles Wesley ends with these words. I hope you make them your own.

Happy with my latest breath,
I might but gasp his name,
Preach him to all and cry in death,
Behold, behold the Lamb.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you have committed to us as your people the message of reconciliation. Some of us, Lord, in this room are pretty messed up. We are hardly reconciled within our own psyche, within our own selves. And part of that reconciliation with you will lead, God willing, to us seeing ourselves no longer hating ourselves, seeing ourselves as the object of your love, adopted children in your family, heirs of an inheritance that is out of this world.

Others of us, Lord, are in relationships that are broken down. And we carry the pain with us into this room this morning. Part of the healing of that pain begins when we are able to enter into the joy of knowing that our relationship to you which really was broken has been fixed by the Lord Jesus. And then with your grace to work out that reconciliation with you into our own lives and into the lives of others.

Help us, Lord, as a fellowship of your people be a reconciling fellowship. In Jesus' strong name we pray. Amen.