

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

1 Peter 3:18-22

By Andy Manning

The title of this sermon is “The Doctrine of Reconciliation.”

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time.

It is the greatest work of literature in all of human history.

Just about every home in the United States contains a copy of the Bible.

But what is the Bible about? What is the main point of the Bible? The Bible is not about how to be a good person. The Bible is not about how to be happy. The Bible is not about how to have a good marriage and raise good kids.

The main point of the Bible is to provide the answer to one question. **How can sinful people be reconciled to a holy, righteous, and just God?**

The Bible is about reconciliation.

And that’s what we’re going to talk about this morning – the doctrine of reconciliation.

Turn with me to **1 Peter 3:18-20 (CSB).**

This is a very interesting, complicated passage of Scripture.

We’re going to spend the bulk of our time on verse 18, but before we do I want to walk through this passage with you and help you understand it.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 19 in which he also went and made

proclamation to the spirits in prison 20 who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared. In it a few—that is, eight people—were saved through water.

What does it mean that Christ “also went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison”?

Here’s the short answer: Nobody knows for sure.

There are at least 18 major theories about what this passage means.

The main problem is that it’s not clear who the “spirits in prison” are.

The first thing you need to know is that the phrase “made alive by the Spirit,” at the end of verse 18, can also be translated “made alive in the spirit.”

Keep that in mind as I give you the three main theories.

The first view understands “spirits in prison” as the unsaved human spirits during the time of Noah.

Christ, “in the spirit”, proclaimed the gospel through Noah.

Since those people did not obey Christ’s message through Noah, they died and are now suffering judgment.

They are the spirits, and their prison is hell.

The second view understands the “spirits in prison” as fallen angels who were cast into hell to await the final judgment.

These fallen angels are believed by some to be the “sons of God” in Genesis 6 who had sex with human women (“the daughters of mankind”).

As a result, God punished them by sending them to hell, or to prison, to await the final judgment.

According to this view, during the time between His death and resurrection, Christ, in the spirit, went to hell and proclaimed victory and triumph over the fallen angels.

There are a couple of verses that seem to support this view, but their meaning isn't clear.

2 Peter 2:4-5 says, “For if God didn’t spare the angels who sinned but cast them into hell and delivered them in chains of utter darkness to be kept for judgment.”

Peter uses an uncommon word for hell, *tartarus*, rather than the normal words *gehenna* and *hades*.

The Jews believed that *tartarus* was the place where fallen angels were sent. It was the lowest part of hell, the deepest pit, the most terrible place of torture and eternal suffering.

Jude 6 says, “and the angels who did not keep their own position but abandoned their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deep darkness for the judgment on the great day.”

So according to this view Christ, in the spirit, went to hell and proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels during His death and resurrection.

A third view understands the “spirits in prison” to be all the human beings throughout history up to that time who had died and gone to hell.

During His death and resurrection, Christ, in His spirit, went to hell and proclaimed His triumph over sin and death.

Some believe that Christ preached the gospel to them and gave them a chance to believe, but that is a false teaching.

The Bible does not teach that you get a second chance to believe in Christ after your death.

So which view is correct? We don't know.

But here's something interesting.

Those of you who were raised Roman Catholic probably remember memorizing the Apostles' Creed.

One phrase says that after Christ was crucified, died, and was buried, that "He descended into hell."

Did Christ go to hell? It depends on how you translate 1 Peter 3:19-20.

But it is interesting that the earliest versions of the Apostles' Creed do not have that phrase. They don't say that Christ descended into hell; just that He died and was buried.

So that's why in the Home Discipleship Catechism, I don't include that phrase. My kids have memorized the Apostles' Creed without the phrase "He descended into hell."

I prefer the view that Christ didn't go to hell, but that He preached through Noah, and those people who rejected Him are now in hell, awaiting final judgment.

But this is not something to divide us. You can take any position you want on this.

But now we need to move on to the next part of our passage, which is also confusing. Look at **1 Peter 3:21-22**.

21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not as the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

Did you notice the problem? **Verse 21** says, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you....”

We don't teach that baptism saves you at Church Acadiana, but this verse says that baptism saves you.

What's going on here?

First of all, remember the most important principle of Biblical interpretation.

Interpret Scripture with Scripture.

Interpret the unclear passages with the clear passages.

Elsewhere in Scripture it makes it very clear that we are not saved by baptism, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

John 3:16 says, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Ephesians 2:8 says, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift.”

Acts 16:31 says, “They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

It is very clear that salvation is by faith, and not by good works or rituals.

