

Reconciled

Text;

Colossians 1:21-23

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”

Introduction:

The key word that links the present passage with the preceding passage is the word “reconciled”. In the preceding passage, 1:20-21, Paul has spoken in eloquent terms about the person and work of Christ. He has described the work of Christ in the most universal way imaginable. He is the creator and redeemer of “all things in heaven and earth”. Nothing lies outside the mission of Christ, and God has “made peace through the blood of his cross”, in order that he might “reconcile all things unto himself”, whether those things be “things in earth, or things in heaven.”

Paul now speaks directly to the Colossians and says to them: “this reconciling work of Christ applies to you. You were wicked sinners, alienated from God, but God has reconciled you to himself, made peace with you, and He could do this because of the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ on your behalf.” In the passage he talks about their past, their present, and their future. Their past was one of alienation from God because of their sinfulness. Their present is characterized by reconciliation because of the work of Christ on the Cross, and their future holds great hope and prospects if they remain attached to the Gospel.

Before we consider the details of the passage we would do well to read a parallel passage in Eph 2:11-22 that follows the same progression as the passage under consideration, but with greater detail. It is one of the best commentaries we can read on the passage we are studying. It states:

“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- remember that you

were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

As for the Colossians, the message of God's reconciliation is good news for us. What was true for them is true for us. We may take all that is said about it in this passage and apply it directly to ourselves, and that is exactly what I want to do. I want us to look at five things that this passage teaches us about how God is reconciling the world to himself. They are:

- The need for reconciliation – sin
- The cause of reconciliation – the cross
- The goal of reconciliation of – holiness
- The condition of reconciliation – faith
- The scope of reconciliation – all

I. The Need for Reconciliation – Sin

Paul says that in the past the Colossians believers had been enemies of God and perpetrators of wicked works. This is not a pleasant description, and in an age and culture, that more and more tries to explain human deviation in other ways, it may sound strange to our ears. No one denies that humanity is plagued by a persistent and seemingly insolvable problem but we have tried to convince ourselves that it is something other than our alienation from our Creator. Indeed, we have often tried to even deny that we have a creator. We fancy ourselves as sick, or victimized, or ignorant, or misled, or maladjusted, but rarely as sinful and wicked. This can be true of the Church as well as the world. Listen to what Robert C. Roberts says in his review of one of the better recent books on sin by Cornelius Platinga, *Not the way its Supposed to be, A Breviary of Sin*:

“The practices and ideas of modern psychologies have been so liberally and indiscriminately mixed with the Christian understanding of persons that many churches now propagate spiritualities quite alien to their own traditions. The practices and ideas of show business and marketing so dominate some congregations and public ministries that serious Christian ministry of word and sacrament looks fuddy-duddy, and a penitential, disciplined spirituality of grace looks morbid and certainly not cost-effective. Uniting both these polluters is the idea that all religion is (or ought to be) in service of *us*: It ought to make us wealthy, happy, amused, functional, creative, integrated, high in self-esteem.

One of the first concepts to get neutralized in this mushy mixture is that of sin—the idea that we regularly corrupt ourselves and our fellow human beings, that we have vandalized the beautiful order that God has placed in the creation, that we are not just victims of wrong doing but, one and all, perpetrators of it, that we have offended God and cut ourselves off from his fellowship and blessings.” (Robert C. Roberts, “Review of *Not the Way It’s supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Int.* 50 (1966): 324.)

Of course we can call it what we want, and try to avoid it as much as we want, but we will remain enslaved by it until we recognize it for what it is and seek its remedy where God has given a remedy in the Cross of Jesus Christ. We must start by trying to understand what it is. Now it is impossible to give a full definition of sin in one short sermon, but what I do want to do is to give you an image of sin from the Bible that is directly related to the passage at hand.

