

Reconciliation

Being Friends with God and Each Other

This is a series of messages on the topic of reconciliation, another set in the Basic Messages of Hope series. The Christian message from the Bible tells us how we can be reconciled to God. This is Priority #1. But the second, Priority #2, is how we can be reconciled to other persons, recovering from alienation and hard feelings in order to gain a keen sense of personal warmth, mutual respect, and concern. Every person in the whole world needs both priorities, especially at this moment in human history. These basic messages teach and inspire in English idiom that is simple in style, vocabulary, and expression, devoid of complex references to Western thought patterns, culture, and theological jargon.

by

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Introduction

The subject “Reconciliation”: These messages give basic teaching from the Bible about the very important subject of reconciliation. To “reconcile” is to bring persons who have not been at peace with each other back together into friendship and harmony. There is great confusion today about how people may be at peace with God. And the need for persons to reconcile is enormous because of the fighting, separations, wars, killing, angry talk, bitter feelings, divorce in marriages, false accusations and much more. We all know how true this is!

Basis in the Bible: The Bible teaches that all people need to come back to God because they have sinned, have offended him and need to find peace with God. That is the foundation for reconciliation. When we find peace with God through Jesus, we begin immediately to see how important it is for us to love other believers and all people. But this seems so difficult and almost impossible in the real world.

Jesus, the Reconciler, the Peace-Maker: Jesus taught us how to live at peace with others. He died to free us from the sins of hatred, bitterness and revenge. He showed us how to be friends with people whom we have been taught to call by ugly names. Jesus was a friend of sinners. He teaches us to forgive those who sin against us. He teaches us to love our enemies and pray for them! Jesus is a peace maker. He sent the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and thinking so that we can also be peace makers. We must follow him and learn how to bring people together in faith, worship, work and conversation. This is the great need of this hour!

Goal for Message Preparers: I encourage you to study these messages and use them to prepare your own messages for your people so that they may solve problems and not make them worse. So that they may enjoy and love each other. So that they may learn and grow stronger in faith and life together. What joy you will see as you help people to heal hurts and come together in peace and harmony!

The Reverend Paul Hostetter, pastor and writer at *Words of Hope*

Reconciliation Message #1

At Peace with God and with Each Other

Theme: To be *reconciled* is to come together again in peace and love after wrongs that have separated us from God and from each other.

1. Reconciliation means being friends after we have been enemies.
2. Reconciliation means loving each other instead of hating.
3. It means having peace and healing after hurt and loss.

The Christian message contains two truths:

1. Be reconciled to God.
2. Be reconciled to each other.

This is a message about peace:

1. How to have peace with God.
2. How we must be at peace with each other if we say we believe and love God.

Please listen carefully to these verses from the Bible (CEV) that teach us about this very important subject.

2 Corinthians 5:18:

God has done it all! He sent Christ to make peace between himself and us, and he has given us the work of making peace between himself and others.

1 John 3:14-16:

Our love for each other proves that we have gone from death to life. But if you don't love each other, you are still under the power of death.

1 John 4:7-12:

My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows that we have been given new life. We are now God's children, and we know him. God is love, and anyone who doesn't love others has never known him. God showed his love for us when he sent his only Son into the world to give us life. Real love isn't our love for God, but his love for us. God sent his Son to be the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven. Dear Friends, since God loved us this much, we must love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is truly in our hearts.

How beautiful life is:

1. When we are right with God. We want to be at peace and to be reconciled with him.
2. When we make something right that divided us from other people.
3. When we live in harmony and not in conflict. Bad emotions make us weak and unhappy.

There are three parts to reconciliation:

1. Our relationship to God. How can we be sure we are in a right relationship with him?
2. Our relationship to other persons. How can we overcome bad feelings and separation?
3. Our relationship with other believers in the church. Paul always announced “peace” to believers when he greeted them in his letters. The church is the one body of Christ. When believers are at odds with each other, everyone loses and God is disappointed with us.

Peace with God.

1. Do you have peace with God? The most important Christian message to everyone in the world is that God is our friend and not our enemy.
2. Do you share this truth with others? The great missionary and apostle Paul stated clearly: “God has done it all! He sent Christ to make peace (to reconcile) between himself and us, *and he has given us the work of making peace between himself and others.*” (2 Corinthians 5:18 CEV)

In Jesus we find forgiveness for all our sins. He died that we may have peace with God. He removed every charge against us. God will no longer judge and punish us. We are forgiven when we believe. This is the Christian message to the whole world.

Believers are God’s *ambassadors* (government ministers of diplomacy and peace-making) in the world. That is why we ask other people to listen to our message because it is so good!

If this is news to you, please listen to this message and you will understand the beauty of God’s love for all people. He wants to be our friend. He is not a harsh judge who punishes us.

Peace with others is our opportunity and responsibility.

The main purpose of this message is to help people see how they can live together in harmony with one another. God forgives us, and he helps us to make peace with those who are angry with us. God does not divide people. Instead, he wants to bring us together! Remember the words from 1 John 4:7-8 (CEV). John says clearly:

My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows that we have been given new life. . . . God is love, and anyone who does *not* love others has never known him.

The apostle John observed what happened to Jesus' followers after his death and resurrection. John saw how often people fight and separate from each other in anger and bitterness. John wants us to understand these truths:

- a. The beauty of peaceful relationships with other people.
- b. The joy and benefits of fair and balanced relationships between men and women.
- c. The value of respectful and mutually affirming relationships between tribes and differing ethnic groups.
- d. The wonderful, good feelings that come from loving words and positive communications between people, especially after they have been fighting each other.
- e. The great benefit for all people when nations are at peace and destructive wars cease.
- f. The deep relief from pain and fear when disputes are ended.
- g. How calm people feel when they forgive, when they stop seeking revenge and give up hating their enemies.
- h. The power and satisfaction Christians experience when they agree together, when they solve problems, serve God, and avoid harmful separations.

What a list of the benefits of reconciliation with others! How often do you think of these benefits? Have you been discouraged and angry? There is hope of a happier and better day. God wants to help you make peace with all persons wherever you are. It seems impossible. But this is God's will, to help us live in peace, calm and love in a world of disagreement and disunity.

The goal of this series of messages is to help people see the need for reconciliation.

- a. To become friends with God.
- b. To become friends with everyone in all the relationships of life.
- c. We want people to see how God, the Bible and the Holy Spirit of God give us the power and purpose to overcome these destructive behaviors:
 - i. Anger and hate between persons
 - ii. Fights between men and women, at work and at home
 - iii. Fights between tribes and classes, feelings of superiority
 - iv. Harsh and hurtful speech and accusations
 - v. War between nations and bitter local political battles
 - vi. All violence, personal injury and loss
 - vii. Bitter memories and an unforgiving attitude
 - viii. Painful and wasteful separations

You know from your own experience what I am talking about. The world is full of bad attitudes and feelings. We carry them in our hearts. We hurt ourselves and we hurt others. We lose our strength and give up hope for better days.

But God wants to help us. Jesus came to change us. The Holy Spirit is in our hearts to remind us, to teach us and to move us to love others and forgive their wrongdoings.

Conclusion:

Point #1 I hope and pray that you know that God is your friend and not your enemy. He wants you to see him as your loving Father. He is ready right now to forgive your sins. Through the blood of Jesus he will wash away every sin and stain in your heart and mind.

Point #2 We all need help so that we can get along together and have peace in our homes, villages, cities, and the world. If we truly believe in the God of love and forgiveness, then we too must forgive and love our neighbors. That is the proof that we have true faith. What a wonderful thing: to be a friend and not an enemy, to forgive and not hold a grudge. Ask God to help you today and he will.

I invite you to listen to more messages in this series on peace with God and peace with each other. This is good news. It is God's message for the world. And it is good for you and me. Please listen again and you too will discover the peace of God in all your relationships.

Reconciliation Message #2

The Hardest Commandment of Jesus: Love and Forgive Your Enemies

Theme: The main word in this message is to “forgive” those who do you wrong, even your enemies. Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.” Then he went on to say, “If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:12, 14-15 CEV).

BIBLE VERSES: Matthew 5:43-48; 6:12, 14-15 (CEV)

MESSAGE

Before I tell you a true story I want to read some hard sayings of Jesus. Please listen carefully and let the Holy Spirit of God speak to you from these words. (Read the verses listed above from Matthew chapters 5 and 6.)

How many of us love our enemies? How many of us pray for them? How many of us forgive people when they do us wrong? Most of us cannot answer yes to all three questions. Today I want to tell you about a community of Christians called “Amish” who openly forgive their enemies and people who wrong them. These Amish Christians emphasize two truths:

1. Every believer must trust fully in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins and salvation.
2. At the same time all believers must work hard to fully obey the commands of Jesus and keep from sin.

These Christians constantly pay attention to the teaching of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mountain” in Matthew chapters 5-7, parts of which I just read to you.

These very sincere Amish Christians believe that they must live separately from the attitudes, fashions, and activities of the world around them. They try hard to live simply and humbly. So they have insisted on having their own schools in order to control the education and environment of their children. Most of their children study in one-room schoolhouses near their homes. Older Amish girls and women teach the children to read, write, and do arithmetic. The children also study the Bible and sing the Christian songs of the Amish in these schools.

Early in the morning of October 2, 2006, a non-Amish man drove a truck

to collect milk for market from the Amish farmers in a small community of Lancaster County in the State of Pennsylvania. That morning he finished his work at 3:30 a.m. Later he walked his own three children to the public school near their home. Then he drove his truck, loaded with three guns and 600 bullets to the one-room Amish school of 20 children in his neighborhood. In his truck he also carried boards that he could use to bar the doors of the school and plastic to tie the hands and legs of the girls.

When he entered the school, he dismissed the teacher, who immediately ran to the nearest non-Amish house to call the police. (Amish homes do not have telephones.) He also sent all the boys and teacher-aides away and blocked the door firmly with the boards he had brought in his truck. Then he tied the girls' ankles with the plastic rope he had brought with him.

The state police arrived promptly. The man had a cell phone so the police called him and tried to persuade him to change his mind. He replied, "Leave here immediately, in the next three seconds, or I will shoot all the girls." The police broke the window and tried to get into the school as soon as they could but they were too late. The man immediately started shooting the girls in the head. He killed five girls and severely wounded five others. Then he shot himself and died. The five wounded girls were rushed to hospitals.

Seven weeks later (11-21-06) a neurosurgeon (nerve/brain doctor) reported that two of these girls were "severely wounded in the head.... One of the two was expected to remain in the ... Children's Hospital of Philadelphia until December. The other is considered fully disabled and is being cared for by her family at home. She is not expected to recover much function if any. All they can do is to keep her comfortable and free from fear and pain. The other three survivors have face, arm, and leg wounds that will be disabling for a long time, if not permanently.... They are seriously damaged and will have long-term troubles from their wounds." What a horrible future from this moment of madness!

People across America and throughout the world heard this terrible, unbelievable story within a few hours. The TV and radio news reports, newspapers, and magazines reported the horrible massacre (mass killing) of these innocent girls under 12 years of age. The killer's wife, who is a Christian, was at a prayer meeting at the time when he broke into the school. What an awful memory for her and her children!

Everyone searched for the reasons why this man would commit such a horrible crime. They learned from police authorities that he was still troubled because of his sex acts toward small girls when he was 12 years old, 20 years before this time. It was also reported that he was troubled by the death of his infant daughter and that he was angry with God because of her death. But why would he ever think of murdering ten young, innocent, defenseless Amish school

girls? No one had an answer. People continue to guess and speculate.

How do you think the Amish parents and their community responded to this brutal act? On the same day their daughters died, they declared openly to the police and others, “**We forgive him.**” One Amish man was reported as saying “sick, sick, sick” in describing the murderer. But no Amish person was reported as being openly angry and resentful. They did not protest against this attack in their community. Instead, they wept and comforted each other and gathered together in their homes to pray. And in the larger community around them, people gathered in churches to pray. Everyone was amazed at the forgiving attitude of the Amish and their calm self-control. They remained true to their faith and obedience to the words of Jesus.

After the massacre individual people, churches, and businesses responded by giving over a million dollars (as of November 2006) to help the Amish parents with their losses, huge hospital and medical treatment bills, travel expenses and the care and treatment of the surviving girls. This money was put in a special fund by Amish leaders. But they didn’t use it only for themselves. They have given at least \$100,000 to the wife and children of the man who shot their daughters. They not only forgave the killer but also recognized that his own family would suffer greatly from the memory of this shocking crime. The Amish backed up their words of forgiveness with an act of amazing generosity! This is the Amish way of forgiving others. Doesn’t this seem like Jesus?

The Amish also forgave the murderer in another way. Several of the family members of the dead girls along with other Amish attended the funeral of the murderer within a few days after the shooting. They were not there to express their anger but to show the mother and children that they are forgiven and loved.

This is love in action. It contradicts what normally happens in our world. The Amish demonstrated extraordinary self-control. Other Christians stand in awe of them. Their calm faith and forgiveness is so unusual. It is almost like a mirror of Jesus dying on the cross.

What can we learn from this story? Here are some points to remember and pray about:

- 1. When someone does something wrong against you, forgive him or her immediately.** Remember the words of Jesus at the end of his lesson on prayer. Forgive those who do you wrong! You will be tempted to be angry and return wrong for wrong, but don’t yield to this temptation.
- 2. All of us suffer from wrongs and evil that we cannot explain.** We would like to fight back and make things right in our own way with

our own strength. We want to “get even.” But we must leave judgment to God. He will always bless and help us if we let go of our hate and desire for revenge.

3. Forgiveness changes people and makes enemies into friends.

Hatred, anger, and resentment divide people, causing deep divisions that are like open, bleeding sores. The Amish have spoken clearly to the world that they forgive. They want healing and not more hurt. They know how bitterness and revenge can destroy us and them.

- 4. We Christians must learn from each other.** Many Christians and non-Christians think that the Amish are strange and poorly educated. Their interpretation of worldliness seems extreme and they appear to be legalistic in their attempt to live “apart from the world.” But the Amish have taught the world a lesson that we don’t want to hear, and this time we can’t shut our ears. Forgive your enemy. Suffer wrong instead of fighting back. Heal wounds. Do not make them worse. People who know about the words of Jesus expect us to be forgiving. The best message we can give them about Jesus is to forgive them when they sin against us.

Do you think this is impossible? It isn’t. Jesus died just like those children at the hands of angry people who loved their way of life and their religion more than the commandments of God. If we believe in Jesus we must also pay close attention to his teaching.

Forgive! It isn’t easy. But it is the only good way. It is God’s way. Forgiveness is powerful. The person who forgives is changed and others are changed too. Hurts and losses are turned into gains. And we leave to God the final judgment about all the hidden details and motives that drive people to do wrong.

5. I invite you to pray this prayer now:

Jesus, I believe in you. Give me strength to live and act as you teach us. Especially help me to forgive people who wrong me. This is not easy for me. It is very hard. But it is your way. So, help me today and every day to forgive others as you forgive us our many sins! In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Note: Select from this message the parts that will help your people understand and obey the commandment to forgive our enemies and those people who harm us.

Reconciliation Message #3

Two Very Angry Brothers Make Peace After Many Years

Theme:

Anger and fights between brothers and sisters happen every day. These fights can lead to threats and murder. These bad feelings can last a long time. Jacob and Esau show us how two brothers made peace after a terrible fight and long separation.

Bible Verses:

Readings: Genesis 27:41-45; 32:9-13; 33:1-11 CEV

Background Study: Read Genesis 27:1–28:5 (note v. 41); 29:1–33:15

Special Note:

The story of Jacob and Esau and their parents Isaac and Rachel fill more than half the pages of the book of Genesis. Take an hour or two and read the whole story. This message focuses on the ugly, angry separation of the adult sons, Jacob and Esau.

There are many other stories in Genesis 25:19 to 49:33 which teach us good and bad about the personal sins of Isaac's family members, the results of their bad behavior and false worship. We also learn a lot about how God is always present to do good while people he loves misbehave. In this message I will quote long sections from the Bible because the story is so powerful and well-told.