So how do we interpret 1 Peter 3:21?

Well, it says that baptism saves you, “not as the removal of dirt from the body, by the pledge of a good conscience toward God.”

In other words, it is not the actual ritual of baptism that saves you, but what the ritual represents.

What does baptism symbolize? It is a symbol that you have pledged a good conscience toward God.

Now that’s kind of hard to understand. I prefer the **ESV’s** translation. “Not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.”

In other words, when you put your faith in Christ, you are appealing to God to forgive your sins and clean your guilty conscience.

And this is what baptism represents.

Baptism is the way that you publicly declare that you have put your faith in Jesus, appealing to God for a good conscience, or the forgiveness of sins.

Now I want to go back to **verse 18** and spend the rest of our time there.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God.

This verse explains the main point of the entire Bible.

It explains the reason that Christ died on the cross.

Christ died to bring you to God.

Christ died to reconcile you to God.

The main point of the Bible is how we can be reconciled to God. There are seven aspects of reconciliation.

7 ASPECTS OF RECONCILIATION

1. The definition of reconciliation.

What does the word reconciliation mean?

Reconciliation is the change of a relationship from enemies to friendship. It is the restoration and renewal of a relationship that has been broken by sin.

Lydia has a couple of aunts on her dad's side, Lou and Peg, who were always the best of friends. Very close. Well, a few years ago when Lydia's grandmother got to the point to where she couldn't live alone, she moved to Dallas and was taken care of primarily by Lou. And this led to lots of fights and bitterness between Lou and Peg. Eventually they got so mad at each other that they wouldn't speak, they wouldn't visit, they were enemies. And this lasted for several years until Gran died, and then it carried on. Both of them were very close friends with Rita, Lydia's mom. And so when Rita died last October, the two sisters decided to reconcile. Both of them came to the funeral and hugged and cried, and that was the first time they had seen each other in years. Two enemies became friends. They were reconciled. Their relationship was renewed and restored.

That's what the doctrine of reconciliation is about. It is about us being reconciled to God, and God being reconciled to us through the death of Jesus Christ.

But that brings us to the second aspect of reconciliation – the need.

2. The need for reconciliation.

If Christ suffered and died to reconcile us to God, then that means that apart from Christ we are enemies of God. And that's exactly what the Bible says.

To understand the need for reconciliation we have to go back to the beginning – the very beginning.

When God created the first people, Adam and Eve, He created them to have an intimate love relationship with Him. God created Adam and Eve, and placed them in the Garden of Eden, and God used to talk with them audibly, and then something happened.

Adam and Eve broke the only rule that God gave them – they disobeyed and sinned against God, and as a result God kicked them out of the Garden of Eden.

At that moment, sin entered into the human race, and people and God have been enemies ever since.

Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Sin caused several problems.

First, sin caused us to be hostile toward God.

From the moment of conception we are infected with the disease of sin, and that means that our natural inclination is to rebel against God and be in charge of our own lives.

We naturally hate God and anyone who wants to be in authority over us.

Colossians 1:21 says, “Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds expressed in your evil actions.”

Jeremiah 17:9 says that the hearts of unsaved people are deceitful and incurable.

Genesis 6:5 says that every inclination of the unsaved person is nothing but evil all the time.

Romans 3:11-18 says that the unsaved person does not seek God; their throat is an open grave; they deceive with their tongues and viper's venom is under their lives. Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. They have turned away from God. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and wretchedness are in their paths. They do not know the path of peace. They do not fear God.

Romans 5:10 says that the unsaved person is God's enemy.

Titus 1:15 says that the unsaved person has a defiled mind and conscience; they are detestable, disobedient, and unfit for any good work.

Titus 3:3 says that the unsaved are foolish, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice, envy, and hatred for one another.

1 John 3:8-10 says that the unsaved are children of the devil,

and 1 John 5:19 says that the unsaved are under the sway of the devil.

So because of this disease of sin that we have inherited from our first parents, our natural inclination is to hate God, and to rebel against Him, and to resist Him, and to worship ourselves.

A second problem caused by sin is that it caused God to be hostile toward us.

Not only did the disease of sin cause us to be hostile toward God, but our sinful actions have caused God to be angry toward us.

John 3:18 says that the unsaved person is condemned for not believing in Christ.

Colossians 2:14 says that the unsaved have a certificate of debt with obligations that are against and opposed to them.

Revelation 20:15 says that the names of the unsaved are not found in the Book of Life.

