

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Great Salvation: Reconciliation

Our subject today is 'Reconciliation' between God and mankind. It is one of the great and important themes of the Bible, the word of God.

The Prodigal Son

Just let us consider that story in Luke 15:11-32. We call it the story of the Prodigal Son. Here was a devoted father of two sons, both of whom would inherit his estate one day. The younger one couldn't wait that long, he wanted his share NOW! So off he went with his share, as far away from home as possible. He wasted it all quickly, living recklessly. While he had money, he had friends. Where were they now? No one cared about his desperate situation. He was starving and penniless. He found work feeding pigs, and was so hungry that he would even have eaten their food.

How would the Jewish thinkers react to this? With horror, no doubt. To them, pigs were unclean. Eventually the runaway son "came to himself". He thought of home, the comfort and love he had wilfully left behind. Conscience began to work, and a distance far greater than that of mileage from home, troubled him. Would his father still want him? Unknown to him, his father was looking out for him, even before he set his face toward home. What a reunion - no need to say all he had prepared. His father wanted him back as a son. He had never stopped loving him. How did the father show his desire for reconciliation and restoration of the lad's place in the home? Verses 22 and 23 tell us: "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put the ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry".

The distance between father and son was removed and reconciliation was effected. This parable is an apt illustration of the vital subject of reconciliation between God and mankind.

From the beginning

Early on in the history of the world sin came in with its sad consequences. Genesis 3 tells us the story. As a result there was estrangement between God and the man He had made. These conditions accelerated until there came a time just before the flood of Noah's time when God was grieved at His heart. His words are given us in Genesis 6:6, "And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart." Complete alienation had come in between God and man. It should be emphasised however that although man was found to be against God, there was no alienation of heart on God's part. Although man was found to hate God, He never hated us.

Down through the succeeding ages God put men on trial, only to find no change in heart. Attention has already been drawn to Genesis 3 when sin came into the world. In the New Testament the apostle Paul comments on this event in Romans 5:12: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

So the man whom God had made was found to be a sinner. After the flood, men became idolaters. Thus God called out Abram and separated him from the nations. God made promises to Abram which only God could fulfill. From Abram there sprang the nation of Israel. To that people God gave the law, but they failed, and were unable to keep it, therefore they were found to be transgressors.

Hating God

The greatest test of all was the presence of the Son of God here on earth. It is written, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). From the very outset of His life it was obvious that there was no room for Him here. The nation of Israel which should have received Him rejected Him, eventually delivering Him up to be crucified. They were found to be haters of God. In John 15:24-25 Jesus says: "If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both Me and my Father."

So man was found to be not only a sinner and a transgressor, but in the presence of perfect grace demonstrated in Christ, a hater of God. In their rejection of Him, man's enmity towards God was seen to the full. The need for reconciliation is clearly seen. But only God Himself could devise a way by which man could be brought back.

Reconciliation now

In the New Testament the first reference to our word is in Romans 5: "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." (verses 10 and 11).

We notice here that the word atonement is so used in many Old Testament scriptures. However, here, the word should read reconciliation. The word atonement is an Old Testament word, and the actual equivalent of this in New Testament language is propitiation. This refers to the Lord's death as it affects God. Christians, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, have now received the reconciliation. It is good to see that it is true of us NOW. How wonderful that we "joy in God". What a change has taken place. In the text just quoted, an explanation is required with regard to the expression "saved by His life". It does not refer to His life when He was on earth, but rather to His life now in heaven. Hebrews 7:25 helps us: "He ever liveth to make intercession for them." It is a great encouragement to be assured that believers are never left to their own resources; Christ is sufficient for every circumstance.

Enmity

In all the scriptures relating to reconciliation the focus of attention is upon the death of God's Son. It is at the heart of our text. It may be that the work of our Lord Jesus Christ is not appreciated by many. He became the object of man's cruelty. They thought of Him as worthy of crucifixion; a death accorded to malefactors. That despicable act brought to a head man's enmity. The only sinless person who had ever lived upon earth was "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). It is also true to say that where sin rose to its height, the love of God was revealed. This is put into simple words by the apostle Paul in Romans 5:20, "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound". The Lord Jesus gave Himself as a sacrifice for sin in order that there should be a righteous basis for reconciling those who were enemies. By that same sacrifice we who were guilty are forgiven, He bore the penalty we deserved. However enmity is a deeper and more serious matter. Reconciliation has to do with our condition more than what we have done. As other scriptures are read this truth will become clearer.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, we read that God is the Source of our reconciliation and Jesus Christ is the Person by whom we have received it. In these verses we find two expressions relating to reconciliation. One is, "the ministry of reconciliation", and the other, the "word of reconciliation". Initially it was the apostles who received them, but believers come into the benefit and responsibility of them. The "ministry" refers to the life of Christ when on earth. His whole attitude was grace. Whatever need there was He supplied it. Those with sickness or even with sins were never turned away. A very striking example of this is when the Pharisees brought to Him the woman taken in adultery. His searching words to the conscience of these religious men were, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." This drove them out of His presence. When Jesus saw that they had gone He said to the woman, "Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?" She said, "No man Lord". And Jesus said unto her, "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more" (John 8:10 and 11).