MESSAGE

This message is about two twin brothers who had a terrible fight and then separated far from each other for at least 26 years (Gen. 31:41). But, in the end it is a wonderful story of how these two brothers, Esau and Jacob, finally made peace. The end was beautiful but the separation was extremely painful for both of them. We can learn a lot from this story in the Bible.

Most brothers and sisters fight often. They should not but they do. We have all done it. They speak hateful and threatening words. They hit each other. Sometimes these fights are really bad so that they separate in fits of anger and nasty words. This story is about the wonderful peace that came to two brothers.

And it will encourage us!

Esau and Jacob were twin brothers, but not identical. They were very different. Their parents, Isaac and Rebekah, were not wise. Father Isaac liked Esau most because he was a tough guy with lots of hair on his body. The name *Esau* sounds like the word for *hairy*. Esau loved to hunt wild animals. At birth Jacob, the second born, “grabbed onto his brother’s heel, so they named him Jacob” (Hebrew *he clutches*). Jacob turned out to be a person who grabbed what he wanted, not always honestly but for his own advantage. Mother Rebekah liked Jacob most because he stayed near the house and grew beans for her in his garden.

Now I will read this story from the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible: (Genesis 27:1-37, 41-45 CEV).

¹ After Isaac had become old and almost blind, he called in his first-born son Esau, who asked him, “Father, what can I do for you?”

² Isaac replied, “I am old and might die at any time. ³ So take your bow and arrows, then go out in the fields, and kill a wild animal. ⁴ Cook some of that tasty food that I love so much and bring it to me. I want to eat it once more and give you my blessing before I die.”

⁵ Rebekah had been listening, and as soon as Esau left to go hunting, ⁶ she said to Jacob, “I heard your father tell Esau ⁷ to kill a wild animal and cook some tasty food for your father before he dies. Your father said this because he wants to bless your brother with the LORD as his witness. ⁸ Now, my son, listen carefully to what I want you to do. ⁹ Go and kill two of your best young goats and bring them to me. I’ll cook the tasty food that your father loves so much. ¹⁰ Then you can take it to him, so he can eat it and give you his blessing before he dies.”

¹¹ “My brother Esau is a hairy man,” Jacob reminded her. “And I am not.

¹² If my father touches me and realizes I am trying to trick him, he will put a curse on me instead of giving me a blessing.”

¹³ Rebekah insisted, “Let his curse fall on me! Just do what I say and bring me the meat.” ¹⁴ So Jacob brought the meat to his mother, and she cooked the tasty food that his father liked. ¹⁵ Then she took Esau’s best clothes and put them on Jacob. ¹⁶ She also covered the smooth part of his hands and neck with goatskins ¹⁷ and gave him some bread and the tasty food she had cooked.

¹⁸ Jacob went to his father and said, “Father, here I am.”

“Which one of my sons are you?” his father asked.

¹⁹ Jacob replied, “I am Esau, your first-born, and I have done what you told me. Please sit up and eat the meat I have brought. Then you can give me your blessing.”

²⁰ Isaac asked, “My son, how did you find an animal so quickly?”

“The LORD your God was kind to me,” Jacob answered.

²¹ “My son,” Isaac said, “come closer, where I can touch you and find out if you really are Esau.” ²² Jacob went closer. His father touched him and said, “You sound like Jacob, but your hands feel hairy like Esau’s.” ²³ And so Isaac blessed Jacob, thinking he was Esau.

²⁴ Isaac asked, “Are you really my son Esau?”

“Yes, I am,” Jacob answered.

²⁵ So Isaac told him, “Serve me the wild meat, and I can give you my blessing.”

Jacob gave him some meat, and he ate it. He also gave him some wine, and he drank it. ²⁶ Then Isaac said, “Son, come over here and kiss me.” ²⁷ While Jacob was kissing him, Isaac caught the smell of his clothes and said:

“The smell of my son is like a field the LORD has blessed.

²⁸ God will bless you, my son, with dew from heaven and with fertile fields, rich with grain and grapes.

²⁹ Nations will be your servants and bow down to you. You will rule over your brothers, and they will kneel at your feet. Anyone who curses you will be cursed; anyone who blesses you will be blessed.”

³⁰ Right after Isaac had given Jacob his blessing and Jacob had gone, Esau came back from hunting. ³¹ He cooked the tasty food, brought it to his father, and said, “Father, please sit up and eat the meat I have brought you, so you can give me your blessing.”

³² “Who are you?” Isaac asked.

“I am Esau, your first-born son.”

³³ Isaac started trembling and said, “Then who brought me some wild meat right before you came in? I ate it and gave him a blessing that cannot be taken back.”

³⁴ Esau cried loudly and begged, “Father, give me a blessing too!”

³⁵ Isaac answered, “Your brother tricked me and stole your blessing.”

³⁶ Esau replied, “My brother deserves the name Jacob, because he has already cheated me twice. The first time he cheated me out of my rights as the first-born son, and now he has cheated me out of my blessing.” Then Esau asked his father, “Don’t you still have any blessing left for me?”

³⁷ “My son,” Isaac answered, “I have made Jacob the ruler over you and your brothers, and all of you will be his servants. I have also promised him all the grain and grapes that he needs. There’s nothing left that I can do for you.”....

⁴¹ Esau hated his brother Jacob because he had stolen the blessing that was supposed to be his. So he said to himself, “Just as soon as my father dies, I’ll kill Jacob.”

⁴² When Rebekah found out what Esau planned to do, she sent for Jacob and told him, “Son, your brother Esau is just waiting for the time when he can kill you. ⁴³ Now listen carefully and do what I say. Go to the home of my brother Laban in Haran ⁴⁴ and stay with him for a while. When Esau stops being angry ⁴⁵ and forgets what you have done to him, I’ll send for you to come home. Why should I lose both of my sons on the same day?”

Genesis 27:1-37, 41-45 CEV

So Jacob runs away and the two adult brothers live far apart for at least 26 years!

The Genesis story shows us later that they had deep agony in their hearts during those years. They wanted to make peace, but they were not able to do so. So Jacob ran away to Haran in Northern Syria, about 500 miles (over 700 kilometers), a long, long distance in those days! Jacob settled in Haran with Laban, his mother’s brother. Jacob married there and had 11 sons. He had many troubles with Laban, his father-in-law. That is another long story. Jacob was not good at keeping friendly relationships. He was too eager to please himself.

After a big argument with Laban, Jacob decided to leave Haran and go back to his home in Beersheba. *The Bible tells us how these two brothers finally came together again.* It was not easy. Both of them were anxious and afraid. But they wanted to heal the painful separation and put the hurts of the past behind them. Listen to the story from Genesis:

Genesis 32:1-21; 33:1-15 CEV

¹ As Jacob was on his way back home, some of God’s angels came and met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp.” So he named the place Mahanaim.

³ Jacob sent messengers on ahead to Esau, who lived in the land of Seir, also known as Edom. ⁴ Jacob told them to say to Esau, “Master, I am your servant! I have lived with Laban all this time, ⁵ and now I own cattle, donkeys, and sheep, as well as many slaves. Master, I am sending these messengers in the hope that you will be kind to me.”

⁶ When the messengers returned, they told Jacob, “We went to your brother Esau, and now he is heading this way with four hundred men.”

⁷ Jacob was so frightened that he divided his people, sheep, cattle, and camels into two groups. ⁸ He thought, “If Esau attacks one group, perhaps the other can escape.”

⁹ Then Jacob prayed:

You, LORD, are the God who was worshiped by my grandfather Abraham and by my father Isaac. You told me to return home to my

family, and you promised to be with me and make me successful. ¹⁰ I don't deserve all the good things you have done for me, your servant. When I first crossed the Jordan, I had only my walking stick, but now I have two large groups of people and animals. ¹¹ Please rescue me from my brother. I am afraid he will come and attack not only me, but my wives and children as well. ¹² But you have promised that I would be a success and that someday it will be as hard to count my descendants as it is to count the stars in the sky.

¹³ After Jacob had spent the night there, he chose some animals as gifts for Esau: ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ two hundred female goats and twenty males, two hundred female sheep and twenty males, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten males.

¹⁶ Jacob put servants in charge of each herd and told them, "Go ahead of me and keep a space between each herd." ¹⁷ Then he said to the servant in charge of the first herd, "When Esau meets you, he will ask whose servant you are. He will want to know where you are going and who owns those animals in front of you. ¹⁸ So tell him, 'They belong to your servant Jacob, who is coming this way. He is sending them as a gift to his master Esau.'"

¹⁹ Jacob also told the men in charge of the second and third herds and those who followed to say the same thing when they met Esau. ²⁰ And Jacob told them to be sure to say that he was right behind them. Jacob hoped the gifts would make Esau friendly, so Esau would be glad to see him when they met.

²¹ Jacob's men took the gifts on ahead of him, but he spent the night in camp.

Genesis 33:1-15 CEV

Jacob Meets Esau

¹ Later that day Jacob met Esau coming with his four hundred men. So Jacob had his children walk with their mothers. ² The two servant women, Zilpah and Bilhah, together with their children went first, followed by Leah and her children, then by Rachel and Joseph. ³ Jacob himself walked in front of them all, bowing to the ground seven times as he came near his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran toward Jacob and hugged and kissed him. Then the two brothers started crying.

⁵ When Esau noticed the women and children he asked, "Whose children are these?"

Jacob answered, "These are the ones the LORD has been kind enough to give to me, your servant."

⁶ Then the two servant women and their children came and bowed down to Esau. ⁷ Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down; finally, Joseph

and Rachel also came and bowed down.

⁸ Esau asked Jacob, “What did you mean by these herds I met along the road?”

“Master,” Jacob answered, “I sent them so that you would be friendly to me.”

⁹ “But, brother, I already have plenty,” Esau replied. “Keep them for yourself.”

¹⁰ “No!” Jacob said. “Please accept these gifts as a sign of your friendship for me. When you welcomed me and I saw your face, it was like seeing the face of God. ¹¹ Please accept these gifts I brought to you. God has been good to me, and I have everything I need.” Jacob kept insisting until Esau accepted the gifts.

¹² “Let’s get ready to travel,” Esau said. “I’ll go along with you.”

¹³ But Jacob answered, “Master, you know traveling is hard on children, and I have to look after the sheep and goats that are nursing their young. If my animals travel too much in one day, they will all die. ¹⁴ Why don’t you go on ahead and let me travel along slowly with the children, the herds, and the flocks. We can meet again in the country of Edom.”

¹⁵ Esau replied, “Let me leave some of my men with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Jacob answered. “I am happy, simply knowing that you are friendly to me.”

Please note the following important points in the story:

1. Both Jacob and Esau were *deeply worried* about their meeting. This is so true of fights between brothers and sisters. They want to make peace, but it is not easy. They are afraid that they will speak harsh words and relationships will get worse rather than better.
2. Jacob was *frightened*. Esau was coming with 400 men.
3. Jacob called Esau “master” and himself “your servant Jacob” (32:18). It is good to *be humble and show respect*. Jacob honored his older brother according to the custom of their people. To heal hurts we must choose our words carefully. Words are powerful.
4. Leah and Rachel and their children *bowed down* to Esau. They were humble too.
5. Jacob offered his many *gifts*, but Esau said, “... brother, I ... have plenty ... keep them for yourself.” But Jacob kept on insisting that Esau keep the gifts. Good!
6. Esau left some of his men to *help* Jacob on his long journey back home to Canaan.

7. Jacob said, “You don’t have to do that.... I am happy simply knowing that *you are friendly to me*” (33:15).

What a beautiful ending to a painful separation of over 26 years! Is this not true to our experiences? Fights and bad feelings between brothers and sisters can last so long.

Here are a few **lessons we can learn from this story:**

1. Lying and deception lead to very painful separations between family members.
2. But God is always at work to help us make peace even though it is difficult.
3. It is never too late to make peace. Reconciliation after many years brings tears of joy.
4. Pray when you need to go through with acts that lead to peace. God will help you.
5. A generous gift and respectful words pave (prepare) the way to peace.
6. Be prepared for a surprise. What seems impossible is always possible with God when we trust and obey him.

Note: This message can be broken into at least two parts. There are many lessons to be learned. Read the verses from your Bible or translate them from English, whatever seems best to you. Make the story be alive! It is so real and helpful.

Reconciliation Message #4

Facing and Overcoming Prejudice

Theme:

All people are guilty of prejudice. Prejudice is an evil that Jesus came to point out, attack, and destroy. My English dictionary defines *prejudice* in these ways.

Prejudice is a *preconceived judgment or opinion*. People's minds are already made up about many things. Their opinions are strong. For example, city people look down on country people and make nasty remarks about them. In my locality some men were called "farmer" with prejudice. This was a put-down, implying that a farmer was stupid, uneducated, worked with his back and not his brain. Not true. Many city people had firm opinions about farmers that were not true or tested. A bad idea about farmers was stuck in their heads. It was an opinion but not the whole truth. They were prejudiced, and being a farmer's son, I did not like it. Their prejudice was wrong.

Prejudice is an adverse opinion formed without just grounds or sufficient knowledge. An adverse opinion produces a negative attitude. Prejudice makes us be against others. We call others names or put them in a box because of the bad but untested opinion that we have about them. White people used to call black people "nigger." Why? Because most white people thought they were better than black people. "Nigger" was a nasty word used by whites to keep "black persons in their place" even if they did not know them.

People everywhere have adverse opinions like this about others. The Jews hated the "Gentiles" in Jesus' day. In Mexico a "Chiapaneco" who speaks a local tribal language is looked down on by "mestizos" who speak Spanish, the national language. So it goes. What immediate bad opinions do people show where you live just by the names they call others?

Prejudice is an irrational attitude of hostility. In America many Democrats hate Republicans even if they don't know them or talk with them. In Sudan people in the north who speak Arabic and are brown in color call fellow citizens from the south 'abd (slave) because their skin is blacker and they do not speak Arabic. This irrational (not clear thinking) attitude turns people against each other without sufficient reason. They are opposed to each other and look upon them as enemies and inferior.

When we pre-judge another person without proper inquiry (questioning and discussion) we are guilty of prejudice. It is so easy to make quick and easy

judgments about the acts and attitudes of others from our own limited point of view. We think we are right when we are not. We rely on our own narrow knowledge of people and things as we learn it from the prejudices of our family, tribe, language, religion, and place of birth. So we jump to conclusions. We pre-judge quickly. And we are usually wrong, at least partly. And we hurt people, which keeps us apart, each in his own camp.

The question is: Can we face this prejudice and overcome it? That is the task of this message. Jesus shows us how in a beautiful way.

BIBLE VERSES: Matthew 15:21-28 CEV

THE MESSAGE

The world is full of prejudice. I have found it in all the parts of the world where I have been—in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and in my own town, my own home and country. Lots of it.

What is prejudice? The word *prejudice* is related to *pre-judge* in English. The word *prejudice* refers to the act of a person who accuses another person of a wrong without proper evidence. To avoid prejudice we must carefully look at ourselves. We must listen to what others are saying and doing, ask questions and then make a careful judgment about what is being said or done. We usually jump to conclusions when something happens. We often accuse people wrongly, especially people we don't know well, or strangers. So we divide the world into "them" and "us" for insufficient, wrong reasons.

Jesus knew about prejudice. He suffered from it himself. He came from the region of Galilee which was a settlement where Jews moved, far north from Jerusalem. Their speech was different so that as soon as he spoke the Jews from the south knew that Jesus was a guy from the poor, refugee town of Galilee. He was *labeled*, we say. He was a marked person—a second-class Jew far from the proud central city in Jerusalem.

One day Jesus decided to go away to the northeast, 35–50 miles away from Galilee to the seacoast town region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came crying to Jesus. As you read the story from the Bible, remember that Jesus knew he was in the territory of strangers, and the people knew that he was a Jew from the inland and not a man of the sea. Listen carefully:

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely

oppressed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21-28 CEV

Let’s look at this story carefully. Jesus left the Jewish religious leaders and “withdrew” to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He had just finished explaining the parable which says:

Every plant that my Father in heaven did not plant will be pulled up by the roots. Stay away from those Pharisees! They are blind people leading other blind people, and all of them will fall into a ditch. (15:13-14)

After saying this, Jesus attacked the Pharisees for deliberate prejudice. They were leading people to make terrible mistakes, very contrary to the true meaning of the holy writings in the Bible.

