

Learning to Walk in God's Love

Part 2: Loving Unbelievers

BRAD ETTORE
AGATHOS CHURCH
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Full Text (for reading on your own)

Solid Theology

For the most part, as I've studied the Word of God, what I've studied has "stuck." As I look back I realize that it is mostly based on how I have studied the Word. I typically have taken one topic and studied that topic exhaustively for an entire year by gathering up every scripture that there is about it and really developing a well-rounded understanding of the overall council of the Word of God on a specific matter. When I was a new believer, I was continually trying to find a spiritual mentor to put myself under but the doors kept closing in front of me in that regard ... to the point that it became obvious that it was the Lord who was closing those doors. The Lord then spoke to me clear as day "I do not want man to teach you, I want to teach you myself." So, I give the credit to Him about the way that I studied because He would put a topic on my heart and I could not think of anything else. My first year in the Lord was about "who I am in Christ." The next year about "finances" - because I had just experienced an incredible transformation in my finances.

Over more than 30 years, I have come to see that this method of study has removed a lot of opportunity for error in what I've learned because when you spend a whole year studying every scripture on one topic, you stand a really good chance of getting it right.

Better Understanding the "When" of Reconciliation

One big shift that has happened for my theology over 30 years has been my understanding of grace - our right standing with God. Even though I wasn't being taught by man, I was still going to church and listening to all sorts of teachings from other ministers and I was hearing the same Gospel message from all of them: "repent and confess your sins all the time." So that is exactly what I was doing and exactly how I was living, and when I would read the Bible I would see that because the teaching I was listening to had given me that lens.

But many years later, I found myself questioning some things. Some scriptures didn't make sense based on the lens that I had. I couldn't get a handle on some particular theology and it unfortunately took me crashing and burning with the Lord to finally get a handle on it. I had been on a mountaintop with the Lord for 6 years that was absolutely incredible, but then I went into 2 years of depression because it seemed to me my walk with the Lord had been annihilated.

I started thinking “what is wrong with this picture?!? I was walking so strong with the Lord; this doesn’t even make sense. Lord, help me!” Over many years, the Lord began to give me a piece at a time. It probably would have come faster if it wasn’t for the filter that I had. The filter was preventing it from getting to me quicker. He began to break down and break down and break down the wall of what I now know was a wrong theology.

And that process has not ended for me - there are still pieces of the grace message that I do not have a full understanding of. One place that I have still been wondering is “what’s the difference between reconciliation, justification, sanctification, and redemption?” I know there is a difference between reconciliation and justification but I don’t fully understand it, but I’ve wanted to understand it! They’re all good, but what’s the difference?!? Let’s take a closer look at reconciliation.

In fact, the way that probably 99% of Christians share the Gospel is “if you accept Christ into your life, your sins will be forgiven” is not scriptural. They are already forgiven! But that raises some new questions: if they are forgiven and we’re forgiven does that mean believers and unbelievers are in the same place? And I’ve always addressed that by saying “they have to receive it” but even that is not correct. The fact of the matter is that the entire world has been forgiven of their sins.

There is actually a theology called “universal reconciliation” that has been around for 100’s of years. I’ve always blown it off because it seemed cultish but it is actually absolutely correct! “Universal reconciliation” is absolutely biblical, but “universal salvation” is NOT the same thing!!! That’s where they go wrong. Unbelievers have been forgiven. *“And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”* (1 Jn. 2:2) Jesus was the propitiation for the sins of the whole world! Opponents to the grace teaching say “of course Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world, but unbelievers must accept the salvation in order to be forgiven.” It’s not true. I thought that way for at least 15 years, but my understanding of it has changed.

For instance, consider what Romans 5:10 says about when reconciliation happens in relation to when you accept Christ: *“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”* Look at that timing! When were we reconciled according to that verse? Was it when we accepted Christ into our lives? No! It was when we were still an enemy that you were reconciled - before we accepted Christ!

