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## Reconciled and Steadfast Colossians 1:21-23

**Intro:** This is now our 7<sup>th</sup> study in Ch1 and we are just now getting to the conclusion of the opening thanksgiving section. Paul has been sharing quite a bit of information and truth to his Colossian readers and he is just about to wrap this section up and begin the body of this letter. And, like any good sermon, Paul's conclusion echoes themes from the opening verses. The key words faith, hope and heard are repeated again from v4-6. Our text also restates the theme of v12-14, that redemption comes in Christ and as such, it encapsulates Paul's hymn of Christ in v15-20. This conclusion also points out the Colossian believer's past (once 21a), present (now 21b) and future (if 23) as well as declares the means of their redemption (He has reconciled 21b), the effects of their redemption (present you holy, blameless and above reproach 22) and the extent of its impact (to every creature under heaven 23b).

Clearly, Paul has been delivering large amounts of truth and he does so with the intention (and prayer) that it will have a positive influence on his readers. Unfortunately, Christians don't always put the truth they know and believe into practice. Some scholars attribute this society-wide condition to the fact that, over the years, television seems to have habituated its watchers to a low information-to-action ratio. They notice that people are accustomed to learning good ideas and then doing nothing about them. We learn enough to talk about a subject intelligently but never follow through on action. This condition has only been made worse with the onset of social media and the 30 second video clip. The attention span of the younger generations is shrinking exponentially.

Sadly, this societal condition has found its way into the church in a big way. Sometimes preachers feel they have done their job by merely presenting the information or the need but that is seldom the case. We saw earlier in the chapter that Paul doesn't praise the Colossians simply because they have learned the truth from Epaphras (v7) but because their faith has led to some tangible, concrete results (v8). The true test of our Christian faith is whether it makes a difference in the way we live and in the way we treat others. Our faith, if it is real, should be noticeable to non-believers because

it makes our lifestyle and conduct stand out in comparison to their own. In these concluding verses, Paul's going to bring that truth to bear in a very sobering manner.

In v20, Paul has declared that the reconciliation offered by God was intended for the whole universe, the entirety of His creation, and this reconciliation means peace; peace where now there is chaos and disorder and enmity between God and His creation. This peace comes about only through the death of Christ, which was the price of redemption that God Himself has paid. It's God's self-giving act of salvation which opens the way to a new relationship with Him and sets in motion His remaking of all things. Although the scope of this reconciliation encompasses the cosmos, it has some very personal implications to believers and Paul now begins to share how the greatness of Jesus' work touches the lives of the Colossians.

**21-** Paul recalls their past (once) and reminds them where they stood before they knew Christ. The word alienated implies isolation, loneliness and a deep sense of not belonging. It doesn't specify that their alienation was "from God" but the implication is there and it fits a Jewish perspective that all Gentiles by definition lived apart from the one true God, which clarifies the heart of the problem possessed by all humanity (Eph 4:18). Paul says that once, they were estranged from God. They had no notion that the God who created them was the strange God of the Jews so they gave no thought to Him. Unaware of the true God, they were going their own way, making no effort to bridge the gap that existed between them and their Maker.

Paul also says they were enemies, meaning they were hostile towards God. Their previous state was one of outright enmity. This may seem a bit strong to our modern sensibilities but it accurately reflects the intent of v13. There is no middle ground, there is only the kingdom of Christ and the rule of darkness and if you are not subject to the one, you will certainly be subjected to the other. Humanity may walk God's path or it can walk its own path, but it is a choice between being for God or being against Him, being His enemy.

Now, "How can you be God's enemy if you don't even know He exists?" Paul reveals that their former enmity was manifested in their mind by wicked works which is likely a reference to both to idolatry and immorality. From early on, humans have worshiped false gods and have become enslaved to

sin so much so that the ways of the true God have become alien to them. But being enemies in your mind doesn't limit the hostility to only the intellectual aspects of our lives. When we're out of relationship with God, it mars our entire life.

Thoughts and actions are inseparably linked together. Chronic sinful behavior twists the mind so that it becomes even more at enmity with God and the twisted mind hurtles us into ever greater depravity. The depraved mind then approves evil behavior as good or natural or even as an "alternative lifestyle". It produces and condones fear and suspicion of others of dissenting opinions and an accompanying urge to hurt and destroy them. Those who become enemies of God become lackeys to sin and sin inflicts only ruin upon them as their lives spiral out of control. Paul even provides a step-by-step description of this vicious, downward spiral of sin in the first chapter of Romans.