So, this Canaanite woman, very foreign to Jesus, and she knew it, came to Jesus, crying out, “Sir, Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is full of demons.” So, Jesus does not say a word, but he knows what he is doing. The woman understands prejudice, but she is desperate. She believes Jesus is different. He is not prejudiced. So, she kept on following him and shouting. The people in the streets knew immediately that this was a dangerous situation. A woman was shouting at a foreigner from faraway Galilee.

But Jesus’ disciples are not so smart. They rush to Jesus and urge him to send the woman “packing,” we would say. They were not interested in overcoming prejudice. They were traditional guys from Galilee defending their leader on the streets of the rough seamen’s region of Tyre and Sidon. The woman was driving them crazy.

Well, Jesus knows what is going on. He plays along with his disciples so that the woman and others can hear him. He says, “I have my hands full helping the lost sheep of Israel, my people.”

That is exactly what the disciples from Galilee wanted to hear. Yes, Jesus, help us, but don’t pay any attention to these unbelievers, these rough fishing, sailor people here in these towns by the sea. Hurrah for you Jesus.

But this doesn’t stop the poor woman. She came even closer to Jesus against

all custom and prejudice. Then she threw herself to the ground and begged, “Please help me, Lord!”

Now what? Jesus puts her off by saying, “It’s not right to take bread out of children’s mouths and throw it to dogs.” Wow! It seems that Jesus is full of prejudice too. He compares this poor woman to a dog, an animal which Jews thought was unclean. They did not keep them as pets or like them. So, it seems that Jesus is sticking with the attitude of his men followers from Galilee. Just push this woman aside and get rid of her.

So then what does the woman say? “You’re right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master’s table.”

And what happens next? Jesus abruptly changes “his tune.” He gives in to her, this foreign woman. “Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!” And right then her daughter became well. The demons are gone.

And at least two followers of Jesus, Matthew and Mark, learned a lesson from him about prejudice. They wrote about it in their books (Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30).

Here are a few points to think about that we learn from this story:

1. *Religious people are often very prejudiced.* The Pharisees were. The Jews were and the followers of Jesus were also. Jesus teaches us that true religion should not make us feel that we are better than other people. We are all sinners who need the love of God.
2. *Jesus teaches us to love everyone and see their needs* even if they are not like us.
3. Jesus shows us how to *shock others into seeing their prejudice.*
4. *God loves the very people whom we look down on, despise, ignore, or hate.* In this event Jesus shows God’s love for a poor woman, a foreigner, a demon-possessed person. Who is looked down upon in your community?
5. *You can get rid of prejudice:*
 - Examine your opinions about people, especially strangers and people with problems. Your feelings may be wrong.
 - Be careful about the names you use for people. Show respect, not bias, rejection.
 - Identify (look for) the actions of others that “turn you off.”

We make things better when we get rid of prejudice. We feel better and make others feel better. We eliminate false judgments about others. Ask God to teach and help you to see and overcome your biases. You will not believe how happy you will be.

Reconciliation Message #5

Listen with Hope and Faith in Your Heart

Theme: If we listen carefully, even to our enemies, something good may happen, which we will miss if we stubbornly close our ears.

Bible Verses:

Proverbs 1:5 NIV:

Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.

Proverbs 2:15 NIV:

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

MESSAGE

We do not listen carefully to people we do not like. We do not expect to hear good things from them. If they make promises or have plans for us, we may laugh with scorn. When conditions are bad, we believe that nothing will change! We do not trust God to act and we certainly do not expect our enemies or opponents to change.

Listen! Listening to your enemies is very difficult because:

1. *You don't like them!* You surely do not love them (unless you are a very good Christian!). You probably hate them and don't want to hear a word from them. You have bad emotions right away if they speak.
2. *You do not trust them.* You feel they have harmed you in the past and will not be different now. You will not be surprised if they lie to you. You expect them to try to take advantage of you. You do not believe them. You believe they want to hurt you.
3. *You do not hope for a solution* to the anger and hurt you have received. You expect conditions to get worse. You are cynical. You do not have a good attitude! If your enemies speak you do not listen carefully for something good and hopeful.

Listen to a true story! This is a story about how enemies listened to each other. And it was good! The story is about the way white people (Afrikaners) in South Africa ruled over the native black people. The whites used military and police power to control the blacks who were the original people in South Africa. The

whites developed a system called “apartheid.” This government policy of the whites was used to limit the freedom of blacks, make them into second-class citizens, take their land, keep them poor, and deny them power and the right to vote in elections.

This story tells us how people (human beings) must rise above racial and tribal differences, religious beliefs and traditions, skin color, gender (men and women, male and female), national self-interests, and bad memories from the past. This happened in South Africa. Here is the story, facts, and comments based on a letter written by the President of South Africa, a black African.

People in the Story:

1. **Leaders in the African National Congress (ANC)** who fought for many years to get their freedom from oppression, unfairness, and the evil treatment by the white leaders in government, business, education and church. They are black persons, all natives of South Africa.
 - *Oliver Tambo*—the late president of the ANC.
 - *Nelson Mandela*—famous ANC leader, imprisoned for 26 years by the white government for his opposition to their policies. He was released in 1990, gave renewed leadership to the defeat of “apartheid,” received the Noble Peace prize in 1993, and was elected the first African president of South Africa in 1994.
 - *Rev. Frank Chicane*—Director General of the Presidency
 - *Thabo Mbeki*—elected second president of South Africa by a landslide in 1999. He wrote the *Letter from the President, ANC Today . . . 14 September 2006* quoted here.

2. **Leaders of the white-dominated government** who were determined before 1989 to rule South Africa for the exclusive rights and prosperity of whites only.
 - *Professor Willie Esterhuysen*—an Afrikaner leader who spoke and the Africans listened!
 - *Adriaan Vlok*—former Minister of Correctional Services, in control of the prisons and punishment of blacks.

Here is the story about listening:

This story is a very important piece of human history. In 1912 black natives of South Africa formed the African National Congress (ANC) as a protest movement against the colonial domination of their territory by white, principally Dutch and British, settlers and rulers. The first Dutch settlers

occupied the land in 1652. They brought others, including slaves from Malay and Africa.

Over the period of the following 340 years the white folk increased the number of their people and took over lands and government for the region which eventually became the country of South Africa. The black African tribes-people were treated shamefully by the white rulers. The Africans were literally beaten into submission by a police state. The hatred and division between the whites and the blacks rose higher and higher, year by year, after the start of the ANC.

Our story focuses on an unexpected invitation in 1989 from an Afrikaner, Professor Esterhuysen, requesting that Thabo Mbeki, then a leader in the ANC, meet with him in London to give him a message from the apartheid government. Mbeki talked with then President Tambo of the ANC who said that “one of his recurring nightmares was that one day this government would send a message indicating its readiness to negotiate an end to the apartheid system. And that we would fail to understand the message and ... fail to respond to it correctly.” He feared that the two sides would find it difficult even to hear each other.

Mbeki was perplexed for good reason about accepting the professor’s invitation. This invitation could be a trick. But Tambo responded that “we need to ensure that we do not make the grievous mistake of failing to hear a message of hope that our enemies might seek to communicate.” So what happened? The officials of the harsh apartheid government and the opposing ANC met several times. “By leaping over the gulf that separated the oppressed from the oppressor, to listen, hear, and understand (their) words, our movement managed to avoid transforming Tambo’s nightmare into reality.”

Mbeki writes years later: “I have often wondered what would have happened to our country and people if we had allowed our history (of bitterness and conflict) so to condition our minds that we failed to hear the message of the oppressor ... (from) Professor Esterhuysen!”

This is POINT #1: Listen to your enemy! Good may come from it, and God may be solving a problem you feel you cannot solve.

Now enter Adriaan Vlok, former Minister of Correctional Services for the apartheid government. At age 57, what does he do? He meets with the Reverend Frank Chikane, a key leader in the ANC, and asks to wash his feet. People laughed after he did it. How could an Afrikaner do that? This is the “height of comedy” in a very serious situation and meeting. What did this action and gesture mean? It was a breakthrough the decades of anger and resentment of the blacks.

The Rev. Chikane said: “Whatever other people may say, I have no doubt

that Mr. Vlok must have gone through what is called a ‘Damascus Road experience’ like Paul (Saul) did.” Chikane had “come face to face with death as a result of wearing clothes (in prison) that had been contaminated with toxic chemical substances ... against him by the experts in chemical and biological warfare” under orders by Adriaan Vlok ... But Adriaan Vlok “washed the feet of a black man he grew up knowing belonged to a sub-human species, and whom he wanted dead...” Vlok decided to “humble himself before one that he had once considered as ... nothing more than vermin...”

Can you see and feel what was happening? God was changing the heart of a misguided, terribly wrong Christian to humble himself and make things right with an “enemy.” And he did it. In the Bible that Vlok gave to Chikane he wrote the words, “I have sinned against the Lord and against you. Please forgive me.” And he referred to Psalm 51. He also quoted from Acts where Paul says, “Lord, when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval...” So what do we learn from this?

POINT # 2: Even people who profess to be sincere believers in Jesus may be wrongly influenced so that they do wrong and hurt others. They must repent seriously and sincerely as Vlok did. The Holy Spirit of God and the Word of God remind believers of their sins. We struggle to avoid repentance and change! We do not want to be humble before our enemies! The question for you now is: Is there someone who has been your enemy before whom God wants you to humble yourself and make things right? There is great joy in doing it—not laughter or clapping of hands, but the quiet peace that comes when people are reconciled to each other after a huge mess and fight.

POINT #3: Always remember that God is working to make wrongs right. He is the great Reconciler. He brings us back to him, and he turns enemies into friends. Always believe it! When we believe this, we are true believers. We must forgive the deep divisions that separate us because God forgives all our sins through Jesus (Matthew 6:14-15). This is the true beauty and wonder of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He makes old things new. He repairs broken relationships we think can never be fixed again.

President Mbeki wrote recently about Vlok’s washing the feet of Rev. Chicane:

I believe that personally I heard what Adriaan Vlok said ... that he now unequivocally [without question] accepts that racism and apartheid were wrong and evil. I heard him say that he did grievous [terrible] wrong by supervising the murder of the martyrs [blacks]. I heard him say he pleads for forgiveness of the millions who

suffered from what he and his colleagues in the National Party [whites] did. I heard him say he wants to do something to heal the wounds of the past, to close the poisoned chasm [deep divide] ... to join the architects [builders] of a new society at peace with itself. I heard him say all these things and was deeply moved that an elderly Afrikaner with Adriaan Vlok's history and pedigree [credentials], could speak as he did and break with his past in the manner he has ... our society ... is gradually growing out of its traumatic past. His words and actions said to me ... that together we must build a new and humane society of hope in which we are each one another's keeper ... I felt uplifted and strengthened that Adriaan Vlok spoke and acted as he did.

POINT # 4: We must remind ourselves that giving forgiveness is not easy. We must know that trusting those persons who have wronged us is very difficult.

We must ask ourselves these questions.

Was it easy for Mbeki to believe that Vlok was sincere?

No.

Did everyone accept Vlok's message and act as Mbeki has?

No.

What does this teach us about deep, ugly conflicts and long-standing separations between people?

Jesus wants us to learn that we must believe that God can work in and change the hearts of others even when we think it is impossible. We must see that this is an example for all of us to be ready at any time for bad conditions to get better. We must be prepared to be shocked at how wonderfully God works after we have waited painfully for a solution to fights, hatred, injustice, prejudice, tribal pride, and great losses which we experience.

Question: What solution to unfairness, anger, insult, and loss are you hoping for today? Or have you given up hope? Maybe you have stopped praying. Your patience is at an end.

The patience of the ANC had run out. The history of conflict was horrible. The scars, losses, and ugly memories seemed to be so deep that there would never be healing, calm, and peace. But it came.

We must pray about these things. We must read the Bible to help us feel deeply about how we can turn enemies into friends.

President Mbeki concludes his letter with these questions from which all of us

can learn:

“... as a nation are we listening to and hearing one another?...

Does *white* South Africa hear what the *black* people are ... saying, and vice versa?

Does *adult* South Africa hear what the *youth* are saying, and vice versa?

Does *male* South Africa hear what the *women* ... are saying?

Does *urban* South Africa heard what the ... *rural* areas are saying?

Do the *commercial farmers* hear what the *farm workers* are saying?

Do the *Africans* in the Cape Peninsula hear what ...*coloured neighbours* are saying?

Does the nation hear the voices asserting that each one of us....must have the possibility to define our identity?

Are we succeeding to bridge the chasms of the past ... to hear human messages and thus empower ourselves to achieve ... national reconciliation which is so important for our shared future?”

He ends his letter with this plea: “... we must learn to listen to and hear one another” in a land that belongs to all of us, “united in our diversity.”

POINT # 5: We must accept our differences and find ways to work together with respect and humility. We must realize how deep these differences are, yet remember always that our God of love brings us all together in a beautiful family in spite of our differences.

We have seen how these deep divides have been bridged in South Africa. From the Bible we have seen how Jews and Gentiles (all other non-covenant nations) have come together in the church of Jesus Christ to erase racial, sex, and class distinctions. But we are always challenged to do better in the business of reconciliation. We must ask ourselves all the key questions as Mbeki tried to do. We must see a picture of what God wants to do so that we may live in mutual peace, dignity, power-sharing, and loving attitudes.

This is the will of God. Believe it and work hard to heal all the hurts that separate us. LISTEN.

NOTE: This is a long message with five major points. I suggest you consider dividing it or working it into a series so that your listeners may fully understand how important it is for us all to listen to our enemies and not just our friends. Healing our hurts is hard work, but this work of reconciliation is the will of God. This is the way his Kingdom comes and how he leads us as our Lord.

Reconciliation Message #6

All Believers Are One!

Theme: All believers are one. This is the message of the Bible to everyone. It does not matter where we come from, what our language or color of skin may be, what we have been taught by our families or religion, who our parents are, what classes exist in our society, how rich or poor we are, what nation or tribe we belong to. God sees us as ONE PEOPLE when we sincerely believe in Jesus. It does not matter what differences we feel.

God showed a vision to Peter that completely changed his attitude toward non-Jewish people. This vision prepared Peter to accept an invitation to visit the home of an officer of the hated Roman army named Cornelius. When they met each other, they realized that a Jewish follower of Jesus and a Roman military officer who also believed are one in spite of their obvious differences because both of them have become God's beloved children by faith.

Bible Verses: Acts 10:1–11:18 — Text: Acts 10:28, 34-36 CEV

Study Suggestions: Read this wonderful story in Acts 10:1–11:18 and try to feel, see, and understand what happened. If you have a good translation in your language, you may want to read the whole story and then talk about it. When you read it, read with emphasis and pauses. Don't rush. The truth that "all believers are one" is very clear. If your translation is not exciting, you may want to read the story in the CEV, the NIrV, or *The Message* translation. Then make your own free translation. That is what preaching is. It means translating the message of the Bible into the language of your people so that they will feel the power and meaning of the story.

We live in a world of many separations. There are "majority people" and "minorities" in every nation, and people feel the difference. The United Nations was created to help all peoples of the whole world come together and find peace, to accept each other, listen to each other with respect, to help each other, and live in unity. Nations that belong to the United Nations must sign an agreement declaring that they believe in "human rights" for all people and the freedom of all people to make decisions about religion and their lives.

But, as you know, there are still many bad relationships between the nations that belong to the United Nations and among the peoples who live in the various nations. Many nations who belong to the United Nations do not protect the freedom of religion among their people. Citizens are not free to change their

religion and believe in Jesus. The majority or state religion declares that they are separate, especially from Christians, and should remain that way.

This idea that all believers are one comes from the Bible. And people, like those in the story in Acts, need the Holy Spirit of God to help them overcome prejudice, name-calling, divisions, bad memories, bitterness, hatred, and racial and religious distinctions. It is our duty and privilege as Christians to help people understand that God sees each person as important and valuable. God has no favorites. Jesus came for all people, not just for the Jews. God loves everyone, even unbelievers! He does not despise or look down on anyone. He is a Father who wants all his children who have wandered away from him to come back into the one family of God.