Sin is the violation of *Shalom*. God created a peaceable harmonious world, a world in which everything was right, a world free of envy, pride, jealousy, lust, grief, waste, greed, and the list could go on for some time, but, simply put, a world free of the corruption of sin. We are so accustomed to a sinful world, that we can hardly imagine the pristine world of original creation. Kids still imagine it when they wish there were no criminals; that everyone was kind, and that no one ever died, but adults pretty much accept the *status quo* and try to get along as best they can in the world as it exists. Sin, the destroyer of *shalom*, is the most persistent and characteristic element of human culture. We are all perpetrators of sin, and we are all its victims. It corrupts our motives, poisons our relationships, spoils our environment, and keeps us from fulfilling our purpose in life, “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever”.

There is one distinct advantage to admitting that sin is our problem, and it is a huge advantage. God has done something about sin. He has set out to put things right. If we have destroyed *shalom* he is intent on restoring it, and his purposes will not be thwarted. As ugly and pernicious as sin is, it is neither absolute nor terminal. It has both a solution and an end, and in the passage Paul turns to the solution when he says: “yet now hath he reconciled”.

II. The Cause of Reconciliation, the Cross

Our passage tells us that the way God is making peace, the way he is restoring *shalom* to the creation and reconciling men to himself, is by the cross of Christ. In a rather strange expression he states in verse 22 that God hath reconciled us to himself by the “body of his flesh through death.” Now the term “body of his flesh” just means the physical body of Christ. He is insisting on the incarnation, that the eternal God really did become a real human being and suffered in a real physical body real physical pain and death in our place. The reason for this insistence is that first century Greeks often saw no good in the physical, as we noted last time; they even considered that it was the source of evil and could not have been the subject of either God’s creation or his redemption. The following quote from the 2nd century illustrates how they thought and how that thought might have been corrupting the Colossians. It is a text that tells us what we must do if we want to see God:

“But first you must tear off this garment which you wear, -- this cloak of darkness, this web of ignorance, this [prop] of evil, this bond of corruption,--this living death, this conscious corpse, this tomb you carry about with you,--this robber in the house, this enemy who hates the things you seek after, and grudges you the things which you desire.” (*The Corpus Hermeticum 7.2b*, in Walter Scott, ed., *Hermetica* (Oxford: Clarendon: 1924), 1:173

Such ideas are contrary to all that the Bible teaches, and that Christians believe. God created the physical world, including our human bodies and pronounced it good. Christ came in the flesh, died in the flesh, and rose again in the flesh so that we might be delivered from sin and one day be raised bodily to an eternal bodily existence with God. His violent physical death and glorious resurrection are what will set all things right and bring the universe back into the state of order and glory for which God created it. As we must accept the reality of sin if we are to get anywhere at all, so must we also accept the reality of the cross of Christ. Cornelius Platinga writes:

At the center of the Christian Bible, four Gospels describe the pains God has taken to defeat sin and its wages. The very shape of these Gospels tells us how much the pains matter: The Gospels are shaped, as Martin Kahler famously put it, as passion narratives with long introductions. Accordingly, Christians have always measured sin, in part, by the suffering needed to atone for it. The ripping and writhing of a body on a cross, the bizarre metaphysical maneuver of using death to defeat death, the urgency of the summons to human beings to ally themselves with the events of Christ and with the person of these events, and then to make that person and those events the center of their lives—these things tell us that the main human trouble is desperately difficult of

fix, even for God, and that sin is the longest-running of human emergencies.” (Platinga, *Breviary*, p. 5)

III. The Purpose of Reconciliation--Holiness

Paul continues by telling the Colossians that God has reconciled them to God by the cross of Christ for a purpose—“to present you holy and blameless and above reproach in his sight”. God did not allow Christ to suffer just so your sins could be forgiven and so that you could have eternal life. No, God allowed Christ to suffer so that he could set things right; so that order could be restored to the universe, and so that order could be restored to our lives—so that we might be holy. Peace, *shalom*, is the fruit of righteousness. Isaiah had caught a vision of this reality when he wrote:

“Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way” (Isaiah 32: 9-13).

