

Preeminent Reconciliation – Colossians 1:21-23

Five Points Community Church (2/22/15) Brett Toney

Your greatest need and only hope this morning is the good news that Jesus Christ died for sin and rose from the dead. Your *greatest* need and *only* hope this morning is the *good* news Jesus Christ *died*. For sin. *And rose from the dead*.

So what are you thinking right now? “Um ... ok. I know that. I sure hope you say something more helpful than *that* this morning.” “Yes. Got it. Love the gospel. Everything orients on Christ.” “Whoop-dee-da, Mr. Pastor-Guy. Who cares?!” Or, “*O, Jesus—save me!*” Paul wrote the words that were just read to a church who he whole-heartedly believed to be blood-bought, born-again, Spirit-indwelt Christians. And he tells them such foundational truths about the gospel? Jesus is Lord. You are a sinner. Jesus saves sinners. This is what the apostle thought he needed to put down on pen and paper? Didn’t they know that? Did the Holy Spirit really need to inspire *that*?

Yes. Because I’m forgetful. Because I live contrary to who I am in Christ. Because I go away to a conference about sin and my heart is pricked with a 2x4. And so are you. You’re forgetful. You live contrary to who you are in Christ. Because, God willing, you read your Bible or you talk to a friend or you hear a sermon, and you are brought to your knees because of your sin. And if not, maybe God will do it this morning. Because your greatest need and only hope this morning is the good news that Jesus Christ died for sin and rose from the dead.

For the last two and a half weeks, I have been grappling with my own sin. The Spirit freshly revealed and convicted me in three areas. And I’ve been talking with my wife and two dear brothers to help me in my sanctification. And then this past week, I’m studying this passage, and it is just percolating in my soul. Paul, speaking the good news of the gospel to me *again*. Encouraging me in the hope secured for me in Christ and exhorting me to turn radically from my

sin. So my prayer for you has been that you would see Jesus afresh here—or perhaps for the first time truly—and that you would hear the gospel *again* and be spurred on to set your hope on Jesus and to turn from sin.

Paul wants this gospel to permeate every facet of your life, to shape every relationship, to transform every vocation, to redeem every thought. So before we look at verses 21-23 in detail, pause. What sin have you been giving yourself to? What broken relationship do you need to seek to mend? Where do you need to seek forgiveness? Or do you need to just ask God to make such things known? What is it?

What You Were: Alienated (v.21)

In v.15-20, Paul captures some of the highest expression of the doctrine of Christ. He describes the risen Lord Jesus as the one who sovereignly reigns over all creation and through all salvation. Jesus *is* preeminent reconciliation. As the one by whom all things were created and in whom all things are restored, Jesus must have the first place. He *must* be preeminent. He *must* reign as King Jesus. There is no one and there is no thing that operates outside of his divine lordship. And there is no one and there is no thing that will be reconciled to God that is not reconciled through him. Jesus *is* preeminent reconciliation—he embodies it.

And this supremacy, this sovereignty, this preeminence is *for your good*. That's why v.21 starts, "And you." Paul is drawing the profound connection between all that he describes about Jesus to you and me. Here is who Jesus is and here is who you are in light of him. If you are in Christ, Paul describes in this verse what you *were*. You "once *were* alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." You were distant and separated from God. You had no hope in this world. You were foreigner in an unknown land. The only hope you had was to go undiscovered for a little longer. You hated God. You hated the very thought of God. You weren't merely ambivalent

towards him. You spewed vitriol at him, if even just in your own soul. All you were capable of doing was evil deeds. You could not *not* do evil. 24/7. You plotted how to do evil. You connived and schemed to sin. You couldn't do anything else.

And what's scary is that if you are not in Christ, if he is not your treasure, if you're just playing games this morning—then this still describes you. The sentence changes from “you once *were* alienated and hostile” to “you *presently are* alienated and hostile.” Don't skirt past this. There is no hope for you before a holy God outside of turning and trusting in this preeminent Reconciler.

But take note of the glimmer of gospel hope for you in Christ. Before even getting to any sort of explicit good news, Paul hints at it. You *were* these things. You *are* them no longer. You *are* not a gossiping Christian. You *are* not a worrisome Christian. You *are* not an addicted Christian. You *are* not an angry Christian. These things you *were* but you *are* them no longer. Your identity is no longer wrapped up in your sin. Your identity is wrapped up entirely in Jesus. What You Are: Reconciled (v.22a)

V.22 tells us what you *are*. You *are* reconciled. “[God] has now reconciled [you] in [Jesus'] body of flesh by his death.” The alienation you experienced, the hostility that was in your bones, the evil deeds you carried out with your body—from it all you have been reconciled. When Jesus loved his own to the end, when he who knew no sin became sin, when the righteous judgment of God was executed at the Golgathian hill, you were reconciled. You became the righteousness of God.