Questions:

1. How can you help your people understand that God wants all people to become one by faith in the one true God and Jesus, his Son?
2. What keeps them from thinking that all are one?

THE MESSAGE

All believers are one. Do you believe that? Most people have trouble understanding this truth. They see themselves as “insiders,” belonging to a particular group of people based on skin color, language, religion, customs, results of war and fighting, class (caste), citizenship in a nation, land, kind of hair, food, myths (stories in their society), or for other reasons. Normally, we see others as “outsiders.” We see ourselves as “inside,” with our God or gods protecting and separating us from others who are not like us.

This was true in Jesus’ day and later when the followers of Jesus taught others about him. The Jews called all other people *Gentiles*. The word means “nations,” but it took on an ugly new meaning among the Jews who used this word. *Gentile* was a “put-down” and a “put-out.” All Jews viewed themselves as on the inside with God and looked on all others as on the outside without God! *Gentile* was a kind of curse word. Jesus came to free the Jews from this terrible error in their attitude toward all other peoples.

Listen now as I read to you how God revealed his truth that “all believers are one” to Peter, a leader and apostle, and to Captain Cornelius, a Roman army officer and a “Gentile” in Peter’s eyes. Listen carefully.

Read (or tell): Acts 10:1–11:18. Read the story or re-tell it in your own words. It is a long story but people will get the points of it, one by one. It is powerful! What do you think of this story? What is God’s message for all of us? It is this:

- Do not look on others as foreigners or outsiders. They are persons like you.

- Do not use name-calling to separate yourself from others, or to make you look better or more important.
- Do not let your religion separate you from others. Christians are God's people, but they should never see themselves as better than others. The Holy Spirit of God makes us one. Be friendly to all. Be hospitable to all. Pray for all. Help all people.
- Work at unity. It is not easy. Even Christians separate from each other into different groups. But we are one in Christ. Don't ever forget it. Respect and pray for other Christians. Help them. Don't despise or reject them. Listen and talk with them. Christians are God's picture to the world that "all believers are one."

As a Christian I apologize for the mean-spirited separations between Christians. It is good to search for important teachings in the Bible, but we must be very careful not to separate from each other because of these teachings. We need each other, and we indeed are one. Never forget that truth. It does not change.

Name calling. We all do it. We put others down and try to make ourselves look good. Here are a few illustrations of name-calling:

1. The Second World War, 1940-45, was a world-wide war. It was shocking. Millions of people died from military attacks, bombings, and cruel acts. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers died in battle: Russians, Japanese, Germans, Poles (Poland), Chinese, British, Americans, and Italians. It was dreadful. It seemed as though the whole world suddenly realized that nations and peoples are very different. The war began because some people in Europe and Asia declared they were different and better.
The German dictator Adolph Hitler believed that the "Aryans" (his word for German people) were the super-race, the best people. He hated the Jews and thought they were the worst people. So he with his followers and soldiers killed several million Jews. It was an unbelievable atrocity. Most of the German people followed Hitler even though they had the Bible in their language. Most of them would have claimed to be Christians, in name at least. But in these moments of world confusion they lost the conviction that God values all people and wants us to do the same. People have carefully studied the history of this great world war. Some have learned the lesson that Peter and Cornelius learned: don't despise or look down on any true worshiper of God.
2. The Japanese people are a very intelligent nation. But in the past they stayed quite separate from other people in East Asia. They often made war in Korea and China, trying to rule over them. They looked on their

emperor (king) as a god. The Japanese leaders became jealous of America and decided to attack by bombing Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. During the night and early morning 2,280 American military men and women on ships in the harbor were killed, along with 68 non-military persons.

The Japanese also invaded the Philippine Islands and many other places in East Asia. The world was shocked. The Japanese soldiers were cruel in the way they killed others. America felt it had to declare war. Why did the Japanese do this? Because they felt they were better than others. They did not respect others, but felt instead that it was their right to attack, kill, destroy, and impose their rule.

3. So, how did Americans respond to these actions and attitudes of the Germans and the Japanese? In addition to declaring war, we fought back by calling these people ugly names. We called the Germans *krauts*, which is short for “sauerkraut” (pickled, sour cabbage, the common food of German farmers and village folk). And we called the Japanese *Nips* and the Communist Chinese *Chinks*. All these names were intended to put them down and to make Americans look and feel better. Even Christians used these names in our anger.
4. I have lived overseas in various places and have not been called bad names. But in Mexico I was sometimes called a *gringo*, which meant that I was a tall white guy from the USA, that powerful nation in the north that is unfair and selfish. I hope and pray we are not.
5. By contrast, in Sudan (Africa) the Murle tribal people gave my wife the name *Meri-nyerith* which means “red comfort.” This was a term of respect: red, because we white people turned red in the African sun, and comfort, because my wife was a kind, caring person.

That is what we all want, isn't it? We want people to give us good names. We don't want them to ridicule us, reject us, or claim that they are better than we are.

In Acts 11:26 we read, “There in Antioch the Lord's followers were first called Christians.” The people gave them a name. It might have been a label to separate them, even as a warning. But it was a good name. It connected them with Jesus, the Christ, the very good person from Nazareth, the man who died for them because he loved them.

So, we should all think about our separations from other people and the names we call others and what these names mean. The early Christians called each other “brother” and “sister.” They learned that God wants to bring us together in his family as brothers and sisters in one happy family. How wonderful it is that God wants us to get along together in this world, to love and respect each other, not to disturb and annoy each other! Isn't that what you want?

Conclusion – Go back with me now and think about what we read from Acts about Peter and Cornelius. What lessons do we learn?

1. *God is speaking to people today* as he spoke to Peter and Cornelius so that we may be joined with them and not separated from them.
2. *We are surprised* when we really think about this. We often separate ourselves from others, and it is not good. We feel powerless to truly worship one God and to tell others that we should be one.
3. We should *break down the walls that separate us from others*, especially from other believers. Peter invited the men sent by Cornelius to spend the night with him. Peter broke down the walls that had always separated him from other people. He actually welcomed Gentiles into his house!
4. We should *take definite steps to show that we are one*. Peter accepted the invitation to visit Cornelius's house. He recognized his attitude of separation and took steps to change it.
5. *Peter was humble*. He admitted his own fault and the fault of his own people, the Jews. He stopped calling non-Jews "Gentiles."
6. *Peter was straightforward with the truth*. He said, "I am certain that God treats all people alike" (Acts 1:34, CEV). Other Jewish believers in Jesus did not agree with him. They were upset. Peter's change in attitude presented them with a big problem! Even today religions separate people and keep them from accepting all others as the children of God through Jesus.
7. *The Holy Spirit confirmed that God welcomed Gentiles who believed in Jesus*. Peter said, "These Gentiles have been given the Holy Spirit just as we have! I am certain that no one would dare to stop us from baptizing them" (Acts 10:47). Baptism is the sign of acceptance by God! It is a sign that we are all one in Christ before God and the world.
8. *Peter faced up to the opposition* from Jewish Christians. They did not make it easy for him. It is not easy to get people to say, "We are all one. No one is better than the other." God invites us to join together in his family, now and always. How wonderful!

This is the good news we call the gospel. It is God's new creation. He destroys the bad names and bad feelings, and he makes us one in Jesus. I invite you to believe in Jesus today. I welcome you into his family, our family. We are one. Believe it and you will be full of joy. Welcome to the one great family of God!

Reconciliation Message #7

Peace-Breaking—Conquering Anger and Insult

Theme: Peace-breaking is much easier than peace-making! Anger is so common. We can soon forget that we are angry with someone. But anger stays deep in our memory and feelings. The anger moves us to speak insults, words that hurt others. This anger we call *contempt*. It is the power in anger that leads us to look down on others.

Jesus teaches us that God judges this peace-breaking through our anger and insults against others just as he judges murder. How can we worship God if there is anger in our hearts and insults on our lips? Jesus says we cannot. We must reconcile with those against whom we are angry and have spoken insults. We must be peace-makers, not peace-breakers!

Bible Verses: Matthew 5:9, 21-26 CEV

Study Suggestions: Read the Bible verses and think about them. Here are some questions that will make this subject come alive in your thinking:

1. What emotions and words lead to murder in your society?
2. Are people afraid of anger or do they accept it, expect it, and even like it?
3. What words do they use to show their anger? How do they insult others when they are angry with them?
4. Do Christians go to worship when there is anger in their relationships with others? Do they really believe the words of Jesus that anger and insult are like murder?
5. Do Christians go to court against each other or against unbelievers in your society? Is this good or bad for them?

Jesus said, “God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called his children” (5:9). The word *bless* means that God makes them happy. They are fortunate if they make peace. The best comes to them if they are peace makers and not peace breakers!

The problem with anger and insult: It is very hard to go to a person and “make friends quickly” (v. 25) if we know that relationships are bad and if harsh, ugly words have been spoken, often in loud anger.

Think about how your people make peace after they have been angry. Try to be very practical and positive in this message. It will not be hard to point out the problem because it exists everywhere among people. But Jesus urges us to clear

anger out, get rid of insults, heal hurts and make peace.

THE MESSAGE

The Christians among the Chol people in Mexico have an unwritten rule about anger. It is this: “Do not raise your voice in anger. Do not speak an insult or a harsh word.” Why? Because these people know that anger and insult lead to trouble, even murder. All of them have long, very sharp knives (machetes) in their houses which they use to cut bushes and small trees in preparing their fields for planting. But, they know that angry men have often used these knives to attack, cut up, wound and kill others in a quick burst of sudden anger. Anger, when we keep it in our hearts, is like very hot water on the fire just about to boil over. How can we stop the fire?

When Chol church leaders gather at church organization meetings they always begin by reading words from the Bible (like Philippians 2:1-4 and 4:8-9) that remind them to keep from anger. They know exactly where these words are in the Bible, and they read them in a quiet, prayerful manner with no comments. They are strong, intelligent people. They debate issues with sincerity. But, they keep the peace and celebrate communion at their business meetings because they keep from anger and disrespect of others. These poor farmers in jungle villages have discovered how to keep the peace through Jesus. What a difference from the days when many days, families and lives were ruined by anger and quick, ugly words.

In Matthew 5:9 Jesus said to his followers, “You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete and fight. That is when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family” (*Message* translation). Then later he said this to them slowly and forcefully.

The reading – Matthew 5:21-26

The Meaning for Us

Jesus is saying this to us:

1. God judges anger and insults as much as he does murder.
2. Don’t be angry with another believer, man or woman.
3. Don’t insult others by calling them names like “fool” or “worthless.” “Raca” (Greek) expresses contempt for a man’s head, as “you stupid.” The next word (*more*) expresses contempt for a person’s heart, “you scoundrel.” Exact translation is not so important. Jesus is talking about all the nasty words we can use for others when we are angry. In English we have some very colorful words, like *nitwit*, *blockhead*, *numskull* (or

numbskull), *bonehead*. Those are older insults. In English the people make new insult words all the time—like *dork* or *nerd*. And there are even more dirty names which I am ashamed to mention!

What about you and your people? What nasty insults do they use against others when they are angry? It seems that all people in all languages have ugly words like these which they use for others when they are angry. And that anger often leads to real trouble—separations, divorce, fights, violence and murder.

How different it is when we compliment each other, use nice names, honor each other and build each other up. The opposite of anger boiling over in hot words!! What blessings and happiness we miss when we let anger remain in our hearts and minds.

What can we do to avoid this kind of anger and insult?

1. ***Remember that Jesus warns us against anger and insult.*** God will judge those who continue to be angry and use nasty words for other persons. We must stop and think, examine our hearts and our words. Don't cover up. We may keep our anger secret, but God knows it is there. And he will condemn it if we do not get rid of it.
2. ***Anger and insult are serious sins.*** They put us in the position of God's judgment to hell. How often do we take it that seriously?
3. ***We must act immediately when we realize that we are guilty of anger and insult.*** How? Jesus gives us two illustrations:
 - A. Don't go to *worship* God if you have anger or say insults about another believer. Go and make it right immediately even if you do not want to do it. You will surprise your brother or sister, and you will be happy together. Do not be afraid that you will be ashamed. People will honor you for your sincerity. It is very important. Don't let your bad feelings control your heart and speech. You cannot worship God properly if you have anger in your heart. Others will sense it if we have contempt for them. We must find ways to get rid of it.
 - B. Don't go too *quickly to court* about your angry dispute with a brother or sister. Find a way to solve the problem. Give up and give in. Do not look upon legal action as the best solution. It is shameful for believers to fight out matters in court. It is better to suffer some loss instead. Christians should be known for their love for each other, and certainly not their anger

and disrespect for each other or against others.

If you let anger remain, it will grow. If you delay in settling a dispute, the problem will get worse. Ask God to show you how to get rid of your anger and insults promptly.

God calls us to live in peace and love with all people, but especially brothers and sisters in the faith of Jesus. God wants us to be examples of love, kindness, patience, goodness. This is our signboard to the world about the very nature and truth of our religion. God forgives us and is no longer angry with us. And now he is helping us be like he is—holy, good, fair, patient, and never guilty of anger and insult.

Righteous indignation, or right anger

But, you may say, “Should I not be angry if a person sins against me? Is it not all right for me to have *righteous indignation*?” Is it wrong to be upset when others hurt me? It is good for you to realize what is wrong. But you must be very careful about anger and the words you speak about those who have wronged you.

The Bible says (Romans 12:14-19 CEV):

Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best *to live at peace with everyone*.

Dear friends, *don't try to get even. Let God take revenge*. In the Scriptures the Lord says,

“I am the one to take revenge and pay them back.”

Think carefully about any offense. Try to help the other person to see the wrong they have done. They may not understand what they have done, or they may not know what Jesus taught us. Help the person. Find a way to solve the problem. Anger only makes it worse. And insults make it worse yet!

In this way we can become peace makers, and not peace breakers. God will be pleased. And people will be amazed at our love, patience, and strength.

Reconciliation Message #8

Who Can Break Down Ugly Walls of Hate?

Theme:

Ugly walls of hate divide people everywhere. Religion builds walls between people. It should bring people together. But more often it sets one group and their beliefs and ways of worship against other groups.

Jesus Christ came to break down these walls.

1. He came to break down walls of hate and hostility that divide people.
2. He came to make one new people united by love and respect.

In this message I encourage you to lead people to confess their hate for one another, to face the walls of anger they have built and the bad names they call each other. These walls are often built because of differences in religion and race.

Then, show them how Jesus Christ demolishes walls between people and gathers them into one new safe house (temple) where they may be united in love and respect for each other.

Bible Verses: Ephesians 2:14-22 CEV

Key Texts:

Christ has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. (v. 14)

On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us . . . in one body. (v. 16)

Study Suggestions – We do not like to talk about hate and hatred.

Paul uses the word *hostility*—the angry feelings that often lead to fighting, harsh words, slapping, hitting, cursing, forcing people, murder and war.

Hostility also means *ill will*—the inner desire to hurt another person, to keep them out of our group, to hurt them in whatever way we can.

Hostility means *hate* (hatred). We don't like to talk about hate because it

makes us shake with fear and worry about what evil may happen.

Even though we don't like to think about hate, we must face the problem honestly because the walls of hate are real. They can destroy all the good we hope for.

People hesitate to talk about hate because the walls it builds between people are huge and powerful. But, we must ask God to help us through Jesus to break down the walls of hate that divide people into angry camps.

As I write today, people in Lebanon are facing off against each other with ugly signs and banners, guns, explosives, fire and threats of violence.

Long ago King Solomon, son of King David of Israel, brought beautiful cedar wood from Lebanon to build the temple of God. Today, over three thousand years later, men, women and children in Lebanon are divided by walls of hate, abusive words, violence, and hopelessness! We must find ways to help each other!

Jesus Christ came to break down these walls of hate and make peace. It may seem impossible to us, but with the help of our Lord Jesus Christ it can be done!

THE MESSAGE

I want to talk today about how religion and race (differences in physical appearance, skin color, blood lines, tribe) separate people.