But how could reconciliation for the whole world have already occurred? It was His death that paid the price! It has nothing to do with us. It was an agreement between the Father and the Son. Jesus came and paid the price for our sins and the Father said “accepted.” The whole picture of the Old Testament is about this. The man or woman who had sinned would bring the spotless lamb, which the priest would examine to see if it was acceptable. The sinner would then place their hand on the head of the lamb so that the sin of man could be transferred to the lamb and the lamb’s innocence would transfer to the man. The priest would then kill the lamb. In Jesus, God examined the Lamb and said “He’s accepted” and “your sins are forgiven.” It happened before we were even born - it was while we were yet enemies.

Look at Ephesians 2:5: *“even when we were dead in trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”* When did it happen? When we were dead in trespasses, He made us alive.

Reconciliation and Salvation

The whole world, literally, has been forgiven of their sins. However, that is not salvation. I am still fighting to understand all the nuances of this. I understand by scripture that it is right, but again I am looking for understanding of all the nuances. What I do understand is that our sins have been paid for by the work of Christ and what it took care of is what the bible calls “reconciliation.”

When you have a friendship and you are at odds with each other, you have to do something to fix that relationship. Once you do what needs to be done to fix that relationship, then there is no more animosity - that relationship has been reconciled. We were enemies of God, but Jesus took care of the sin issue so that there is no more animosity between God and man (even though much of the world is still running around living sinfully)! God took all the animosity, put it on His Son and in Him reconciled the whole world to Himself! He did not reconcile Christians only. He reconciled the world to Himself! How? By “not imputing their trespasses!” *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”* (2 Cor. 5:19)

So, what the world has now is no more animosity between them and God, but they still don't have eternal life. Eternal life is the gift that is found in His Son that has to be received to be with God forever. Now the world has the opportunity to come to God because we have been reconciled. Previous to Jesus' work on the Cross, we were separated from God. Many people will quote Isa. 59:2 *“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.”* But that is an Old Testament verse! Jesus took care of it. He removed the sin issue. Now we can stand before God! And God says “so, what do you want to do? Do you want to be with me or not? My Son - in Him is Life!”

This causes the other verses to start to make sense. *“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”* (1 Jn. 5:12) Romans 5:10 sums it up: *“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”* Having BEEN reconciled (past tense) we shall be saved (future tense) by His life. ***His death brought reconciliation, His life brings salvation (eternal life).***

Is God Angry with Man?

Because of the sacrificial death of His Son and the reconciliation between man and God that provided, there is simply no more enmity between man and God. It doesn't exist any more!!!

Nevertheless, I know that many believers think that God is angry with a sinful world, so I looked up every word for angry, anger, and wrath in the New Testament.

“Angry” is used 11 times in the New Testament. Of those 11 uses, only 2 of them are about God, the rest of them are about man being angry. The only 2 instances where it is talking about God being angry with man are in the book of Hebrews - referring to the Old Testament! *“Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.’”* (Heb. 3:10) Hebrews 3:17 is the other occurrence: *“Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?”* Were these instances before or after Jesus dies on the Cross? Before! He was angry with sinful man. The bible does say that - but it is all in the Old Testament ... you can’t find it in the New! It doesn’t exist.

“Anger” is used 4 times in all of the New Testament, whereas it was used 400 times in the Old Testament! 3 of the 4 New Testament occurrences of “anger” were about man. One was about God (Jesus). It’s in Mark 3:4-5: *“Then He said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they kept silent. And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.”* Look at that situation. Was Jesus angry at them because of their state of being a sinner? No! It was not “sin separating man from God, God’s angry at man.” Jesus was angry about an attitude they had towards a particular situation. “You prefer this guy remain lame? Your hardness of heart!” He was not angry because of their state of being; He was angry because of an attitude they had in this situation. That is totally different than God being angry at man because man’s a sinner. And that’s the only occurrence of “anger” that came from God in the entire New Testament.

What about Wrath?

“Wrath” is used 48 times in the New Testament. The majority of those instances are again dealing with man’s wrath - nothing to do with God. There are many times where “wrath” does have to do with God and I believe this is where we get our idea that God is angry with man so let’s look at some of those right now: *“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”* (Jn. 3:36) I mean, how can you say God’s not angry? It seems to be right there! Let’s look at the other scriptures on wrath too.

