

Now Is the Time

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2 (NIV)

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ¹ As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

I struggled to craft a sermon for you tonight. The opening line from Paul in our portion of 2 Corinthians is: "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (verse 20) Is that what I should preach to you tonight? Do I need to implore you, beg you, plead with you: "Be reconciled to God"? Do I need to do this as if you are not already reconciled to him, that you do not have peace restored between you and God, as if Jesus has not taken away your sin, as if you don't believe that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," that Christ's righteous has been given to us? (verse 21)

Would it be right for me to preach a sermon to you as if you are unbelievers who need to be reconciled to God? Because that's what the main message of these verses seems to say. Are any of you not reconciled to God? Do you not believe that Jesus took your sin on to himself and instead gave us his righteousness? Are you instead indulging in sin, ignoring the message of the cross, ignoring that God's wrath for our sins has been satisfied by Jesus being sin for us so that we have peace with God? Are you receiving God's grace in vain?

But how could you be receiving God's grace in vain? You decided to take time out of your Wednesday evening to come to an extra church service. It's not as if you get extra credit from God by coming tonight. Your fruit of faith is right here, readily seen. You are gratefully and eagerly receiving God's grace. You are enjoying this time of God's favor. You are obviously reconciled to God. This message imploring and urging reconciliation with God is not for you tonight, or is it?

By coming to an Ash Wednesday worship, you are expressing a few things. One is you know that your time on earth is limited. Death will come for you at some point unless Jesus returns before that. You are very conscious of your sins. You know that dust you are and to dust you will return. You know that the wages of sin is death, that the wages of your sin is your death.

At the same time, though, you came here tonight to focus on a message of reconciliation, the message of the cross. You came here tonight not to sit in ashes and mourn your wretched state as a sinner, to add on to a guilt complex that you've been nurturing. You are here to treasure the fact that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (verse 21) You came because you know that God has provided a solution to death, that he himself took on our sin and was punished for it so that our physical death would not result in eternal death in hell, eternal separation from God. Because of what Christ has done, we look forward to the day when death becomes a door we go through to experience eternal life in heaven because God has gifted to us his righteousness through Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. What we are doing here tonight is enjoying and embracing God's favor that he offers us right now. Now is the time of God's favor. Now is our day of salvation as we rejoice on Ash Wednesday about what Christ has done for us, how he has reconciled us to God by means of his perfect life and death on the cross.

So, what of Paul's words do I preach to you tonight? You already have been reconciled to God. You are receiving God's grace and making use of this time of favor God has given you. You have embraced your day of salvation as God has reached out to you through his Word and has made you righteous, right with him, sins paid for and done away with.

Well, Paul wrote this letter to Christians living in Corinth. That means that there were people who were part of that congregation who needed to hear this message of reconciliation, who needed to be urged to not waste God's time of favor and their day of salvation, to not receive God's grace in vain. If we are not the ones who are lacking this reconciliation, if we are not the ones receiving God's grace in vain, who is?

Who do you know who we call a member of this congregation, a person we call brother or sister in Christ, that we no longer see, that we no longer worship with? Who is the person who we brought up sharing Christ with them who now say that they can no longer believe this because the world is too evil and God seems so far away, so distant, so inactive, so absent, so uncaring? Who is the person who stopped coming and we stopped contacting them because the conversations went nowhere and they never came back? Who do we know that might be nursing a grudge against someone because of something they said or did and that keeps them from worshiping with us? Who do we know who purposefully chooses to stay in bed on Sunday mornings or finds anything and everything

else as a way to avoid coming to church, avoids gathering with their fellow believers, avoids this message of reconciliation, who is wasting God's time of favor for them, God's time of salvation for them? What are we doing for these people who need to be reconciled to God?

I put those questions out there, and I can almost hear the responses. "C'mon, pastor. I've tried. They write me off. They don't listen to me." "Now is not a good time to talk to them about God." "You don't know what you are asking me to do. You don't have to live with these people. You don't have to face their anger or their complaints." "I keep pushing to have them come to church, but they push back. They become more resistant. I'm driving them away, and they are going further away from God." "I can't answer their objections." "Aren't you supposed to do that? You're the pastor?" I know these responses because they are the same ones that run through me head when I talk myself out of reaching out to people with God's grace, with his warning.

Then I hear God talking through the Apostle Paul. "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (verse 2) In other places in the Bible, God tells us that the harvest is plentiful, but the workers few. He says to work while it is day because night is coming when we can no longer work. Life is short, and we have no guarantees of how much time of God's favor we have.

The urgency to make sure people are reconciled to God and that they are not receiving his grace in vain presses in, and I begin to wonder: "Are all my reasons why I avoid talking to these people who are or have drifted away from God and his grace just excuses? If I told these excuses to God, what would he say? Would he say, 'It's okay. I didn't really mean it when I had Paul implore you to be reconciled to me or that I had him urge you and your fellow believers not to receive God's grace in vain.'" God's time of favor is now and our day of salvation is now. Can I really excuse myself from doing this? If I hide behind these excuses, am I failing to help my brothers and sisters in Christ be reconciled to God, to not receive God's grace in vain?

Once we get past our excuses for not urging our drifting away brothers and sisters in Christ to make use of God's grace and be reconciled to God, we realize that there are different ways or reaching different people. Every person is different. You know them. You probably know them better than your pastor does. What do they need? Are they the type of person who needs a sit-down talk to be confronted with the fact that they are wasting God's grace the more that they stay away from his Word? Would they respond best to a note of encouragement or a note that says I miss you and miss worshiping you – an e-mail, a hand-written letter, a text, a Facebook post? Do they need someone to show them some kindness, an offer of help, a prayer? Do they need someone to be persistent with them, to not give up on them, someone who gently urges them each day or each week with a little morsel of what God's grace is doing for them?

Let's not just think about this. Let's put it into action because we know that we have been reconciled to God, that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (Verse 21) What time during this Lenten season can you set aside to reach out as Paul did, to urge people to be reconciled to God, to urge people not to receive God's grace in vain?

As you do this, you fulfill your calling from God as Christ's ambassador, as God's co-worker. That means that you are not going about this encouragement, this work, alone. You have God with you and on your side. As you urge people not to receive God's grace in vain, the Holy Spirit is working on them through you. He who formed the world with his words, he who brought the dead back to life with his words, he also draws people back to a peaceful relationship with him through words, through his message of grace, his message of reconciliation.

"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (verse 2) You have been reconciled to God. You are the righteousness of God as Christ substituted his life for yours, as he became sin for you. You are Christ's ambassador, God's co-worker. Now is the time of God's favor. Now is the time when his salvation for all people is proclaimed. May God use us to reconcile people to him, that they would not receive his grace in vain. Amen.