

**The How of Reconciliation
2 Corinthians 5:21**

In the 14th century what became known as the “black death” spread throughout Europe killing an estimated 20 million people – approximately one-third to one-half of Europe’s population. Though the “black death” is the most infamous plague in history it was not the only one. There have been many horrific plagues that have impacted the world over the course of human history.

But when it comes to the matter of discussing plagues and their impact on this world there is one plague that is far more widespread and deadly than all others combined. It is, as the Puritan writer Ralph Venning called it, the “plague of plagues.”

It affects every person who has ever lived and is 100 percent fatal. And unlike other plagues, it causes not only physical death but spiritual and eternal death as well. And what is this plague? It is the plague of sin that has separated us from God and has turned us into His enemies.

So is there any hope for us? Is there a possible way for this plague of sin to be removed from us so that we might be reconciled to God so that we might be able to enjoy fellowship with Him both now and forever? And the answer, of course, is yes! There is hope!

A hope that is not rooted in us, and what we might be or do, but rather a hope that is rooted in God and who He is and what He has done for us on our behalf.

And this thought brings us back to our study of **2 Corinthians** and more particularly to **2 Corinthians 5:18-20** and to the biblical theme of reconciliation. And so, what have we learned so far about this particular theme from **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**? We learned from **2 Corinthians 5:18** that reconciliation is to God, by God and through Christ and that those reconciled are given the ministry of reconciliation. This is what we learned in **2 Corinthians 5:18**. So, what did we learn from **2 Corinthians 5:19**? We learned that those who have been reconciled to God “**through Christ,**” or in other words “**in Christ,**” and who have been given “**the ministry of**

reconciliation” and thus **“the word of reconciliation”** are to proclaim that word to all the peoples of this world without making any distinctions. This is what we learned in **2 Corinthians 5:19**. And finally what did we learn from **2 Corinthians 5:20**? We learned, based on the example of Paul, that those who have been reconciled to God **“through Christ,”** or in other words **“in Christ,”** and who have been given the ministry of reconciliation and thus the word of reconciliation should not only proclaim that word to all the peoples of this world without making any distinctions but when they do so they should do so passionately.

But we are not yet done with this theme of reconciliation. This morning we will continue with this theme as we move on in our study to **2 Corinthians 5:21** and to one of the most beautiful verses in all of the Scriptures. And what will this verse provide us? This verse will provide us “the how of reconciliation,” or in other words this verse will explain to us how God was able to reconcile us to Himself “through” or “in Christ.”

Now I know that I have addressed “the how of our reconciliation” briefly already as we examined **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**, but this morning “the how of our reconciliation” will be the focus of this message as we examine **2 Corinthians 5:21** for “the how of our reconciliation” is, in fact, the focus of this verse.

So now let me read this verse for you. And what does it say? **“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”**

These fifteen words in the original Greek, given in two parallel, mutually defining clauses, describe for us the means by which God was able to reconcile us to Himself through Christ. And what was that means? Theologically speaking, the means by which God was able to reconcile us to Himself through Christ was by the means of imputation.

So what does this mean? Theologically, “to impute” means to credit or reckon or count something to one’s account. So how was God able to reconcile us to Himself through Christ? God was able to do this through imputation. Or in other words, He was able to do this by crediting the sin that belonged to us to Christ’s account and the righteousness that belonged to Christ to our account.

Of course, this imputation on the part of God would be impossible apart from us having exercised faith in Christ, for apart from us having faith in Christ we will not be joined to Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, and if we are not joined to Christ we will not be found “in Christ,” and if we are not found “in Christ” there is no possible way that God by the means of imputation would be able to credit our sin to Christ’s account and His righteousness to our account. And if God was not able through imputation to do these things, we would not be able to be reconciled to God, and if we were not able to be reconciled to God, we then we would continue to be cut off from Him and unable to see Him clearly nor worship Him. And what a tragedy that would be, for not only would our souls forever remain unsatisfied but in this life God would not receive from us the praise, honor and adoration that He truly deserves.