Paul's reminds them of what they were in the past, now he reminds them of what they are in the present: reconciled. Enmity is the natural contrast to reconciliation and it's the unfortunate condition that makes reconciliation necessary. Reconciliation is the only thing that can break the vicious cycle of sin. It heals our ruptured relationship with God and brings us back into harmony with His holy character and purpose (22). The Greek word translated alienated literally means transferred to another owner. This transfer of ownership, from God to Satan and self, took place in the Eden and has affected humanity in both mind and behavior. Now, in Christ, we're no longer alienated but reconciled. The difference between believers and non-believers isn't just forgiveness, it's a complete change of status. How was this change of status accomplished? We've been rescued from our Godless state at great cost, the cost of Jesus' death.

22- Paul refers to this death by using what appears to be a rather clumsy phrase: in the body of His flesh by death. By doing so, Paul reemphasizes that the One who is fully identified with God (15-20) is fully identified with sinful humanity. He shared our life, experienced our suffering, bore our sin and endured the full brunt of the consequences of our sin: **death**. Those who are members of Christ's body find that their sin is already canceled by His death and that the kingdom of darkness, with all its menacing powers and authorities, is already defeated (3:15). Paul stresses the physicality of Jesus and the reality of His physical suffering to show the contrast between

Christ's involvement in the world and the Colossians' current tendency to want to escape into abstract spirituality. They may seek for pure spiritual experiences but Jesus bled real blood on a real cross in order that He might bring them back to God.

So, God's answer to the problem of our alienation is reconciliation and the means of this reconciliation was not just accomplished by Christ's work on the cross, it was initiated by that work. In this amazing work of reconciliation, God didn't settle with meeting us halfway. No, He covered the entire distance and meets us all the way, right where we are, and invites us to accept His gift of salvation. There are 2 different ways of understanding human need and God's salvation: 1) we can see God as the Judge, and we are guilty before Him. Therefore, we need forgiveness and justification; or 2) we can see God as our friend, and we have damaged our relationship with Him. Therefore, we need reconciliation. But of these perspectives are true and are an accurate assessment of anyone who hasn't accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

While Christ's death was the means by which our reconciliation was accomplished, the effect of reconciliation or the result of it are seen in the rest of v22. God's purpose in reconciliation is personal holiness: to present His people before Him as holy, and blameless, and above reproach. God doesn't make peace (20b) so that we can continue to live as rebels! He has reconciled us to Himself so that we may share His life and His holiness.

The imagery of the first 2 comes from the world of sacrifice. As we saw in our study of Leviticus, any person, animal or object could be declared as being holy, not because it was better than its peers but simply because it had been dedicated or sanctified unto the Lord. The root meaning of holy is being set apart, being devoted to God and that's exactly what God's children are – we are set apart by Him, to Him and for Him. As such, our lives should now reflect our new standing.

The word blameless can also be translated as without blemish. As you recall, when an animal was offered in sacrifice to God, one of the top qualifications was that it had to be unblemished. You couldn't bring the runt or the lame or the poor sheep or goat that was just recently mauled by a predator and barely survived. No, you had to bring the "cream of the crop," the one that could win the blue ribbon at the county fair. Also, we learned

that when a man offered an animal in sacrifice, he laid his hands on it in order to 1) identify himself with his offering and 2) to express his heartfelt desire to be holy and unblemished himself. But here, it seems Paul believes that this OT desire has now become a NT reality. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the only human who knew no sin, we formerly blameworthy sinners have become the righteousness of God in Him (**II Cor 5:21**).

The last term (above reproach) leads us into the imagery of a court of law. The term means free from accusation and it holds both present and future implications. When we are eventually presented before the judgment seat of Christ, there will be no accusations raised or leveled against us. But we don't have to wait until then to enjoy this benefit of reconciliation. Once we've been reconciled to God, no charges can be brought against us (**Rom 8:31-34**). Christ's work of salvation was accomplished and completed on the cross but His work for us, His people – joint heirs and co-laborers, is still ongoing to this day. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, would like to hurl charges at us around the clock and likely does but **Zech 3** teaches us that the Lord refuses to accept them. In our Christian walk too, people may have accusations to bring against us, even legitimate ones, but they cannot change our relationship with God.

The result of God's work of reconciliation in our lives is that, in Jesus, we are declared pure and we can't even be justly accused of impurity. Of course, this is in no way a license for believers to sin. On the contrary, what it actually means is that a true desire for salvation must rightly be accompanied by an honest desire to be holy, and blameless, and above reproach, not just a desire to escape the fires of hell on your own terms. You can't say you want to be reconciled but you also want to retain your enmity against God by living as you always have. Our natural attitudes and actions are at war with God. This is why unbelievers must repent (change their minds) before they can be saved. It's why Paul urges believers to be presented to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him, in true worship.