Gentiles – The Bible tells us that the Jews were separated from non-Jews. In the days of Jesus and the first Christians, Jews called all non-Jews “Gentiles,” which means other nations. The Jews had forgotten the reason why God called them to be “his people.” Instead of bringing all nations together to worship God, the Jews thought that God had chosen them and rejected all the other nations in the world!

Contempt – The Jews had contempt for the “Gentiles.” *Contempt* is an English word that describes the deep inner feeling we have when we think that another person is worthless and beneath our consideration. Americans say “write them off!” We scorn such people and push them aside (extreme reproach). We despise and disdain them.

The Jews built a wall of contempt for non-Jews. The Romans and others got back at them (retaliated) by having the same attitude! The wall of contempt separated people whom God had created to love each other!

Jews had a rule in their families that any Jewish boy or girl who married a non-Jew should be totally rejected. They would hold a funeral ceremony for that Jewish boy or girl and declare them “dead”! They built a “wall” of exclusion

between themselves and their own children because they hated non-Jews (Gentiles) and anyone who associated with them.

The Jewish Temple — The temple of the Jews in Jerusalem was built to help the Jews worship God, learn his laws, and pray so that they would be kind, fair, welcome strangers, and teach the ways of God by their good actions toward others. But the walls in the temple gave a confusing message!

Dr. John Stott explains how the temple walls built by Herod the Great became a “dividing wall of hostility.”

“The temple building . . . was built on an elevated platform. Around it was the Court of the Priests. East of this was the Court of Israel, and further east the court of the women. These three courts . . . were all on the same level as the temple itself.

“From this level a person descended five steps to a walled platform, and then on the other side of the wall fourteen more steps to another wall. Beyond this was the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. This was a huge court running right around the temple and its inner courts.

“From any part of their court the Gentiles could look up and view the temple, but they were not allowed to approach it. They were cut off from it by the surrounding wall, which was a one-and-a-half meters wide (five feet) barrier. On it were . . . warning notices in the Greek and Latin languages:

“Trespassers will be executed (killed).”

(From Stott in *Ephesians*, pp. 91-92)

What message do you think these levels, steps and walls gave to Gentiles who visited the Jewish temple?

1. The courts for the Jewish priests, men and women were all on the same level. They accepted each other as the people of God, and (in theory) they viewed one another as equals.
2. The Court of the Gentiles (non-Jews) was built below the Jewish courts, separated by two walls and 19 steps below (at least 13 feet or 4 meters)—a long distance! The temple gave the message to outsiders, “We are here, higher up, and you are down there. We are not equal or the same. We have our God, and you have your gods. So, we can never come together.”

3. The non-Jews could “look up” to the level of the Jewish courts but they could not enter or they would be killed!

Question: Do you think the Gentiles felt that Jews loved and accepted them? Do you think they were eager to learn about Israel’s God, the Scriptures and the meaning of the temple? Probably not at all!

God’s intention was that Jews respect, teach and love other nations so that they would understand the holiness, goodness and love of God, and know how important it is to obey him. But the Jews used the temple to keep out the very people that God wanted to believe in him, love him and obey him, the One True God.

Other Questions:

- What do you feel about Christians today?
- Do they really welcome outsiders into their churches?
- Do visitors feel respected and loved even if they believe and worship differently?
- Do unbelievers feel they will be kept at a “lower level” with “walls” in between?

Read what Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus: Ephesians 2:14-22.

“Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. Christ gave his own body to destroy the Law of Moses with all its rules and commands. He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person when he united us in peace” (vv. 14-15).

“On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body” (v. 16).

“Christ came and preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews, who were near God. And because of Christ, all of us can come to the Father by the same Spirit” (vv. 17-18).

“You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God” (v. 19).

“You are like a building, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone” (v. 20).

“Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord. And you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God’s own Spirit to live” (vv. 21-22).

1. Verse 14 – JESUS CHRIST HAS MADE PEACE between people who are very different. He brings people together who have been apart. He UNITES them. He makes them one.
2. Verse 14 – CHRIST BREAKS DOWN THE WALL OF HATE that people have built up. Jesus teaches us to come together as one family of people with the one religion of the Bible. There are no “Jews” or “Gentiles,” or even men and women in the Christian religion. God breaks down the walls between people who used to be separate because of their names, religion, and customs.
3. Verse 15 – Christ gave his own body to “DESTROY THE LAW OF MOSES with all its rules and commandments.” This statement may surprise you. How can the Apostle Paul say that Christ abolished the law when Jesus Christ in the Message of the Mountain (Matthew 5-7) said he came not to “abolish the law but to *fulfil* it”?

We should not be troubled by what Paul wrote. Jesus made a distinction between:

a) *the moral law*, which teaches all believers everywhere how to live and how to treat other people, and

b) *the ceremonial law*, the rules and regulations about sacrifice, worship, priests and the temple. These ceremonial laws were fulfilled (done with, no longer needed) when Jesus died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sin.

God’s New Covenant was made by Jesus so that we may believe when the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts (see Mark 15:37-39; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18). Jesus, through the Holy Spirit and the Bible teaching, changes us and directs us to act with love and truth. Rules about worship and church should help us to believe and act as God wants, but worship and church do not save us!

4. Verse 15 – Jesus brought Jews and Gentiles together as “ONE PERSON” and “ONE BODY.” What a change! God is doing that today. He is bringing people together who never thought they could be one. He is making “one person” out of separated persons who thought the walls of hate would separate them forever and their children! This

is the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ. It destroys hate and brings people to love and respect God and each other. It brings people together who always thought they were too different to join together and meet together.

Conclusion: Do you understand this message from God's Word, the Bible? This is God's new order for the world. It is God's new people. It is God's new society where we are all together in one loving, believing, worshiping group of God's family.

I hope you understand. I hope you can break loose from the fears, prejudice, traditions and feelings that say to you, "This cannot be!" But, it can be, and it will be because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to make peace for us. This message from God makes us new and free people. It gives us the power and the will to destroy walls of hate and organize meetings of love! Believe today!

Note: This is a long and important message. You may want to divide it into two messages!

Reconciliation Message #9

Among Christians, Who Is Chief? Advice for Leaders and Followers

Theme: The question is: how can Christian leaders help believers to avoid jealousy, competition against each other, quarreling, and division among each other? Leaders together with believer-followers are the one body of Christ. But too often they all are not one in heart and mind. Leaders often encourage believers to separate for many different reasons, some good, but most wrong and bad.

Paul teaches that all believers must work together as God's gardeners! They should divide up the work as a farmer does—plowing, planting, cultivating, fertilizing, watering and harvesting. The farmer-owner assigns all workers and their supervisors to their tasks. When they work together well, there will be a good harvest and all will be happy.

But only God makes things grow, not the church leaders. If God does not make his work grow, the work of leaders will turn out to be nothing. There is much important work for everyone to do. And God will give each credit as he deserves. We should not push and shove each other!

Leaders must give all the credit and honor for their successes to Christ and God. They must be team-builders. They must unite people under Christ, the Lord. Followers must listen to and follow leaders but only those who honor Jesus as Lord. Most leaders who separate God's people into opposing groups cause unnecessary and harmful divisions in the one body of Jesus Christ. And when hard issues come up, people look for leaders, but they do not always make the right choices. They may pick an unwise leader who feels he needs power and attention.

Bible Verses: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 and 3:1-9 (The New Living Translation is very helpful. Study it if you have it.)

Study Suggestions: The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in the city of Corinth. Corinth was a big center for trade by ship, business, education, religion, sports and sex! The church leaders had a big job teaching and leading the new believers.

Paul was their first teacher. Then Apollos and Peter led the people. But then the believers “got in each others’ hair”! The believers showed their zeal and enthusiasm for God’s work, but that led them into jealousy.

This is a lesson all believers must keep on learning. It is so easy to split into separate groups. This happens everywhere. People come together for a good work. Issues arise. They do not agree. A leader speaks out while another leader also pleads for people to follow him. And a split happens. People get tense and “uptight.” The joy of unity and one purpose for God turns to anger, argument, and firm divisions.

In Corinth the talk among the believers led to arguments, selfish fighting and rivalry. The people divided into competing groups. Some said, “We are the Paul guys.” Others said, “We are better. We follow Apollos. He is the best leader.” Still others said, “We belong to the Peter party.” But those who thought they were best said, “We follow only Christ!” (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Paul points out that they were all wrong! God wanted them to work together as one team.

Do you see the picture? Has this ever happened where you are? “Can Christ be divided into pieces?” No. But Christians and their leaders often follow ordinary human emotions and ambitions. They may be impatient. They don’t have good information about the issues. They don’t take time to pray and read the Bible.

They forget that there is only one person who can make God’s garden grow. That is God alone. Leaders often have good ideas, but they fail when they divide up the body of Christ. And followers are not wise when they select one leader and attack the others. This causes anger, loss of energy, time and happiness.

Think about how leaders work in your church. How can you help them to cooperate, build each other up and give full credit to everyone who works for God? It is so beautiful when Christian leaders and all who work with them join together in perfect harmony and joy while doing the work of God. They give God all the honor for the power that he gives to them. They show that good results come from God. And they know that God sees each one and will credit that person properly.

THE MESSAGE

This is a true story, but I will use different names so that no one will be embarrassed. A man by the name of James Geng came to America as a refugee from the Sudan. James ran away from home in Sudan when his village was

attacked by government soldiers. They were killing the men and older boys. Planes bombed the village. The grass-roofed houses and buildings burned. The soldiers took some of the women and girls to be their slaves and for sex.

In horrible fear James, only six years old, ran away with many other boys and fewer girls. They were forced to cross rivers full of crocodiles. Many of these children drowned in the rushing, deep water. They frantically passed through the high grasslands and slept where there are lions. Imagine, if you can, six- through eight-year-olds doing this alone!

First, James went on to another country, Ethiopia, at least 300 miles away. Then he and his friends were forced out of Ethiopia. They fled back to Sudan, and finally entered the north of Kenya, another country, a long distance away. There they finally settled into a refugee camp of the United Nations. They lived in small mud huts with grass roofs. They prepared one meal a day for themselves from grain that the UN gave to them.

After 15 years or so, the government of the United States opened the way for about 3,500 of these young men, and some girls, to come to America. James and his friends were glad for this new opportunity in a strange land far away.

While in the United Nations camp, James went to church. He studied the Bible. He decided to follow Jesus. The leaders in the church recognized that he was a dedicated Christian. They saw that he could be a leader. So, the leaders of the church in the camp ordained (appointed) him as an “evangelist.” James felt good about that. He continued to follow Jesus in worship meetings, Bible studies and prayer groups. The church sent him away for special studies for Christian leaders.

When he arrived in America he saw the need for his fellow Sudan Christians to have a church group of their own. In the first city where he lived, James tried to lead, but he was too ambitious. He caused trouble, arguing and jealousy. He wanted to succeed, but he didn’t know how to lead in God’s way. He was discouraged and felt rejected, so he moved far away to another city.

In that city the same thing happened. James met with a group of Sudan refugees in a church. He decided he wanted to be their leader, but he created trouble. So, again he moved.

It seems that no one helped James to be a humble leader. He was eager. He was full of zeal. He wanted to be recognized for his success and power. But, he didn’t understand how to lead in a Christian way. James thought he had to be chief! That was natural. He learned that even as a small boy. So he wanted to lead his way.

No one took James aside to explain to him that his own zeal was “eating him up.” He had zeal for God, but it was not the Holy Spirit kind of desire to lead. His need to be honored and recognized was too great. So the people rejected him. He went away discouraged. But it was his fault.

So he moved again, very far away! There he found a large group of his own tribal group in a big church. Isaiah Har, a man whom he knew in the UN Camp, was their humble leader. But again James wanted to be the leader, the big chief! Within a few months he was causing division in the group. He pushed his ideas and criticized what the humble leader was doing.

The believers listened to him and started to gossip. Not knowing how much their talk would hurt the unity of the group, they talked to each other and started to take sides. Then, again James was disappointed. He could see that he could not get all the power and praise that he hoped for. He was not put in charge and recognized as he wanted. His zeal was eating him up.

So, he was rejected, but he sowed enough seeds of discontent that he finally led a large number of believers away with him to another church. In that church he is showing that he can be a leader. But the pain and hard feelings of separation from the other church are strong and hard to heal. He has good ideas, and he knows how to get people to follow him. But he is too proud to cooperate and share the power and honor of leading with others. He seems to need others to praise him. So he makes dishonest claims for good things that others have done. The love and unity God wants for James and his group is not as wonderful as it should be.

Lessons from Paul’s Letter to the Church in Corinth

Paul, Apollos, and Peter did not compete against each other. But the new and weak believers in Corinth did not know how to do everything in love and harmony. So, they “took sides.” They divided the body of Christ and claimed leaders for each group. The result was bad, chaos!

This kind of conflict is so common everywhere. Leaders have too much ambition and self-confidence. Followers do not know enough and are impatient. So, believers divide the one body of Christ.

Questions

Do you know of persons like James? They are good people, but their need to be Number One and the Chief is so strong that they become proud and dishonest, and

push their way to the top unfairly. They may do some great good, but they also cause a lot of trouble! Does it need to be this way?

No. This kind of leader needs to learn how to unite people under Christ. The leader may have great ideas, a strong personality, a great intelligence and lots of energy. But he must remember some key points if he is to be truly a good, Godly leader.

What the Bible Teaches Us about Leaders and Their Followers

I would like to read a few words from a letter which the great leader and apostle Paul wrote to a church that was having leader problems. Listen carefully please:

Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I could not talk to you as I would to **mature**, that is, grown-up Christians. I had to talk as if you are still under the control of **worldly** ways of thinking, more like babies than adults! I had to feed you with milk and not with solid food because you could not take anything stronger. And it seems you still are not ready to act like adult believers because you are still controlled by your own ambitions and old ways.

You are **jealous** of each other. You are too eager to be Number One!

You still **quarrel** and fight like children!

Doesn't that show that your own **desires** (fleshly and worldly) control you as they did before you believed? You are acting like people who don't belong to Jesus, our Lord.

One of you says: "I am a Paul guy. I follow him." Another says, "I am in Apollos's group. I think he is best." When you separate like this, are you acting like believers? No, you are missing the way God wants you to work together as one.

1 Corinthians 3:1-5

Look at the Key Words in These Verses

Think with me about some **key words** in what Paul wrote (note bold print in Bible reading above):

Mature, or adult. God's desire is that Christians act as full grown-ups. They should no longer divide up in little groups as children do in their play. The new way for leaders and their followers, as Jesus taught us, is to listen patiently to each other and work together. That is grown-up behavior. It takes self-control and patience.

Jealous. This word is also related to zeal. Leaders should have zeal. That is good. We need Christian leaders who are convinced of what should be done. We want them to stir our enthusiasm and passion for Jesus and the truth. But, the danger is that believers who face problems can be impatient and afraid. It is easy to divide into groups that compete with each other. Then they may pick leaders who are not as wise as Paul and Apollos and Peter. So then they compete against each other and become jealous.

Jealousy is the feeling that “I must be recognized as best and Number One. I want people to see our group as right and the best!” When this happens people begin to separate and hard feelings develop.

In Corinth the new believers still had to learn that Jesus is the only real leader. True believers are all followers together under him. Leaders must be humble but strong at the same time! That is not easy.

In the story I told you about James, the problem was that James had the ability to lead, but he had deep needs of his own to be a chief. He was jealous of the power of other leaders. So, when he did not get to be chief, he split the group. When that happens, everyone loses a lot! They may act as if they are still one, but in their hearts they will know they are not.

Quarreling and arguing. The happy believers in Corinth broke up into different groups. Each group insisted that they were the best and right. They were probably sincere, but they started acting like children.

Recently a family was at my house. They had three smart and energetic sons who love to play rough and tough for fun. But the boys learned that they soon begin to argue, disagree and push for power! Two would get together against the other one. So, they came to their father and said, “Dad, we need your help. We are not getting along. Our fun is at an end. We are fighting and quarreling. We need a leader to help us all play together.” Smart boys! They learned the lesson of the loss that comes from divisions and fighting. They saw how competition can be bad. They chose a good leader, their Dad, who is wise and loves them.