John 3:36 says that God's wrath remains on the unsaved person.

Ephesians 2:3 says that unsaved people are children under wrath.

What is God's wrath? It is His extreme anger toward sin that will ultimately be expressed at the final judgment when God casts unsaved people into the eternal Lake of Fire with the Devil and His demons.

God is extremely angry toward unsaved people for their sin.

A third problem caused by sin is that it created an infinite separation between us and God.

Colossians 1:21 says the unsaved person is alienated from God.

Ephesians 4:18 says the unsaved person is excluded from the life of God.

Isaiah 59:2 says, "But your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen."

Because of our sin all of us have been expelled from the Garden of God's presence.

An illustration of this separation is the Jewish Temple.

God had the Jews build the temple so that it had two main rooms. The first room was the Holy Place, and then there was the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies. Separating these two rooms was a veil, or a curtain, or two large tapestries. And the Holy of Holies

represented God's presence. That's where God was. And nobody was allowed to enter into the Holy of Holies except for the High Priest, and He could only do so once a year, on the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. The reason that God created the temple that way was to illustrate that He is holy, and people are sinful, and we are separated from Him, alienated from His presence.

And so there is a great need for reconciliation.

Unsaved people are hostile to God.

God is hostile to unsaved people and is preparing to send them to eternal hell.

And sin separates people from God so that they cannot have a relationship with Him and enjoy His presence.

That brings us to the third aspect of reconciliation – the initiator.

3. The initiator of reconciliation.

When Lydia and I get in a fight, one of us has to initiate reconciliation in order for us to make up. But it's so hard to initiate reconciliation. I think usually it is probably Lydia who is the initiator. She's more humble than me. It's so hard for me to swallow my pride. The person who is the first to say I'm sorry, or let's talk and make up, is the initiator.

When it comes to reconciliation with God, God is the initiator. It's not us who seek God's forgiveness, but God who chases after us to restore us to a right relationship with Him. Even though we are the sinners, and God is the innocent one, God is the one who sent His son to suffer and die in order to bring us back to God.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says, "18 Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 19 That is,

in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us.”

So this would be like me sinning against Lydia, and us getting into a fight, and then instead of me going to her to make up, she takes the initiative and comes to me to make up.

This is what separates Christianity from every other religion. Every other religion is about man taking the initiative to be reconciled to God by trying to make up for your sins with lots of good deeds. But with Christianity God takes the initiative and sends Christ to make up for our sins through His death.

Even though we sinned against God, God comes to us and says, “I want us to be reconciled; I want us to be close again.”

But reconciliation was not free. That brings us to the next aspect of reconciliation.

4. The cost of reconciliation.

How many of you have ever been to Lagneaux’s Seafood Buffet? I love that place. So on my birthday this year that’s where I decided to take my family. And it was good. All you can eat boudin, fried catfish, fried shrimp, jambalaya, gumbo, fried chicken, frog legs, boiled crabs, and on and on. It was amazing. I ate so much that I had a hard time falling asleep that night. It was good, but it cost me. To feed my family of eight, and some of those are discount prices because of their age, it cost me over \$170. I invited my parents, too, but thank goodness they had other plans!

Reconciliation has a high price tag, too. What was the cost of reconciliation?
What had to happen to make reconciliation with God possible?

Remember, we sinned against God, and the punishment for sin is God’s wrath, or eternal suffering in hell.

What did God do to reconcile us?

He sent Jesus Christ to die in our place for our sins.

That's what **1 Peter 3:18** says. "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God."

For reconciliation to be possible, God's righteous wrath had to be satisfied.

A holy God cannot just overlook sin. Our sin had to be punished.

And so Christ died to satisfy and appease the wrath of God.

The Biblical word for this is **propitiation**.

The word means to satisfy, to appease.

In Biblical terms it means the death of Christ fully satisfied all the righteous demands of a holy God toward sinful men.¹

Our sins incurred a penalty, and Christ paid the penalty through His death on the cross. He satisfied God's wrath for us.

1 John 4:10 (HCSB) says, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

John Piper wrote that propitiation "refers to the removal of God's wrath by providing a substitute. The substitute is provided by God himself. The substitute, Jesus Christ, does not just cancel the wrath;

¹ Harold Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011), 575.

he absorbs it and diverts it from us to himself. God's wrath is just, and it was spent, not withdrawn.”

However, just because Christ died to satisfy God's wrath against us doesn't mean that everyone automatically goes to heaven.

There's more to reconciliation than that. That brings us to the fifth aspect of reconciliation.