Look at Ephesians 5:5-6 *“For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”* Who is Paul describing? People living in sin! Paul makes it clear. He says don’t let anyone deceive you with empty words that say otherwise. *“the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”*

Also consider Romans 1:18 *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ...”* There it is again! That sounds like how a good portion of the world is surpassing the truth in unrighteousness. Now, let’s continue in Paul’s letter to the Romans. If you continue in Romans 2:1-3: *“Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who*

judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?" Verse 4 has a present tense understanding of how God is currently dealing with man: *"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"* But there will be a future day of wrath (verses 5 and 6): *"But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself **wrath in the day of wrath** and revelation of the righteous judgment of God who **'will** render to each one according to his deeds' ..."* We see the future tense continue in Romans 2:16 *"**in the day** when God **will judge** the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."*

Look at Colossians 3:5-6: *"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God **is coming** upon the sons of disobedience,"* Notice it doesn't say that the wrath of God is here, but that it is COMING.

Jn. 12:47-48 says *"And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken **will judge him in the last day.**"* There is an opportunity right now to accept Him. But there will be a judgment at the last day! Notice the timing! Acts 17:31 also shows us (through Paul's teaching to a crowd) that *"He **has appointed a day on which He will judge the world** in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."* There will be a day when God judges the world.

All of these verses clarify what John 3:36 says. There will be a day when the wrath of God does come. None of these verses say that day (of wrath) is now. John 3:36 is the only one that looks like God's wrath could be a present tense reality because it says that the "wrath of God abides." But if you look at all of these other scriptures it makes it clear that the wrath abides but it is not being implemented.

1 Thes. 1:10 says *"and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even **Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**"* Jesus is the answer! The world has been reconciled to God. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself - not imputing the world's trespasses to them but instead placing them on Christ. Now that they are reconciled to God, they have the opportunity to come before God and believe in His Son. The way has been provided to them. They are no longer separated from God by sin. Jesus took care of it.

Even the founder of the Dallas Theological Seminary (a very conservative seminary) said "there is no longer a sin problem, there is only a Son problem." He knew that because of the reconciliation Jesus' sacrifice provided that the world no longer has a sin problem - it has a Son problem. *"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."* (Jn. 3:36) But all the other scriptures say when that's going to happen - in the last day. Therefore "universal reconciliation" is absolutely biblical. It is NOT universal salvation! We

still must accept Christ. Now, this can seem like it is splitting hairs. Do you accept Christ into your life to have your sins forgiven or do you accept Christ into your life to have life? It's the later and I am finding such richness in knowing that God dealt with my sin issue before I was ever even born! Romans 5:8 echoes the timing of the reconciling work again: *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

How does this Help us Love People?

The whole reason we are looking at this is to try to determine if God is angry towards sinners. This is part of the "how" to love people. The first thing when it comes to loving people is that you have to have correct theology. This will either make loving people so easy or very difficult. It is all about your theology.

You may think "how can theology help me love people?" Consider this example ... if you really believed with all of your heart that God was for polygamy, then the women and men are both going to be OK with it because that's what they believe God is for. And if you watch documentaries on this you will see that they really truly believe that God is blessing this because it is their theology. Likewise, if you believed drunkenness was a good thing, it would probably cause you to drink a lot more! We act out of what we believe. If you believe God is angry and hating sinful people, it will affect your actions towards others!

It is easy to think that you love unbelievers, but what about when they are hating you because you are a Christian?! What about someone doing something to you that really offends you? Are you still going to be good? Are you still going to be able to love them? You sure are not going to be loving if you think God is ticked off at that person! Your theology is beyond important because you are not going to be able to stay in love unless your theology is correct! So, let's get our theology correct. You may have thought "no, I've seen it in the bible ... God is angry at man!" But let's remember what we just looked at - what the Word says. This is an era of reconciliation. God imputed everyone's sins to Christ. He is not holding any of them against anyone! There will be a judgment day - but it's not today!

This should help us love people! Remember that Jesus already died for that sin and for that sinner! For the womanizer, drug dealer, pimp, or foul mouthed co-worker ... Jesus died for it! Fish swim, birds fly, and dogs bark. Sinners sin! That's what sinners do! Dogs bark because they are dogs. Sinners sin because they are sinners. The beauty is knowing that God knows about all of it and He died for that very comment or action. Jesus knew about it all and died for it all. If we get ugly towards them we begin fighting against the very work that Jesus did. "I took all of that on the Cross, the Father said 'accepted, done.' Could you get back in agreement with me? Could you please just love them?" It is total freedom to realize this!