Delight with me for a moment in this word, “reconciled.” In making the connection between who Jesus is and who we are, I find it wonderful that Paul decided to use this word. He could have easily said that we have been saved, redeemed, delivered, rescued, freed, renewed,

justified, recreated—he could have used any number of words to describe at this point what Jesus accomplished for us. But what I find so delightful is the implicit relational dynamic of this word. In order to be reconciled, we had to be separated from God. We had to be in dis-fellowship. We had to be in conflict. But now, in Christ, we have been brought near. The relational dynamic of what Christ has done is what Paul draws attention to. We’ve been made right with God. We can eat at his table. We have been brought into intimate fellowship with the Triune God himself.

And you’re going to hold a grudge against another brother or sister in Christ? You’re going to be bitter because you were or were not asked to do something? You’re going to blow up at your spouse or kids? How can we who have been given a *restored relationship* with God himself—who have been *reconciled* by the risen Christ—so readily break fellowship with a loved one, let alone another believer? I mean, I get it. I know how. I do it. I let things simmer beneath the surface until they spill over. But I read and reflect on this reconciliation and just think how foolish and absurd I am. “O, God don’t let my sin wreck my relationships. Let me be quick to admit my own faults and seek forgiveness. Let me be the one who initiates reconciliation. I *am* reconciled so let me reconcile.”

What You Will Be: Righteous (v.22b)

As we keep reading in v.22, we read what you *will be*. Paul says the reconciliation that Jesus has accomplished and has been applied to us is for a specific purpose. You have been reconciled “*in order* to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” The very reason why you have been reconciled is *so that* you would have a future hope, *so that* you will *be* something different. There is a day coming, Church, when you will be saved to sin no more. Though we *are* reconciled, there still wages within us sin’s guerilla warfare. The “old self” that died with Christ still clamors before succumbing to his deathblow.

But it will not always be so. “One day the trumpet will sound for His coming / One day the skies with His glories will shine / Wonderful day, my Beloved One, bringing / My Savior, Jesus, is mine.” The Bride will be walked down the aisle to embrace Her beaming Groom. She will be presented to him “holy and blameless and above reproach.” So take hope—sin will not have final victory. God has a purpose in your reconciliation, and that purpose is to make you holy. What you *were* is not who you *are*, and what you *are* is not who you *will be*.

Condition of Reconciliation (v.23)

Having encouraged his readers with such wondrous truths of the gospel, Paul changes gears to exhort us. V.23 starts with a *really big “if.”* This is kind of like when you were a kid and your mom would say, “Yes, you can go to the movies with your friends”—and you get excited and start making your way for the door—“*if* you clean your room, do your homework, and walk the dog.” And you kind of feel like all the joy is spoiled. Right? “C’mon, *Mahm!*”

Paul isn’t spoiling our joy in Christ, but he does want to ensure that our joy is *in Christ*. Look at v.23—all that he described about our reconciliation and being delivered from sin is true for us, “*if* indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.” So in this if-then statement, the “then” comes first in v.21-22; the “if” statement is here in v.23—“*if* you continue in the faith, *then* you will be presented in holiness before him.”

Wait a second. Say what?! “If I endure, *then* I’ll be saved when all is said and done? Didn’t we just walk through the definitive and final reconciliation accomplished *for us by* Christ? Isn’t that a ‘works righteousness’? Aren’t we saved by Christ *alone*? And *now* you’re saying it’s up to *me* to endure?” Yes. That’s what I’m saying. Sort of.

I think what Paul and the Spirit of God are after here is promoting our endurance. Paul doesn't want us to read of Christ's definitive work on our behalf and grow slack in our pursuit of holiness. There is a holiness without which you will not see the Lord (Hebrews 11:14). The aim of v.23 is to serve as a warning to us. And it is us, Christians, that Paul warns. He is writing to Christians who in the outset of his letter gushes over because of the testimony he heard of their faith. He has no question in his mind that they are genuine in their profession of faith and that they evidence fruit of the Spirit's work. And yet he offers this warning: "If you do not continue, if you do not endure, then you will not attain that final salvation, then you will not be holy and blameless before God."

Warnings as a Means of Endurance

And I think we miss the Spirit's intent if we explain this away as some hypothetical situation or literary device. Paul is addressing Christians and telling them to ensure that they endure. This does not contradict the abundance of passages in the Bible that teach that *God* will ensure that those whom he has chosen will in fact be eternally saved.¹ God's elect do have eternal security. But God uses means. And one of the means he uses to ensure that those whom he has reconciled endure to the end is warnings—warnings like this one and those found in Hebrews and other places in the New Testament. Paul's warning here—cautioning us of the dangers of *not* enduring—is one means God uses to promote and ensure our endurance. Furthermore, God's elect will always heed the warnings; they will always hear warnings like this one and turn from the danger warned against.