What is implied in this passage, and what is everywhere the consistent and persistent teaching of the Apostle Paul, and all of the New Testament, is that when God saves us he both justifies us and sanctifies us; he declares us innocent and righteous on the basis of the work of Christ, but he also gives us new life, and sends the Holy Spirit who begins to transform us from the inside out. He does the work of making peace by establishing righteousness one person at a time as he begins to create in us righteous character, and by that righteous character we then become instruments of God’s *shalom* in a still-broken world. This is God’s way of salvation. It is both justification and sanctification, as Calvin wrote about this very verse in the 16th century:

“Now this passage is noteworthy because it shows us that God never freely confers his righteousness on us in Christ, without also regenerating us in obedience to that righteousness, as it is stated elsewhere that Christ is made unto us ‘righteousness and sanctification’ (I Cor. 1:30). We obtain the first (justification) by being freely accepted by God, that is to say, because he accepts us as agreeable; and the second (sanctification), by the gift of the Holy Spirit, when we are made new creatures. Now the link between these two graces is inseparable.” (author’s underlining, *Commentaire sur l’épître aux Colossiens*, author’s translation).

IV. The Condition of Reconciliation – Faith

Having contrasted the Colossians inglorious past with their glorious present, the Apostle now looks to the future, and he does so with a conditional statement: “If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard”

Some of you may not like that “if”. We are accustomed to hearing that salvation is a free gift; that it is all of God; that it has nothing to do with us; that we can’t lose it. There is a sense, of course, in which all of those things are true, but it is also true that “He who has begun a good work in us will perform it until the day of redemption” (Phil 1:6). Where God is working he is creating righteousness and that righteousness is producing peace. Sanctification is not an option. God does not do his work half-way.

There are a couple of things we need to notice about this conditional statement. First, let it be said that in Greek there is more than one way to say “if”, and it is not always apparent in the translation exactly how we should understand it. This is a very strong “if” that anticipates that the condition will be met. It can sometimes even be translated by “since” as if the condition had already been met. Paul is not expecting the Colossians to fail, but he does see them in danger because of the false teachers that are trying to entice them away from the truth of the Gospel. This leads us to a second observation. Only faith in the Gospel helps. As attractive as other teachings might be, if they bypass what we have talked about they are dead end roads. They will not lead to forgiveness, salvation, restoration, and *shalom*, but will just make us more sophisticated sinners with better excuses for our contorted characters, and ultimately lead us, not to hope and salvation, but to disappointment and even despair. Faith in the gospel, in God’s good news of salvation, in the finished work of Christ, in his ongoing work of sanctification; this is what will give us a foundation for life that even the strongest adversities and adversaries cannot shake.

V. The Extent of Reconciliation – Every Creature

One last detail of the text needs to be considered. In verse 23, at the end of the passage, Paul says that, the gospel that had given them hope and which they had believed, was preached to “every creature under heaven”. This has puzzled some, and some have even accused Paul of exaggeration, but there are a couple of important reasons why he makes this statement. First, he wants to emphasize that the Gospel is public. Unlike the esoteric teachings of the false teachers which appealed to human pride by presenting itself as for a select few, Paul says the

Gospel is public; it is to be preached from the rooftops, cried aloud from every corner. It is not the good news for a select few; it is the good news for all. It is not about God forming a secret society of select initiates; it is about God transforming the world and establishing his kingdom of *shalom*.

The final thing we have to say, is that the gospel is for all. God has one way of setting things right, one way of salvation. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and all are "freely justified by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). If you are like the Apostle Paul and consider yourself "the chief of sinners" the Gospel is for you. If you are a like the Pharisee who thought he hadn't sinned you need to take a closer look; the corruption of sin has spoiled you as much as it has those persons you despise for being so wicked, but take courage the gospel is for you too. None are too bad, and none are good enough, but God's grace is sufficient, and Christ has reconciled us to God by "the blood of his cross."