5. The phases to reconciliation.

Let's say that I sin against Lydia, and she decides to forgive me and she initiates reconciliation by coming to me and saying, "Hey, I want to make up; I want us to be one again." Now that she has come to me, does that mean we are now reconciled? No. Something's missing right? What's missing? My response.

Reconciliation requires two people.

By Lydia forgiving me and initiating reconciliation, she has made reconciliation possible. But for reconciliation to occur, I have to respond appropriately. I need to humble myself, and apologize, and repent, and assure her that I will be careful not to repeat the offense.

Reconciliation with God is similar to that. There are **two phases to reconciliation**.²

First, God has taken the initiative to reconcile Himself to the world through Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:19 says, "That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

God has taken the initiative to make reconciliation possible.

² Ibid., 578.

The death of Christ has made us savable.

It made us reconcilable, whereas without Christ's death we are irreconcilable.

But that's only the first phase to reconciliation.

The **second** phase of reconciliation is that man has to reconcile himself to God through faith in Christ.

God made reconciliation possible.

But for us to be reconciled, we must respond with repentance and faith.

That's what conversion is. It is the decision to turn from your sins, hand over the steering wheel of your life to Jesus Christ, and invite Him into your life to be your Savior and Lord.

Acts 16:31 says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

To be reconciled to God, you need to respond to God's initiative.

Your response should include A, B, and C.

A – admit you are a sinner in need of a Savior. This is where you apologize to God for sinning and rebelling against Him.

B – believe that Jesus died in your place and rose again as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

C – Call out to Jesus to come into your life and be your Savior and King.

Romans 10:13 says, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

But we're still not finished! Now we can talk about the results of reconciliation with God.

6. The results of reconciliation.

I don't know if you've ever been to the Kart Ranch, but when you play the arcades you win tickets. And before you leave, you can use your tickets to buy a prize. Well, no offense to the Kart Ranch, but it sure takes a lot of tickets to get anything valuable. You can have three hundred tickets and still not be able to afford a good prize.

Reconciliation with God is not like that. Reconciliation has some wonderful rewards. Let's look at **four results of reconciliation.**

First, peace with God.

Before salvation we are at enmity with God; we are hostile to God and God is hostile to us.

But when we are reconciled to God we have peace with God.

Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Peace with God includes the forgiveness of our sins and the guarantee that when we stand before God at the final judgment, we will not be condemned, but will be saved.

Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 1:7 says, "We have redemption in Him through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."

The second result of reconciliation is access to God.

Remember that before we are reconciled to God we are separated, and alienated, and cut off from God's presence.

But through Christ's work of reconciliation we can now have access to an intimate relationship with God.

Romans 5:2 says, "We have also obtained access through Him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

Colossians 1:21-22 (NLT) says, "21 This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. 22 Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault."

Before reconciliation God's face and God's ear were turned away from us. God didn't listen to our prayers. God wasn't surrounding us with His protecting, comforting presence.

But after reconciliation we can have access to God.

And we don't need to go through a priest. We can go directly to God.

Hebrews 4:16 says, "Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time."

The third result of reconciliation is adoption as God's children.

God created every human being, but every human being is not a child of God.

Unsaved people, non-Christians are God's enemies.

In fact, the Bible says that the unsaved are children of the devil and are under his control.

But when you get reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, God adopts you into His family, and you become a child of God.

Galatians 4:4-5 says, "4 When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

And the fourth result of reconciliation is joy in God.

Before we are reconciled to God we live in fear of God's wrath.

We live in fear that God is going to punish us now, and that God will punish us in the next life.

But after we are reconciled to God, we have joy in God because we know that we are forgiven and that we have peace with God.

We know that God loves us, and God is with us, and God is watching over us, and God is for us.

Romans 5:11 says, "And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation."

7. The ministry of reconciliation.

The last aspect of reconciliation is called the ministry of reconciliation.

When God saves you and reconciles you to Himself, He has a purpose for your life.

He wants you to enjoy your relationship with Him, but He also calls you to the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:19-20 says, “19 That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: ‘Be reconciled to God.’”

Notice what God has called us to. He has called us to be God’s ambassadors.

We represent Jesus Christ wherever go.

We are to live in such a way that our words and actions make Jesus look good and then attract people to Jesus.

As well, God has committed the message of reconciliation to us. We are called to try to reconcile people to God. We are called to take the message of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ and try to reconcile as many people to God as possible.

First God reconciles you to Himself, and then He calls you to the ministry of reconciliation, to try to reconcile others to God.