Is that not the way it is with people? Christian believers have the same problem. They are eager to do right. Leaders want to solve problems in a hurry. But, then, boom, there is a blow-up! Quick words and a little anger. People are no longer listening to each other and learning from Christ. They are competing to be chief! Jealousy, zeal and sharp words divide them. They choose sides. And the beautiful unity God wants is gone.

Worldly. The word in the Greek language in which Paul writes is “fleshly.” That means these Christians were not living at a higher level in a better way. They were still stuck in the problems all people have: “divide and fight!” But, Paul says, unite and do what God wants in love under the leadership of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

That is the **LESSON:** in the church only Jesus is chief. He is Lord. We are all together under him and with him, followers and leaders together. This is not easy for us to learn. But, if we do learn to really be adult, fully grown-up believers, we will find ways to make decisions, to do God’s work together and, to obey Jesus’ commandments to love each other truly. What a difference! No more childish fights for first place. Jesus is Lord, and we are all happy and peaceful together under our Christ, our Leader!

Another important point and illustration:

We are all workers together in God’s garden, but only God makes things grow (see 1 Corinthians 3:5-9). All of us know how wonderful it is to see a great crop or garden after all the work is done by many people. The sight and joy of harvest is truly wonderful. Leaders and workers together make it happen.

But only God creates the seeds with the power to grow and give food. God’s people are working together in God’s garden Each believer is needed. Each work is important. They are not divided into chiefs and servants! The one garden team works together so that they can see the wonder of God’s power in seeds, growth and wonderful food.

What can you do where you are to bring believers together? It takes prayer, time, strength, control of your feelings and humility. How beautiful it can be! Be a leader, but be humble. Be a worker, and be glad you are an important person on God’s team!

Reconciliation Message #10

Peace With Our Father God—Our Highest Hope

THEME: Deep in our hearts we all have the feeling we need and want to be at peace with God. We want our Father in heaven to be our friend, not our enemy. But most of us know we have been running from God and hurting him by our bad behavior and attitudes. What can we do to be on friendly relations with the great God of the universe, our Father? That is a serious question!

Bible study: Read Luke 15:11-31 and Colossians 1:21-23 carefully. Also, read the article “Reconciliation” in the *New Bible Dictionary* and “Salvation” in the *Learning Bible*, page 1923. Think carefully about these questions:

- What fears do my people have about God, or the gods?
- Why do they have this fear? Do they feel they are far from God and unworthy?
- What do they do to remove this feeling of separation from God?

When you write and prepare your message, put some of these questions and your answers into the message.

THE MESSAGE

Introduction

How much do you care about your relationship to God? I feel it is very important. Some years ago I did not care much. I was young and reckless. I did not like our religious leaders and all the rules. I did not care much about my father either. He seemed to be too careful, too strict, too good, too much interested in work, and no play! I am sure most of you have had the same feelings in one way or another at some time.

Bible reading

Today I want to read to you one of the very best stories in all the world. Please listen carefully. It will give you a wonderful answer to the questions I just asked you! Jesus told this story to his followers:

Luke 15:11-31 (New International Readers Version)

The Story of the Lost Son

¹¹ “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger son spoke to

his father. He said, ‘Father, give me my share of the family property.’ So the father divided his property between his two sons.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son packed up all he had. Then he left for a country far away. There he wasted his money on wild living. ¹⁴ He spent everything he had.

Then the whole country ran low on food. So the son didn’t have what he needed. ¹⁵ He went to work for someone who lived in that country, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The son wanted to fill his stomach with the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “Then he began to think clearly again. He said, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food! But here I am dying from hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go back to my father. I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven. And I have sinned against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer fit to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.’” ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“While the son was still a long way off, the father saw him. He was filled with tender love for his son. He ran to him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattest calf and kill it. Let’s have a big dinner and celebrate. ²⁴ This son of mine was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found.’

So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants. He asked him what was going on.

²⁷ ‘Your brother has come home,’ the servant replied. ‘Your father has killed the fattest calf. He has done this because your brother is back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry. He refused to go in. So his father went out and begged him.

²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve worked like a slave for you. I have always obeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But this son of yours wasted your money with some prostitutes. Now he comes home. And for

him you kill the fattest calf!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me. Everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad. This brother of yours was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found.’”

Key Questions in This Story

1. What did the younger son do that offended his father’s heart? He wasted his father’s hard-earned money in wild, wrong living. A more important question: have you offended God by what you are doing? How do you feel?

2. Later the son thought clearly: “I am here dying of hunger and my father has more than enough to feed me. I will go back to my father.” We should never forget that God is rich! He has all we need when we are in trouble.

But what else did he say to himself in his deep distress and disappointment? Now, listen, this is very important! “I will say to my father, ‘I have sinned against God. I have sinned against you. I do not deserve to be called your son ever again.’” He was honest, was he not? He did not lie or try to cover up his mistakes and foolishness. He was desperate. But he was moving in the right direction. Do you agree?

3. So, what happened? He went back. I am sure he was worried as he returned. He felt so bad about his relationship to his good father who gave him his inheritance when he was still young. And he “blew it” away. It was gone. He knew his father always loved him, but he was not sure what he would do now.

Do you ever feel that way about your relationship to God? Do you worry that your sins have separated you from God so that he will be angry, reject you and refuse to call you his child again? Many people feel that way. And they should! We need to be straight with God. He is pure and holy. He hates all sin. But he loves the sinner.

4. What did the father do?

He was looking for his lost son, worried and afraid.

He was “filled with tender love for his son.”

“He ran to him.” He was so glad he returned and was alive.

“He hugged him and kissed him.” (Jewish fathers still kiss their sons today.)

What is Jesus really saying about God in this story? He is saying: God is waiting for us to come back to him. God loves us. He is full of joy when we come back to him even if we have made a mess of our lives.

Do not be afraid to come to God! He is waiting for you. He is patient, kind and full of love. Notice! The father showed his love before the son said a thing! He forgave him instantly. Imagine the peace which the son felt in his troubled heart.

5. What did the bad boy say to his honorable father?

“Father, I have sinned against God. I have sinned before you. I do not deserve to be called your son ever again.” What else could the boy do? He could not pay his father for the money he wasted. He could not wipe away the awful sins he committed. He had to be honest, and he was!

That is what God wants from each one of us. He is waiting. He wants us to come back even though we are ashamed because of what we have done and said. Don’t be afraid! God is waiting for you to come to him right now!

6. How did the father show his love and joy that his son came back? Listen! He said to his servants:

“Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger. Put sandals on his feet. Then get a fat calf and roast it. We are going to have a feast and a wonderful time! My son is here. He was given up for dead and now he is alive. He was lost and now is found.”

What a wonderful time they had! What a time of joy for the father and his son.

This is a picture of what God, our Father in heaven, wants. He is ready to make a party for us! He wants us back. He is not waiting to punish us. He forgives and hugs us when we come to him. He does not demand sacrifices, gifts, and hard work for us to pay him back for our foolishness.

What a story! Do you see it? Do you feel it?

Conclusion: I want to finish this message by reading from another book in the Bible which clearly emphasizes what Jesus is teaching us. Listen carefully.

At one time you were separated from God. You were enemies in your minds because of your evil ways. But because Christ died, God has brought you back to himself. Christ’s death has made you holy in God’s sight. So now you don’t have any flaw (fault, error). You are free from blame.

But you must keep faith (in God) steady and firm. Don’t move away from the hope the good news (the gospel) holds out to you.

(Colossians 1:21-23 NIrV)

Peace with our Father God—we need it so much! Down deep in our hearts it

is our highest hope. When we return to God he forgives our sins and he then sees us as holy, good and without sin. Just as the father in the story gave his son clothes, sandals, a ring, and a feast, God is full of joy when we turn back to him. All our sins are gone. We are clean.

We receive this gift of reconciliation and salvation through faith in Jesus. God hugs and accepts us. We are back in his house forever.

* * * * *

Note: Today, all around the world, young men are leaving home to find work, excitement and freedom in the big cities of the world. Many of them get into big trouble as the son did. If you know about such a young man, you might tell his story as an illustration of what is happening right now. But, be careful that you do not offend the family or the young man in telling the story. Use a false name.

Reconciliation Message #11

Don't Eat Each Other Up! But Love!

THEME: People quarrel and fight too much! Paul says, “You must not keep on biting each other. You must not keep on eating each other up. Watch out! You might destroy each other.” Paul is using shocking language to get people’s attention. He is comparing them to animals that eat each other up. People do that, and it is very sad. God’s Holy Spirit wants to help us to love each other in all we say and do.

BIBLE VERSES – Study Galatians 5:13-25, especially verses 13-15.

If you think carefully about verses 13-15 you will remember word fights where people were almost eating each other up. Harsh, angry, and ugly words hurt. They cut deep into our hearts and souls. People divide into separate camps and groups when they speak out against each other in harsh words. Your people need this message: at home, at work, in relationships with their children, and in government and politics. Jesus teaches us how to speak in love and make our life much better, more peaceful and enjoyable!

THE MESSAGE

This is a message about our words and a good life. It is about the new life God gives us. It is about loving each other instead of eating each other up with angry words! I am sure you know what I mean. With words we can destroy each other. But it can be stopped.

The Problem Illustrated

I once lived in a country where I saw fights in people’s houses. Women screamed at each other in anger and pulled each other’s hair out. What horrible scenes! They did not stop until they were tired and looked at each other in despair, holding hair they had actually pulled from another’s head. The men could not seem to stop them! It was terrible. The people seemed to feel that such fights were normal and could not be avoided.

Where I live now, I hear police sirens in the city every night. The police are called to homes where family members are fighting each other and cannot stop. In the daytime I see police cars in the neighborhood stopping fights, arresting people

for violent behavior. On the TV news I see reports every day of similar fights. I listen to the political news and wonder how our leaders in government will lead us when there is so much harsh talk and brutal criticism.

I am sure you know what I am referring to. People have the power to eat each other up with their words. And when the harsh talk stops, the pain and injury are still there. Peace is gone. What can we do?

Help from the Bible

Please listen carefully as I read a few words from a letter that the Christian leader and missionary Paul wrote to believers in a church who were arguing with each other.

My brothers and sisters, you were chosen to be free. But don't use your freedom as an excuse to live in sin. Instead, serve one another in love. The whole law (of God) can be found in a single command. "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Compare Leviticus 19:18)

You must not keep on biting each other. You must not keep eating each other up. Watch out! You might destroy each other.

Galatians 5:13-15 NIrV

Some Key Words and Thoughts from Paul

1. Freedom – This is a very powerful and popular word in all the world today. Fifty years ago in very many regions of the world colonial powers gave freedom to people. It was an exciting time. People made new flags to show their freedom. They marched in the streets. They shouted for joy, and they often cursed the colonial powers. Everyone was talking about freedom!

But freedom is dangerous because it can be understood and used wrongly. Paul reminds the believers in Galatia that "Christ has set us free" (5:1). God called to us to make us free from the powers of sin, but not so we can do and say anything we want.

People often see God as a dictator whom they think wants to control us and take away our freedom. God frees us from sinful ways so we can live together in peace. He frees us so we can control what we say, and not make matters worse with nasty speech.

Paul says, "Don't use your freedom as an excuse to give in to your sinful nature." The freedom God gives us is, first, the freedom from punishment for our sins. Because of Jesus' death for us God will wipe away our guilt completely. We are free!

But secondly Paul is saying, be careful! This does not mean you can do as you want. Your sinful nature will still try to drive you to sin. You will feel a contest in

your heart, mind, and feelings. The sinful nature is not totally dead. One of the ways it shows itself is in free speech! All people in all languages have words they use which stir up trouble. You know what they are! Those words insult and show strong anger. They may be dirty (vulgar) words. They cause trouble, not real freedom.

I will read a few more words from Paul in his letter:

“What the sinful nature does is clear . . . It is full of hatred and fighting. It is full of jealousy and fits of anger. It is interested only in getting ahead of others. It stirs up trouble. It separates people into their own little groups . . . People who live and act like that will not receive God’s kingdom [rule].”
(Galatians 5:19-21 NIrV)

People may think they are free when they talk and act exactly as they want. Not true! We lose freedom when we cause trouble and divisions by our angry words.

In English we say, “I want to get this off my chest,” which means, “I have a quarrel with you and I am going to tell you exactly how I feel with words that may shock you. And I don’t care how you will feel afterward!” So we “unload” on another person. And what is the result? Disagreement solved? No. The matter gets worse because we are eating each other up! It is so easy to do.

In another letter Paul wrote:

Do not let any corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may benefit those who hear. . . Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every evil intention. Be kind and tender to one another. Forgive each other, just as God forgave you because of what Christ has done.

Ephesians 4:29, 31-32 (from several versions in English)

Now think carefully. When are you really free? When you speak your best! When you help and do not hurt. When you are patient and kind. That is the way you want others to act and talk. You are glad to give them the freedom to talk and act like that. We must ask God to help us kill the sinful nature so we can be truly free.

2. “Serve one another in love.” Galatians 5:13c-4

This is the rule that leads to true freedom. Paul says, “The whole law [of God] can be found in a single command.” How can that be? What is it?

“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” This comes from the very old book we call the Old Testament, in Leviticus, the book of laws. It says, “Do not try to get even with another person. Do not hold anything against one of your

people. Instead, love your neighbor as you love yourself. I am the Lord.”
(Leviticus 19:18 NIrV)

Jesus repeated and emphasized this commandment (Matthew 22:37-39). Now think for a moment! If you love someone, will you lash out at them and speak ugly, hurting words? If you love someone, will you insist that you get your own way, especially by using strong, insulting words? No. If you love another person, even when there is trouble, you will be careful to be loving in each word you use. Sometimes it is best to say nothing, but pray.

3. The “new nature” – when God’s Spirit speaks to us and we believe in Jesus, God gives us a new nature. The sinful nature is dying, and the new nature takes over in us.

Listen to what the great leader Peter wrote about this:

God’s power gives us everything we need to lead a godly life . . . he did it so we could *share in his nature*. He also did it so we can escape from the evil in the world. (2 Peter 1:3a, 4b NIrV)

That is almost too hard to believe. God gives us his nature when we believe. He changes us. The sinful nature is dying and the God nature is starting to live in us. So, we can love, speak in kindness with patience, and not eat each other up anymore! (Note: Paul is using what we call sarcastic language, to make the people laugh at themselves for their foolishness. He is trying to shock them into thinking more clearly about how Christians should think about themselves.)

The new nature produces wonderful fruit. (Galatians 5:22-23 NIrV)

The law of love does this for us. Listen carefully:

But the fruit which the Holy Spirit produces is love, joy and peace. It is being patient, kind and good. It is being faithful and gentle and controlling oneself.

There is no law against things of that kind.

Believers who follow Jesus will produce these fruits in their speech. They will not be eating each other up. This is true freedom. In this way our words solve problems instead of making conditions worse. And we all feel better and get along better. Isn’t that what you want? You can have it by believing in Jesus and following his new way of life. If you do so, I promise you, you will see what true freedom is.

Reconciliation Message #12

How to Treat Strangers and People You Do Not Know

THEME: The Bible teaches us to invite strangers into our houses. Jesus showed us how to visit and talk with strangers. We are all afraid of strangers. Most of us are taught from childhood to be careful about opening doors to strangers.

Most people divide the world into **outsiders and insiders**.

Insiders are people like us. We are like them. We understand them. They understand us. We feel we know them and can trust them. So, we like most of them, and they like us because they are like us!

But *outsiders* are the people we see as strangers. They may be so strange that they speak other languages. A foreign language is a wall between us and them. And they have so many different ways of acting, eating, dressing, talking, working, and worshipping that we can easily ignore them. They are too different, so we ignore them and forget them. They are too different, so we ignore them and forget them. It is risky to be friends with them. So we keep ourselves separate from them. And we hope they will not bother us.

Jesus attacked this separation directly and boldly when he moved among the Jews and others in his travels and teaching.

Once Jesus saw a tax collector named Matthew sitting in his office for tax collection. Jesus invited Matthew to follow him! The Jewish religious leaders (Pharisees) were furious—very upset and angry! Matthew was connected to the Roman government so he was an outsider.