So, what is my hope for this message? My hope for this message is that as we consider “the how of reconciliation,” which in essence is “imputation,” that we might be led to ponder the love and grace of God, and that as we do this that we might be led by God’s Spirit to worship Him, and in worshiping Him find satisfaction for our souls.

So, what is the question that we will be seeking to answer this morning? How was God able through imputation to reconcile sinners to Himself? And what is the answer? **2 Corinthians 5:21** gives us the answer.

God was able through imputation to reconcile sinners to Himself, first of all, by making Him who knew no sin to be sin on their behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So now let us look at **verse 21** and see if this is not so. And how does the verse begin? It begins with the word “**He.**” And of course the “**He**” refers to God based on **verse 20**.

Reconciliation, or in other words bringing sinners into a right relationship with God, begins and ends with God Himself and what He has done for sinners on their behalf, rather than what sinners have done for God on His behalf.

Sinners cannot reconcile themselves to God, rather as we have already seen in **verses 18-20**, sinners must be reconciled to God by God through Christ. And how did God go about doing this?

Let us continue to read the verse. **“He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.”**

So who is this person that Paul referred to in **verse 21** who did not know sin, or in other words who was without sin, that God according to this verse made sin? The only person ever born into this world without sin and the only person who has ever lived in this world without sin is Jesus.

So was Jesus born into this world without sin? Absolutely! Jesus was born into this world without sin because Jesus, unlike others, was virgin born and not linked to the sin of Adam as others were (Romans 5:12 cf. Matthew 1:18, 20).

What does **Romans 5:12** tell us? **“Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned [How? They sinned in Adam except for whom? Except for Christ].**

Why was Christ an exception? Christ was an exception because Christ, as we learn from **Matthew 1:18, 20** and **Luke 1:35**, was virgin born, having been conceived, or in other words having been implanted into the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit. And because of this Jesus, the second person of the trinity, was not considered by His Father to be tied or linked to Adam’s sin as every other person who has been born into this world has been. So was Christ born into this world without sin? Absolutely!

But did He live in this world without sin? And what is the answer? The answer is again absolutely! Christ, the second person of the trinity, having been implanted into the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, was God incarnate, and as God incarnate He could not have sinned and therefore we would have to conclude that Christ lived in this world without sin.

And this was not only the testimony of Christ, when He told the multitude in **John 8:29** that He always pleased His Father, and the testimony of the apostles, such as John in **1 John 3:5** when he said of Christ, **“in Him there**

is no sin,” but also this was in essence the testimony of Christ’s Father Himself who on two different occasions—once at Christ’s baptism in **Matthew 3:17** and the other at His transfiguration in **Matthew 17:5**—said of Jesus, **“This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”**

So was Christ, in addition to being born into this world without sin, also able to live His life in this world without sin? Yes! Jesus was not only born into this world without sin, but He also lived his life in this world without sin (Matthew 3:17, John 8:29, 1 John 3:5).

And what did Paul say God did to His beloved Son, the One in whom He was well pleased, the One who was born into this world without sin and who lived in this world without sin? Paul said that God made Him to be sin. So in what sense did God make Christ to be sin?

We need to be very careful in answering this question. When Paul said that God made Christ to be sin, Paul did not mean that God made Christ a sinner (1 Peter 1:19). For if God made Christ a sinner, then the blood of Christ would not have been unblemished and spotless. And if the blood of Christ were not unblemished and spotless, then His blood, as God’s lamb offered up for our sin, would not have been able to propitiate or satisfy the debt that we owed to God because of our sin.

The lamb that God provided, on our behalf, had to be perfect, and the blood that would be shed by that lamb would have to be unblemished and spotless, and that is exactly what Christ provided according to Peter in **1 Peter 1:18-19**.

So if Paul, when he said, **“He [God] made Him [Christ]...to be sin on our behalf,”** did not mean that He made Christ a sinner, then what did he mean? When Paul said that God made Christ to be sin on our behalf it meant that God treated Christ as a sinner, having imputed every sin of every person who would ever believe in Christ to Christ (Isaiah 53:4-6). This is what Paul meant when he said that God had made Christ to be sin.