**23-** Paul now turns to the Colossians' future (**if**). He has emphasized that Christ has accomplished this perfection for us; it doesn't come from our own striving or efforts. But, God's goal for us is to take what we are positionally before Him and make us that in reality in our current lives. That's still a work in progress, and requires a response on our part. Modern Christians need to

recognize that they've been reconciled to God to live a life that He approves. The NT doctrine of reconciliation teaches that Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves; but we must do what He will not do for us. He will not force us to live lives that are holy, blameless and above reproach but He has given us everything we need to do just that (II Pt 1:3). Jesus offers us to God but our lives are still our own offering.

The new standing of the Colossians as Christians was brought about in an instant, at their conversion (13), but that isn't the whole story. This new status is all theirs, as long as they continue in the faith. To do that, they need to be steadfast and unmovable in the faith. As long as they remember that their relationship depends on what He has done in Christ, all will be well. It's possible, though, to put one's faith in other things under the guise of Christianity. The Colossians face a real danger that the true focus of their faith will shift from the message they received (the gospel) to their own efforts at spiritual perfection. We may think the main danger to saving faith is attempting to prove oneself good enough for God by good works. It's equally possible (and futile) to try to prove oneself worthy by religious effort. Once the focus shifts from God's grace, salvation becomes a matter of human achievement and is doomed to failure.

Now, Paul's statement here seems to cast a shadow on the assurance of the Colossians future eternity. Is Paul suggesting that it is possible for a believer to lose their salvation? Not at all! Paul's use of the *if* clause in no way was meant to suggest any doubt in the security of salvation nor does it lay down any condition by which we must keep up our salvation. We didn't do anything to make ourselves saved and we can't do anything to keep ourselves saved – our salvation is solely the work and responsibility of Christ.

Paul's employing an architectural image here; of a house firmly set on a foundation. The town of Colosse was located in a region known for earthquakes and the term moved away can also mean earthquake stricken. What Paul is saying here is that, if one is truly saved and built upon the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, then they will continue in the faith and nothing will move them. They've heard the gospel and trusted Jesus and He's saved them. In other words, we're not saved by continuing in the faith, but we continue in the faith and thus, prove that we are saved.

To put it another way, those who have truly been reconciled must truly persevere. Paul's main focus in this verse is continuing in the truth of the gospel. It is important for Christians to continue in godly conduct but, we're not saved by our godly conduct. Godly conduct is the product (result) of our salvation. So it's even more important for Christians to continue in the truth of the gospel because we are saved by grace through faith. As one Bible scholar put it (Bruce), "If the gospel teaches the final perseverance of the saints, it teaches at the same time that the saints are those who finally persevere – in Christ. Continuance is the test of reality."

For this reason, the Colossians (and all true Christians) must keep their eyes fixed on the goal that lies ahead, the hope promised by the gospel. Here, Paul has come full circle back to the theme of v5. The gospel that the Colossians had received is all that is necessary for salvation. It's the only source of hope for this life and it carries a promise of eternal life to come. It is the true gospel that has won converts throughout the world, a fact that bears testimony to its authenticity.

It was to this very gospel that Paul had become a minister or, more literally, a servant. As a servant of the gospel, his job is to further the spread of it in the world, to guard it from misinterpretation and, ultimately, to pass it on down to future generations in its entirety, with its original message completely intact and undefiled. Of course, he shared this responsibility with fellow workers such as Timothy, Epaphras – who started the Colossian church and Tychicus, who carried this letter to Colosse, and with us. We're no less responsible to pass this message on to the next generation as Paul was. It is now our task, our responsibility, our glorious privilege.

The idea of reconciliation points back to the theme of 13, the transfer from one spiritual realm to another. The results of this transfer means those who were once alienated (21) are those who've been given a share in the inheritance of God's holy ones (12); those who were hostile in mind and evil deeds (21) are those who have been rescued from the power of darkness (13) and whose calling is now to increase in the knowledge of God in every good work (9-10); those who've been transferred into His kingdom (13), whom He now presents as holy, blameless and irreproachable (22) are those who, in Him, have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (14).

Of course, all this comes with a warning. If believers are to be holy, without

blemish and free from accusation in the future, they must remain steadfast in the faith in the present. They can't take their new status for granted, be nonchalant about its real responsibilities or be fooled into thinking that other avenues to God exist. Jesus Christ alone offers the solution to human alienation in the world. Without Him, there is no hope for the future. □