Why did Jesus invite him to be a learner and leader? Because Jesus wanted to show all people that he came for everyone, not just for his own people the Jews. So then Jesus sat down with more “tax collectors and sinners.” “Terrible,” the Jewish religious leaders thought! This is the normal reaction of people everywhere. We stick with the people we know and stay away from those who are strangers. “Drink coffee or tea with the people you know. Forget the rest!” See Matthew 9:9-13, Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-32.

How do your people treat strangers? How do believers treat people who do not believe? God calls believers to “be separate from the world,” but this does not mean that we should not be hospitable and kind to strangers and outsiders.

Scholars who study the churches around the world have noticed how quickly new believers live separately and break relationships with “tax collectors,” those people who are different from them. When this happens, believers no longer have a good opportunity to tell others the Good News about Jesus.

Jesus was famous for being a friend to strangers and sinners. That is why the

Jewish religious leaders (his own people) killed him. Jesus broke the traditions and rules of his own people. Jesus came to be our friend while we were still strangers and sinners in his sight. So if God loves us enough to send his Son to be our friend, how can we not be friendly to strangers and sinners? That is the theme and topic for this message.

BIBLE VERSES:

About foreigners:

“Do not mistreat or abuse *foreigners* who live among you. Remember you were *foreigners* in Egypt.” (Exodus 22:21 CEV)

“. . . and you know what it is like.” (Exodus 23:9)

About “favorites”

“But all who do right will be rewarded with glory, honor, and peace, whether they are Jews or Gentile. God does not have any *favorites*.” (Romans 2:10-11 CEV)

Paul wrote: “Some of them were supposed to be important leaders, but I did not care who they were. God does not have any *favorites*.” None of these so-called special leaders added anything to my message [the gospel].” (Galatians 2:6 CEV)

“But if you treat some people better than others, you have done wrong, and the Scriptures teach that you have sinned.” (James 2:9 CEV)

About strangers and angels

“Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests without even knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

About strangers and the final judgment of God

“When I was a *stranger* you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:31-46 CEV — see especially verses 35, 38, 43-44.)

“The king (God) will say to them, ‘Whenever you failed to help any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you failed to do it for me.’

Then Jesus said, ‘Those people will be punished forever. But the ones who pleased God will have eternal life.’”

So we see that our treatment of strangers is a serious business in God’s sight.

THE MESSAGE

(Note: You may use the “theme” above to begin this message. Then add to it what I write below. You may choose to use some or all of the Bible verses. I will use some of them in what I write next.)

Now think about what I have said as follows:

1. “Be friendly to strangers” is another hard saying of Jesus.
2. How we usually feel about strangers and foreigners—why we hesitate.
3. The wonderful result of being kind and welcoming strangers.
4. Strangers and the Final Judgment of God.

Now let us think together how we treat strangers.

1. Another hard saying of Jesus. Sometimes we are surprised and even frightened at the new commandments Jesus gives to us. He does not think the way we think. We may feel that he does not know about the problems we face. He expects us to do exactly the opposite of what we normally do. This is true about strangers.

Jesus was always making friends with the wrong people! That is what the Pharisees thought, and so did Jesus’ followers at first. Jesus was a new kind of man and leader who accepted everyone. He talked with them. He ate with them. He healed them. He obviously loved them even though they were not the usual Jewish “good guys.” This was shocking behavior for a “rabbi,” a teacher who deserved respect. Jesus did not fit the pattern of the thinking of the people.

We live in a world that is made up of “strangers and foreigners” and “friends or citizens or family.”

In Pakistan when people meet they always do three things in this order:

First, they give a greeting. The greeting itself is usually a clear sign of the persons’ connections. Muslims will almost always say, “Salaam ‘alekum,” which is Arabic meaning, “Peace be with all of you.” Others will simply say, “Salaam, Ji” which means, “Peace, good person that you are.” (Salaam—an Arabic loan word, and Ji—an Urdu/Hindi word of respectful acceptance of another.) So, the separation of people begins right away in the first words spoken!

Second, they ask, “What is your name?” Names usually show the religion of the people.

Third, they ask, “What is your tribe [ethnic group, caste group]?” This step in meeting defines how people will feel about the person they have just met. They will consider them to be either potential friends or strangers. They will be open to the people who are from their group, and will be closed and careful in exposing themselves to those who are strangers and outsiders.

Jesus attacked the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, for this kind of personal treatment. The Pharisees “pegged everyone,” we say. They put them in

their place—that is, the position the Pharisees had in their prejudiced minds. These bad leaders set aside what God taught the Jews about being kind to strangers and foreigners. The Pharisees put themselves in a special, upper class. Other Jews were second class. And Romans, “gentiles” (the nations), were hated. They were the out-class!

Today we live in a world where most of us meet strangers all the time. They are strange to us because of the color of their skin, or their language, or their clothes, or their religion, or their place of birth, or their education—we just know that these people are different. They are really not our people!

Jesus and the New Testament teach us to be “hospitable” to all people. The Greek word in the New Testament is a double word meaning “a person who likes strangers.” (See Romans 12:3; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; and 1 Peter 4:9 for use of “hospitality.”)

This is the new style of living from Jesus. Be nice to strangers! Welcome them. Help them! Listen to them! Tell them about God’s love. Feed them! Pray for them. It is a tough commandment. But it is good!

2. Our problem when we meet strangers and foreigners

- We are **suspicious** when we meet them. We have doubts about getting close to them. We are not sure they will treat us well. We feel we do not have control of the situation because they are different. Even if they smile, we hold back from them.
- We **keep them a distance from us**. We feel that we cannot predict what they will do. So we may be polite. But we hold back our affection, and we are not enthusiastic about having them around us. They feel that right away!
- We **hesitate**. We hold back from having a warm relationship with them. We feel they might cheat us or fool us. So, we may be polite, but our hearts are cool!
- We are **hostile** toward them. We may not be openly angry. We may control our thoughts and words. But, based on our experience or ignorance of these people, we are cold to them. We will not open our hearts to them.

Jesus was quite opposite. He boldly scolded the Pharisees for their bad attitudes. He was a model for his followers, but they were slow learners. And we still are slow learners. It is so nice and comfortable to stick with your own group and keep others at a distance. God’s plan is for us to come together with strangers, foreigners, sinners, and people we see as problems. God’s purpose is for us to “build his Kingdom” of love and right among all people. But, we must open the door so this can happen.

3. The wonderful results of being kind to strangers. We can see this clearly in two stories about Jesus:

- A. The way Jesus treated the woman in Samaria (John 4:9). Jesus broke the rules for separation and saved a failed, hurting woman from despair. He loved her.
- B. Jesus blesses the one leper who came to thank him. He was a foreigner! (Luke 17:11-17, especially verse 17, NIV)

There are other examples in the gospel stories about Jesus which show that he welcomed strangers when the Jews did not. He “broke the ice,” we say. He attacked the breaking of God’s law for strangers. He did it by his own actions and attitudes. And the whole world today is better because of it. But so many have not understood or accepted this new way of Jesus.

Segregation – separation from others is their way. Discrimination – make a careful judgment about others and keep your distance from them!

4. Strangers and the Final Judgment of God – Matthew 25:31-46

(Note: You may want to read all or part of this passage.)

Toward the end of his time of teaching Jesus tells his followers about the final judgment of God and how he will separate “the sheep from the goats.” One of the tests of those whom Jesus accepts as his sheep is, “I was a stranger and you invited me in.” That is a test of true belief and faith. Jesus calls us to believe in him and act like him! He does not credit us just for good words! He expects us to do the very unusual thing—welcome strangers, feed people who are hungry, give clothes to those who need them, and care for sick people.

So Jesus calls us to change the world! He calls us to be friends and not enemies. He calls us to accept others and not reject them. He calls us to do the unusual thing even if people think we are crazy just as the people thought Jesus was a fanatic!

This is not easy. Carrying a cross as Jesus did is never easy. But it is the way of true faith and obedience.

This may seem like too much to ask of you today. Believe Jesus and he will give you the strength to welcome and help strangers too! You will be amazed at the joy you will bring to them. And the joy you will feel in your heart.

Reconciliation Message #13

Restitution—Making Wrongs Right Again

THEME: “Restitution” in the language of the Old Testament means to make whole or complete again after a loss, a theft, an injury, a wrong act. The word comes from the root word “salaam” which means peace and wholeness.

Jesus does not use the word “restitution” but he taught that sincere believers should always make sure to make wrongs right. Christian faith has to do with both what we believe and how we behave. Sometimes we separate the two and emphasize faith too much. When we do this we may ignore correcting our offenses against other people.

Forgiveness of our sins is always God’s free gift to us, but it is not an automatic ticket to overlook or ignore making wrongs right again. When we go to worship or the communion table, we should first test our hearts, memories and conscience to see if there is a wrong that we should make right with a fellow believer or someone else. This is a basic belief of all Christians.

Believers should never fail to act so that unbelievers can say that we are weak and careless about making wrongs right. I think no one will argue that there are many wrongs that should be made right. The Kingdom which Jesus brings is God’s rule so that wrongs are made right, between us and God, and between us and the people we live with. So, think carefully with me about restitution—the process of making wrongs right with others.

In many nations and societies there are laws and rules in the government about paying people back for losses and wrongs that have been done. Christians should make things right without these laws and customs. When we do this we show our love for each other as Jesus taught us.

BIBLE VERSES:

Exodus 22:1-15 – Read this carefully and notice the words (in the NIV English translation) *pay back* and *restitution*. Jesus’ law of love supersedes and encompasses this rule, but he does not cancel it even though he does not repeat it. See Matthew verses below.

Leviticus 6:1-6 NIV – “The Lord spoke to Moses. He said, ‘Suppose one of you sins by not being faithful to me. You do it by tricking your neighbors. You trick them in connection with something they have placed in your care. You steal from them. Or you cheat them. Or you find something they have lost and then tell a lie about it. Or you go to court. You take an oath and tell a lie when you witness

about it. Or you commit any other sin like those sins.

‘When you sin in any of those ways, you become guilty. You must return what you stole. You must give back what you took by cheating your neighbors. You must return what they placed in your care. You must return the lost property you found. You must return anything you told a lie about when you witnessed in court. You must pay back everything in full. Add a fifth of its value for it. Give all of it to the owner on the day you bring your guilt offering.

‘Bring your guilt offering to the priest to pay for your sin. It is an offering to me. Bring a ram from your flock. It must not have any flaws. It must be worth the required amount of money.’”

There are Christians who still pay attention to these laws in the Old Testament which the Holy Spirit now writes on our hearts. But we may forget.

But the “guilt offering” is no longer necessary because Jesus took all of our guilt and wiped it out when he died on the cross. So we will be forgiven if we wrong others even if they do not forgive us. God accepts us fully. But if we have wronged others we cannot say, “God forgives me! So you must forgive me too.” If at all possible we should pay back whatever loss a person received because of our failing.

It is not necessary to add “a fifth of its value” to the pay back, but something we give in addition will show our sorrow for the wrong and our love for the person.

Matthew 5:16 NIrV — Jesus said, “. . . let your light shine in front of others. Then they will see the good things you do. And they will praise your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:23-26). Make things right!

Romans 13:8-9 CEV — “Let love be your only debt! If you love others, you have done all that the Law demands.” NIrV says, “Pay everything you owe. But you can never pay back all the love you owe each other. Those who love others have done everything the law requires.”

Good believers do not cancel or ignore their debts and obligations to other people. They try to pay up in full! That is the way true love works. We do not do this to cancel guilt or earn merits with God. This is the way of true faith. And the world is amazed if and when we do it! They can see that God is ruling in our hearts. That is why we are here on earth.

We should not depend on insurance, government laws, institutional rules and family customs to take care of these matters when we should pay back and make wrongs right. Believers should move themselves and do it. This is love in action and not empty words!

“A Ritual for Reconciliation” — This is a true story from the book *Doing Theology with the Maasai*, by Doug Priest, Jr., page 123-124. The Maasai are a large tribe of people in the country of Kenya, Africa.

Case Study #11:

A Ritual for Reconciliation

A missionary couple had come to study the Maasai language, and after a series of events, their language helper admitted that he had stolen from them. He returned to them what property of theirs that he still had. The community was faced with a decision: should the offender be tried according to the laws of the country which would mean court appearances and possible imprisonment; should he be released from his job and the offense forgotten; or should the matter be treated under the dictates of traditional law? The latter option was determined to be the best one in a meeting of the local elders.

The language helper’s father was called to a meeting of the local elders. This involved much expense for him as he lived about one hundred kilometers away. The elders discussed the case and determined that the helper should pay for the items which had already been sold, that he should pay the missionary the traditional fine for stealing, and that he should provide an animal to be slaughtered as part of the reconciliation ritual. The fine was determined to be one calf or its equivalent in sheep and goats.

The day for the slaughtering arrived. The language helper, his father, several village elders, the language learner and a few warriors participated in the ceremony. First the fine was paid. Next the animal to be slaughtered was chosen and led from its pen and hung from the branch of a tree by the neck until it suffocated. The animal was slaughtered, with the heart, spleen and brisket roasted over the fire. The rest of the meat was taken into a house and boiled.

When the brisket, *enkiyieu*, was finished being roasted, everybody gathered under a shade tree and it was explained that the brisket is the most holy piece of meat from an animal. Examples were given: when a man dies it is the fat from the brisket of a freshly slaughtered ox which is used to anoint the body; when one believes he is cursed, he calls the supposed accuser to a ceremony where the two share meat from the brisket. If the supposed accuser eats the meat while saying that he did not pronounce the curse, though he actually did, he will die.

After the explanation, the meat from the brisket was removed from the two adjoining bones. Four pieces of meat from the center of the brisket were cut off. The language learner and the helper were each given two pieces of meat in their right hand. They then exchanged the pieces of meat with one another and ate them.

The two were then blessed by the elders present. The blessing which was pronounced contained the following elements: (1) peace should return to the two parties; (2) a warning was given to the language helper not to steal again with dire consequences if he did so; (3) acknowledgment of the proper payment of the fine; (4) an injunction to both parties to forgive one another and to put the incident behind them; and (5) blessings to each party so that each may prosper. After the blessings were uttered, the meat from the brisket was eaten by all. Then the boiled meat was brought and it too was eaten.

So what do you think of that story? Will it help your people to hear this story? What do you want to add or change?

THE MESSAGE

The above are resources for a message on restitution. I suggest you make a message of your own based on what I have given you above. The outline for your message might look something like this:

1. Believers must make wrongs right. We all need this. There are so many terrible wrongs that need to be made right.
2. Jesus and the Bible teach us how important it is for us to make wrongs right. When we believe in God and accept his wonderful forgiveness we are making a pledge also to love God and others as much as we love ourselves. We cannot expect others to forgive and forget. We must owe no one anything except doing good and paying our debts. That is love in action.
3. The story of the Maasai and the missionary.
4. What should you do to make some wrong right today? You will know God's love in your heart if you do. And others will be pleased and will praise God too.

This is the way of Reconciliation—getting back into good relations with people and God. It is so important! And wonderful when it happens!

Reconciliation Message # 14

Christian—Forgive!

Christian—Forgive! Because God forgives us, and we must do the same.
1 John 4:7-12

Story from *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Madeleine Albright, Harper Collins 2006, pages 68-69

Bob Seiple, who served with me in the State Department as the first American ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, tells a . . . story . . . about overcoming hate. It concerns Mary, a young Lebanese woman he encountered while working as the head of World Vision, a Christian relief and development agency.

In the 1980s, Lebanon had been the scene of a destructive and multilateral civil war. Mary lived in a mostly Christian village; and when a Muslim militia invaded it, everyone fled. Mary tripped on a root, plunging face-first to the ground. As she scrambled to her knees, a young man of no more than twenty pressed the barrel of a pistol into the side of her head and demanded, “Renounce the cross or die.” Mary did not flinch. “I was born a Christian,” she said. “I will die a Christian.” The pistol fired, propelling a bullet through Mary’s neck and spine. Remorsefully, the militiaman carved a cross on her chest with his bayonet, then left her to die.

The following day, the militia returned and prepared to occupy the village. As they carted off the dead, a few of them came across Mary, still alive but unable to move; she was paralyzed. Instead of finishing her off, the militiamen improvised a stretcher out of wood and cloth and took her to a hospital.