¹ John 10:28-29; Rom 8:29-32; 1 Cor 1:8-9; Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 5:23-24; Jude 24

² See Schreiner's *The Race Set Before Us* (IVP, 2001) and "Perseverance and Assurance" in the *Southern Baptist*

Tom Schreiner has really helpful stuff explaining this,² but let me give an example. Say you go to your doctor tomorrow and he says, “Look. You’ve got to lay off the paczki. I know you love them, and you live just down the road from the bakery, but you just can’t eat a dozen paczki a week. If you keep eating like that, the paczki are going to kill you.” And because you have a long-standing relationship with your doctor, and he has always done what is best for you, you listen to him and stop eating packzi. The packzi aren’t literally going to kill you, but the ongoing practice of consuming them in excess will have such a detrimental effect on you that you’ll have a heart attack and die. It’s a silly illustration, but you get the point. Warnings are intended to change behavior, habits, and practices. And the illustration of course breaks down because the doctor is unable to ensure that you will not ever eat a paczki again or have a heart attack. But nevertheless, when you live to be 83, you could look back and say that that doctor saved your life with that warning. That warning was the *means* used to preserve your life.

And such it is with Paul’s warning. If you do not continue in the faith, if you are unsteady, if you are waffling, if you are turning from the hope of the gospel, then you have no standing to think God will make you holy and keep you to the end. As one commentator put it, “[C]ontinuation is the test of reality. If it is true that the saints *will* persevere to the end, then it is equally true that the saints *must* persevere to the end. And one of the means which the apostle uses to insure that his readers . . . do not fall into a state of false security is to stir them up with warnings such as this.”³ Neither Paul nor I nor the Holy Spirit want you to read v.21-22 or look back on any experience in your life and think that you’re all set. Don’t reflect on v.21-22 and think, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. The gospel—I got it. I’ve been a Christian for decades. I’ve been a

² See Schreiner’s *The Race Set Before Us* (IVP, 2001) and “Perseverance and Assurance” in the *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 2:1 (Spring 1998).

³ Peter O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* in the Word Biblical Commentary series, p.69

member of Five Points since I was kid. I went to this crusade or had this experience at camp, and I'm all set to go."

Make Every Effort to Endure

You must endure. You must press on. You must strive with all effort to turn away from sin. You must lay hold of every means of grace to help you continue in the faith. You need to watch out for idols of the heart that might lead you astray. You need to be in relationships with other Christians where they know your sins and struggles and you know there's—we call that Shepherd Groups. You need to cultivate an anchor of hope in the gospel.

You need to be so proactive and on guard because your sin is more proactive and on the offensive. If we fail to take sin seriously, if we fail to heed this warning, we will not meet the Lord in gladness but in trepidation and fear. We will be like those of Matthew 7, who on that day will say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And Jesus will turn to us and say, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." Sin has such a deceptive power that we can deceive ourselves into thinking we are immune from sin. Sin is a parasite that is seeking to take control of our whole being.

So what is it? What was it that you thought of when I paused at the beginning of this sermon? Where do you need to ask forgiveness? Where do you need to confess and repent?

Friends, turn from it. Don't let it have any kind of hold on your life. Confess it to another believer. Don't try to walk through it alone. Sin loves to isolate, but God loves to draw into community. And let this axe blade of gospel grace sever the root of sin. *You have been reconciled.* What you *were* is not who you *are*. Christian, you *are* a new creation. You have a

new identity. You *will be* holy and blameless and above reproach before him, so start living like it now. Press in to the sanctifying grace of God that is yours in Christ.

And by all means possible, stop gossiping. Stop being fearful. End the anger. Don't click on that link. Be content and not envious. And rest. This isn't legalism; this isn't "law." It is the Spirit-empowered, faith-filled pursuit of godliness. It's living in the light of your reconciliation. It's *being* who you *are* in Christ.

Christian, Jesus breaks the power of cancelled sin. Sin no longer reigns in your life. You no longer must give in to it. Its power was snapped in two when the tomb emptied. Because Christ canceled the just penalty of sin, it no longer has power over you. You have been set free from the bondage of sin. His blood makes even the foulest clean. His blood is availed for you. So continue in the faith. Be stable. Be steadfast. Don't shift from your hope in the gospel. O how I yearn for you and me to be holy and blameless and above reproach before him. O how I yearn to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your master."

So what is it? What is it that you have been thinking of? What sin needs to be severed? Take hope. There is no sin too grievous that God cannot forgive in Christ. It does not matter how greatly you have sinned or how repeatedly or for how long. In Christ, all is being reconciled (v.20). Take hope. It does not matter how greatly you have been sinned *against* or how repeatedly or for how long. In Christ, all is being reconciled—you *will be* made holy and pure. You will be a pure and spotless bride, and your transgressor will be brought to account.

O, how seriously we must take our sin, not making excuses or explaining it away or trying to soften the sting by trying to skirt around it. And O how readily Christ is there to reconcile all things to himself. Flee to him now. You once were alienated and hostile and doing

evil. But he has now reconciled you. And you will be holy and blameless before him. ... If indeed you continue in the faith. May it be so.