There is no more enmity between God and man! Look at Eph. 2:14-16 *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself*

one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.” God is at peace with all people! No matter what they’ve done or are doing. Even if they are not at peace with God, God is at peace with them! Jesus has done it all! God put to death the enmity between God and man. We have peace with God. When God reconciled us He put to death the enmity between Him and us!

In order to truly love the lost, we have to understand that they have already been reconciled to God. There is no enmity. God is at peace with them. But, loving does not mean agreeing with their sin or sinful lifestyles. God is not saying be a doormat and let them walk all over us. BUT, when we get our doctrine and theology right we are able to lovingly tell someone why they are wrong. Love can break down walls. It is about having our theology right to see that God is loving them. Of course, if during this time of reconciliation they never receive the Son - if they don’t accept Jesus Christ into their life - then they will stand before God for that rejection of His Son ... and the wrath of God will come on them. And at that point it might be even more than a Son issue, because we see that at the White Throne Judgement unbelievers will be judged for their works (plural) which makes it sound like it is more than just not receiving His Son.

A Few other Notes

Some verses will tie together reconciliation and justification in the same verse because the audience was believers. (For instance Romans 4:25 does this because it is speaking to those who have believed ... see the context of the audience in chapters 3 and 4 of Romans).

Also know that whenever you are looking at an important doctrine there will always be a few verses that don’t seem to make sense, but when there are 2 verses that don’t make sense and 25 that all say the same thing, always go with the large bank of scripture and ask yourself how do these other 2 fit into that? They look like they contradict, but how don’t they?

For instance, 2 Corinthians 5:20 is the only verse where reconciliation is future in tense. It may be that this was written to adherents of the Law for Righteousness (Old Covenant) as an attempt to beg them to let go of that old system and receive the reconciliation that Jesus had already bought as referenced in the previous verse (2 Cor. 5:19)

The process is Reconciliation —> Justification (righteousness) —> Sanctification —> Redemption (what will happen in the last day when He comes and raptures His church. We will be redeemed at that point). The whole world has been reconciled to God by the work of Jesus. Those who receive the Son receive Justification, righteousness, and sanctification. There is of course a huge difference between those who are in the world (who are only reconciled to God) and those who have accepted Christ (are reconciled, justified, and in varying degrees sanctified). When we’ve accepted Christ we have the Holy Spirit dwelling on the inside of us, eternal life given to us and promised to us by God, God’s plan taking place in our life, the wisdom and blessings of God, whereas the world simply has the opportunity to come to the Lord now with no animosity between them and God - so that they might receive His Son.

Since there is no animosity between the world and God, neither should we have ANY animosity between us and them! Just love for them. Amen!

Text Summary (for reading as a group)

For the most part, as I've studied the Word of God, I typically have taken one topic and studied that topic exhaustively for an entire year by gathering up every scripture that there is about it and really developing a well-rounded understanding of the overall council of the Word of God on a specific matter. I have come to see that this method of study has removed a lot of opportunity for error in what I've learned because when you spend a whole year studying every scripture on one topic, you stand a really good chance of getting it right. That said, one big shift that has happened for my theology over 30 years has been my understanding of grace - our right standing with God. Over many years, the Lord began to give me a piece at a time. It probably would have come faster if it wasn't for the filter that I had. The filter was preventing it from getting to me quicker. He began to break down and break down and break down the wall of what I now know was a wrong theology. And that process has not ended for me - there are still pieces of the grace message that I do not have a full understanding of. One aspect that I have still been wondering about is "what's the difference between reconciliation, justification, sanctification, and redemption?" They're all good, but what's the difference?!? Today let's take a closer look at reconciliation - because it will help us better understand how we can love people as Christ loves!