When Christ, God’s sacrificial lamb, suffered what He suffered on the cross and ultimately died the death that He died, He did not do so because of His sin but because of our sin that had been imputed to Him, or credited to Him, by God; and therefore it would be incorrect to say that God made Christ a

sinner, but it would not be incorrect to say that God, in having imputed or credited our sin to Christ, treated Him like a sinner.

So let me read **Isaiah 53:4-6** and see if this is not so. **“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. [NOW LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY] But He was pierced through for [What? His transgressions? No! But rather for] our transgressions, He was crushed for [What? His iniquities? No! But rather] our iniquities.”** This is what the verse says.

So was Christ a sinner? No! Did Christ become a sinner when our sin was imputed to Him? No! But did God treat Him like a sinner when He imputed our sin, our transgressions, and our iniquities to Him? Yes! Absolutely! When God imputed our sin to Christ, He treated Christ, His perfect and spotless lamb as a sinner so that He, as our substitute, might satisfy the righteous demands of God’s law against us as He suffered our suffering and died our death.

So how was God able through imputation to reconcile sinners to Himself? First of all, God through imputation was able to reconcile sinners to Himself by making Him who knew no sin to be sin on their behalf. But this is not all.

God was not only able through imputation to reconcile sinners to Himself by making Him who knew no sin to be sin on their behalf, but God was also able through imputation to make sinners the righteousness of God in Him.

So now let us read **2 Corinthians 5:21** and see if this is not so. **“He [God] made Him [Christ, through the means of imputation] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become [also through imputation] the righteousness of God in Him.”**

Christ did not suffer what He suffered on the cross of Calvary simply to satisfy the debt we owed to God because of our sin. No! He also suffered what He suffered on the cross of Calvary **“So that,”** as we read here in **verse 21**, those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation **“might become,”** or in other words might be made, **“the righteousness of God in Him.”**

Now let us once again be careful. Just because a sinner might have become the righteousness of God in Christ does not mean that the sinner has become a righteous man. If that were the case then we would be perfect, but we are not perfect are we? In fact, we are far short of being perfect. So if becoming the righteousness of God in Christ does not mean that we have become perfect, then what does it mean?

Having become the righteousness of God in Christ simply means that as God sees us as joined to Christ and to His righteousness that He will treat us accordingly. In other words, He will treat us as righteous or He will treat us as if we ourselves had lived the sinless life that Christ Himself had lived.

This double imputation in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, where God imputed or credited our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us, is “the how or reconciliation.”

There have been many horrific plagues that have impacted the world over the course of human history.

But when it comes to the matter of discussing plagues and their impact on this world there is one plague that is far more widespread and deadly than all others combined. It is the plague of sin that affects every person who has ever lived and is 100 percent fatal. And unlike other plagues, it causes not only physical death, but spiritual and eternal death as well. And what is this plague? It is the plague of sin that has separated us from God and has turned us into His enemies, thus separating ourselves from Him both in this life and the life to come.

This, of course, is the bad news, but the good news is that God has provided us a cure for our affliction through His Son. All we have to do in order to take advantage of this cure is to exercise faith in Christ so that our sin might be imputed to Christ and His righteousness might be imputed to us. And, of course, as soon as this is done we will be reconciled to God.

I am a sinner and I deserve death. But now through faith in Christ I have now been reconciled to God, and because I have been reconciled to God I now have access to Him as a friend and as a son. And I would hope and pray that we, as the friends and sons of God, would not squander the opportunity that God has given us to continuously seek Him out and to ponder His tender

mercies toward us and to be filled through the filling of the Spirit with praise satisfying our souls as the Psalmist says, “**with marrow and fatness.**”

May we, by the grace of God, be continuously longing and even yearning to worship God throughout our lives in light of all that He has done for us through Christ in reconciling us to Himself through Christ.