Word of Reconciliation

In spite of this display of grace towards men, they rejected Him. What a wonder it is that His death became the means of the offer of a realised reconciliation. The second expression, "the word of reconciliation" is really the preaching of the gospel. All believers can be involved in this. We are ambassadors for Christ, representing Him in a hostile world. The preaching is, "we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God". What a message this is. Are we being involved? If asked as to how reconciliation can be, the last part of verse 21 gives the answer. "For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." What a wonderful statement this is! Our hearts are to be moved by it. It has already been pointed out that reconciliation does not only have to do with what we have done, but with the awful root of rebellion against God. The focus of attention is again upon the cross of Calvary and upon His subsequent resurrection. The result of this finished work is that all the distance and the enmity have been removed once for all. What should the response be to these things, but worship?

The Greatness of Christ

In the Epistle to the Colossians are two more references to reconciliation. Before quoting the relevant scriptures we should understand the outstanding character of this epistle. It was written at a time when attacks were being made on

the truth of the Person of Christ. Therefore, in dealing with reconciliation, the stress is on the greatness of the Person who accomplished it.

“And, having made peace through the blood of the His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things on earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.” (Colossians 1:20-22)

The truth of the Deity of Christ is a vital part of the Christian faith. He became a perfect and sinless man; otherwise He could not have brought reconciliation to us. He was God manifest in the flesh. Earlier in the chapter which has been read, it is said “For in Him all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell.” (Colossians 1:19). These words are true. Note that it is the Son of God who is the Reconciler. There is another dimension to reconciliation in these verses, it is things, not persons which are reconciled. All that has been affected through sin, whether it be things in earth or things in heaven, is to be reconciled. He is great enough to do it and He has paid the price. What a price! The blood of His cross. The actual fact of the reconciling of all things awaits a future time. It will be when the Lord Jesus appears in His glory. There are many scriptures which tell us of the great change that will occur then. The area of this reconciliation will be very large; the word is “all things”. However, there is no mention here as in Philippians 2:10 of things under the earth. The whole of mankind shall confess Jesus Christ as Lord in that day, even those who have never done so in this day of His grace. Reconciliation does not touch things under the earth.

And you ...

The next part of the scriptures read is much more limited; it is addressed to us. Verse 21 starts “and you”. Christians have already been reconciled, so this same verse closes with the words, “yet now hath he reconciled.” The last verse read is about the Lord’s death. It contains a striking expression, “In the body of His flesh through death”. Another scripture which gives light as to its meaning is Romans 6:6, “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him ...” Not only have our sins been removed, but our old nature has been judged in His death. And so it is said of all believers, “holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight.” It may well stagger us. It is our position in Christ and it is true. It should be said, however, that God expects a character of life in keeping with this standing. It is with this in mind, that the writer of this epistle challenges the Colossian Christians. He writes, “If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard” (verse 23). There is always a need to challenge the reality of our faith. The “If” in no way casts a doubt upon the perfect standing of believers in Christ. However there is the constant need for an ongoing faith which gives continuance and stability and a sure hope.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is in many ways complementary to that to the Colossians. In Ephesians 2, the words, “aliens” and “enmity”, are found showing that and there is a need for peace. The enmity here is not between man and God, but between Jew and Gentile.

Making one out of two

God’s purpose before the world began was to establish His Church here on earth. In the church there would be no longer any national distinctions. At the cross, where the old nature was judged, a way was found of removing the enmity and making both Jew and Gentile one in Christ. The important passage in Ephesians 2:14-16 says: “For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”

All believers in the Lord Jesus Christ no matter what natural distinctions there may be are collectively “one new man”. And both Jew and Gentile have been reconciled to God in one body by the cross. God in His wisdom has triumphed, because the one body is to represent the Lord Jesus on earth until He comes again.

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