

*Announcing a Reconciliation That Has Already Happened*

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

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January 24, 2010

In 1972 Lieutenant Hiro Onada finally came out of his cave. He had been living on the island of Lubang in the Philippines for almost 30 years, since he went there as a Japanese soldier during World War II. He had been a faithful soldier all those years, living off coconuts, avoiding capture, occasionally engaging the enemy. What he did not know was that the war had ended. Finally the Japanese authorities got hold of Onada's former commander and brought him to the Philippines. He stood outside Onada's cave and announced, "The war is over. Please come out."

The world is full of people fighting a war that has already ended. Even the church contains people who keep their backpacks on and their rifle ready. But the good news we have been given to announce is that the war is over. God is not mad at us. He has given us the message of peace—that God has ended the war and declared amnesty so that we can be reconciled to him.

This is Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 5(18-20). We cannot say this too many times. "God reconciled us to himself through Christ." "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

Paul goes on to say that we have been entrusted with this message. That's what it means to have a "ministry of reconciliation"—not primarily that we have been called to bring people together but that we have been called to tell people that God has already done everything he can on his side to bring us back to himself. We are like ambassadors for God, telling the world that the war is over. It's time to live at peace with God. Stop hiding from God. Stop sniping at God. Come out of the cave and live in the light.

Our job is not to announce the possibility of reconciliation with God by doing *x* or *y*. Our job is to announce a reconciliation that has already happened. If I tell you that you need to be an evangelist, some of you will pull back because you no longer feel that evangelism is about telling good news, which is the root of the word. To you, evangelism has become bad news, telling people that they'd better get right with God, or else. But I love the way Paul sees his ministry, and I invite you to share in that ministry. Our role as evangelists is tell people that the war is over, that God is not mad at them, that the meaning of the cross on which Jesus died is that God no longer holds our sins against us.

The religions of the world usually focus on what we have to do to reconcile God to ourselves. They start with the assumption that the gods are angry and that there must be something we can do to placate the gods. Maybe we can give the gods something, maybe we can say magic words or sing the right songs, maybe we just need to try harder to follow the rules and stop doing what we know is wrong. A lot of so-called Christians approach their relationship to God the same way. Even Baptists make it sound like you can have peace with God if you say this prayer or walk this aisle. You see, it's still about how we can reconcile God to ourselves, how we can make peace with God.

But Paul's message is utterly unlike that. He says that God has acted in giving himself on the cross so that *we* have been reconciled to God. God demonstrated his love for us. He demonstrated his forgiveness. God did not create a possible way for us to get ourselves back into a relationship to God. No, God reconciled *us* to himself. God did not have to placate his own

anger. *We* were the ones that were acting like enemies; we were the ones who were childishly angry at God and suspicious of him. God has taken the initiative not only to forgive us but to bring us back to himself. Rather than presenting a peace plan for us to follow, God just unilaterally declared peace. All that we are left to do is to believe that there *is* peace, that God isn't mad at us, that he does really love us, and begin to live as God's friends.

Don't you just love that? Don't you just love God? I'm not making this stuff up as some wishy-washy liberal. John Calvin understood the same thing long ago. He said in commenting on these verses, "Paul declares the sum of the Gospel message to be reconciliation to God, who is pleased through Christ to receive us into favor." That's the sum of the gospel: that we have been reconciled to God and received into God's favor. That's what the angels sang when Jesus was born—can you remember it from a month ago?—"Peace on earth, good will to humanity." In other words, "The war is over. I have received you in my grace." Oh, *now* I get it! Paul says in Romans 5:1-2, "We have peace with God"—not we *can* have peace with God, but we *do* have peace with God—through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." The war is over! We are in a state of grace already. That's the good news. Paul repeats the idea in verse 10 of that chapter: "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." That's what the cross meant: that we are now reconciled to God, because he no longer holds our sins against us. That's why we want to sing! That's why we want to live for him.

Paul himself had been an enemy of Jesus, but he was reconciled to him by God's own action, through nothing Paul did. The consequence of that was that Paul became the messenger of God's unbelievable love, that God has reconciled *the world* to himself—not just our kind, but all people. And that's what we are called to do as well, like a servant who has been forgiven a great debt and is expected to forgive the debts of others. It makes no sense to receive amnesty for ourselves and refuse to extend it to others.