Seiple continues:

And I’m talking to Mary, sitting across from her, and I said, “Mary, this makes absolutely no sense. These are people who tried to kill you. Why in the world would they take you to the hospital the next day?”

She says, “You know, sometimes bad people are taught to do good things.”

And I said, “Mary, how do you feel about the person who pulled the trigger? Here you are, an Arab woman in a land twice occupied at that time—the Israelis in the south, the Syrians every place else—strapped to a wheelchair, held hostage by your own body, a ward of the state for the rest of your life. How do you feel about the guy who pulled the trigger?”

She said, “I have forgiven him.”

“Mary, how in the world could you forgive him?”

“Well, I forgave him because my God forgave me. It’s as simple as that.”

In Seiple’s view, there are two lessons in this story. The first is that there are people who are willing to die—and kill—for their faith. This was true thousands of years ago and is no less true today. The second lesson is that religion at its best teaches forgiveness and reconciliation, not only when those acts are relatively easy but also when they are almost (impossible).

Reconciliation Message # 15

God’s Memory—Flawless (perfect in detail), yet Forgiving

Introduction: People often think of God or the gods as a person who is brooding (always thinking about us with anger) about our sins. People feel they must sacrifice and suffer in order to quiet his anger and dissatisfaction. Not so! Remember these words from Psalm 103 (verses 6, 8-13 NIrV):

The Lord does what is right and fair for all who are beaten down. . . .
 The Lord is tender and kind. He is gracious.
 He is slow to get angry. He is full of love.
 He will not keep bringing charges against us.
 He will not stay angry with us forever.
 He does not punish us for our sins as much as we should be punished.
 He does not pay us back in keeping with (equal with) the evil things we did.
 His love for those who have respect for him is as high as the heavens are above the earth.
 He has removed our lawless acts from us as far as the east is from the west.
 A father is tender and kind to his children.
 In the same way the Lord is tender and kind to those who have respect for him.”

This kindness of God who knows all of our sins and flaws in every detail teaches us that we also must seek for ways to be kind to people who sin against us. God sets the standard!

An Outline for this message:

1. **The Lord knows all our sins.** (Habakkuk 3:2 NIrV) A prayer:
 Lord, I know how famous you are.
 I have great respect for you because of your mighty acts.
 Do them again for us. Make them known in our time.
 When you are angry, please show us your tender love.

2. **The Lord prefers to FORGIVE and FORGET!** (Jeremiah 31:34):
 “I will *forgive* their sins and *forget* the evil things they have done.”
 If God can do that, should we not do the same? Yes!
 But it is not easy to forgive and forget. Our memory is too good! We

forget God!

Pray like this (Psalm 25:6-8 CEV):

“Please, Lord, *remember*, you have always been patient and kind.

Forget each wrong I did when I was young.

Show how kind you are and *remember* me.

You are honest and merciful, and you teach sinners how to follow you.”

When we forgive and forget, we do things God’s way! What is better than that?

3. The Lord forgets so we must cleanse our memories of anger and revenge.

Hebrews 8:12 – The Lord says to us: “I will treat them with kindness, even though they are wicked. I will *forget* their sins.”

God is all-knowing. He is super-intelligent! But he chooses to forgive and forget our sins when we turn from them and believe in him. How wonderful! We also have powerful memories. We remember so many good and bad things, acts and words. Some help; others hurt! The best way to wipe away those bad memories is to remember often how God decided to forget and forgive us when he sent Jesus to suffer and die for us. God rescued and saved us from the dark pit of our ugly memories. The God who did that will help us today to forgive and forget.

Reconciliation Message # 16

What to Do When You Have Bad Memories

Introduction: What do you remember most? Memory is powerful! It is amazing how much a person can remember. We have good memories and bad memories. It seems that our bad memories are often stronger than our good memories.

Once I was in a meeting where there was a quarrel between Christians. During the conversation one woman spoke at great length describing with great detail in a strong voice what happened and who said what. She seemed to remember exactly what others had said.

I was stunned by the power and accuracy of her memory. But it was so negative! She remembered the sins of others and could quote what they said in the exact words. Her memory was destructive. It did not stop the conflict and disagreement. Bad feelings between people in that meeting got worse. I felt I was in the darkness after listening to her.

I have often wondered about the life of this woman in years that followed. I have not been near her, but I am sure that her good memory of bad stuff has made life harder and unhappy for her, her husband and her children, and many others also!

This message is about what we can do to remember good things and erase the bad. It is a lesson about how God taught his people long ago to remember and never forget the wonderful acts he did for them.

My father was a humble, good Christian. In his late years, 80s into the 90s, he wrote me many times: “I spend my time remembering the good things that happened and how God blessed us.” That was a good lesson for me! My father suffered from many unpleasant and hard experiences, but he chose to remember the good stuff! And I am better for it.

Bible references for this message:

Deuteronomy 5:15 NIV – “*Remember* that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”

Numbers 11:4b, 5, 6 CEV . . . even the Israelites themselves began moaning, “We don’t have any meat! In Egypt we could eat all the fish we wanted, and there were cucumbers, melons, onions, and garlic. But we’re starving out here, and the only food we have is this manna.”

Remembering is a choice! Sometimes we do not see clearly when big changes come to us. We can focus our memory on the wrong things. Later the Jews remembered all that God did for them. They were able to make choices and remember the best things.

1 Chronicles 16:11-15, 28-30, 34 CEV – King David wrote many psalms (songs) for the people of God (Israel) so they would *remember* the special, good things God did for them. Here are a few lines from a psalm which is repeated also in Psalms 105, 96 and 106.

“Trust the Lord and his mighty power; Worship him always.
Remember his miracles and all his wonders and his fair decisions.
You belong to the family of Israel, his servant;
 You are chosen ones, the descendants of Jacob.
The Lord is our God, bringing justice everywhere on earth.
We *must never forget* his agreement (covenant) and his promises,
 not in thousands of years!
Tell everyone of every nation,
 ‘Praise the glorious power of the Lord.
 He is wonderful! Praise him and bring an offering into his temple.
 Worship the Lord, majestic and holy
 Everyone on earth, now tremble!’
The world stands firm never to be shaken. . . .

Praise the Lord because he is good to us, and his love never fails.”

What do we learn here about remembering and never forgetting?

1. When we remember rightly we will trust God and his power over life.
2. We will remember how fair God is. He is present to do justice in the affairs of life.
3. We will remember that we are the family of God. He has called and chosen us.
4. We will never forget his agreement to be our God forever. He keeps his covenant.
5. We will tell others about our good God when hard things in life come.
6. Bad memories will not shake us because our God is wonderful.

Are you suffering from bad memories? Do those memories trouble you and keep you from turning to God? Remember: God delights in solving problems.

He is eager to help us when bad people and hard times trouble us. He is slow to anger and is quick to forgive.

If you do not have good memories of God's acts, come to him today and he will do miracles in your life. He will be true to you all your life, in good times and bad. *Remember! Do not forget!*

Reconciliation Message # 17

The Amazing Power of Forgiveness

How an Iraqi Christian General, targeted for assassination (murder) by four young terrorists forgave them, rejected local custom and government, and changed their lives from evil to great good. A remarkable story (from the book *Saddam's Secrets*, by Iraqi General George Sada, Integrity Publishers, 2006, pages 293–296):

A Time for Peace

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, . . . a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 7-8, NIV)

Because of the work I do, I have to have bodyguards at all times. One day when I was working at home one of them came to me and said there was a car with four young Muslims going back and forth in front of my house, and they were taking video pictures of my property. We knew what that meant: it's a common tactic of terrorists who are planning to blow something up. So my bodyguards, who are all big, strong Assyrians from the north, jumped in their cars and chased them down. They raced all through the streets of Baghdad at high speeds, three cars of them, and they finally caught them and brought them back to the house so I could question them and find out what they were doing.

When I saw the four young men, I knew these were not ordinary terrorists. They had long beards and Muslim clothing, but they were different. When I asked what they were doing, they admitted that they were planning to blow up my house. I knew I had to decide what to do with them and the options were clear. I called the prime minister and told him what had happened and he told me, "By all means, Georges, take them to be interrogated by intelligence officers at the ministry of the interior. God only knows what they may be able to tell us."

I listened and I thanked him politely, but when I put down the receiver I looked at the boys and just shook my head. They looked like good boys, and they were frightened because they knew what was going to happen

next. But after a few minutes I asked them, “Do you know me?” They said, “No, we don’t know you.” So I said, “Then why do you want to kill me?” and they said, “We were told to kill you.” I said, “You don’t know me but still you wanted to kill me?” And they answered, “Yes, that’s true.”

So I asked them, “What do you do when you’re not blowing people up?” Two of them told me they were engineering students at the University of Baghdad, and the other two were in their second year of medical school. Again, I just shook my head. Here were four bright young men, obviously from good families, and they had been turned into murderers by foreign-born terrorists and the fanatical clerics of their own religion.

I felt sad for them, and I knew very well what the intelligence officers would do to them when I turned them over to the police. As I was considering my options, I asked them, “Why did you listen to these men who told you to kill me?” They said, “They’re foreigners, and they told us that it was the will of Allah for us to kill you. If we didn’t do it, we would be cursing Islam.” I looked at them and I just said a silent prayer: *Jesus, tell me what to do with these young men.*

After I thought about it for a moment, I knew what I was supposed to do. They were trembling with fear, and they had no doubts about what was going to happen to them. The prime minister was angry, especially since they had targeted my house and wanted to blow me up. There would be no mercy for terrorists—these or any others. But I knew I had to settle it another way.

Finding Another Way

I went back to my office and called the prime minister once again, and I told him that I had decided to let them go. He yelled, “What? Georges, no! What are you talking about? You can’t do that. It’s against the law!” So I said, “Sir, these people were trying to kill me. You know that I’m a Christian, and we’re taught to practice forgiveness. Even Jesus Christ, when they hung him on the cross, said, ‘Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’ So let me deal with this in my own way.”

When I came back into the room and told the young men they were free to go, they didn’t believe me at first. They were sure it was a trick; they were going to be killed as soon as they stepped outside. But I assured them it wasn’t a trick and nothing would happen to them. I told them to go, and they went. But four hours later, I looked out the window and I saw all four of them coming back to my house, this time with their fathers and mothers. I invited them to come inside and immediately the parents fell all

over me, thanking me for sparing the lives of their sons. They said I had saved their lives and they offered the boys to me as bodyguards.

They were kissing me and thanking me over and over, but I said, “Okay, thank you very much, but listen to me. I have bodyguards and I don’t need any more. The only thing I want from you is that you send these boys back to the university. These two are going to be good doctors, and the other two are going to be good engineers one day. They’re our hope for the future, and Iraq needs them. So why are you allowing these bright young men to be in the hands of foreigners and terrorists who are telling them to kill people like me whom they’ve never even met?”

Most of them had tears in their eyes by this time, but they were listening carefully to what I was saying. So I told the boys, “Please listen to me. Those foreign terrorists are nobody. They’re losers, they’re killers, and they’re cowards. They won’t do the dirty work themselves but they want you to kill your fellow citizens. They’re nobody, but you’re somebody, because you are the future leaders of Iraq. Please don’t throw your lives away for losers like that.” And they heard me loud and clear.

To this day, those four boys still come to my house from time to time to say hello and wish me well. They say, “Sir, is there anything we can do for you?” And I say, “No, but how are you doing in school?” And they say, “We’re doing very well.” So I tell them, “I want you to work hard and make sure you pass your exams. And when you graduate as doctors and engineers, come back to see me and we’ll try to put you in good positions in the government.”

When I spoke to the prime minister about this, he said, “Georges, sometimes I don’t understand you. You Christians always do things like this, but God only knows what they’re going to do.” And I said, “Sir, the only thing they’re going to do is graduate from the university as doctors and engineers, and one day I’ll put them in good positions. And I think this is the best way of making our young people whose eyes have been blinded by hate and lies to see the truth. One day you’ll see what happens.”

It’s been nearly two years now since that incident happened, and some people still tell me that one day those young men will come back and finish the job. But I don’t believe it. I didn’t decide to release them on my own: I prayed about my decision and Jesus told me to release them. So I’m not sorry that I let them go, and I mean that even if something bad does happen to me one day. But I can tell you this. All of their people know this story now, and some of them say, “We know very well what would have happened if General Sada was a Muslim. The boys would have been hanged that same day. But that man had mercy on them because he’s a

Christian.”

When I see these young men now, they’re so different than they were. They’ve shaved their beards, they’re wearing very nice clothes, they’re doing very well in their studies at the university. I have some friends who tell me I did the wrong thing, because these young men are Sunnis and they wanted to see them hanged. Fortunately, many people in Iraq know this story now, and many of them believe I did the right thing. But I know it was the right thing.

Incidentally, one of my bodyguards took the video camera they were using and he copied the file onto my laptop computer. So we know exactly what they were doing and saying in the car before they were caught. If I had simply made the easy decision and done the usual thing, they would be dead now. It’s easy to hate, and I could have hated them and allowed them to be hanged; but I knew that Jesus wanted me to find another way, and that’s what I did.

from – *Saddam’s Secrets*, by Iraqi General Georges Sada,
Integrity, 2006, pages 293-296

Bible Verses: Luke 23:26-34, especially verse 34a (Matthew 18:21-22; Col. 3:13 “... as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also *must* forgive.” (ESV) See article Forgiveness (II. In the New Testament) in the New Bible Dictionary.

Message Outline:

- A. The Horrible Power of Hate
- B. The Test of Faith—in the face of contrary opinion, law and expectations.
- C. The Amazing, Saving Power of Forgiveness
 - 1. Lives are saved.
 - 2. Persons motivated by evil are changed.
 - 3. People learn about Jesus Christ and the good news of God’s rule.

Appendix

Suggestions for 13 More Messages on Reconciliation

Important topics with supporting Bible references for preparing additional messages

1. Correcting Old Hurts—Joseph and His Brothers
Genesis 50:15-21 (see background in Genesis 37:1-36)
“Forgiveness is surrendering the right to get even.”
2. Change Your Enemies into Friends!
Proverbs 16:7; 18:19 (see NIV Study Bible footnote for 16:7);
Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14-15
3. Get Rid of Bad Emotions and Feelings
Ephesians 4:31, 32, 26; Philippians 4:5-9
The evil feelings of people — Romans 1:29-32
4. The Opposite of Selfish Ambition and Envy
James 3:13-18
5. Equal Rights (Justice) for Everyone
Exodus 23:1-9; Isaiah 1:15-23; God is just and fair: Revelation 15:3-4
6. God—He Makes Peace; We Cannot!
2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Romans 5:11
 - A. Jesus pays for (appeases) our offenses.
 - B. Christ creates a new heart in us.
 - C. So, we are reconciled to God, and we are commissioned as messengers of this marvelous reconciliation!
7. Jesus Gets Tough with a Mean, Selfish Official
Matthew 18:21-35 (theme: Forgiving Debts)

8. Jesus' Model; Women and Men Together for God
Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 11:11-12
see New Bible Dictionary article, pages 1246–7
9. Christians—You Are All *One* in the Body of Jesus Christ!
Ephesians 4:1-6, 15, 16 (see also John 17)
 - A. Attitudes – vv. 2-3
 - B. One body and Spirit – v. 4
 - C. One Lord and Father of the Church – vv. 5-6
10. Christians—Accept Each Other as God Accepts You!
Romans 15:5-11
11. How to Think and Pray When Furious Enemies Attack You
Psalm 7 (NIV, CEV)
 - A. Be alert about enemies.
 - B. Be sure of your own innocence and integrity.
 - C. Tell God straight to help you.
12. Live to Make Happy Memories
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (CEV), Psalm 90:13-17
 - A. Faith and love produce happy memories.
 - B. Happy memories help us through suffering.
 - C. God makes our hearts pure and innocent. He makes our love for each other grow “by leaps and bounds.”
13. Sincere Love Wipes Away Many Sins
1 Peter 4:8 (CEV), 1 Corinthians 13:5-8, James 5:20
 - A. Love makes us hesitate to see sin even when present.
 - B. Love wipes away sin by forgiving the sinful person.
 - C. Love hides sins by preventing them from happening.