The way that probably 99% of Christians share the Gospel is "if you accept Christ into your life, your sins will be forgiven" is not scriptural. They are already forgiven! Unbelievers have already been forgiven of their sins. *"And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."* (1 Jn. 2:2) Jesus was the propitiation for the sins of the whole world! Opponents to the grace teaching say "of course Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world, but unbelievers must accept the salvation in order to be forgiven." It's not true. I thought that way for at least 15 years, but my understanding of it has changed. For instance, consider what Romans 5:10 says about when reconciliation happens in relation to when you accept Christ: *"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."* Look at that timing! When were we reconciled according to that verse? Was it when we accepted Christ into our lives? No! It was when we were still an enemy that you were reconciled - before we accepted Christ! But how could reconciliation for the whole world have already occurred? It was His death that paid the price! It has nothing to do with us. It was an agreement between the Father and the Son. Jesus came and paid the price for our sins and the Father said "accepted." Look at Ephesians 2:5: *"even when we were dead in trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)"* When did it happen? When we were dead in trespasses, He made us alive.

The whole world, literally, has been forgiven of their sins. However, that is not salvation. Our sins have been paid for by the work of Christ and what it took care of is what the bible calls "reconciliation." When you have a friendship and you are at odds with each other, you have to do something to fix that relationship. Once you do what needs to be done to fix that relationship, then there is no more animosity - that relationship has been reconciled. We were enemies of God, but Jesus took care of the sin issue so that there is no more animosity between God and man (even though

much of the world is still running around living sinfully)! God took all the animosity, put it on His Son and in Him reconciled the whole world to Himself! How? By “not imputing their trespasses!” *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”* (2 Cor. 5:19) So, what the world has now is no more animosity between them and God, but they still don’t have eternal life. Eternal life is the gift that is found in His Son that has to be received to be with God forever. Now the world has the opportunity to come to God because we have been reconciled. Previous to Jesus’ work on the Cross, we were separated from God. Many people will quote Isa. 59:2 *“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.”* But that is an Old Testament verse! Jesus took care of it. He removed the sin issue. Now we can stand before God! And God says “so, what do you want to do? Do you want to be with me or not? My Son - in Him is life!” This causes the other verses to start to make sense. *“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”* (1 Jn. 5:12) Romans 5:10 sums it up: having BEEN reconciled (past tense) we SHALL be saved (future tense) by His life. ***His death brought reconciliation, His life brings salvation (eternal life).***

Because of the sacrificial death of His Son and the reconciliation between man and God that provided, there is simply no more enmity between man and God. It doesn’t exist any more!!! Nevertheless, I know that many believers think that God is angry with a sinful world, so I looked up every word for angry, anger, and wrath in the New Testament.

“Angry” is used 11 times in the New Testament. Of those 11 uses, only 2 of them are about God, the rest of them are about man being angry. The only 2 instances where it is talking about God being angry with man are in the book of Hebrews - referring to the Old Testament! Were these instances before or after Jesus dies on the Cross? Before! He was angry with sinful man. The bible does say that - but it is all in the Old Testament ... you can’t find it in the New! It doesn’t exist.

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deceive you with empty words that say otherwise. *“the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”*

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The whole reason we are looking at this is to try to determine if God is angry towards sinners. You may think “how can theology help me love people?” If you believe God is angry and hating sinful people, it will affect your actions towards others! You sure are not going to be loving if you think God is ticked off at that person! This is an era of reconciliation. God imputed everyone's sins to Christ. He is not holding any of them against anyone! There will be a judgment day - but it's not today! God is at peace with all people! When God reconciled us He put to death the enmity between Him and all men! In order to truly love the lost, we have to understand that they have already been reconciled to God. Of course loving people does not mean agreeing with their sin or sinful lifestyles. God is not saying be a doormat and let them walk all over us. BUT, when we get our doctrine and theology right we are able to lovingly tell someone why they are wrong. Love can break down walls. It is about having our theology right to see that God is loving them. If during this time of reconciliation they never receive the Son - if they don't accept Jesus Christ into their life - then they will stand before God for that rejection of His Son ... and the wrath of God will come on them. But prior to That Day, the world has the opportunity to come to the Lord now with no animosity between them and God - so that they might receive His Son. And since there is no animosity between the world and God, neither should we have ANY animosity between us and them! Just love for them. Amen!

Points to Ponder . . .

- When does the Bible show us that we were reconciled to God?
- Who, today, is reconciled to God and how does that change how you view the world?
- There is a place for wrath in the New Testament - but when do we know that wrath to be for?
- God is at peace with all men - are you (at least so far as it depends on you)?