Paul uses a political word to describe his role as a spokesman for reconciliation—he calls himself an ambassador. I grew up in a Southern Baptist organization for boys that was called "Royal Ambassadors." It sounds awfully quaint, but it meant that we represent the King in the world. This was our motto: "We are ambassadors for Christ." Growing up in Japan, too, I knew about ambassadors. The American ambassador was, to me, the second most important person in the country after the Emperor. You may never have heard of Edwin O. Reischauer, a wonderful Harvard professor who served as Ambassador in those years, but to people in Japan he was the voice of America.

Paul no doubt had in mind the Roman *legatus*. When the Roman empire defeated a country, the Roman Senate would decide that the country should now become a province and part of the empire. They would send out ambassadors, *legati*, who arranged the terms of peace and drew up the constitution for the new province. It was something like Douglas McArthur in Japan, dictating the terms of peace and remaking Japan's government in the image of the Allies. Paul is the ambassador of Messiah Jesus who has brought in his kingdom, conquered the powers of evil, and announced the terms of peace with the world that rejected him. They are the most generous terms of peace ever announced: all is forgiven, you are full citizens, accepted into my kingdom.

That is the message, Paul says, that we have been given as ambassadors: "The war is over. You are no longer enemies. God has demonstrated his love for you. So I am *begging* you, be reconciled to God."

What if, when the prodigal son went into the far country and wasted his inheritance on riotous living, the father had sent the older son to that far country with a message? What if the older son had been sent not to condemn but to say, “Dad has *already* forgiven you. There is nothing you need to do. Just come home.” That is our role. One simple-English translation (NIrV) of 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 reads, “God brought us back to himself through Christ’s death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.”

During the Christmas season I heard many times on the radio the John Lennon song that begins, “So this is Christmas...” The ending of that song features a chorus sung high over the words: “War is over / if you want it/ war is over / now.” That is the message Paul is delivering from God. The war with God is over if you want it. The war is over now. In the name of Jesus, be reconciled to God.

I don’t know why there is a Japan theme running through this sermon, but let me close with another story from World War II, the story of two men, Jacob DeShazer and Mitsuo Fuchida. The day Pearl Harbor was attacked, Jacob DeShazer was peeling potatoes on KP duty in California; he was so mad he threw a spud against the wall and vowed revenge. He got his chance soon. He took part in Jimmy Doolittle’s surprise air raid on Tokyo as a bombardier. The plane ran out of gas, though, and he parachuted down in China. He was captured by the Japanese and placed in a brutal POW camp where there was torture and starvation. Jacob’s roommate starved to death. But in the midst of that camp, Jacob found a Bible, read the love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13, and his crazy hate for the Japanese guards was replaced with love. After the war, he went back to the States to go to Seattle Pacific College.

Mitsuo Fuchida was the commander who led the first wave of bombers in the Pearl Harbor attack. After the war he was humiliated and bitter. He left the army and went back to the family farm in a small village and did menial work, planting rice in the paddies. His soul was in misery since his successful life had come to such an end.

Back in Seattle, Jacob DeShazer began to feel that God wanted him to go back to Japan with the gospel. He quit school and when he got to Japan prepared a little pamphlet called “I Was a Prisoner of Japan” about how Christ had changed his heart.

Mitsuo Fuchida was called by General McArthur to come to Tokyo to testify at a war crimes trial. He passed by the famous statue of a faithful dog at the Shibuya train station. Standing there in the station was Jacob DeShazer, handing out his pamphlet. He gave one to Fuchida, with no idea that this was the man responsible for thousands of deaths at Pearl Harbor.

Fuchida read the message that there is a God who forgives, a God who loves everyone, and that he has declared peace. He read about a God who reconciles and changes hearts. And Fuchida accepted that message. He decided to live in that grace and that peace. He himself became an evangelist and spend the rest of his life telling people in Japan and in America about the God who has reconciled us to himself.

That is the good news: the war is over, and it means not that you have been defeated but that you have been accepted and loved. Thanks be to God. Amen.